

Patchouli Memsahib

One Australian Woman's Journey — an excerpt

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1. Valley Dreaming

Let us journey together
Let us enter the wide mouth of the river
Let us travel
Back
To the river's source
Let us follow it
Backwards
Through the valleys
To the mountains
Swimming upstream
Against the current
To find the clear trickle
That is the source
Of understanding.
We trace the current back
To the realm of high mountains
With deep crevasses
Only to discover
That the river
Is fed by
Not one
But a myriad of tiny streams
That spring from the earth
From the chasms
In the bones of the mountains
And join together
Flowing as one
Across the soft belly of the lowlands
Out to the estuary
Where it will thrill and mingle
With the many streams from near and far
As they become one
In the vast surging power
Of the ocean
That embraces every land
Before rising to the sky
From where it will fall
To kiss the face
Of every land
Let it fall upon us all

Gently, without favour
And in equal measure

The Enchanted Realm

Herein lies an explanation of how a girl picked herself up and followed her beloved to the ends of the earth because she was not of the world she was born into and so she put on her wings and flew to distant lands on the eagle's back.

Once upon a time there was a wild garden. The garden was met on one side by the wild bush. The wild bush plunged over cliffs towards a bay. On two sides, the garden was hemmed in by driveways, where danger lurked. On the fourth side, the garden was met by a narrow winding road that wound up a hill from the bay. That road led to the world beyond. The garden pulsed with life. Feral bees nested in a possum box and on sunny days the garden throbbed with their hum as they thrust their bodies into salvias of red, purple and pale azure. The trilling of rainbow lorikeets demanded attention as their tongues worked through the bristles of the banksias. Water dragons, feeling entitled, basked like crocodilians among lilies in the warm water of giant pots. An occasional kookaburra watched as Maria Mercedes and her large clan of magpies, conducted a busy social life in the treetops. They had been named by the Brazilian who had stayed for a while, leaving an imprint, just as all the others who passed through had done. By night bandicoots worked the soil. Bats screeched in the banksias. Possums thundered and foraged with Oedipal dramas of succession and rejection, in pursuit of their life cycles of birth and rejection. It was always the same story, wherein The Grand Ma, possum matriarch, was ultimately deposed by her children. Discreet and rarely seen was Josephina, a three-metre green tree snake. Periodically, interlopers appeared. Brush turkeys, with small minds, listened to no one. They did what they had always done, scratched up the leaf litter and flew up into the banana trees to feast. And survive. Giant, channel billed cuckoos flew down every November from Indonesia and New Guinea, with no visa at all, and no interest whatsoever from The Customs Department, to cuckold the magpies and currawongs. Tiny silver eyes tinkled in thickets while Eastern honeyeaters and blue wrens darted from red fuchsia into dense green lemon myrtle.

Within the garden was a house. It was entirely surrounded by the garden. The house was very old and made of stone. The stone was porous and damp came in where it was not sealed in between. The keys were old and did not lock the doors. There were no eaves on the house and the rain beat against the windows and ran down the walls corroding the window sills, rotting the wood until it became soft and brown. Some of the heavy stones across the doorways were cracked and several cracks appeared also in the walls. Cavities opened up within the walls. One of these cavities above a door was the home of Josephina where she thought she would live happily ever after. Each year her babies fell out of the cavity onto the doorstep. Humans often found tiny green tree snakes writhing on the doorstep. The tiny snakes were not sure whether to enter the house or move away from it, since it smelled of humans and so lay writhing, undecidedly. One day Josephina had a nasty shock. As a black storm was advancing, she approached her home only to find that it had been ill-advisedly filled with expandable foam, an unnatural, hard and bulging creature that blocked her entrance. She searched for another way in through doors and windows but was savagely driven out of the house, out of the garden, towards the wild bush, just for who she was. Inside the heavy walls of the house was a surprise. It was an enchanted space, an octagon, in perfect alignment, ready to work magic on those who inhabit the space. Perhaps it was a stately pleasure dome. Indeed, the room did have a glass dome as a ceiling, from where the sky could be viewed. Clouds raced past and the moon passaged at night. The main windows were aligned to the sunrise so that long thin fingers of sunlight reached to the farthest walls all morning. To the north a high window sought out the moving sun. In the southern part of the octagon was a huge stone fireplace of magnetic power. At high noon on the winter solstice the sun's rays shone directly onto the keystone at its centre. Each part of the octagon looked out onto a different view. The enchantment of the space held sway over lives through many generations of this domain as the stories unfolded upon the descendants of Ernest the King and Queen Ernestine.

