

In the Wilderness with Karkani

Part One - My wilderness

Chapter One

She took the DVD which contained my autobiography and went home. I saw Karkani several times after that but she never mentioned anything about my autobiography until about two weeks later. She came round to my place and told me that she understood its construction, although it wasn't like a traditional autobiography. It wasn't meant to be I told her.

Yes, she agreed, you aren't really a traditional person are you?

I went to the fridge and got her bottle of wine out. It was half full, with the cork sticking out. I poured her a glass and took it to her. Personally, I don't drink for the taste, just the effect, so I got myself a tin of beer. I have been trying to function like a regular human by restricting myself to lower strength stuff. Even if you are an alcoholic, sometimes it's good to come round a bit from time to time.

The problem though, she began, is that I don't think it's complete. There are gaps in your story.

This isn't the first autobiography I've written I replied. The first one was when I was about seventeen and contained more than a thousand poems. I typed them out on my sister in law's typewriter, went to W H Smith's, and bought a folder and a stencilling set. I stencilled on the front 'the complete works' and then took the folder out into the back garden and burned everything. It was very satisfying. I wrote another about ten years later and got rid of it as well.

Karkani was a bit reflective as she sipped her wine. What is it about some people who can just sip? I have to gulp.

Why didn't you keep them?

Some writing for me is therapeutic I told her. We sat together on the sofa drinking and chatting for an hour or so. In the end, and I'm not sure how it happened, we had made some decisions.

The upshot of it all was that I should try to 'fill in the gaps' somehow, and she would help me. Added to that, we should go away somewhere because that might make it easier to relax into the task. We had spoken often about a wilderness trip but she was a novice, had not hiked, trekked or roughed it before. But, she was a freelance something or other, and had all the skills to record and elicit thoughts out of my head and onto her digital recorder. I love hiking and backpacking and in the end it was all agreed.

I have been backpacking with girls before, and usually regretted it because they generally want to take everything including the kitchen sink with them, and take a long time doing stuff because they want to look the part as well. Apparently, a girl has to be at least partially made up with creams and lipstick before she can take the tent down. Or am I just being stereotypical and sexist? Anyway, Karkani was no different. She usually wore her hair loose, and it went down past her shoulders. She was always made up properly and smelled of a bowl of fruit or something similar.

After a few beers I fell easily into my intrepid explorer guise and told her a few 'essential' tips.

Firstly, I began, we must travel light and only carry the essentials. And if you take extra clothes, make up, and stuff, you will have to carry it all yourself. There's no room for extras and you soon realise the weight once you've been walking for a few miles. And I am not a gentleman who might take pity on you. She glared at me and then looked witheringly. I should say at this point that she can't really glare as some girls can. Her glare still betrays a soft femininity and it makes me smile. I haven't told her that in case she starts practicing real glaring in front of the mirror.

Have you got some good walking shoes or boots? I asked her about clothes and equipment as well. She agreed to bring everything she thought appropriate to my place in a few days so I could 'inspect' them. She really did say 'inspect' just to make the point that I was treating her like a little girl.

It took us a few weeks to get sorted. I like to think that I'm retired and she sees herself as freelance, so we had nothing to stop us going whenever we chose. She did want to know when we would return and I said it might be reasonable to agree on seven to ten days. We could of course return at any time if we wished.

Chapter Two

We got a lift to an appropriate dropping off point and then were on our own. Her rucksack was a bit lighter than mine because I was carrying the tent. In line with our sharing policy, she was carrying more of the back-up food supplies and other bits of stuff. It was about eleven o'clock when we started, on a bright and warm morning.

One thing you have to realise in the hills is that the weather can change very quickly sometimes, and it did for us. We had been walking up a steep incline for about forty five minutes and the weather had changed to low clouds and greyness. Then it started spitting with rain, not enough to soak us, but enough to make us aware of the deteriorating day. I stopped, dropped my rucksack, and took my trousers off. Then I opened my rucksack, took my shorts out and put them on, at the same time stuffing my trousers into the sack. All this time, I realised, Karkani was looking at me in a bemused way until I told her to take her trousers off as well. Don't argue, just do it. I'll tell you later. There was no point talking now. She did as asked and revealed her long legs and small flowery patterned knickers. Very nice I thought. Then she paused to choose one of the two pairs of shorts she had taken out. The rain was getting worse so I bundled up her trousers and snatching away one pair of shorts, roughly packed her sack and fastened down the flap.

We carried on up the hill and were soon at the top. All this time I had been looking for shelter but there weren't any trees, rock shelters or anything. Looking down from the top I could see some rocks jutting out from the hillside below us and to my left and pointing to them, we set off quickly. The shelter was nothing to write home about, just a rock jutting out a few feet from the hillside but it was adequate. We sat down and remained quiet for a few minutes, just watching and listening to the rain coming down.

I got the little gas burner out, and the pan, poured the water from my water bottle in and lit it. We had two plastic cups, one that fitted into the other to save space. In true equal shares spirit we had agreed that we would swap the cups each time we made a drink. I gave Karkani the larger one but she said I should have it because I had made the tea. I didn't argue but, taking the drink, posed a question to her instead. Why did I ask you to take your trousers off?

So you could admire my legs? She ventured.

Well, I started, that was a bonus, but no, it's not the right answer. She didn't have a clue so I explained it to her. If your trousers get wet it will take a long time to dry them out, especially if the weather remains like this. Your shorts will dry quickly. So, if it's not a cold day, it's better to hike in shorts if it's wet. And you can wear the trousers at other times because they will be dry. She suddenly turned to her rucksack and pulled her trousers out. Surprisingly, at least for me, she started smoothing out the wrinkles and then carefully folded them and returned them lovingly into the rucksack. I had always accepted that clothes in a rucksack were meant to come out crumpled.

I had always planned that the first day's hiking would be a short one but not this short. It is a good idea to keep it short because it lets each person ease into the adventure, and is a good opportunity to check and test everything out to make sure that everything needed is packed and works. We stayed in the shelter of the rock for more than an hour. It looked like the rain was set in for the day and so we decided to find a suitable place and set up camp. Karkani didn't want to wait at the shelter whilst I went further down the hillside to identify a suitable spot, so we set off together. I was looking for the three criteria needed for a good camp site. We needed to be near a source of fresh water, have level ground to put up the tent, and find some dried wood to make a fire. We didn't need a fire to cook because we had the gas burner but it is very good for the adventurer's spirit, and morale, to have a real fire.

I put the tent up, although we had agreed that for the first few times we would put it up together, to get the hang of it. The rain made such simple ideas impractical. As soon as it was up, we both got in out of the weather and sat there squashed in with our rucksacks. Yes, I agreed, it was a bit cosy. I always smile inside when people use the word cosy in this sense, just to be polite.

It was too early to settle down, just about three o'clock. We sat in our tent and I for one felt quite good about it. We can go for a bit of exploring if it stops raining, I said hopefully. In the end it didn't stop raining so we unpacked and set up our camp. We sat at the edge of the entrance, just inside, spread our sleeping bags out, set up the gas burner at the entrance, and looked through our equipment and supplies. I put the torch by the entrance flap, in case you need to go out in the night, I said. She understood. But it wasn't until the morning that she realised the full extent of doing your business in the wild. I found it really surprising that she thought about things as they came up and often didn't appreciate them in advance.

What about food? She asked.

Well it's going to have to be half a tin of cooked meat each but I have brought something else as well. I got out a small wholemeal loaf; but no butter. And now for something to warm you up. I slid the bottle of whisky out of my sleeping bag.

We had discussed drinking on the trip and I had explained the rules, although she didn't really need to know because she didn't have to drink. The rules, I explained are no alcohol during the day, except perhaps a drink if we came across a bar or similar. Then we could have one or two drinks each. The strong stuff can only be enjoyed after we have identified a camping site, set everything up and decided what we are going to eat in the evening. Then we can drink, although within limits. She had agreed to help me keep within the limits and I, in turn, agreed to try to follow her guidance if I was going too far.

She wasn't one for whisky but had a little bit mixed with a lot of water. She didn't like it even then. I, on the other hand, had a big snort followed by another later on. It was enough, just, to keep me happy. I opened the tin of cooked ham and cut it roughly in half, and did the same with the bread.

The idea about food was that I planned our route so that we would pass close by at least one village every day. If we could find a butchers or bakers we could buy enough fresh food to last the rest of the day. The tins were mainly for times when nothing else was available, like this, our first day out. Karkani expected butter and nicely laid out sandwiches. I promised it would get better, and she reluctantly and hesitantly started eating. I must say that I enjoyed the meal more than it deserved.

After our feast, well you've got to smile; Karkani said that we should remember why we had come on this trek. Well, I said, I don't know how it's going to happen. The creativity can't just be turned on whenever you want. She said that she could ask me questions, record it on her digital recorder and then we might do something with it later. I found out that although I was in charge during the day, the evenings belonged to her. She would quiz me, nudge me along, and tire me out. Despite my few grumbles though, it was quite pleasant.

Before we start, I said, do you know the best way to lay out the sleeping bags? She just stared back at me after glancing at the two neatly laid bags. Well, I continued, it is possible to zip them together so we can sleep together. I showed her and she seemed pleased with the revelation. Now I am all yours for the first interrogation, I declared.

Chapter Three

I just lay there on top of the newly arranged bedding and she sat up by the entrance ready to begin. I kept quiet and was quite happy to lay there. Right, she said decisively, where can we start? After a bit of giggling from me she brought me back to reality with the words, we will start at the beginning. I was just engulfed in mirth and had difficulty being at all serious.

When did you write your first poem?

Ah! I remember that, I said. I was five and at nursery school. The teacher wrote the words

Hubble bubble
Toil and trouble

on the blackboard and told all the children to copy it down. No-one knew what it meant but when you're five you just follow what you're told. But, instead of writing that, I wrote my own poem. I think it had the same first line but the second was different. I do remember it rhymed. It is the only poem I have ever written that rhymes. I got told off for that but I could never understand why I should have been told off for being original. Anyway that is the answer to your question. By the way, how long will your recorder work for. She told me the memory was massive and in any case if she found an internet café, she would email her work to herself and then clear the memory to carry on. I had never come across an internet café on my travels in these parts, but didn't say anything to her.

What else do you remember from your junior school days?

Nothing really. I do remember that one day when I was 11 I went to school and the whole class had a test. Later, we were told it was the 11+ and we would all be going to the secondary school instead of grammar school. It made no difference to me. I didn't know the difference. After that, I went to the secondary school.

What's your first memory there?

Nothing happened until the third year. That's when I discovered girls.

I was wondering how long it would take you to get on to your favourite subject, she said in an 'I know you inside out' kind of way.

Well, there you are, I declared, and threw my arms up into the air in triumph and nearly uprooted the tent. I was questioned at length about my first romantic experience, with Tammy.

Poems for Tammy

I was in a shop recently
When I saw Maltesers
On special offer.
They were only £1
For a box.
I was taken back to 1973
When I gathered up all
My pocket money
All 32p of it,
And bought you a box
Of Maltesers
To try to tell you
I loved you.
That's not a bad
Inflation rate for Maltesers
Is it?
After all these years.

When I worked in Bradford
There was a shop
I used to pass in my car.
It was called Tammy's.
I always thought it
Might be you
Sending me a message
After all these years.
I fantasised that you
Still yearned for me.
I thought about going in
But then thought you probably
Had half a dozen kids by now
And we would both be
Fat and buggered up
By life.
I decided I would
Rather remember you
As you were when you
Were fifteen
And I was thirteen.

You know,
I always had a
Secret desire for Nargis.
She was always nearby
As your best friend.
Was she hoping for
A first love?
I always wondered
And sometimes thought
She was thinking
About me.

Before we went to bed, I insisted on Karkani showing me her feet. I explained to her how I had gone out hiking with a friend many years ago. After the first day, he had blisters. By the time he took his boots off on the second evening his blisters had burst and his socks were soaked in blood. That was the end of his trip. Karkani's feet were fine. I told her that problems occur for one of two reasons. The first is that the person has hardly ever walked. The second is if the boots or shoes are new and haven't had time to soften up and shape to the feet.

Although we had not really done much walking, we slept very well, warm, as the night came on, and the soothing rhythm of the rain on our tent.

