‘Four or five months at the most, but you might go sooner,’ the oncologist said, like a travel agent wait-listing me for a popular destination. ‘I’m sorry.’ He lowered his gaze to the scans of my disease on his light table, the dense white clouds scattered like cold fronts through the darkness of my body. ‘I can get you on a trial for the new drug in a month’s time. But bear in mind there are no guarantees with that one, either. It’s likely to buy you only a few extra months at the most. Time to start thinking in terms of quality rather than quantity of life.’ The five o’clock shadow along his jaw made him look more lugubrious than usual.

‘I’ll try anything. But tell me what to expect if the new drug doesn’t work. In terms of dying.’ Trying to convince us both that I could take the hard facts.

‘Metastases in several organs now. Your immune system’s severely compromised, of course. So it’s not uncommon for patients like you to succumb to various opportunistic infections.’

‘Any other possibilities?’

‘Cognitive impairment. The body’s thermostat often malfunctions. The extremities turn blue. Other patients die from heart attack, seizures or respiratory failure. If something like that doesn’t kill you, it’s often the liver that succumbs to the cancer.’

‘How do I know if my liver’s . . . succumbing?’

‘The skin turns yellow.’

‘Sounds colourful.’ Neither of us smiled.

Looking out at the pewter-grey drizzle of another Perth winter’s day, I yearned for somewhere warm and friendly. Bali, perhaps?
What do I tell Jonti, I wondered as I drove home. I’d never told my seven-year-old daughter that I might die from the disease, because up until that appointment I’d thought there was a chance I’d survive it. Even then, despite the oncologist’s dire prognosis, my chemotherapy-induced baldness and the occasional pang where my right breast had been four years earlier, I still felt strangely dissociated from my illness. The lumps around my ribs remained painless. With the nausea and debility from the chemo no longer present, I felt better than I had for months. Only the numbness in my hands and feet remained, a common enough side effect of the drugs. What if the oncologist was wrong and I didn’t die? Every second person I’d told about my cancer had stories about miracles, remissions or spontaneously shrinking tumours. Surely it would be better not to tell Jonti until I felt certain death was near? It seemed unkind to make her anxious for any longer than necessary.

The damp interior of my dented old car smelled like fungus as I steered it into the underground car park of the shopping mall. Volvo for safety. I’d been a market researcher before the cancer returned about a year ago. Convenient work, after completing my divorce and my Masters in Psychology. I knew all about Faith Popcorn, cocooning, continuous self-updating and other consumer trends. But I’d tried to apply the principle less is more since my ex-husband left me after my mastectomy. Luke Purser, financial adviser and discreet philanderer. Diversified portfolios, endless lines of credit, hidden trust funds. I’d signed them all away but kept the household contents and the old Volvo.

Less is more, I reminded myself as I checked my dwindling account balance at the ATM and picked up some travel brochures. But within fifteen minutes I’d bought moisturiser, body wash and lambs-wool slippers for Jonti, and a soft woollen rug to cover us both when we watched television together.

Plenitude, Onkaparinga, L’Oréal Preserve and Protect.
Recent research shows that people who are sad make more mistakes shopping.

Jonti’s new slippers were a bit too big for her, and emphasised the thinness of her knock-kneed legs. Sinking into our soft new luxuries, we ate takeaway sushi in front of the news. Cocooning. A consumer trend caused by global fear and uncertainty.

Ice trafficking, terrorist training cells, metastases.

‘Would you like some wasabi or soy sauce with that, darling?’

‘No.’
‘What do you say?’
‘No.’
‘What did you forget to say.’
‘Thank you. No thank you, Mum. It gets up my nose.’

