

# MAYA'S DANCE

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*For Lucie*

*The second way of finding a meaning in life is by experiencing something – such as goodness, truth and beauty – by experiencing nature and culture or, last but not least, by experiencing another human being in his very uniqueness – by loving him.*

Viktor E Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*

# 1

*My darling Jan*

*Today I have been dreaming again. I was sitting in my chair, watching the dust motes tumble and curl on the buoyant air. My eyes were heavy, but I swear I did not sleep. I remember feeling the knotted wool of my cardigan beneath my fingers, and watching a cockatoo absent-mindedly chew a gumnut in the tree outside my window.*

*And then I heard it. The orchestra. I glanced at the television, but it was turned off and the room was still. Yet I could hear the music clearly, each note of each bar. The drums beat first and then the clarinets joined in, jolly, celebratory. The music swelled and grew. Now violins. I shut my eyes and saw a marching band, twirling and stamping through the streets. I could almost smell the roasted chestnuts and feel the sweet shock of ice cream on my tongue.*

*They were playing the Radetzky March. Our dance. Do you remember how I spun and twirled? How I became more than a Jewish girl with battered shoes and dirty clothes – I became a part of the air, the trees, the sun. I remember the intensity of your blue eyes as you watched me from the back of the crowd. We did not know then what it would mean, how that dance would change our lives.*

*It has been fifty years since then, Jan. Time is losing its direction, both stretching and contracting, playing tricks. This morning is an aeon past, a tiny dot seen through the wrong end of a telescope. It is impossible to*

*distinguish the details. Yet those months with you, they shine large and clear. I can see and hear the camp. Those stolen moments with you, the squeeze of my mother's hand, the sun on the back of my head as I stoop toward the wheelbarrow. The memories envelop every sense. I can smell them.*

*Here in Sydney, I am a world away from Poland and the Nazis. But you seem to be closer than ever. Space and time mean less to me now. Five long decades are dissolving and there you remain, at the centre of everything. You are strong and in focus. My love for you has not diminished. We are still bound together, you and I.*

*Today, after I heard our dance again, I made a decision. I have thought about it often over the years, but now the time is right. I am alone and my brain won't work for ever. Today I met someone who can help me. I am going to find you again.*

*Just a little longer, my love. I am coming to you.*

*For ever*

*Maya*

### **Sydney, May 1995**

Kate tied a double knot in the laces of her sensible shoes and opened the front door. Steadying herself with a deep breath, she paused for a moment before she stepped out of the cool, dark silence of her cluttered hallway into Sydney's buzz and hum. Late autumn filled the street; the weak sun slanted across the rooftops but the clouds were heavy with rain. She opened the gate and headed up the hill. Today would have to be better.

She fixed her eyes on the broken paving stones at her feet as she walked quickly towards the bus stop. She knew them well now, each crack and hole in the pavement. The discordant warbling of currawongs in the treetops reminded her that she was far from home.

Last night she had lain awake, crumpled covers twisting around her legs and her radio alarm clock flashing through the seconds. The time had swelled and spread, dragging her heavy, listless body through alternating stages of wakefulness and sluggish sleep. Peter was gone.

It was a month now since his letter had arrived. Her heart had brightened at the Hong Kong postmark, and at first she did not believe what was written in the familiar black ink of his fountain pen. He had met someone else. Her name was Natasha. They were moving back to the UK – together. He had tried to be faithful, he really had, but his relationship with Kate was never going to work across the distance. He would always remember her with affection.

Kate blotted her eyes with her sleeve and focused on the busy road at the top of the hill. Oxford Street. It was already milling with people: young men in suits, women with freshly shampooed hair and heels they would regret by lunchtime. Some of them were smiling. Kate weaved among them, twenty-eight and all alone, swept along by the crowd in the big, dusty city.

He would have loved it here. In the six months since she had arrived, it was as if each new experience had existed only in order that she could one day relive it with him. Every day had spoken of a shared future. She had assessed her work acquaintances for their potential as his friends. She would run a silent conversation with him in her head as she sat by the sparkling Harbour or scanned a menu in a new café. Eventually it seemed as if he had been here with her all along in this friendless new city. It was unimaginable that through those months he had been living a different, real life in Hong Kong. And she no longer played a part. Her stomach knotted.

She walked past cafés and clubs, sidestepping sleepy restaurateurs as they hosed last night's grime and vomit from the pavement. Past the bookshop, no time to linger, then she slowed as she neared the bridal shop, its window resplendent with cream silk and taffeta. Her reflection stared back at her, ghostly against the wedding dresses and sparkling chandelier. Just a normal young woman, hair pulled back carelessly into a high ponytail, work pants a couple of years out of fashion, cardigan slightly pilled from the wash. A well-bred, intelligent sort of woman, someone you would introduce to your mother. Dependable, no-nonsense, English. The sort of young woman who

just yesterday had burst into tears when her GP had asked, 'How are you?'

She held the strap of her handbag against her chest like a protective shield as she climbed onto the heaving, fume-spewing bus. The brakes squealed and she jolted forward as it harrumphed its way towards the terminus. Today, like every day, she would pull herself together. Walk into the newspaper office, nod politely in the lift, sit at her desk and take a moment to still her racing heart. Hold on white-knuckle tight, as if gripping a palm tree in a tsunami.

'Morning.' It was a statement rather than a greeting. The chief-of-staff, Jackson, did not look up.