Chapter Four

I have never come across a woman who wakes up before I do in the morning and Karkani is no different. The sun was just up and the tent was full of light. I got up as quietly and carefully as I could and headed out into the morning air. After a while I went down to the stream and filled the small pan with water. Although it had rained nearly all night, the stream was still as quiet and peaceful as the day before. I made tea and then sat at the entrance of the tent and watched Karkani sleep the sleep of the innocent. Karkani is originally from Fujairah, which is one of the emirates in the country known by us as the United Arab Emirates. It is very small and if you look at a map of it, it is in the far north east of the country. Karkani is not her birth name, and for some reason that I don't know, her name was changed. Her present name comes from pre-Islam, I think. You can see a tourist summary of Fujairah below:

The pace of life in Fujairah is relaxed. The city faces the Indian Ocean and is protected from the rest of the Arabian Peninsula by the Hajar mountain range. It is the only emirate of the UAE not located on the Arabian Gulf. The Arabs of the east coast are Sharqiyyin, who trace their origins back to Yemen, and the great Hinawi-Ghafiri tribes that divided southeastern Arabia during the 17th century. They are of the Azdite group of Arab tribes, descended from Fahm bin Malik. Their arrival in the area around 570, followed the collapse of Saba's Great Dam of Marib. Their cousins are the Shihuh, an important tribe that continues to populate the Musandam Peninsula north of Dibba and Ras Al Khaimah.

The strength of the Sharqiyyin lay in their control of Wadi Ham, which runs from Fujairah past Bitnah and Masafi to link with Wadi Siji where it continues onto desert plains. Wadi Ham has been the site of many battles down the centuries. Apart from the trade route from Ras Al Khaimah to Dibba it was the only means of access to the Gulf of Oman from the western regions. Although the Persians, Portuguese and Dutch had a presence on the east coast, the remoteness of the mountains has enabled the people of Fujairah to protect themselves against foreign rule....



I woke her up and presented her with a hot, sugary, cup of tea, just as she likes. She sat up and was childlike in her waking routine, blinking at the bright tent lit by the sun.

What time is it? She asked.

It's just after six, I replied. She was not impressed but I told her that it was fairly normal to get up at this time when you're in the wilderness. We have to make breakfast, sort ourselves out, take down the tent and pack our bags. Then we have to make sure we leave the site just as we found it. It will take us the best part of two hours, and eight o'clock is not an unreasonable time to start walking.

I gave her the benefit of the doubt and did most of the early morning stuff myself. We had a bit of bread left over from the night before so I made some soup from our powdered supply. It's not really a good breakfast but I knew we would get to a village by about eleven o'clock and then we could get whatever we wanted. Karkani was away for a while, doing various things, I imagine, and came back with water drops in her hair after a wash in the stream. We breakfasted in silence. I was just hoping she wouldn't feel that this kind of adventure was not for her until I had a chance to impress her with fine views and good food.

Chapter Five

We set off at around eight, just as I had predicted. Karkani wore her trousers from yesterday. I had never thought of her as being shy or reserved. She said it was because it was still cool this morning. After the climb of the first day, the terrain now was quite easy. I reflected that everything that could go wrong had done so up until now; a steep climb, rain, and two poor meals. I was determined to make it up to her.

She cheered up as we saw a forested area opening up on our left, and a lake spreading out to our right.

It's beautiful, she said. We sat on a rock and took in the view for a while and then I rallied her to her feet with promises of a village. I just hoped it had a good shop or two because I didn't really remember. I crossed my fingers and almost prayed. Soon, we saw a change in the landscape; fields were appearing all around.

Look, I pointed, can you see the village? She could see the rooftops she said and we were spurred on.

Our luck was changing. The village had a small square and there were quite a few shops. Some were clearly for the tourist trade but there were a butcher's and a baker's shop.

Right, I said with a confidence I hadn't had for a long time, get whatever you like. Remember, we need supplies for the rest of today, and if possible something that will still be good to eat for breakfast tomorrow. I got two pies and a few fresh brown bread rolls. She wanted salads and fruit but also got a sandwich. We couldn't decide what would be good for breakfast so we ended up buying a few more rolls and some cheese. I wasn't sure the cheese would last but we kept it wrapped and put it in a side pocket in my rucksack. I found a tin of cooked meat to replace the emergency supplies we had raided last night. It is very important to maintain these kinds of things just in case. Then Karkani revealed her sweet tooth and bought some chocolate bars. We sat on a bench in the square and ate enthusiastically, without any words.

In the afternoon, when the signs of human activity had disappeared from view, we found ourselves walking in the bottom of a v shaped valley. The sides were very steep and the only way to go was along the bottom. There was a bubbling stream to accompany us and we stopped for a while to dip our feet in the water and splash each other when the urge became unstoppable. Karkani had cheered up so much as the day progressed; good walking, good food, and beautiful scenery. She had a smile as big as I had ever seen and a happy-go-lucky, almost skipping walk.

I was thinking of the camp site for the night and looking out for the signs. I saw a dead tree, the only tree in sight, up ahead. It looks like we can have a real fire tonight, I told her. We stopped for a while as I broke off some branches and twigs. The wood was very dry, light in weight, and it was easily collected. Karkani sat on a nearby rock swinging her feet side to side; she was really very childlike and carefree. We shared some of the fruit she had bought and then walked on.

We stopped at about five o'clock. There was only one flat spot, just about perfect for our purposes. The stream we had been following was only a few yards away, and there was plenty of wood for a fire. Karkani said she would put the tent up, and I liked the idea. I sat and watched her. It made me feel very masterful to have her do the work. She did it very well although I did help her by holding the frame whilst she spread the topsheet out. She pegged everything down quite expertly and then got the gas burner out to make tea.

Are we using the fire for cooking, she asked.

No, I replied, we'll just use it in the evening. So she made tea and we enjoyed the moment.

As the sun disappeared over the hillside, the day started to cool down, and I started on the fire. It was now Karkani's turn to sit and watch.

The secret, I said, is to clear the dry grass away from the fire area so there isn't any chance of starting a wildfire. Then the fire should be built quite small so it will last longer and not burn down our tent. We can keep adding wood to the fire as it needs it. We had brought a box of matches wrapped in a plastic bag, but also a few lighters. The wood was so dry that it caught easily. There is nothing as welcoming as a fire when you are out in the wilderness. As it got dark, the light of the flames danced across Karkani's features.

Chapter Six

This fire reminds me of my travels in the desert, she said.

Tell me about them, I began, but she broke me off and reminded me that it was my time to spill the beans.

I'll tell you later, she added, and so we began the second night of questions and answers.

You know, I said, your system is working because I know what I want to talk about; things have been developing inside me all day.

She was pleased by this and quite formally spoke into her recorder 'Day two' and said I could begin.

It's a bit frightening at the end, I stated quite clearly.

It's OK she said, because you are here with me and I am a daughter of Fujairah. We are hard to scare.

It happened in 1979. I was at university and had a girlfriend that started as a one night stand. I woke up one morning with a girl asleep next to me. I couldn't remember how or where or what had gone on the previous night, only that here I was in my own room next to this girl I didn't know. The first thing that made me anxious wasn't whether we had done anything or not; instead it was a feeling of guilt that I couldn't remember who she was, not even her name.

I thought and thought, but everything was a blank. I got up quietly and went next door to my friend's room. Waking him up, I asked him what her name was. I didn't ask about what had happened; that could wait for later. How the hell should I know, he blurted out from his sleepiness, you are the one that went to bed with her. I went to another friend's room. He had been with us as well. He was a bit more amenable and said he thought it was Carol. Thought! I exclaimed. What if it isn't and I call her that? I was a bit panicky now. You have to remember I was only nineteen at the time. That's the best I can do, he said and turned into his duvet to go back to sleep.

She woke up and I tried to think of a way to get her to say her name but if you've ever tried that, it is impossible. What question can you ask to elicit that information without making her suspicious? We had a cup of tea and then she got dressed. I was getting a bit excited at her matter of fact way about dressing in front of me but had to concentrate on the matter in hand. In a bit of a nervous outburst I said a sentence, I can't remember what, and ended with the word 'Carol'. I was almost shaking, but she turned around and carried on as normal. I sighed a massive sigh of relief and it took me about ten minutes to calm down from the ordeal.

Anyway, one thing led to another and we were a couple. We had both paid our rent one term in advance and so we lived together by moving in to mine for a bit and then moving into her flat for a few weeks, and so on. She was well off because both her parents were doctors, so her flat was much better than mine.

The best memories I have is a regular event that took place. In between her flat and mine there was a park with a lake and rowing boats. We would get a bottle of wine and two glasses, which she would hide in her over sized handbag, and then I would pay the chap at the entrance, and we would row out. In the middle of the lake there was a small island which was banned to rowers because it was a nature reserve mainly for birds. But if I rowed around the other side, so the man in charge couldn't see us, we could row up to the little island and sit there drinking wine, and enjoying our privacy.

I became quiet and reflective. Karkani eventually broke the moment by saying, that's very romantic. But it wasn't too frightening. I'm coming to that bit, I said.

Carol lived on the seventh floor of university halls of residence. The floors were alternately all male, then all female. One event occurred that frightened everyone to death, well almost. There was someone, a man, who had the master key to all rooms in the building. No-one knew who he was. What he did was to enter a girl's room in

the middle of the night and just sit on the edge of her bed and watch her sleeping. He didn't touch her, or anything else, just looked.

That is frightening, whispered Karkani in a low and concerned way.

Well, as you can imagine, no girl would sleep alone. Those who had boyfriends would either sleep at the boyfriend's flat or insist that the boyfriend slept at her place. The girls without boyfriends slept together in two's or more. I slept at Carol's because she said she had too much stuff to move to my place for any length of time. The security was increased and lots of night time activity from security staff went on. This didn't do anything to lower the fear factor because when we were in her flat we didn't know whether the footsteps outside were security or prowler. In any case, no one knew for sure that the prowler wasn't one of the security staff himself.

On the good side, however, it was good for us boys because we didn't have to try to get into bed with our girlfriends. It was all so easy as trembling girls held on to us all night. One night, the fire alarm went off. We went and stood outside the door, but no one was interested in evacuating the building. On this exclusive female floor there were more boys than girls. All the boys just looked round, saw the ratio, and then sheepishly looked anywhere else they could. We were all more than a bit embarrassed.

Sometimes I would leave her place quite early to get back to my flat. It would be light outside and the prowler was never known to be active after dawn, but when I went down in the lift the hair would stand up on the back of my neck with foreboding. I always fantasised that the lift would stop at a floor below and as the door opened, the prowler would be there, staring into my eyes. I still get nervous now, thinking about it.

And you know what? The prowling stopped after a while, but no one was ever caught. Now, I added, is the daughter of Fujairah as brave as she said she was? The flames from the fire looked more sinister now, and in true ghost story style, Karkani moved closer to me. It was going to be a very clingy night, I could tell.

Carol – How we met

The way I fell into your arms
Started on Hadrian's Wall.
Rachel, from Devon
Said she had been to Johannesburg
And all the blacks she had seen
Were quite happy.
I told her
They had to smile
Or they'd be out of a job.
She never understood politics
And so
I suppose it was inevitable

That her body alone would not be
Enough.
So one day
We stood on Hadrian's Wall
And had a massive bust up
In front of a coach load
Of tourists.
And then you fell
Into my bed.

Carol - A sheltered life

You truly had
A sheltered life
Until you met me.
I took you to your first
Football match.
It was a real pity
That your initiation
To the greatest game on Earth
Should have been Newcastle
And West Ham
And that a petrol bomb
Was thrown into the away
Supporters.
You didn't shake with terror
Too much though.

Carol – Something interesting

I said let's do something
Interesting tonight
And you being the trusting
Fool that you are,
Agreed.
We went to the railway station
And I said we will go to London
To feed the pelicans in
St James' Park.
It's a long way
From Newcastle to London
Just to crumble up
A few slices of bread
But we did it
And it was great fun.
You never really got
The fun of it
Like I did.

Carol - Geordies

Another evening I said
Let's go to the railway station
And get the first train out.
Despite your experiences
With me,
You agreed again!
It was the midnight post train
To Peterborough.
I was the only
Brown man,
And you were the only
Female on the train.
The other thousand or so
Passengers
Were well tanked up
Newcastle fans
On their way to
The Cambridge match.
Now, wasn't that
A fun journey?

Carol – Rowing boats

Our favourite pastime
Was drinking wine
On the lake.
I would row out
And always be surprised at
How the atmosphere
Suddenly changed.
The silence of the lake
The romance of the water
Lapping up against
Our little boat.
You, looking pretty
And me
Dreaming on.

Carol – Going blind

You told me
You had a degenerative disease.
By the time you were
Thirty
You would be blind.
By now you will
Have been blind for
Nearly twenty years.
I always admired your
Matter of factness
About it all.
I wonder if you still
See my image in your heart.

Chapter Seven

I woke up feeling like a snake was trying to crush the life out of me. The brave daughter of Fujairah had held on to me all night and although her features were as relaxed as ever, the crushing grip of her arms were vice like. I managed to extricate myself.

After breakfast and packing up we were ready to set off when Karkani commented;
You know I am very happy with all this....
I knew then that the 'but' word was coming.
She went on; but I really need a shower and somewhere proper to sort my clothes out.

Ha! I exclaimed. I have a surprise for you later on today that will fulfil all your dreams and expectations. Just trust me. Do you trust me?
She squeezed my arm and stared deeply into my eyes. Of course I do, and then she kissed me. This was something new. She is very unreserved in bed but usually doesn't express herself like this otherwise. I put it down to the cheese at breakfast. That made me smile and to hide my mirth, I walked off, my back to her. She fell into step and off we went.