We talked about a few hard facts raised by the news. But I couldn’t bring myself
to tell Jonti about my prognosis. Maybe cocooning is a form of denial, I reflected as
the world weather came on. Denpasar 29 degrees and sunny. Watching more cold
fronts approaching Perth on the weather map, I recalled the cloudy tumours on my
scan. When Jonti laid her head underneath my collarbone, I felt the pressure on
the small tumours there, but still no pain. She closed her eyes, apparently oblivious
to the lumps her temple rested on. I ached only when I looked at her trusting face
as I put her to bed.

Lying in my bed that night, the term ‘radical acceptance’ first occurred to me.
It sounded like the next big trend in my life and probably the final, most difficult
one. Only the glow from my digital alarm gave me any light. I thought about
writing Jonti a letter for later, when I was long dead and she’d grown up. But
how would the letter look to her then? Would it read as a maternal expression
of love, an attempt to share with her the little wisdom I had? Or would it read as
the megalomaniacal ravings of someone desperate to be remembered long after
her death?

Early in the morning my cries for help woke me from a dream. In this dream,
I was so tightly bound in thick silk thread that I couldn’t move. I sensed I had
wings, but I couldn’t free myself from the thread to test them. My waking cries
were muffled by something hovering around my mouth as if waiting to gag me, but
the grey dawn creeping under the curtains revealed no intruder.

Was this cocooning, or death?

* *

After walking Jonti to school, I felt the first pain from the lumps around my
collarbone, a throbbing burn. It seemed to deepen as the morning progressed.
By midday I imagined I could feel the cancer in every organ. Which one would
succumb first? I felt like a blindfolded hostage, unable to see from which direction
the assassin’s shot would come.

In our letterbox I found a booklet from the Cancer Association titled How to
Tell the Kids You Have Cancer. I turned to the chapter headed ‘What to Tell Them
if You’re Not Going to Get Better’. It was only two sentences long: ‘This topic is too
complex to deal with in this booklet. We suggest you seek advice from elsewhere.’
'You need stronger painkillers. Keep your eye on these methadone tablets,' the oncologist said. ‘Big demand for them on the black market.’

The methadone did the trick within an hour. After a few days, I mistook the absence of pain for comparative wellbeing. I put the Cancer Association booklet aside. But I woke on the fourth morning with my voice thin and scratchy, as if I’d been shouting for help all night.

‘Why are you talking funny, Mummy? You sound like you’re trying for a high note but can’t reach it,’ said Jonti.

I rang the oncologist. He told me one of the tumours was probably pressing against my vocal chords. If I don’t find the words to tell Jonti soon that I’m dying, I thought as I put down the phone, maybe I won’t even be able to tell her in my own voice at all. One day soon I might wake with it gone forever, a silent herald of my imminent oblivion.

Perhaps it would be a good idea to tell her about my prognosis in Bali, where we might be consoled by friendly locals, massages and luxury accommodation. Who knows, I thought. Maybe a holiday will boost my immune system and send the cancer into remission. It sounded a surer thing than the shark cartilage and wheatgrass remedies the naturopath around the corner had suggested.

‘How would you like to come to Bali with me on a nice holiday?’ I showed Jonti the resorts and scenery in the travel brochures.

‘Can we have a Bali holiday like that one?’ she asked, pointing to a photograph of a little blonde girl sipping a pink drink with her elegant mother and father by a swimming pool. All of them wore low-cut white swimsuits. ‘Without the father though, I guess,’ Jonti murmured wistfully. ‘And . . .’ she bit her lip.

‘. . . the glamorous mother?’ I guessed, my voice quavering.

‘I want a relaxing Balinese holiday for my daughter and me that won’t cost too much,’ I told the over-tanned travel agent. ‘One with a gourmet detox menu. In about a week.’ I want a miracle. I want to leave death behind. ‘It’s safe there now, isn’t it?’

The travel agent glanced at the lumps near my collar. She ran her forefinger nervously around her neckline.