It came to pass that within the wild garden, where the fuchsias nodded and the bees supped on salvia, within the building of the soul temple, within the octagonal room lived a princess. The princess's eyes were the colour of a clear aqua lagoon with a sandy bottom. They reflected and absorbed all that she saw. In her heart she stored a large pot of love and sometimes it filled up to the brim and became too heavy to carry.

Then it spilled over. This happened when it didn't have anywhere to go. The birds and the water dragon could only sip small bird and lizard portions of the love so that sometimes it splashed over the edges of the pot and out of the eyes of the princess.

Time and again the princess gathered herself up and set off up the narrow winding road that led to the wider world. While honey-scented angophoras dropped their bark to become naked to the Spring, and with the pot of love spilling out of her eyes, she left the wild garden and the enchanted house with the keys that didn't work and began her journey.

She said goodbye to the two Ernests, who had nurtured her but who had departed too soon, leaving her alone with only their spirits watching on. And she set out towards the wider world.

Her journeys, for there were many, led her far and wide to a life full of adventure and also of misadventure. There, in the wider world she took on the mantle of many identities. She became 'Zhao Tai Tai', 'Khun Feva', 'Bu Febia'. And also, she became the 'Patchouli Memsahib'. She became 'Teacher-Teacher', and that 'vague arts bird'. She passed herself off as 'The Visitor', 'The Friend' and 'The Activist', even as 'The Writer'. At times she was known as 'Krishna Baby'. But most importantly, she became known as 'Mum' and 'Gran'. All these identities she encountered and absorbed as the situation required, until she became plump with the fullness of life.

But one quest remained. One search was not yet completed. That was the search for the next king. How could she become the queen without her own king? The king remained mysterious, squeezed against the wall, waiting to assume his full dimensions. Momentarily she stepped forward but no one was there to see. So, she fell back into the shadows waiting to be called. And the prince? He was the one who must do the calling but he was also struck dumb, afraid to step into the light, unable to manifest. Sometimes she thought he was there, behind a frosted glass door and yet he remained elusive. Was it something to do with the premature departure of Ernest the King?

It is true that many times the prince seemed to appear in different forms. Perhaps he came disguised as a Chinese intellectual, with the book of thirty-two generations of the Fu family behind him. Or perhaps as a Thai monk, a Sasak tribesman, a Balinese peasant or indeed as the son of a king of Kurdistan. But the prince himself was always on a journey, artfully changing form as he travelled from East to West, following the dictates of his own heart. The princess ministered to him as he rested on his journey, until the turmoil in his heart burst the pod that bound them and he disappeared, riding on the winds that blew him into his future.

But he always left a gift for the princess. It was a shining star, foaming with stardust. And at these times of separation, the love in the heart of the princess spilled over and splashed on the little ones left behind. The love poured out until the little ones slipped about in it and struggled to stand in all that love. With time they grew strong and clever and later sought out higher ground.

And so it came to pass that the princess, weary from her many journeys, returned to the enchanted house to rest. To rest and recover. There, through the many years that had passed, the two Ernests, now in spirit form, stood guard, hoping for the best. But her return was also a time to incubate. There was a frenzy of cleaning, as the princess prepared a nest for something to be born. What was it? Was it the return of the prince? Would he, this time, come out from behind the frosted glass? Would he stay and rest until the journey's end? Could the princess lay her head on his shoulder and he on hers? Could the vines of their lives find peace and grow together? Could he take her hand so that they could walk together into the wider world? Or could it be that the princess would metamorphose all alone, wrapped in her silken cocoon to emerge as a queen in her own right?