I told her; soon we will come to a road. There is only the one road that passes through here. We will cross it and then there is a small village a bit further on.

A lake was beginning to open up in front, and in the far distance for the first time, except in the villages, I saw a person, fishing. There would be much more interactions with people from now on, as the untamed hills were replaced by fields with sheep and cows, and we would see the odd farmhouse. Further on, the wilderness would open up again.

We saw the rooftops of the village and headed there. There was only one shop, a general store, and very little fresh food. Karkani was disappointed but put on a brave face. I think she was looking forward to fresh fruit again but, except for a few mouldy offerings, most of the food on offer was in tins. I told her to just buy enough for lunch, because I had a treat in store for her later. This reminder of what was to come cheered her up again. Tell me what the treat is, she implored me with quizzical eyes. She knew I wouldn't tell her and even her feminine wiles were not enough.

We walked on, and followed a path around a green grassy hill. We came to a point where the path split into two and I asked her which one she preferred. One went gently downhill and disappeared around a curve of the hill. The other one turned sharply up to the top and looked very unappetising.

As I expected she pointed hesitantly at the gentle downhill slope and then, seeing my reaction said, that's not the one, is it? I told her how many people got it wrong.

Almost everyone chooses the one you said, I began. Actually both paths lead to the same place. The uphill one looks worse but is very short, and the downhill one takes about another hour to get to the same place. Of course, I continued, we could take your choice of path, but if we go uphill your surprise is only twenty minutes away. She didn't need any more words, and set off in front of me up the steep incline.

At the top as we both paused for breath, she looked down onto the scene below, of a full sized camp site next to village where we could see people, shops and even two restaurants. It didn't take long to get down to the camp site. I told her what was available. Over there, I said, pointing to some plain looking buildings, are showers, washing machines and dryers. Then, around the corner there is a shop that sells camping supplies and food. I'll put up the tent and all that, while you do what it is you have in mind. She didn't need a second word, and was off to explore.

I paid for the camp site space for two nights. There is a lot of walking and interesting places around here, so I thought we would use the camp site as a base. It's not really my cup of tea; I prefer backpacking away from civilisation but I had to think about Karkani's needs as well. She was really at home. She hired towels and bought a shower cap, bought some small sachets of shampoo and whatever else she required and skipped off to the showers, emerging an hour or so later, smelling like a bowl of fruit. Her face was pink from the hot water and she had a big bag of plums in her hand. I was just overwhelmed by her lustre and exuberance. She behaved like someone who had been freed from a prison, or a life sentence, or something similar. Later, she insisted that the whole experience was brilliant but I was doubtful of her sincerity.

That's surprise part one, I said. Part two is tonight.

Are you being vulgar? She wasn't used to references to bedroom activity out loud. No, that's even later on, I said. Part two is over there. I swept my hand towards the village. You might not have noticed the river that feeds into the lake we passed earlier. She admitted that she couldn't remember the river. Well, I continued, that river comes past the village on the other side and there is a very good fish restaurant nearby. All the fish are caught and cooked absolutely fresh. People travel for miles to eat there. And tonight it's goodbye to tins and bread rolls. I felt very magnanimous. She was pretty pleased as well.

It was still only about five o'clock and we had the tent set up, and the evening planned. So for the next few hours, Karkani diligently worked me over with questions.

What do you want to recollect this evening, she probed. Nothing on my mind really, I replied. I was just happy to be here and to see her contentment.

OK then, I'll ask you some questions. She paused for quite a while then asked; tell me about your first marriage.

That topic only causes me pain so I didn't answer. Instead I said; I don't want to talk about that but I can tell you the first time I nearly got engaged, and my narrow escape. She was ready and spoke into her recorder 'day three'.

It happened in 1978. She was called Mandy. Her full name was Amanda. It was late April and lessons were coming to an end. We would have a few months of revision before taking our A-Levels. It meant we didn't have to attend lessons or even go to college. We could revise at home. I was close to Mandy and asked her if it was a good idea to revise together. She thought it might be worth a go but we had to keep our minds on revision and nothing else. I agreed, of course, but had my own intentions clearly set in my mind.

We agreed to meet at a local beauty spot which was about two miles from my house and about a mile from hers. There was hardly anyone that passed through there, except a few dog walkers from time to time. Anyway, the first meeting was pretty dry and businesslike. I realised I would have to make the first move and did, at the second meeting. We just kissed and stuff, nothing really over the top. She did complain half heartedly that we should be revising but I knew I had her, and I knew she enjoyed it.

Soon, the alarm bells began to ring. We had met every day for a few weeks and she was in love with me. I liked her a lot but my main problem was that in the Indian community in those days you could get chopped up for less. She started telling me about her cousin who had just got engaged and it wasn't long before the subject changed to us and our future. I was out of my depth. Sex was one thing, but engaged at eighteen was something else. And we would probably end up going to different universities, or would one of us have to sacrifice our choices for the other? It was a bit much for me to take in at the time and so I became a lot keener on revising when we met.

I had opened a door for her that she had not ever tried to open before, and she wasn't going to let me have my way with her without some payback. It was fun whilst it lasted but after a while I knew it had to end. The problem was, though, that it was so easy with her and you have to remember I was just about eighteen years old. If you get it on a plate.... I realised I was getting 'vulgar' as Karkani would have put it, and stopped talking.

Well, go on, she insisted.

We went our separate ways after the exams and although she wanted me, I forced myself to avoid her. It wasn't difficult after a while because I met Louise. She was blonde with bright blue eyes and very beautiful.

Tell me about her.

I'll tell you about her later. For now, I'll just finish this story off. I went on a university course in 2003, half a day a week, and there was a woman on it called Amanda. I didn't recognise her but she recognised me. It took me about three months on the course before I realised who she was, and it made me feel very uncomfortable. Although it had been...how many years? I calculated...25 years since I saw her last, it was unforgivable to meet someone I nearly got engaged to and not remember them. Anyway, once I knew, I spoke to her. I didn't mention our relationship at all, just made up some excuses about memory issues that made me forget things. I made it out as a medical reason. It didn't matter in the end because I had hurt her in 1978. She's married now, with two children, and works in a hospital.

The less I say about Karkani getting ready for the evening, the better. It always frustrates me that girls take so long. Anyway, she finally presented herself and had a fine patterned purply blue shawl thrown over her shoulder. That's not standard issue camping attire, I said, trying to be firm, but I was impressed. We walked across the village streets and to the river. I thought we could get a view of the river at sunset first. It was beautiful; about twenty five feet in width and disappearing round a bend about a quarter of a mile downstream. Look up there, I pointed back upriver. The restaurant had changed since I had last been there. Now, it had an extension that stretched over a part of the river. It was an outdoor restaurant added to the existing indoor one. We got a table outside. It was a bit chilly by the time we had finished but still I preferred it to sitting inside.

Something you cannot write in a script happened that really made it perfect. While we were dining, the moon appeared over the hillside. It was a heavy round full moon that sat low in the sky.

What do you want to do now? I asked her. Karkani just took my hand and asked me to lead on. We went to a fancy bar and had some drinks, (I had already had a big slug of whisky before we set off for the restaurant, and some wine with the meal). Then to end the evening on a light and humorous note, I asked Karkani to lead me back to our tent. It was hilarious. She couldn't even find the campsite, although the whole place was fairly small. After retracing our steps a few times from clearly small village tracks, she found the camp site and had it not been for me stopping her, we would have gone into a tent that belonged to someone else. She really doesn't pay much attention. I think she has placed all responsibility on me, except the recollections. I don't mind being in charge.

Chapter Eight

In the morning, we lay in the sleeping bags. I had got up and made tea on the gas burner. Although the showers and toilets were open twenty four hours a day, the café and the shops didn't open till eight. Karkani was looking pretty. I told her the itinerary for the day. Until now she hadn't asked and I hadn't told her what we were doing each day. Even though she hadn't asked this morning either, I thought I'd tell her anyway.

Well, my princess from Fujairah, do you want to know what I have planned for today?

If you want to tell me, she said.

Well, I began, we have toilets and showers available all day today and for tomorrow morning. That's as long as we stay here. So, unless you want several showers, we could sort ourselves out and go exploring. We will leave the tent up, and one rucksack here. There's a walk over the hills. It's in the other direction from the river; three miles or so walk there, and the same back.

What's on the walk? She asked, a bit indifferently. I think she secretly just wanted to stay at this camp site. I can't blame her, but we are here to do more than sit in a tent or eat meals in fancy restaurants.

You don't sound very interested, I pointed out.

No, really, I am. She never wanted to deprive me of my enjoyment.

Well, I'm not going to tell you unless you ask me nicely and show some interest. I was being deliberately obstinate. She turned to me and we locked eyes and I knew I couldn't keep anything from her. Well, I began again, there is a little village on the other side that is actually almost the size of a small town. There are lots of bars and restaurants and tourist shops. I hadn't ignited her interest yet because all those things were also available here. She tried to show enthusiasm, though.

I stopped talking to raise the expectation, and when I failed miserably, I went on. The real reason I want to go there is because there is one particular shop I want to go to and where I can get something for you. She perked up at the thought of shopping and presents. Someone thought it might be a good idea to open the shop which sells Indian artefacts and some ordinary touristy stuff. I don't know why they should open the shop in that village because it hasn't really got anything that represents this area or the wilderness. In one corner of the shop there is a glass wall cabinet with jewellery in it. Now she was all ears. Karkani's jewellery collection is mainly gold, which isn't bad but I have a weakness for Rajasthani jewellery that is often silver. Rajasthani earrings are quite long and hit the spot for me where others fail to reach.

She was up and showered and ready much sooner than usual. Gallantly, I carried our one backpack. And we left the other in the tent. One thing about campsites in the wilderness is that there is very little crime and I have often left things behind and the tent up to return to the same, with nothing missing. The walk itself is through farm fields for the most part, and easy going. Eventually, the fields end and then it is tracks, a bit uneven but quite easy. From the top of the hill, the journey down to the village we were visiting was the same. Lots of people make this journey because it is easy and because there are things to do and see in both villages.

Do you want me to carry the pack? She asked me and I fantasised about that for a while. I could see her laden with the pack whilst I sauntered along, the master of the moment.

No, I said, as the man in me overcame the fantasist. She had made the offer and I knew she wouldn't risk it a second time. Anyway it wasn't heavy. When we got to the village she understood why I had said that it was nearly the size of a town. There were a few buses and occasionally even a taxi; lots of eating places, and shops loaded with tourist stuff including postcards and little models and statues. Magnanimously, I

asked, what do you want to do first? I knew she wanted to go to the jewellery shop but also knew she would never say it and appear greedy. The daytime belongs to you, so you take me where you want, She said.

We wandered around in some shops for a bit, but they were very similar to each other, and eventually I decided a drink and snacks were called for and so I took Karkani to a place that turned out to be fairly modest. After that we found ourselves in the jewellery shop. She saw the cabinet and pretended to take her time getting to it. I followed. There, in front of me, I saw exactly what I had been thinking of. Among the various pieces of jewellery, there were the silver dangling earrings. I asked the shop assistant to get them out. Karkani was wide eyed, I was hoping, in a good way. She took off her own small gold ones and I put the Rajasthani ones in her ears. I have never seen her blush so extravagantly ever before. It was worth it just for that. I did fiddle around with them for a bit but when I had finished she looked absolutely fantastic. A mirror was provided and Karkani admired herself for quite a while. She wouldn't wear them out of the shop, but promised she would wear them for me tonight.

We returned at about three thirty in the afternoon and I said I was going to have a lie down. I fell asleep and woke about two hours later. I don't know what Karkani got up to during that time but when I woke up she wasn't in the tent. She came back about twenty minutes later and told me she had just been walking around the village. She had bought some food and we had a little picnic on the grass outside the tent. I know the daytime is for you to decide, but I want to show you something. Of course you can decide, if you want to. I was quite surprised at her words.

We set off and walked past the village. Just before we left she went into a shop and bought some apples. I thought to myself that she must be fruit mad. We walked for just about five minutes and then she led me into a field. There was a bench and we sat down. I was expectant but nothing seemed to be happening. Karkani was quite excited. Look, she said, pointing down the field. I saw horses, four of them, cautiously walking towards us. This is what happened when I came earlier, she said almost in a whisper. The horses were big, the biggest I can remember seeing, and clearly well looked after. Karkani stood up and held out an apple. The boldest horse, although still clearly cautious, approached and Karkani fed it an apple. After that the other three came up and she fed them each an apple and stroked them lovingly. So did I. I don't think I'll ever forget the single tear that Karkani shed. Then she was quiet. I didn't understand and just stood next to her. Later, she told me that she had had some horses of her own as a child. She never talked in detail about her childhood in Fujairah.