‘Department of Foreign Affairs still have a warning out. But everyone says there’s so much security in all the hotels there now that nothing unsafe could possibly happen. And there are some fabulous deals on accommodation. If you’re looking for a bit of pampering, there’s a lovely boutique hotel in the Balinese foothills offering a full range of massage treatments. The Nirvana.’ She flicked open
a brochure and showed me the tariffs and a photo of thatched villas and pavilions clustered around a deep blue swimming pool. On the li-los lounged the same white-swimsuited family Jonti had pointed out at home. ‘Architecturally designed to resemble a traditional Balinese village.’

‘Apart from the lap-pool.’

‘That’s an infinity pool. Chlorine-free, fed by a sacred spring. The villas look Balinese on the outside but all the interiors are modern and spotless. It’s owned by Australians,’ she said, as if that explained the cleanliness. ‘And children under twelve are heavily discounted.’ She tapped at her computer. ‘Only a few economy seats available in a week though.’

‘Okaaay. I’ll take it.’

‘How long would you like?’

‘A lifetime, but I’ll settle for six days.’

‘Take care of yourself,’ Luke said, suave and dark-suited as a diplomat. ‘Bargain hard.’ He glanced at the sparse new down on my scalp and ran his fingers through his own hair, greying but still abundant.

‘With the doctors?’

‘With the Balinese. They don’t mind, it’s just a game to them.’

I swallowed another painkiller.

* * *

When the courtesy bus delivered Jonti and me to the Nirvana Hotel in the lemony morning sunlight, a petite Balinese receptionist in a pale blue sarong and demure white kebaya placed frangipani leis around our necks.

‘Isn’t this Hawaiian?’ Jonti whispered, fingering her lei.

‘Selamat pagi,’ the receptionist murmured, pressing her hands vertically together under her chin as she glanced at my scarf sticking to my scalp in the humidity. ‘I am Ketut,’ she smiled warmly, the fine lines at the corners of her dark eyes and the bridge of her nose deepening. I guessed she was no more than twenty, but you can’t always tell with Asians. ‘Dewa will take your bags and show you to your villa.’

She gestured towards the door. A slender young man wearing a shirt and a sarong the same as hers bowed and smiled mildly, sunlight glancing off his small round spectacles.

‘What was she doing with her hands? Praying?’ Jonti whispered as Dewa wheeled our suitcases ahead of us to our villa. ‘It looked like she was praying. Maybe your bald head frightened her.’
‘She was just saying hello,’ I replied, adjusting my scarf. ‘That’s how the Balinese greet everyone.’

Dewa flicked a few switches on, bowed and left us in the white interior. A standard deluxe cocoon. Sleek minimalist decor, thick linen, bar fridge. Victoria Bitter, Perrier, Bintang. Floor-to-ceiling windows framed thin locals toiling in picturesque, terraced paddy fields against a soaring vista of river valleys and mountains.

‘What’s she doing?’ Jonti asked, pointing to an old villager in a muddy sarong kebaya placing a basket near the spring between the swimming pool and the fence.

‘Making offerings. She’s Hindu, I think.’

‘What’s in her basket?’

‘Probably food.’

‘For the guests to eat?’

‘For the spirits.’

‘What about those gardeners?’

‘I think one is Muslim, the other Hindu.’

‘How can you tell?’

‘I’m guessing the one on the left wearing that black cap is a Muslim.’

‘So the one with the folded sort of tea-towel on his head is Hindu. Look,’ Jonti said, picking up the pamphlet about massage and spa treatments by the phone.

‘Can I have a Luxurious Balinese massage?’

‘Maybe tomorrow.’

‘And I want one of those wrap-around skirt thingies they wear. And some beaded slippers like Leila’s mother bought her.’

**

We took the hotel’s courtesy bus to town to look for souvenirs and sarongs. Little woven offering baskets of cracker biscuits, flowers and rice sat on the dashboards of cars and the steps of shops. Every third or fourth shop sold wooden, stone or bronze carvings of gods and goddesses. I paused outside a temple compound. Surrounded by spiritual belief and yet so far away from finding my own. Would anyone here know how to make a miracle happen for me?