'Hi.' Her tone sounded unnaturally bright; the small shock of hearing her voice outside her head.

'You will need to go back to the city. There's a fiftieth anniversary memorial for the Holocaust this weekend. They're planning a big do at the Opera House. There's a press conference this morning with a group of survivors. Scully's just finishing off in the darkroom, he'll drive you.'

Jackson held out a piece of paper with printed instructions. His voice softened. 'I know, I know. It's another picture story. I know you're more than capable of covering something bigger than this, with your experience in Asia and everything. That's why I'm asking you to do it.' He studied his hands. 'Go and see what you can find. You never know, this could be your big break.'



Scully was sullen and hungover. He swore as they waited at the traffic lights, lurching start-stop through the morning traffic. He cursed again when he could not find a parking bay. Kate rested her hands on her lap, occasionally glancing at his strong hands on the steering wheel, his delicate brown fingers, the pale pink of the webbing where the sun and surf had never reached. Was he angry at her? The photographers all knew her assignments were a waste of their time. Her ethnic affairs and religion round usually yielded page ten at best – stories about migrants

and church groups. 'We're bound to find a good human-interest angle,' she said brightly, trying to sound convincing.

They were already late when the white sail tips of the Opera House came into view. Scully threw the car backwards and forwards aggressively as he manoeuvred into a parking space, then heaved his heavy camera gear off the back seat. Kate trotted beside him as they made their way back along the road towards the Harbour. Side by side up the steps. To anyone else they could have been mistaken for a couple. She thought of the times she had walked up steps with Peter, grabbing each other's hands, and pushed the image away. Scully shoved through the door in front of her and she followed at his shoulder, trying to keep up as he strode through the echoing foyer.

A small group of journalists had already gathered. They were shuffling their feet and looking at their watches. Scully backslapped a Channel 10 cameraman, his white teeth gleaming and his eyes creased in a greeting. Kate slipped to the side of the crowd, close to the door, and peered into the room where the final touches were being made for the press conference. Trestle tables had been erected at one end, covered in white cloths, a cluster of microphones on top like a bunch of black flowers. A small audience sat fidgeting and coughing, settling into the seats, greeting each other, laughing. The Holocaust survivors.

She sat down quietly and started to observe. She felt calmer now, more of a real person and less one half of a broken couple. Her work, where she was trained to read faces and listen to snatches of conversation – this was what she did best. She took out her notebook ready to find an angle, something new, something interesting.

The organiser was talking about the Holocaust, but she focused on the survivors. An elderly gentleman in the next row smoothed the back of his hair with a sun-spotted hand. As his sleeve rode up, she noticed a neat row of faded numbers tattooed on his forearm. Others held hands or wiped away tears as the speaker recited a few lines of poetry. What must these people have seen? Every one of them would have a story.

But which had *the* story? The story that would prove to her colleagues that she could turn her hand to almost anything.

This was harder than they realised, those other journalists whose only job was to record what was said in parliament or at court. There the story was handed to them on a platter. But here? These people had suffered, they had lived through the Holocaust for God's sake. You couldn't just grab one and ask them what it felt like. This was what took real skill – forming that connection, encouraging them to talk. And then the writing. That had always been her expertise. Capturing a lifetime's experience and trauma in a few hundred carefully chosen words. She would chip away at the sentences until they were right, until the narrative sang. Not everyone could do that. Not as well as she could, anyway.

She glanced down at the still empty page of her notepad. She would find the story. She always did. She was a good journalist; better than they knew.

The organiser finished speaking and placed his hands gently on the lectern. For a moment, a respectful silence echoed around the room until, as if on starter's orders, the journalists stood and moved as one towards the survivors, like seagulls swooping on fish. Kate sat back, watching the television reporters divide their spoils, hiving off interviewees into exclusive corners of the room. Just be patient, she told herself; it's going to happen. The story always found her, she just needed to hold her nerve. Scully was standing in the aisle, arms folded across his chest and the camera hanging loose off his shoulder, waiting for her to make her move. She glanced around. There weren't many survivors left to interview.

An older lady to her right smiled at her – a warm, gentle smile.

'Quite a speech.' Kate smiled back at her, encouragingly.

'Oh yes, he spoke very well.'

The lady's head was bent forward; her grey hair was pulled neatly into a bun at the base of her neck, a style she had probably worn all her life. Her skin was now thin and taut over her high cheekbones and

there was a hint of fleshiness about her nose and jowls, but the set of her mouth, the straightness of her back, the scarf elegantly draped around her neck, implied her former beauty.

'What brings you here today?' Kate asked. Keep it fresh and friendly; wait for something significant to be said.

The lady smiled again, perhaps with embarrassment. 'I was in a camp in Poland. I lost my mother and my grandmother. My stepfather, too.'

Kate hesitated for a moment, unsure what to say. 'How awful for you.' She was aware how inadequate she sounded.

The lady extended a thin arm. 'I am Maria. You may call me Maya.'

Kate glanced at the tip of the lady's handkerchief poking out of her sleeve, but there were no tattooed numbers that she could see. A diamond bracelet glinted on her wrist.

'Which camp were you at?' asked Kate.

Maya smoothed her skirt. 'I was in a small labour camp in east Poland. I lived there for more than a year. One of the guards fell in love with me and helped me to escape.'

Kate's stomach clenched with the thrill. What a story! The rush was better than any drug. 'I'd love to hear about it,' she said, taking out her notepad and beckoning Scully with her eyes.