In the evening when we had eaten much more modestly than the night before, Karkani got out her recorder and sat down next to me in the tent. She got out the earrings and quietly put them on, as promised, and nearly sent me mad with desire. It was the action of putting them on, the concentration and then the dangling and flashing when she moved her head. Paradise or what....

'Day four' she said into the recorder and then said, now tell me about Louise. What is it about a woman that she never forgets? Had it been me, I don't think I would have remembered a name from an hour ago let alone a name spoken only once, yesterday.

It took me a few moments to settle and then I started. She was the most beautiful girl in the college and everyone wanted her. But I didn't have much trouble beating off the competition. Most people were too shy, I think, whilst I was bold and asked her straight out. She had long blond hair and blue eyes. We went out together during the winter of 1978, one of the coldest on record. I used to wear brown cowboy style boots with gold tips, and denim jacket and trousers. Not to forget the blood red tee shirt that I liked best. She lived up a steep road and I used to walk her home after our night out. I used to slip and slide on the ice, but at that age, you have to look cool.

We used to meet in a bar near her home, about the same distance from my house and hers. We had some drinks, and then we might go on to a restaurant, but not usually nightclubs. I could afford it because I had a part time job. Most of the time we were just happy being in each others company.

What made this relationship memorable was when we made love in a graveyard. At the bottom of her road there was a church and a graveyard. I couldn't take her home; my parents would have killed me. And she didn't really think it would be much better if she took me to her house either. In winter you don't have many choices. If it were summertime we could have gone to the park or some local beauty spot, or anywhere secluded. Near our homes there wasn't really anywhere like that. Anyway, one evening I was taking her home after a night out. When we got to the graveyard I simply led her in. She didn't complain. It was incredibly cold but we managed to do the business. It was really quite good.

I'm not sure that you're the man for me, Karkani interjected and made a face I can only describe as ugly.

The relationship didn't last long, but it was good, and I was a local hero among my friends for having got her in the first place and then for having had sex in a graveyard.

The way it ended was really funny. I have always been popular with girls, and I gave Karkani a 'don't forget how lucky you are' look. She was unflappable. I was seeing three girls at the same time; Louise who was my real girlfriend, a Polish girl with long dark hair and eyes, and another girl who I can't remember anything about. Anyway, they must have talked to each other and realised I was 'cheating'. I always thought that it was because I had too much love to give that drove me into multiple relationships. I didn't neglect any of them. I didn't think I was cheating. That night I had agreed to meet my Polish girlfriend but when I turned up, all three girls were there, sitting together. I knew then that the knives were out but my own reputation was pretty impressive.

I gathered myself and my thoughts and casually walked over to them and nonchalantly asked them if they were OK and could I get them another drink. I think they were surprised at my lack of fear in the face of three girls wronged, but they agreed to a drink. I got them and said I would be with them in a minute and went off as if I were going to the bathroom. There was a phone nearby and I quickly rang two friends, telling them to drop everything and get down here now. I told them to pretend they had just happened to call in and feign surprise when they saw me.

The thirty minutes of waiting for my plan to work, was the longest ever. I made lots of small talk until there wasn't anything else to say, and I couldn't raise the issue of relationships without getting drawn and quartered. For their part, the girls kept trying to drop me in it, so I would be forced into submission, but they were surprisingly calm about it. They must have planned for hours! As my friends arrived, about five minutes apart, I would get up, look surprised and take them to the bar to get a drink. I quickly filled them in about the situation and told them my only option was to make us into three couples. It didn't work, cost a lot of money in drinks, and I lost all three girlfriends in one go. I do like to think that everyone was nevertheless suitably impressed with my cool, yet devious attempt to save my skin.

And so ends the story for tonight.

Karkani wasn't happy with the sex in a graveyard bit, but I felt she was a little bit intrigued at the same time. I said she could ask me questions about it, but after a struggle between her revulsion and fascination, she said she didn't want to know any more. I told her all this was a long time ago and I was no longer a bigamist or a philanderer.

Tomorrow, I told her, we are heading back out into the wilderness. I know you don't like it much, but we have had a good time here, and it's time to move on. She agreed, albeit a bit reservedly. So we need to do some shopping, get our wilderness heads on and get out there. The rest of the evening was all about her earrings and my fantasies.

Chapter Nine

We headed out early and I told Karkani that today would be a great adventure in the wilderness. She just followed me. I wanted her to walk by my side, but the trail was often not wide enough. We left civilisation behind and about an hour after we set off, I spotted the lake that would be our adventure for the rest of the day. We are going to walk three quarters the way around that lake, I pointed. She liked water and brightened up. Isn't it beautiful? She asked with wonder in her voice.

We walked right down by the lapping water, gentle and soothing; it was singing for us. I held her hand and we walked slowly on, carefree, as if we were the only people on this Earth. We stopped for a picnic; lots of fruit as usual amongst the more stodgy stuff I preferred.

Are we going to camp near the lake? She asked.

Better than that, I replied; just wait and see.

Full of surprises aren't you? She ventured, but I told her nothing more. We walked on and saw all sorts of birds, although I am no good at identifying them. One even swooped low and then struggled for height with a little fish in its talons.

In the distance there were several large boats anchored in the deeper water. That was where I was headed. Some enthusiastic people buy these large boats and come to the lakes like these at weekends. The boats are too large to moor at the waters edge, so they leave them in the deeper waters and use rowing boats to get to and from the shore. I have never seen the owners because they usually only come at weekends, and

some of them come very rarely. Over winter they find a harbouring point further along and pay to keep them safe till next spring.

After a while of reflective walking I stopped and dropped my rucksack. Karkani sat down in the grass as well. Shouldn't we be setting up our camp now? She wondered. I kept silent for a while and then said; look over there. Behind us there were a small stand of trees, and set back from them, there was a shelter. It was like a large garden shed, about the size of a household garage. You could walk past it if you didn't know; it blended into the surroundings so well. Karkani looked and eventually recognised its shape. Your room, madam, I said in my hoteliers voice.

We wandered up to the shelter and went inside.

Who does it belong to? Karkani asked. She was a bit apprehensive.

It's OK, I replied. It doesn't belong to anyone but is here if someone wants to use it. Remember our first day out, when it rained all day? Well, it would have been great to have a shelter then, wouldn't it? This place is more popular so someone has constructed it for the benefit of travellers, like us. If you come during the busy season, you would never get in because it's better and easier than putting a tent up. First come, first served, unless you are like me and prepared to share.

The shelter was rectangular, with a fireplace at one end. Beside the door, there was one dirty window, and some benches. They could be used for sitting, or pushed together to make a bed, just about big enough for two. I could imagine rolling off in the middle of the night and landing with a thump on the wooden floor. The shelter was simple, functional, and free.

We left our rucksacks inside and then strolled through the trees to the lakeside to enjoy the setting sun. About fifty yards away there were two small rowing boats pulled up halfway out of the water and tied to some wooden posts sticking out of the ground. Tomorrow, I said, we'll row out onto the lake. I added; these boats do belong to someone but it is unlikely they would come here in the midweek and certainly not early in the morning. The owners do know that people sometimes use their boats but most are OK about it. What they don't like is if you try to go near their big boats, anchored in the deep waters. We won't do that.

It soon began to get dark and so I told Karkani it was time to collect some twigs and small branches for a fire in the shelter.

There is some wood already stacked outside, she observed.

Yes, I replied, that's for emergencies. The rule is that, if possible, visitors collect their own wood. In case of very bad weather or an emergency, like injury, the stacked wood can be used for immediate benefit. Out here you should always think of the next visitor. That's why you should also tidy up before you leave. It is basic, I reminded her, but there isn't a scrap of litter or a mess, is there? She reflected on what I said and then started collecting twigs for the fire. I had noticed that we didn't have anything to start the fire with because these twigs were not bone dry like the last time we had a fire.

Inside the shelter, I opened my pack and took out a knife. It was very sharp and I kept it in a leather sheath. I don't like sharp things, a hangover of previous experiences. Taking some wood I straddled one of the benches put the wood in front on the bench

and started shaving it as finely as possible. Karkani watched. It is actually quite hard work and you need very thin shavings for them to ignite easily. It took me quite a while to get a good handful. Then I heaped the shavings up in the fireplace, and separated the wood Karkani had collected into small twigs, and the larger pieces. I used one of the lighters because you can keep the flame longer than lighting a match, and lit the fire. I strategically placed the small twigs over the now burning shavings, and we were in business.

So, what's the recollection for tonight? She asked.

Well, I began, enough of girls. I paused to think and eventually said; I'll tell you about my spiritual home.

'Day five'. Karkani did her official bit into the recorder.

I was working in India and the contract was never expected to be very long. When it ended, I decided to retire. I have retired twice before, but people keep bringing me back to be miserable again.

You've done lots of things repeatedly haven't you? Karkani mentioned the three autobiographies as another example.

Yes, you're right. I don't know why.

I decided to do something I have always wanted to do – live in the Himalayas. I know lots of Himachali people and had no trouble getting them to find me a nice apartment. It was in the lower Himalayas in a small village about three miles from the nearest town. The apartment was on the first floor; a living room, bedroom, bathroom, kitchen, and sun lounge. There was also a large sitting area outside. The landlord and his family lived on the ground floor. I would be paying about £500 per year in rent. Thrown in for that amount was breakfast and supper delivered piping hot by the landlord, and a cleaning lady, who came every day and, besides cleaning, did my washing as well. What a bargain! One day, Karkani, I will take you there.

Life was quiet and blissful. Near the house there was a small shopping street where I could get fruit and vegetables, some snacks, like biscuits, and about a ten minutes walk away was a tourist beauty spot with a café. Oh! I nearly forgot; there was a beer and wine shop nearby as well. I used to go to the café almost every day, not only for the food, but because there were really nice walks and an ice cold, clear stream to follow. There was also a snooker and pool hall, and you know how much I like playing pool.

Looking out from my apartment, on the left hand side I could see the valleys stretching out for miles leading back to the lowlands, and on my right was a wall of huge mountains. The wildlife was amazing. Every morning I could watch the eagles soaring on the warm air currents. There were lots of monkeys and my landlord had told me on the first day to keep my outer door closed. Apparently, the monkeys would try to get inside for the food, and they were not frightened. I saw them ripping drying clothes from washing lines, and all sorts of fooling around. At night I could hear wolves howling in the distance which was fantastic. I had been told there were also bears but had not seen any myself.

The shelter was darkening and the flames from the fire were the only light. I could see Karkani's shape but none of her features. I held her hand and she came closer. Before we settled into the night, she checked the door was properly closed because she said

she could feel a cold chill, and then she put some more wood on the fire and we lay down on the joined up benches in our sleeping bag. I finished the story and we went to sleep in each others arms. It wasn't just romance, you understand; it was fear of falling off the benches as well.

Chapter Ten

As usual I woke up first. The fire had gone out but there were a few embers. The wood was finished so I stepped out and took some from the pile, reminding myself to replace it before we left. I made the tea and went back into the sleeping bag to get warm. Drinking the tea, wrapped up in the warmth, with Karkani by my side was magical. The light outside filtered in through the dirty window, that had probably never been cleaned, and the fire was making crackling sounds which made us feel content. She snuggled up to me and it was only the sheer force of my self control that brought me back to the present. This was a big place with lots to see, and laying around in this comfort would lead us nowhere.

Can't we stay here, curled up for a bit longer? She appealed. I was wavering but then insisted we should try to keep some kind of schedule. So we, very reluctantly, got up.

After breakfast, we left the shelter and went for a row in one of the boats. I can't swim and Karkani said she hadn't swum for years, so we decided to keep to the edges of the lake. I rowed and Karkani sat opposite me looking beautiful. After a while, we swapped round. I don't think Karkani liked the idea of rowing and had preferred to sit there looking beautiful. I said I would look handsome for her. We laughed about that for a while. Some ducks appeared nearby, totally unconcerned by us; then carried on with their morning routine. It reminded me of when Carol and I used to go out on the lake near the university, years ago. I felt the same inner peace. Even fifteen yards out from the shore the quality of the environment is different.

After a while we returned to our shelter, or cabin, as Karkani had started calling it. We sat on a bench inside but then decided that the day was too nice to waste and packed up our camping equipment. When we left, the wood pile was a bit bigger than when we had arrived, the fire was out, and the shelter was clean and tidy, ready for the next visitors. We only had to walk for about half an hour before we saw a building in the distance. That, I informed her, was where people could leave their boats over the winter, and the building you can see is a café and restaurant. She didn't say anything but kept walking. We had enough food supplies, but I think she was thinking the same as me. But when we got there, everything was closed, and a sign said 'closed for season'. There was another sign below that said; 'winter opening times 10am – 5pm Saturday and Sunday'. We were both a little disappointed but we continued walking.

I prefer this time of year, I said to Karkani, because it's still quite good weather but there is hardly anyone here. You should see it at the height of the summer; it's packed and, in my opinion, pretty rubbish then. You can see loads of people who have no understanding of the wilderness, showing off their BMWs and fast boats.