A grimy young woman, two wailing toddlers tugging her torn sarong, emerged from behind the gate and pushed her empty hand towards me. Sharp-featured and unkempt, she didn’t look like one of the locals. I placed a few rupiah on her palm and hurried on with Jonti to a glass-fronted shop with designer watches in the window.

‘What was she doing?’ Jonti murmured.

‘Begging for money.’
‘You should have given her more, then.’
‘We might need more money ourselves,’ I said, scrutinising a silver ladies Rolex. It was cheaper than back home and I’d lost mine. But how authentic was it? And would measuring the time I had left make my life go faster or slower?

Dodging scooters precariously loaded with caged roosters and sacks of rice, we crossed the road to some makeshift rattan and thatch market stalls. A middle-aged stallholder, her gap-toothed smile emphasised by bright red lipstick, grabbed Jonti by the wrist.

‘Hallo! Beautiful girl! Blue eyes! Come. I give you cake. I give you good price on sarong.’
Frightened, Jonti withdrew her hand. I grasped her other hand firmly.
‘No thank you,’ I said.
‘Why did she grab me like that?’ Jonti murmured as we turned the corner.
‘Just being friendly. And maybe because she’s desperate for money, too.’

Especially since the bombs, I guessed.
‘Why has she got holes in her teeth?’
‘Shhh. Can’t afford a dentist, I suppose. Most people here are quite poor, Jonti.’
‘Poorer than us?’
‘Well. Too poor for a holiday, I guess.’

We bought Jonti a yellow festival umbrella, hand-painted and fringed in gold, and a sarong edged with purple elephants. I bargained with the nonchalant long-haired youth there, though not as hard as Luke had advised. But I bought myself bronze statues of Shiva and Kali at less than half the marked price from the next stall.

Looking east, hoping for some kind of enlightenment. At the very least.

* * *

‘Selamat pagi,’ Ketut called from the reception desk as we crossed the gleaming white lobby with our bargains. I couldn’t return her prayer-like gesture. My hands were too full of souvenirs.

As I crammed our souvenirs into our Pak-Lite suitcase back in the villa, I thought about all the luxury items I’d bought when I was married: the sleek black Eames chairs and Bokhara carpets, the Royal Doulton porcelain and the designer clothes. Why had it seemed so important to me to have the best of everything? Now I’d bought these bronze gods as if I might touch true spirituality, when these and my luxury possessions at home really indicated nothing so much as the paucity of my relationships with others.
Jonti looked slightly baffled as I embraced her suddenly. The lotus pods in the pond next to our villa rattled in the breeze, a sound somewhere between promise and emptiness.

We had a late lunch at the pavilion overlooking the infinity pool. On the far side of the pool, a perfectly proportioned blonde woman in a black designer bikini snapped the lycra over her taut buttocks as she rose from her li-lo. She looked disdainfully at my chest, obviously lopsided despite my oversized T-shirt. Her tanned, gangster-moustached companion in black Speedos walked to the poolside bar and bought her a lurid green cocktail with a bright red acrylic bird perched on a swizzle stick. Looking pleased with himself, he stared at the woman’s cleavage as if he’d paid for it with the drink.

‘Australians, I guessed.’

‘Just this once,’ smirked the woman. ‘I’m detoxing. I’ll have to do a few laps to work this off.’

The oncologist had told me exercise prolonged the lives of some cancer patients. I supposed I should swim laps too, when no-one else was looking. But how many laps would make a difference? The effort I might spend on self-care now seemed limitless, yet ultimately futile.

‘Mum, you went blue around the mouth a few minutes ago, then back to normal again. I wasn’t going to tell you, in case it put you off your food,’ muttered Jonti, chewing on a shoestring fry. ‘It put me off mine a bit, but only for a while.’

‘Blue around the mouth, really? Must be the weather.’

‘Cold weather makes you blue around the mouth, Mum. This is tropical weather.’

What if I’m closer to dying than I think I am? What if coming on this holiday is a sign of cognitive impairment? How can I read the signs pointing to my own death? Though the air was hot and still, I began trembling. I leaned my elbows on the table to steady myself. I had to tell Jonti soon.

‘Feel like a swim, Mummy?’ She skipped blithely over to the pool, her beauty incandescent in the tropical light. Astonishing: when I die, such memories of her will be lost forever.

‘I left my bathers in the villa.’ Actually, I hadn’t been able to find a swimsuit top with a prosthetic my size in the specialist lingerie shop back in Perth, and I wasn’t brave enough to reveal my deformed chest further to the sleek couple on the li-los.

‘I’ll watch you.’

‘Can I buy myself a pink drink? Like the girl in the travel brochure?’

‘Go ahead,’ I said, as expansively as my wavering voice would allow.

As she jumped into the water, my daughter’s body in the blue polka-dotted bathers looked both optimistic and vulnerable to me: sway-backed, lithe-limbed,
flat-chested, with her rib-cage sticking out like a chicken’s. What if she had the breast cancer gene? I’ll enquire about testing when we return to Perth, I resolved as she dog-paddled in circles in the infinity pool.

At the poolside bar, Jonti chatted happily to the smiling Balinese bartender before turning around and raising her drink towards me, as an adult would.

‘Just like in the photo,’ she called to me. After she’d slurped the dregs noisily through the straw, she dog-paddled back and stood on the tips of her toes right in front of me, neck-deep in the water, almost floating.

‘You look sad, Mummy.’

‘Do I?’

‘Why are you sad when we’re having our tropical paradise holiday? The best holiday we’ve ever had.’

‘I’m glad you like it. What do you like best so far?’

‘Our room. This pool. The servants are so friendly.’

‘Ssh. They’re not servants, Jonti. They’re hospitality workers.’

The Australian couple swaggered stylishly towards the bar, glancing quickly at my chest again.

‘You’d think a bit of cosmetic surgery . . . ’ the woman murmured to her companion.

‘Why do the Bali people smile more than the tourists?’ Jonti asked me. ‘Are they happier? Or do hospitality workers just have to smile more?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Why are you sad, Mummy?’

The couple were out of earshot.

‘Well I guess I am. Jonti,’ I said, my voice even thinner than before, ‘you know how Mummy had cancer a few years ago? And . . . ’

‘It came back,’ she said, matter of factly. For a few seconds I wondered if she’d been one step ahead of me all the way, if she’d already guessed the doctors couldn’t save her mother.

‘Well. And you know that when cancer comes back, it often . . . sometimes . . . usually . . . ’ Jonti watched my mouth carefully. Maybe it was turning blue again. ‘Just about always doesn’t go away. Not for long, anyway.’

‘But you can live with it,’ Jonti smiled. ‘Just like you have.’

‘Well no, sweetheart. Not for long. Not forever. The doctor said Mummy’s not going to live for much longer, Jonti.’

I watched my daughter’s upturned face, its complexion fading against the savage aqua of the pool. She did not cry or whimper. She bit her top lip, but there were no tears in her eyes. What I saw in the sky-blue eyes of my daughter, who had
shared her thoughts and feelings with me nearly every day of her seven years, was her sudden, irrevocable aloneness. She remained almost motionless in the infinity pool, looking straight at me, yet not seeing me. So this is what it’s like to begin dying, I thought. For Jonti, I’m already no longer here, really.

‘But we still have time together,’ I said desperately. ‘Several months at least. Longer if the new drugs work.’

But the pinkness had left Jonti’s cheeks entirely now and she breathed deeply. As a long-distance swimmer begins her race. As the dying enter their last minutes.