I don't think I'd like that, she replied, not because I wouldn't enjoy it, but because I will always remember it like this. The first time you see a new place...she tailed off and simply put her hand in mine. We walked on. After a while she continued; but there is one thing we haven't achieved.

I asked her what was on her mind.

The recollections could take weeks because there's so much still to say.

Yes, I agreed, and I have been thinking of something else as well.

We stopped for a snack and then I told her what I was thinking. It's all very well you finding out about me, and helping me to do something with the material later, but what about you? What about your story? She was silent now; she never liked talking about herself. She was quiet for a long time.

This is your world we have been dealing with, she began, but I couldn't take you to mine. I can't say why, but I can't take you there.

That's OK, I reassured her, but there must be somewhere else that you can take me.

Remember, my spiritual home is the Himalayas. I wasn't born there, or lived there for long. Where is your special place?

I can't take you to Fujairah. After we left there, our family went to Oman; it's just south from Fujairah. I suppose that is my special place, (map on page 11). After that I came to this country. Oman is similar in many ways to Fujairah but it is better because you can go there as a tourist.

Why is that better? I didn't understand.

Well, for one thing, people speak English. If we go to a Muslim country and want to be together as a man and woman, we would have to be married. No-one checks that if you're a tourist. And, she added, if you want a drink you can in the tourist areas but not anywhere else.

There are lots of things to think about, I said, but this story is not going to be finished until you have your story on that recorder. We had made some big decisions sitting in my wilderness. Things were beginning to open up inside me and I was getting excited.

Anyway there is still tonight for recollections she said. We had agreed that we were ending the adventure tomorrow, but we could always come back again if we wanted. I had thought then, that if we went to Oman, it wouldn't be so easy to return there, but also we probably couldn't afford to go for a long period.

We better get going again, I said, conscious that we hadn't made much progress so far, in a walking sense anyway. We left the lake behind and were out in the hills. For the most part they were fairly gentle but there were a few steep short climbs. Karkani had done well for a novice trekker. Although, I reflected to myself, I had made it as easy as possible for her.

We'll find a little shop attached to a bar just round the next bend and we need to stock up on fresh food, because tonight we will be camping out.

A shop in a bar? She questioned. Yes, I explained, because there isn't much around here except one beautiful place. Lots of people come to visit it and so the bar owner saw an opportunity to supply the hungry walkers. And if I remember correctly it has a

very good selection of fresh food. We will need to stock up for tomorrow as well because there won't be any shops until late afternoon. I thought we were returning tomorrow, Karkani queried. Yes we are, but we might as well make the best of the day. That means we won't get to the railway station until late afternoon.

Sure enough, around the next bend was the shop. I think we should get a few drinks in, I suggested, almost apologetically. Don't feel guilty about it, she said, because you've almost been behaving yourself on this trip. She was being very generous. And so, with this new mutual adoration we went to the bar first. There were a few people in there but it was clear the season was coming to a close. Karkani had a red wine, to fortify her, she said, and I had a few pints of Guinness with the same thoughts in mind.

After suitably fortifying ourselves, we went next door to the shop. The barman was also the shopkeeper and asked us to bring our shopping back into the bar when we were ready to settle up. Even though it was clearly coming to the end of the season, there was a lot of choice of fresh food, and Karkani's eyes lit up at the sight of yet more fruit. I got two lovely large pork pies. The pies and meats were supplied by the award winning Brown Brothers butchers in the town about six miles away. We got more than we needed really, but this being our last night in the wilderness we were a bit demob happy. Karkani is a real enigma. She was born in a Muslim country but eats any kind of meat and drinks alcohol. She is completely comfortable about it, but isn't religious; at least she has never spoken of her religion.

Karkani saw a big sponge cake with cream, lots of it, trying to escape the packaging. I had no idea how we would get that in one piece to the camping spot I had in mind. In the end, Karkani somehow managed to get it in the very top of her sack, loosely fastening the package to the flap.

We had to climb then for about forty five minutes, a pretty steep climb. At the top there was about another mile of walking until I pulled Karkani up and we both stopped. Now, I said, I want you to walk just around the bend and tell me what you see. She looked quizzically at me but set off. As she turned the corner she turned back to me with her eyes wide and her mouth hanging open in surprise. There is a lovely waterfall there, and that's why people come to this place. It's not massive, but it is lovely with a small pool below. The water then disappears into an underground river, to emerge somewhere else. We were the only people there and we put our rucksacks down and sat at the edge of the pool to literally soak in the experience.

After a short while, Karkani took off her shoes and socks and went into the pool. The water comes up to the thighs but is always surprisingly warm. Even in winter, I've noticed this. We spent about two hours there. Karkani had to change her clothes before we could set off. I had been a little less excited than her and managed to keep my clothes pretty dry. When she was ready she bounded up to me and gave me a big kiss, an open expression of love that she was usually reserved about.

It was only another few miles to the camping spot and we got there easily on the back of our brilliant waterfall experience. It had the regulation three criteria; fresh water, a flat area for the tent, and firewood from the few trees there. The wood on the trees

was not suitable, but all around, on the floor were small dead twigs, dried leaves and bits of usable firewood. We went through our routine and soon everything was in place. I was really impressed at how quickly Karkani had picked up the various tasks. I always enjoyed watching her zip the sleeping bags together. She was careful with the cake.

Before we settle down, I said, we should talk a bit about tomorrow.
OK, she agreed.

We have two choices. We can either just take our time and then have an easy walk into the town and the railway station, or we can get off pretty smartish in the morning and get a good view of the sea and the cliffs. Then we will get to the railway station in the late afternoon.

You decide, she said simply.

I thought about it and said; I know, we'll vote for it in the morning.

She laughed knowing that I would vote for the early start and she could only agree with me to keep me happy. I love your commitment to democracy, she said sarcastically, but with a lovely smile on her face.

The evening went very well, especially when Karkani said with a long sad face; bad news I'm afraid.

I held her and asked what was wrong.

There's no more memory in my recorder.

I leapt up and shouted hurray! I even surprised myself, then realising she was genuinely disappointed, I said; it doesn't matter, we can just talk about other stuff tonight. She let my gleeful outburst go, but wasn't happy. I would make it up to her. But she was soon back to her bubbly self.

We ate handsomely, especially the pork pies. Then, after a breather, Karkani got the cake out and cutting a bit off she fed me herself. I couldn't let that go, so I fed her. We laughed so much that in the end there was cream everywhere. I must say, I deliberately missed her mouth several times. She went to wipe it off but I insisted I should do it. You can probably imagine the rest.

I lit the fire as it got dark and colder and we sat embracing each other and remembering events of the last week. Then she said; I don't want to go to Oman. We sat silently. I was waiting for the reason but she wasn't particularly keen to give me one. I had already thought about it myself. If we went it wouldn't be for long and it would be expensive. My 'retirement' and her 'freelancing' by definition meant we had to watch our money. I had thought; because they were memories, we could do it in the UK, and maybe go to Oman later, just to visit. I kept my thoughts to myself for the meantime. We got past this point of difficulty by not addressing it. Slowly, the love and fun returned and we had a brilliant night.

Chapter Eleven

As we were drinking our morning tea, I narrowed my eyes and slyly asked her if she wanted some cake. There was about half left. She looked at me and tried to find a suitable answer, but before it came, she was giggling and spilling her tea all over the

place. I think a cake should be compulsory on adventures like this. I would never have thought of it myself, but you live and learn.

We set off bright and early, just about seven thirty. The walking today was going to be fairly flat and featureless but we would get to the cliffs and the sea by about eleven o'clock. There are always interesting things on the way, of course, but not specific places to see. I had planned for us to sit at the top of the cliffs for a few hours, have our lunch there, and then get the train at a different station from the one we had originally planned which was only about three or four miles away. We would then be home by early evening. I intended to ask Karkani to stay the night. We had been together for quite a while but never got as far as moving in together, either at her flat or mine. We did sometimes stay over, but this adventure had taken us to a different level. We were clearly compatible but I suppose we were both unsure of the future. I suppose it depends on previous experiences and for me, certainly, the last several years had been bad.

We arrived about on time and I swelled with my own self importance as I declared I was a perfect planner. Karkani just ignored my claim to fame. The sea was quiet today; I had been here when it thrashed around angrily. There was a picnic area to one side and we used the benches to sit and eat for our lunch. We didn't have a lot of any kind of food, but we did have lots of bits and bats, mix and match sort of stuff. In the end, the lunch was fabulous. It is amazing what you can get out of what is left over. The remainder we put in one bag and back into my rucksack for leftover snacks later. In the summer season, there would have been an ice cream van here, and sometimes a hot food caravan, but today there was neither. There were a few people passing by with their dogs, or an odd couple or two taking in the air. On the whole, though, it was deserted but very beautiful. We watched a boat in the distance as it traversed the sea and disappeared into the distance.

Well, I know what I'm getting you for Christmas, I said.

She was interested.

I'm getting you a monthly delivery of fruit, delivered on the first of each month for a year.

She smiled at my sarcasm and stuck her tongue out at me.

Very nice, I declared. And what about me, I continued, what are you getting me?

She thought for a few seconds, and said a bag, big enough to put your ego in. But she did laugh and I wasn't too upset.

It's not ego, I retorted, it's organisation and experience. Have you not been completely taken care of all this week?

She repented and said I had been very thoughtful and I said I thought I deserved a kiss.

Part Two - In the wilderness with Karkani

Chapter One

It had been almost two months since we had returned from our wilderness trip and I was getting very frustrated. The magic of the trip had somehow disappeared when we returned. It was as if we had never been. Out in the wilderness we got close, so close together, and the magic.... But on our return it was as if it were business as usual.

Karkani came round as before and I went to her flat, and we had stay overs. The spark I thought we had discovered in the wilderness was no longer there, and yet I knew we had crossed a line and gone deeper into each other. I didn't really know what to do. I think Karkani was oblivious to it all and she couldn't see why I was annoyed. I wasn't annoyed with her; it was annoyance that some magic had disappeared and I couldn't find it. I did wonder whether the magic was only because we had been away, and that the magic of those days was really just an illusion.

Another thing that got to me was that Karkani wouldn't open up about herself, when I had done it when it was my turn. She had said she didn't want to return to Oman, and I had thought that was OK because memories are in the mind and don't require the person to actually be there to remember them. But she was incapable of opening up at my flat or hers either. So I was frustrated. I didn't want the relationship to go sour over these concerns, but felt also that there needed to be a movement of some sort from her and from me.

I thought about going away again but also thought about our finances. Then, I remembered a conversation I had had with Frank, a friend of mine about a year ago. He had inherited a cottage somewhere in Scotland. An uncle had died and left it to him. My friend didn't want to sell it, and thought it needed a lot of work on it before it could even be considered for sale, but he didn't want it to fall into rack and ruin either. He couldn't really utilise it himself because all week he worked and lived away from home, and apart from his wife, and wanted to be with her at weekends. She was disabled and he said he couldn't really take her to the cottage because she wouldn't be able to handle the walking and lack of electricity and gas. So, in a drunken moment in a bar, he said that if any of us, his friends, wanted to use the cottage for a holiday or a retreat, we were welcome to it. His thinking was that anyone living there for even a week would at least keep it warm and clean, and maybe when the time was right, he could do something about renovating it and then selling it on.

I contacted him and we did a bit of catching up on the phone, and then I asked him about the offer he had made so long ago. He was quite casual about it and said his open door policy still stood. I said I would let him know.

Karkani came, smelling of fruit, one evening, and I knew I needed to get something going between us again. She gave me the regulation kiss. That sounds awful, doesn't it, but that was the level I had sunk to. I held her for just a few moments more than usual and she responded with a loving glance at me, mixed with uncertainty. She asked me; is everything OK?

Mmm...I responded, and then she knew it wasn't.

After a glass of wine she probed me further. There is something on your mind, she began, tell me. Anyway, I told her of my thoughts and concerns, but didn't tell her about the cottage.

Yes, she agreed, it was lovely in the wilderness, but we are back here now and that was a holiday.

Why can't every day be a holiday? I asked, especially bearing in mind our lack of work commitments. These opportunities don't come along very often in life. Why don't we go somewhere else?

She said in a painful voice; I told you before, I don't want to go to Oman.

Well then, not Oman, I answered, somewhere else. After a silence, I went on; and I want you to be part of the collection of poems as well. I have opened up but it feels to me like we have only done half. Your bit is missing. There's not a lot to tell, she was getting defensive. Does that mean that what there is to tell is irrelevant? She couldn't argue with me, and we had a few minutes of uneasiness.

Later, I apologised to her, and said I shouldn't push her. She said it was OK, and we sealed our peacemaking with a hug. I cooked the evening meal. She was easy to cook for because she never complained and ate just about anything on the menu. I think part of that was because she wasn't much of a cook and, therefore, felt she shouldn't complain. After drinking her wine she said, we could think of a day out or something, to talk about things. Her offer; was it a peace offering, or a finger in the dyke?