She’s in shock, I thought. I leaned right over, reached out and grasped both her hands. Don’t let go. Get in and swim with her, I told myself. As if that would make a difference, as if there were a way to keep the savage knowledge from engulfing her, as if I might make my daughter’s future without me less lonely.

I promised myself I would swim with her as soon as I could control my trembling, regardless of what the stylish couple thought of my one-breasted chest.

‘You can stay home from school lots. So we can be together every day.’

Jonti inhaled a long, stuttering breath before speaking at last. ‘And then? What then?’ She rested her head on the hard edge of the infinity pool.

* * *

A fresh copy of the Australian newspaper had been delivered to our villa step. ‘Bashir urges followers to beat up infidel Aussies’, the front page read. I wrapped Jonti in a thick white Nirvana towel and checked that the external doors of our suite were locked, chastising myself silently: what kind of fool am I, searching for consolation and miracles in such an unstable place? I should’ve just increased my methadone dose and stayed home.

‘So we’ve come here to take a holiday from dying,’ said Jonti, small and hunched on the glaring white field of the teak four-poster bed. ‘I guess the pictures in the travel brochure back in Perth were someone else’s Bali holiday.’

‘Would you like room service for dinner tonight?’ I asked.

After our dinner of Nasi Campur, seafood satay on lemongrass sticks and black rice pudding, we lay on the bed and listened to the sounds of unfamiliar nocturnal creatures outside. After a few minutes, Jonti curled inwards towards sleep. I took extra painkillers, turned off the bedside lamp and watched the phosphorescent feet of the chiak-chiak lizards like stars against the windows. Beyond them, I could just see the ancient volcano and the mountains to the east, a dark frieze against the indigo evening sky. Was the volcano still active?
After a few minutes I sensed the slow merging and disintegration of my thoughts as the painkillers took effect. Closing my eyes, I couldn't distinguish between after-images of our first day in Bali and the beginning of dreams. When I finally fell asleep, I dreamed that Luke had left a bomb at the villa door. What was required of me? Would I defuse it? It was as if I was being asked to do something almost impossible. You can save yourself if you just free yourself from your habitual ways of thinking, he said. It’s a matter of finding the finest wire, the right attitude. His speech was interrupted by an explosion, which changed to a more urgent tone. He sounded like one of those shock jocks on commercial radio back home. This is it, your life brought right into the terror of our times.

An even louder explosion woke me. It was just a dream voice, I told myself as I groped in the dark for the bedside lamp, but I was in no doubt that the explosions were real, for flames leapt into the night sky on the farthest side of the village to the north. Not as close as the explosions had sounded when I was half asleep. But what if there were more bombs waiting to go off closer by?

The yellow light from the lamp flooded the bed. Jonti wasn’t there next to me. I rushed around the villa. My voice broke her name in two as I called it from the courtyard, from the balcony. She wasn’t there.

Bombs, terrorists, Madeline McCann.

I rang reception. No answer. Shouldn’t someone be there at all times, especially in a four-and-a-half-star hotel? Perhaps they were already busy evacuating guests.

I ran bald-headed through the courtyard in my T-shirt. Distant gamelan music and unseen creatures called in the darkness; tiny phosphorescent dots floated in the reeds of the lotus pond. Filament lights? Tropical fireflies? Spirits?

Panting and sweating, I arrived at the infinity pool and peered into it. The weak light cast by the poolside lamps revealed something shifting in its depths. My vision seesawed alarmingly. As I stared at the bottom of the pool, the darkness there spread and threatened to engulf me, until I realised it was a shadow from the overhanging tree. A few reflected stars winked back at me from the surface of the water.

The grounds of the hotel were quiet. I ran along the balcony past the empty restaurant and into the entry foyer. A pale shape shifted towards me across the plate glass windows and retreated a few steps before advancing again, the hands outstretched on the glass window like small suns. Jonti, but her face was folded into itself like a flower in darkness.