We could, I added. Where do you want to go?

Anywhere is fine for me, she said, as long as we're together.

I always wonder at how girls can be so clever and thread their men inside out. I didn't say anything, but instead opened another tin of beer. The moment had passed. At least I had moved her from nothing to one day out. Now I had to get her to go to Scotland for a week or more.

She restarted the conversation. Have you got anywhere in mind?

Well, I began, not really. There are so many places we could go.

Tell me some. Let's make a list, she said in an organised sort of way.

Or it could be a surprise, I added hopefully.

It could be, I suppose.

Look, I was finally determined, rather than going round the houses, why don't you put your faith in me and let me just organise something.

OK, she agreed, but tell me which day.

Have you got so much to do? I was impertinent.

She was a bit surprised by my tone of voice. I'll leave it to you then, she ended.

After she'd gone, I called Frank and said I'd like to go to the cottage next week. The only thing he asked was how long for, and told me I would have to get the key from his wife. He agreed to call her so she would expect me. I knew her well and her house was a lot closer than my friend's workplace, which was eighty miles away. The next day I called Karkani and told her to be ready to go away for about a week. I told her to bring the same stuff we took on the wilderness trip but made sure she understood it was not another trip of hiking and tinned meat. I did it on the phone because I felt it would be easier for me. I was sure there would be lots of questions when she next came to see me, but at least we would know what we were going to argue about.

As is often the case with girls, all the expectations I had of the questions and arguments, never happened. She came to see me, happy as could be, kissed me twice on the lips, and asked for a glass of wine. The subject didn't come up until the end of the evening when she said, so, you're not telling me anything, and I don't want to know. If you want to take me round the country, I'm quite happy to be a nomad; pity there aren't any camels. Then we went to bed.

Chapter Two

You know the problem with you, she hissed, is that you think you're the only person who feels pain. Don't you think I felt the change when we returned from your wilderness trip? Don't you think I haven't been suffering with you over the last month and more; pushing me away, being objectionable?

We were on the train travelling to Scotland. We had just sat ourselves down in a surprisingly almost passenger free coach, the second part of a three part railway journey and the longest bit, almost two hours. We were sitting opposite each other and were both leaning over the table with our heads close together. When I say she was hissing, that was the effect of her outburst which she, thankfully kept to a low voice, hence a kind of hiss. She had been quiet on the first leg of our journey and now was giving me the full treatment. I had never seen her like this.

I tried to interject but she waved my attempt away and carried on. And you keep asking me to talk about myself. Well it might not be nice and I might not want to talk about it. And it might be better if I got everything out of my system, and maybe I should. OK, I will try my best. I'm giving you the benefit of the doubt because I think you might really care about me. I raised my finger to contribute again, and again I was waved away. So, if I say no, I can't talk about it, please don't push me. I will try to do what you ask because I want you to be happy. But you have to try to love me for who I am. Do you love me?

She fell silent then. So did I. Did she doubt my love? Well, I hadn't been expecting anything like this; after all she was so reserved usually. Neither of us spoke and we sat back into our seats and occasionally just glanced at each other. She had caught me off guard, and I think she was probably surprised at herself as well. There had been times when we disagreed, or I was too insistent about something, but she usually worked her way into me and rationally got me to accept my mistakes or misunderstandings. So we both sat, listening to the rhythm of the train as it hurried us to our new adventure.

After a while she said; I will try. That was it. It seemed to me that it had been something inside her that stopped her from living as she really wanted, some blockage. I could understand that because I have had lots of blockages in my life. Maybe she was fearful that we might split apart because I knew that she couldn't get past a certain point in a relationship. Maybe she was afraid. There were lots of maybes coming upon me, in waves. I tried to block them out and somehow lighten the mood. I didn't want to start off like this. After all, I loved her so much.

When we got off at the railway station, we went to the right platform for the final part of our journey. We hadn't spoken. It wasn't right. I saw a café on the platform, and realised that we still had more than twenty minutes before our connecting train. Shall we have a cup of tea? I asked her. She nodded her head and I led her towards the café. The tea seemed to relax us both, so I asked her if she wanted a sandwich. No, she replied, I'll wait until we get there. And so, little by little we got talking again, because, I think neither of us wanted to spoil it for the other.

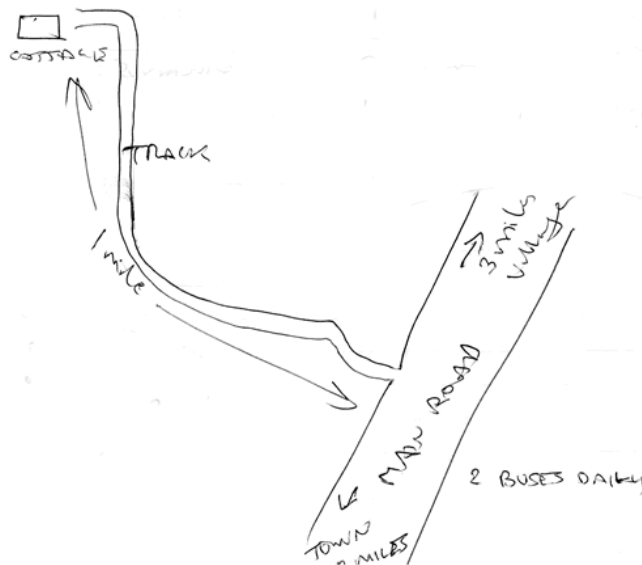
When we arrived at our destination, we got off the train at a two platform railway station. It was as small a railway station as you could imagine. I had found out the times of the bus that would take us to where we needed to go. There were only two

buses a day on that route, and it was about eight to ten miles as I had roughly calculated, and the cottage was a further one mile or so of walking along a track. We had more than an hour before the bus, and that had pleased us. We could look around the town and do some food shopping. So we did. I studied the shops with our potential needs in mind. We might have to come here later in the week and I wanted to remember what was on offer. My friend had told me that the village, which was only about three miles from the cottage, also had some shops because he had been there himself when he came to inspect the cottage.

We shopped, mindful that there was no electricity at the cottage, and so no fridge. Then we sat on the bus and enjoyed a lovely view all the way to our stop. There were fairly gentle green fields and hills, with grey mountain peaks in the distance. We were carefree because I had asked the driver to let us know when we arrived where we needed to get off.

We set off along the track to the cottage. The walking was nice and easy. Karkani asked me; if you had one wish of what you want to get out of this trip, what would it be? A big question, out of the blue.

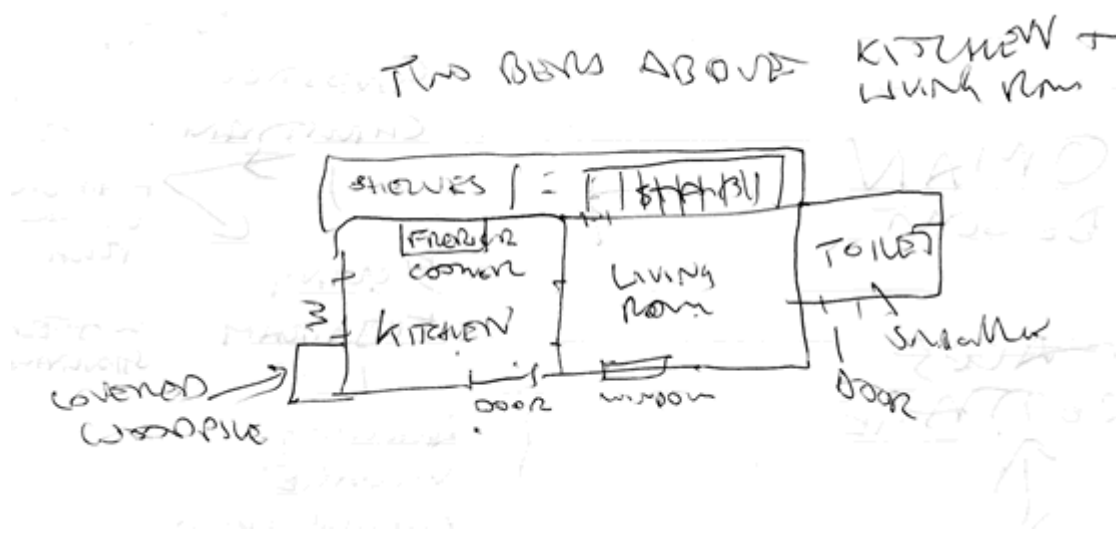
I thought about it and then said; I wish that the feelings won't end when we leave.



Chapter Three

To the average observer, one look at the cottage would be enough to get them to turn around and walk back to the main road, without a single backward glance. Both Karkani and I were silent, for different reasons, I expect. She was nearer to the average observer type and I was already working out how to make it work. It looked like a tumble down construction, an outhouse, a place you would think twice about before wintering your cattle in. The key fitted, and leaving our rucksacks outside, I opened the creaky door and we went in. It looked like someone had suddenly departed and everything was left lying around. Karkani was silent.

The door opened straight in to the kitchen. It had a table and chairs, dusty and mouldy looking, in the middle of the room, and a cooking range at the end, opposite the door where we had entered. There was a door leading off to the side and it led in to the living room, which was sparsely furnished, with an old sofa as its main offering. Both the kitchen and the living room were about the same size, twelve feet square, approximately. There was another door from the living room that led to some stairs. Upstairs were two bedrooms, the same size as the rooms below. To get from the first to the second one you had to walk through the first bedroom; there wasn't a corridor. On further inspection, we found a toilet and a very basic bathroom outside, and a small wood pile, covered over by a roof, next to the kitchen. There were a few men's clothes and the ordinary things you might expect to find in a small house occupied by a single elderly person. Everything was in need of attention, but I could understand why Frank, my friend, had left everything in place; for the possible benefit of visitors.



Leaving Karkani to sort herself out, I didn't know what to say to her, I knew what I needed to do. The first priority was to get the range going, and so I gathered up some wood from outside, and returned to the kitchen. There were a number of heavy metal doors at the front of the range, and I opened the bottom one in the middle. I could see the ashes, from a fire last burned more than a year ago, and stuffed in the wood. I lit the fire and left all the range doors open, to maximise the release of heat. The cottage was one of those that felt colder inside than if you stood outside. The fire needed to be kept going twenty four hours a day. It was the only source of heat in the place, and I remember reading that in the past, before electricity, the kitchen was usually the central place for everyone to sit, work and play. I opened the door into the living room and hoped that some heat might get in there. The real advantage was that the rooms were small, and so it should be possible to keep both of them warm.

I put my hand on the top of the range to feel if it was getting anywhere. It wasn't really, but about fifteen minutes later, the room was beginning to feel much better. The chimney seemed to be clear and there was no smoky blowback into the room. Thinking on my feet, I went through the list of things to be done, and in what order. I went outside to the well and soon realised it wasn't a fit place to draw water. The

water looked dirty and there were twigs and leaves in the bucket when I drew it. I untied the bucket and went down to the stream, just about thirty yards away. I placed the almost full bucket, on the range, at one side. We would need hot water for washing and stuff like that.

Next, I found some pans. There were a frying pan, a milk pan, and a bigger, heavy metal pot. I got some water on for a cup of tea, and then unpacked our provisions. All this time, I realised, Karkani had quietly been watching me come and go. Have you done this before? She asked. I told her I had been on a course; not an SAS type of survival course, you understand, but just a good practice outdoor course. She raised an eyebrow. I would have been back on the train by now she reflected, mainly to herself.

I found a cloth and dusted off two chairs. Karkani didn't want to sit down, so I spread a cloth on her seat, slightly less dirty than the seat cover and swept my arm out to her dramatically, and she did sit. The kitchen sink was pretty dirty as well, but I washed out two cups and soon we were sitting near the range, enjoying the heat, and sipping sugary tea. I noticed Karkani was beginning to open up and relax a bit. I said, flippantly, I could live here. Karkani added, not with me you wouldn't.

A few hours after arriving, the kitchen was hot, essential cutlery and crockery had been washed, the table cleared and cleaned, and it was beginning to get dark. I had done a bit of exploring and found an old bicycle in a little cupboard under the stairs. It had flat tyres but I was sure there must be a pump somewhere. Karkani said she never learned to ride a bike because they are not much use in the desert. I could see her point. For a very short moment I imagined the classic romantic film scene where the boyfriend is trying to teach his lover to ride and they fall giggling into a field of flowers, into each others arms, and fall in love forever. I cast that thought away, and reminded myself where we were.

In the last light of the day, I got the candles out, and true to my expectations, there was a candlestick holder in the living room. I went back outside and was a bit concerned that the woodpile was so small. If you only have the range to supply all your heat and cooking needs, there should be a good supply of burning materials. The mystery was solved when about thirty yards away, next to a wall, I found a large supply of wood, covered in a sheet.

Chapter Four

We woke up early after quite a good night's sleep. We had had a crisis before bedtime. Karkani simply refused to sleep 'in a dead man's bed'. Especially, she added, when the sheets and blankets on the bed were probably the sheets he died in. Normally, it wouldn't be such a big deal with me, but in this cottage, with the flickering of a single candle, and a long way from civilisation, a chill went down my back. We had compromised by clearing the bed of all the sheets and blankets and zipping our sleeping bags together instead.

This morning, though, Karkani seemed full of life. She told me that she was going to make the tea and then breakfast. She leapt out of bed and wandered off downstairs. I thought to myself that I could get used to this, but habit forced me to get up as well. The range was still warm from the night before and heated up quickly again when I added more fuel. The tea was nice, and then she cooked some sausages and eggs. We didn't need to worry about the lack of a fridge because we could store our food anywhere apart from the kitchen and it would remain cool.

After breakfast, Karkani announced that today we should clean the kitchen from top to bottom. I didn't like that idea much but she reminded me that this trip was for her benefit. I had no choice but to agree. There were no cleaning creams or powders, so we used hot water and washing up liquid. It seemed to work and the kitchen was beginning to look really nice.

What sort of house do you want for us to live in? She simply dropped this bombshell on me suddenly. From doubting whether she loved me at all, she had now just confirmed that we were as good as man and wife. She didn't realise the hugeness of the question and simply carried on scrubbing away at the sink. Well? She insisted. I replied; whatever you want. After all, the home is the wife's domain. I realised I had just said 'wife'!

Mid morning, we had toast with jam. It was such a simple thing but I felt like a child, remembering the same snack from years ago.

When I was a child, Karkani began, as if reading my mind; we had something similar to this. It was more like a pancake than bread and the jam was fresh, made from all the fruits around. This was the first time I had heard her speak of her past. There was always lots of fruit and sweet things. I especially liked dates and my father always brought some back when he returned from his business.

What business was that? I probed.

He was an important man. He used to travel to meetings of the tribes, to decide what we should do, and how people should live. I don't remember much of the details because I was only about eight and girls weren't expected to know anything outside the home.

What about school? I asked. We were educated at home. You see, we were quite a well off family and everything was available in our compound. People came to us; teachers, traders, and we had servants. Best of all, we had stables and I had my own horse. I used to ride right down to the sea shore and on the beach. She went silent.

I was beginning to understand something. Karkani's outburst on the train was like a purging for her. And her enthusiasm on waking, and now this cleaning, was an intention to clear the past. I decided not to analyse anymore, and just let her open up like a beautiful flower on a sunny morning. I was also getting quite poetic.

At lunchtime, it was Karkani who cooked again. I offered to help but she said she just wanted me to be there and she wanted to look after me. I was impressed and felt honoured.

In mid forkful she said; do you think your flat is better, or mine?

I knew what was coming next and although I wasn't against it, her easiness was making me nervous. It depends on what you want. I was cryptic.

What do you mean? She wondered.

Well, if you want rugged maleness, then my flat is better, but if you want soft pinks and fluffy cushions, yours is best.

She put her fork down. What, do you mean that if I lived in your flat it would always be as it is now? Wouldn't you let me add my own colours?

Well... I began; I suppose it wouldn't be up to me, but us, together. And, she added, which bit of you is the rugged bit?

Then she smiled and picked up her fork again.

In the afternoon, we went for a walk. We had seen the terrain from the main road to the cottage; gentle green grass hills. We set off this time to explore further. There was no track, so we picked our way through the tufts of grass to the top of the hill. Once there, we looked out on miles of rolling hills with mountains rising to the east. If the grass was sand, Karkani began; it would look just like a desert. She was reminiscing again and I was pleased that I had managed to get her to talk.

One day, she started, my father said we had to leave our home because there was trouble. I couldn't see any differences but he said it was still a long way off. We packed up in two days and had to disguise ourselves in different clothes. I had to say goodbye to our horses. Then, we set off, looking like a camel train; our possessions wrapped and stacked on the camels like a real trading caravan would look. We travelled for several days. It was very hard; very hot in the day and freezing cold at night. The dunes were our friends, my father said, because they hid us from people who might want to hurt us. We went on and on for days, until, one day, we saw the desert ending and a small town appearing in the distance. We went to a large house on the corner of the first street of the town. It was big but plain looking. There, we were welcomed by people I had never seen before, and my father turned his camel around and raced back to the coming war. I didn't see him for months and never heard a word from him either. He came back after a long time and said we could never go back.

The breeze blew gently through her hair, as Karkani stood vague eyed and stared into the distance. I looked at her from the side and imagined myself in the desert with her. I missed the coast, she said. In our new home there was only sand, and water came from a well. There was no school, and no horses to ride. When my father took us away from there we simply moved to another sandy town, and then another. In the end we left for Muscat. We call it Mascat. It is the capital of Oman. From there we got a ship and ended up after many weeks, in this country.

Karkani cooked the evening meal, but was distracted all evening by her thoughts. She didn't even argue about sleeping in a dead man's bed.

Chapter Five

Next morning, she was full of it again. It was as if she had let everything drain out in the night.

We have to go shopping she announced.

That's great, I exclaimed, that you are taking the initiative.

Well, she said pompously; if I am doing the cooking, I must take care to see we have everything we need. She was enjoying being in charge, and so was I.

It's a four mile walk if we go to the road and then follow the main road to the village, I said. There is another route through the fields that is shorter, but it might take longer depending on the terrain. Then, after telling her the choices, I said, and it's up to you to decide which way we should go.

She was thoughtful. I think her head was saying go on the road because it would be easier, but her heart wanted to explore the other route. Well, she said eventually, it's probably better to go the new way. It'll be more interesting. So we set off on the route that took us through the fields.

The walk wasn't too bad at all and we probably saved a mile or so of walking. The terrain was quite good, with gentle hills. Towards the end of the walk, we followed a stream that went right into the village. There were three shops there; a grocery store with a fresh fruit and vegetable section, a butchers, and surprisingly, a dress shop that also did alterations and tailoring. We had one virtually empty rucksack with us and Karkani decided on our requirements whilst I dutifully followed her around. We went to the grocery store first, and then the butchers. There weren't really any meat cuts that appealed to us and I happened to mention this out loud. The butcher said that there were fresh chickens available and Karkani said that would do just fine. The butcher came out of the back of the shop with a potato sack and said the chicken was inside. This reminded me of how my father used to get chickens when I was young. The farmer used to just stretch the chicken's neck and put it in a sack. My father used to prepare it on the kitchen table at home.

I can deal with it I said.

Karkani said so could she.

On the way back to the cottage, I asked Karkani how she had learned to prepare meat. It didn't seem a likely thing for a Muslim girl to learn.

Well, I learned later, she said, what the war was about. No-one cared which religion anyone was and we all lived and ate the same in Fujairah. But we weren't Muslims. The people who lived near us were Ibadi Muslims. Then there were other types of Muslims. I found out later that we were Gnostics and that is why we had to leave. But, I think there are still Gnostics living in Fujairah even today.

It started to spit with rain and that ended the talk for now as we put all our effort into getting back to the cottage and out of the weather.

We had a cup of tea, and then Karkani cleared the table and got the chicken out. Muslims, she said, will cut the throat of the chicken, recite prayers, and let all the blood pour out. They wouldn't eat this chicken because when you just break its neck the blood remains and dries out in the body. We didn't eat Halal chicken after we left Fujairah, although we had done so before. So, we used to prepare the birds ourselves.

Do you want a lesson in preparing a chicken? She was really into her stride now, being in charge, and all bossy. I loved it.

Of course I do, I said. The only problem I have, though, I added, is that I chop off the head and the feet first. Then it doesn't look too much like an animal. I had always been a bit squeamish about that.

She started, and except for the fact that our knives weren't ideal for the purpose, she plucked the chicken, cleaned out its innards, keeping some bits for the cooking,

skinned it and cut the whole carcass into small pieces. Then she collected up all the bits not required and put them into the sack.

I really didn't know you were so proficient, I said, otherwise I would not have done so much myself for you on our first trip out.

You needed to, she said, because it was your trip.

She prepared and cooked everything. I felt pretty superfluous and so I went in search of the bicycle pump. For a small cottage it was incredible how much stuff, or should I say rubbish, there was in the place. I found it eventually, in a little cupboard in the living room; a strange place, I thought, to keep it. I pumped up the tyres which was surprisingly hard work because the pump was almost useless. I rode the bike around outside. There wasn't anywhere to ride unless I went down the path towards the road, but I didn't fancy that. The bike was in desperate need of oil and a good clean. I went back inside, and although it wasn't dark yet, I put a new candle in the holder, ready for the evening.

The meat smelled lovely, and as I sat down to be served by Karkani, I couldn't wait to dig in. After she'd had a few mouthfuls she continued with her story. About 350AD, she began, the Roman Empire adopted Christianity. The problem was they moulded it into something they could use as a political tool. The Gnostics were the holders of the teachings of Jesus and they complained that the Romans were corrupting them. In a bid to stop the Gnostics interfering, the Romans started hunting down and killing all the Gnostics they could find. The Gnostics fled from Roman controlled areas and ended up spread all over the countries now in the Middle East. You can still find them in all those countries today, and that is also why Christianity appears in the Qu'ran. Then, when I was child, Muslim neighbours started to campaign against our communities. That is why I ended up here and that is why I don't talk about religion. I learned all this from reading books and researching for myself. We ended the meal in silence.

That night, I apologised to Karkani for putting her in a position where she had to re-experience the painful events of her life. I told her that it was like looking at an old photograph album. People spend so much time crying over the pain for something that has gone and cannot come back. I told her, I had burned my past; it was the only way to manage. Tomorrow, I told her, our new life would start. I had no idea what would signify that new life, but I knew the corner had been turned.

Chapter Six

It was a bright and warm morning. The sun welcomed us back into wakefulness. We went downstairs together and Karkani started brewing the tea.

Part Three – poems for Karkani

Seven Days – the first collection for Karkani

al-Haram
The Sinners

We were the sinners
Not before but now
We were.
Wrapping the sheepskin
Teachings into our cloaks
We wandered like Moses
Into the desert.
Flee from the hunters
Weak women
Pale from seclusion
Even in this burning sun.
Who are the Ibadis and
Who the Gnostics?

Hikayat Zaynab
The Story of Zaynab

A mother walks
Around her compound
Her compound
Her place
For her children.
And now, to pace
Someone else's compound.
The little hands
And innocent eyes,
Karkani swept along
In this desert storm
Of words and suras
Encased in dunes.

Barari al-Humma
Prairies of Fever

Deserts like gallons
Of unwanted paint
All in one colour,
Sand coloured.
Free at last to wander
Without fear in a

One colour world
Where no-one else
Wants to live.
The Ibadis and the Gnostics
Are all sand coloured
Now.

Ayyam min hayati
Days from My Life

My life of horses,
And dates,
Sweets from Arabia.
Burkhas and eyes
Resisting the sandstorms
Bringing me to you.
The love of someone
From another world.
You threw open the doors
To my colours again.

Kitab al-Bukhala'
Book of Misers

The misers close in
On their bounty
And cling with
Dirty nails and unwashed
Bodies
To their unknown
Wisdoms in a language
No-one else understands.
It is enough to drive
Them to their camels
And charge an unknown
Enemy.

Shah Nameh
Book of Kings

The kings recline in their
Tents in the sand.
A goat is slaughtered
Its blood disappearing
Into the thirsty desert.
And animal droppings
Are the only sign

In the end
That they had passed this way.
The sun curves across the sky
Following the caravan
And drying out the
Camel droppings.

Hadiqat al-Haqiqa
The Enclosed Garden of Truth

The dry
And barren world
Cannot enter here,
Into the heart of colour
And truth, where
My dreams reside.
My horses splash still
In the surf of the ocean
And I still play with
My dreams
And dream of my home.

Another Seven Days – the second collection for Karkani

Your dunes of sand are no more,
Replaced with hills
Of Scottish green fields.
The words of pain
Have been thrown to
The winds
And cannot be found.
There is a new space
Now
Inside you
That waits to be filled
By me.

The secret dreams
Of what can be
Are no longer dreams.
You can stop it

And simply ask for love.
It was there all the time
Just dusty with
The memories of the past.
A creaky cottage door
That led to the mess
Of a life lived in hopes.
We washed the walls clean
Dusted the chairs
And freed the spirit,
Our spirits.
The futility of dreaming is over.

The grass grows despite
The Scottish weather.
And the obstinate tufts
Of grass
Demand their bit of
Life.
Dandelions, planted
By no-one
Still wash and blow
In the breeze,
Still stand their ground
And laugh out their
Existence.

The old man who hung on
To life like a desperate
Sailor in a storm
Left behind a meagre treat.
That became our medicine,
From distant and cold
Made us warm and loving.
The old man's spirit
Wanders the high seas
Of the hills and mountains
Looking for an old cardigan
With holes in the elbows.
He made us free.