I know you are not supposed to wake sleepwalking children, but, gasping with relief and breathlessness, I hugged her tightly and rubbed her back. She opened her eyes and sobbed loudly, immediately, her breath warm and milky.

‘Don’t cry, sweetheart. I’m . . . here now. You are safe.’
‘You’re not here for long. I won’t be safe soon. I knew there was something you weren’t telling me.’
‘What do you mean, sweetheart?’
‘You’ve been dying all these years.’
‘But no-one told me, either. Until last week.’
There was a note taped up next to the reception desk. *Securiti fone 123.*
I kept rubbing her back. ‘Sshhh. I’ll ring this number for the guard.’ I fumbled the numbers with one hand.
‘Security,’ a Balinese man answered.
‘Eva Pereira from . . . villa 21. I was wondering . . .’
‘Ah, Mrs Eva. Good evening. Dewa here.’
‘Dewa . . . the porter?’
‘That’s right. By day I am porter. By night I am security.’
‘What were those . . . explosions?’ I rasped.
‘Everything is okay, Mrs Eva.’
‘How do you know . . . everything is okay? Can you . . . guarantee we are safe?’
‘Everyone is safe. Those are funeral pyres, not bombs. Many cremations in July.’
‘Why?’
‘Less expensive to cremate many bodies at the same time. We rest our dead in the earth until then. Better for their souls. Balinese royalty don’t always, though. Westerners and aristocrats always burn too soon, no?’
‘How long . . . does it take the average body to burn?’ I asked. Just another rude tourist. ‘Sorry.’
‘Is okay, Mrs Eva. Maybe twenty minutes. Not sad. We believe in reincarnation. Many Australians watch our cremations and ask questions about death. Is hard to leave Western nightmares behind, no? Do you need help to find your way back to your room?’

Only a glow remained in the sky where the fire had been. ‘No. We’ll be . . . okay. Thanks.’ I put down the receiver.

As I took Jonti’s hand, I found myself musing as if in a dream, yet not: we are lost, my daughter and I, in our own terror. No bargains, painkillers or security measures can help us. The other guests are celebrating life or sleeping peacefully. The reception staff have left. No cocoon is sanctuary enough for Jonti and me. Neither can I find my way to radical acceptance.

Then I noticed someone had left the reception computer on. Light-infused colour sparkled on the screen. It appeared to be a photo of a Balinese woman holding a tray at the sacred spring near the infinity pool. From that distance, it looked like the real thing, a villager making an offering. Jonti and I went closer and
scrutinised it, as if we might find some answer there. ‘The Nirvana Hotel website,’ I said.

‘Ketut!’ Jonti murmured, pointing to the woman’s face. Underneath the hotel’s gold-lettered name and address, the receptionist was carrying the tray of cocktails towards the same white-swimsuited family we’d seen in the travel brochure back in Perth. Her smile looked genuine enough, but the breasts under her now immodestly cut kebaya were much larger than Ketut’s.

Digital enhancement, cosmetic augmentation, continuous image updating. Whose body was that? Looking at that full bosom shimmering like a mirage on the liquid crystal display, I felt the absence of my right breast as a fleeting ache, then numbness.

Only the deep-blue Balinese sky on the screen looked authentic to me, the colour of Jonti’s eyes when I had broken to her the news that I was dying. I held fast to that colour, though my vision blurred for a moment. So little time left together, and such a long dark journey still ahead.

But my daughter was more than one step ahead of me. ‘Don’t worry, Mum. I’ll be all right.’ She squeezed my hand. ‘Will we get this?’ She pointed to the small gold print on the screen:

**Find Yourself**

*Special Offer Limited Time Only*

*Child Stays Free*

‘Yes,’ I replied. ‘We’ll get it, somehow.’

I took my daughter’s hand and we turned away from someone else’s Bali. Outside, the air pulsed with the calls and wings of unfamiliar species. We entered that night lit by the afterglow of funeral pyres, our arms outstretched as if we might find our true reception there.