How many lovers
Have been cast asunder
On these hills
To laugh and frolic
To love and live?
And in the end they return
To the world

With a bit of Scottish
Moor land dream
Tucked into their
Pocket.
It grows inside.

We locked the door
Of the cottage
Like returning a bottle
Of medicine to its cupboard.
Every step on the track
Led us from the womb
And into life.
Of electricity and gas,
Ready meals and tosh!
And we no longer cared
But let our laughter go,
Carried on the wind
Across the wonderful
Landscape.
One step merging into two
And back to one
And us.

What would you like
To remember from our trip?
There is no need to
Remember any more.

Part Four - Parasmani; the Alchemist's stone

Chapter One

Karkani said it didn't matter, but I said it mattered a lot. You see Parasmani is translated as philosopher's stone in simple English. But I know that this isn't the correct translation. You see, a philosopher does not have to know his subject. A philosopher can argue any point because it is just a process, not an experience. It's just an activity.

We were sitting in our cottage in Scotland. After our adventure, we had returned to emptiness back home. I wasn't happy for us to live in my flat, and she wasn't happy either for us to live in her flat. In fact, we were not happy being back. So, in a fit of impulsiveness, I said why don't we live in the cottage. After all, there was no-one there, it was empty, and it didn't cost us anything. We had managed without electricity, and, in fact, it had been a really good experience; no TV, computers or any electrical items. We had enjoyed everything. And, I added, we can always come back

anytime we want to. So, I had given notice on my flat, and we used hers to store our stuff, and we simply returned to the cottage. The future would tell us if we should stay, and for how long.

And that's how we got to Parasmani. Karkani asked one day, why do some houses have names and not numbers, or names and numbers. I said she was brilliant, and without explaining her question, declared that we should give a name to our cottage. She said she couldn't think of a name but I said I had always wanted a house called Parasmani. But then the only translation I could find was philosopher's stone, and I was unhappy with that.

Karkani said I should ask someone who was an expert in Hindi, English, and spiritualism. I could only think of Dr N, and so called him up one day. He thought about it and said he'd call me back. I told him it might be better if I phoned him in a few days. You see, we had my mobile, and could get a signal. But I kept it switched off because we couldn't charge it easily. I only turned it on when we needed it. We did have our charger and charged it at Mr Wallace's farm down the road. We bought our meat, eggs and milk from him, and it was only about a mile from our home. He welcomed us and said he liked company.

Anyway, to get back to the point, I called Dr N after a few days and he said I could use the word alchemist. An alchemist is a holy man who lives his spiritualism through his own experience and doesn't care about knowledge or philosophy. He did say there were lots of false fakirs, but we were talking about genuine ones. And so I named the cottage Parasmani. I was over the moon, and Karkani, although she couldn't see the joy of the moment, was happy that I was happy.

Karkani lit the evening candle and that was a cue for a drink for me and cooking for her. She was determined to do most of the cooking, and although I love cooking as well, I was happy for her to fulfil the role she was seeking to make her own. I always enjoyed sitting in the kitchen watching her do her stuff over the cooking range and chatting about all sorts of things. She was so happy, and so was I.

The cottage had changed a lot since our first visit. We had got rid of lots of the old furniture and hired a van to bring our own stuff. We did try to keep it traditional, in line with the style of the cottage, but frankly, I didn't really decide anything. Karkani was the one who decided about things in the home, and did most of them herself. I was the donkey, expected to move things and drag furniture around until she was satisfied. I didn't really mind. And we had brought lots of cleaning bottles and cloths, for just about any eventuality except a nuclear attack. And we had bought a new bicycle for Karkani. She was learning to ride and was a quick learner. I decided to stick to the old bicycle already at the cottage. Once oiled and cleaned it was fine, much the same as everything else there.

In order to keep our days organised, this was Karkani's idea, it was decided that we should keep our reminiscence sessions going. I agreed, on the basis that it was a mutual contribution. We made a list of what we might include and I decided that I would concentrate on my war zone memories since I had never written about them before. She said she might try members of her family. We had brought a laptop and in line with everything else, Mr Wallace's house was where we charged it. We paid him

money for this. He said he knew how much his electricity bill was on average, and we paid the amount over that. I wasn't sure of the accuracy of our usage but, either way, I expected it would be nominal. Karkani wanted me to start with our reminiscences, and said I should make a list. I told her I would include the following topics; Kabul during the Russian occupation, emergency powers in the Panjab, a meeting with a warlord, Arbil in Iraq, the Kashmir civil war, and the Moscow underworld. She said she would think about her list and provide it in due course.

Chapter Two

I am always surprised at how things happen to guide you in life. We were in town one day, and went to the library to use the internet. There was an email for me from a friend. He had read my last book, and had some news. The book hadn't been published; I just shared it with friends. Anyway, he said that he had showed it to a friend of his and one thing led to another. There was a job, delivering outdoor training to new or inexperienced backpackers. It was held about 15 miles from our home. Was I interested? There was a phone number and details attached. I had the email printed and we took it with us.

We talked about it. I said I was retired and enjoyed it. Karkani said that I didn't need to take it but should at least find out all the details. I said that the type of people doing this kind of training were usually ex-army or physical health instructors. She said find out anyway, if only to reject it. I agreed under the force and pressure of her feminine ways.

I contacted the person in the email and went to see him at an outdoor activities centre a few days later. In fact it was very tempting. He said that they specifically didn't want professional outdoor types. They already had those people. This course was designed for new hikers and backpackers and the trainer should be like them, so participants wouldn't feel intimidated. He said he had been interested in the descriptions in my book and felt I might be suitable. When I told him I had been a trainer for 20 years, teaching in colleges, he was even more interested. I asked him how many hours a week it was and he said it was only if they could find people to attend and only during the summer season. I told him I would contact him in a week or so and left, feeling very good about it all.

Karkani said that the decision was entirely mine, but with true female practicality said that we could do with the extra money. I thought the opportunity was too good to miss, but said that we should specify something in particular to spend the money on rather than add it to our weekly spending budget. In that way, we could see some tangible results coming from the work. I phoned the centre and agreed to a temporary, try it and see kind of deal.

Karkani asked me if she should try to find some work. I told her that we should define the purpose of our lives because I didn't want to just get sucked back into the crap of life again.

I'm not doing this for the money, promotion or because it is a job, I began. In fact, if I thought of it as a job, I wouldn't do it. I want to do it because I think I will enjoy it. The money is just incidental, useful, but not the reason for doing it.

So what about me? She persisted.

Well, although we are a couple, you should decide for yourself, I replied. Let's look at the facts. We are not rich. We do manage quite well but don't have all the things we might want. On the other hand, all our time is our own. And, we are happy.

Karkani agreed, but I could sense a feeling of something that I couldn't put my finger on.

These are my feelings, I said. There is a good reason for you to do anything you like. I don't want you to feel that you are tied to the kitchen sink or anything like that.

I enjoy our life, she began, but it might be a good idea to do something away from the cottage, just for a few hours a week even.

You decide, I said. The only thing that is important for me is that we should keep enjoying ourselves and only do the things we really want to.

She said she would think about it and tell me if any ideas came into her head.

In the evening, true to her word, she informed me it was time for some memories. Although she had said she wanted me to start off, I asked her if she wanted to start. She agreed.

Well, she began, when I was little, I had an uncle who was my father's brother. He was called Abdel. He was my favourite person after my parents, and he always hugged me and brought me sweets when he called. He was a Muslim, the only one in our family. There was a local Muslim saint who had died many years before. People had built a statue memorial of him and the locals used to go there to pray. I don't know how, but my uncle Abdel became devoted to the shrine as well. In those days no-one cared what religion anyone was.

One day, when he came, he said there was a fair coming to town and did I want to go? I was very excited and he sat me on his pony and led us through the crowds. There were jugglers and clowns, as I remember, and lots of food stalls. We tried everything and it was the first real memory of my childhood. I can't remember going home because I fell asleep on the way back. When I woke up, in my bed at home, my uncle had left a toy, a cloth doll. It became my favourite toy. And that's the story of my first real memory.

Have you still got the doll? I asked.

No, she replied reflectively, It was lost somewhere on the journey from Fujairah to Oman. Karkani was sad now, and so to console her I moved closer and held her in my arms.

She put on a brave face and looked at our evening candle. We never used a clock but measured our evening by the candle; very middle ages! Then we led each other to bed.

Chapter Three

There are three criteria when choosing what to pack for a trip into the wilderness. Karkani was always amused by my practicing before a training course. I found it helpful to think out loud, and she thought I was being a bit of a show off. I continued, but this time spoke to Karkani as if she were on my course; you must think about how

important the item is, how much space it takes up, and how heavy it is. So, I said pointing at Karkani, if you want to pack an extra lipstick, would it be OK? She thought and replied teasingly, of course, sir, because it meets your three criteria. I was not going to be drawn by this. Well, it's not my criteria and don't call me sir. She looked at me cheekily and did a bit of a suggestive wiggle. She knew she was safe from my wandering hands when I was practicing because I tended to get very involved, and hard to distract. I was going to say, I'll see you after class, but then drew my attention back to my task.

It is also a good idea to make a list of everything you pack, I said. When you return from your trip you can mark each item out of five; one being the least useful and five being essential. Then you will know which things to pack next time because you already have a list, and what to leave behind because you never really made use of the item. Over time the list becomes second nature and your planning will be near perfect. There are only a few exceptions to all of this. You must always bear in mind the type of trip you are going on, the season, and the amount of time you intend to be out.

The first course went well. Most of the people were middle aged and their reasons for attending were mainly to experience the outdoors and keep fit at the same time. The course was easy, fun, and spread over a few days. The participants were also enjoying a holiday and stayed at the centre, either in a room, or camped in the field next door. I said they should try to camp out so they could experience some of the joys of the outdoors in a safe place and get used to the equipment.

Have you decided what we are going to spend our new found wealth on? I asked Karkani one morning. As she was in charge in the home, I had asked her what she felt was the most important project.

She had two ideas. One was some sort of electrical power supply. Not for twenty four hour use, she clarified, but just for now and then, and if Mr Wallace went away on holiday or something. I agreed with her but said we would have to wait for a petrol or diesel generator because it cost quite a lot of money.

Secondly, she said she wanted a vegetable garden. This would be very cheap in money terms but, she said, in the first place we needed to dig the ground. I showed Mr Wallace the area we had identified for the garden and he told me it was possible. He said that there was a mini digger and driver for hire and the local farmers used the service to dig out troughs to lay clay irrigation pipes to the fields. So we hired the service and in half a day, and not at any great cost, the chap came and turned over the soil. Karkani was really pleased and said this would be her outdoor project.

When landing at Kabul airport, our plane had to circle as it dropped height because Kabul is surrounded by mountain ranges. I was telling Karkani my memory for the evening. The capital itself is no bigger than a large provincial town. There is one main road that cuts through Afghanistan from the south-east to the north-west and if you look from the air, it looks like a black line has been drawn on the Earth. Outside of Kabul there are some large towns, like Kandahar, but mostly there are small villages, and even smaller, settlements. The colour of Afghanistan is sandy coloured.

I went during the Russian occupation and when we landed we were not allowed off the runway for hours. We all stood in the shade of the tailfins of the plane and moved

round as the sun tried to find us. We were surrounded by very young looking soldiers with machine guns. I noticed that hardly any of them had shoelaces and thought about how they would pursue the enemy. In the distance, at the end of the runway, I could see a convoy of helicopter gun ships rising out of the dust and into the sky. There were two thin long missiles hung underneath each helicopter. They disappeared into the distance.

It is almost impossible to fight in Afghanistan and no-one has ever conquered the country. In my opinion, it is an impossible task and anyone going to look for themselves would soon agree, I think. There is nothing to see either because the war happens in the valleys and mountains away from the towns. There, the odds are even; the foreign armies can't use many of their powerful strategies, and the Afghan's know the terrain inside out.

Anyway on the way out we had to wait for four hours whilst a Russian general was being ferried from somewhere to get our plane. We were bound for Moscow. The main restrictions on us whilst we were there was the language, and the aggressive behaviour of the troops. Although I didn't witness the war first hand I did see casualties outside a local hospital. One chap, had a pipe sticking out of his stomach that made me a bit queasy, and the hospital inside was full.

Chapter Four

The next day Karkani declared that we would have a picnic. I'm didn't enjoy your choice of memories because it makes me feel sad, she said. I offered to change but she said we should get these things out of the way. The solution was to have a picnic, so at about lunchtime, we wandered off up the hill with a bag full of home made food. It wasn't very warm so we found a spot under a tree and sat next to each other for warmth, and out of love. She was so matter of fact about laying out the picnic and I felt good that she was mine.

I suppose you don't miss things until you have lost them, she reflected. I just listened. I remember when we used to pick the fruit off the trees when we wanted to. There was a season, of course, but I can only remember the times when the tree branches bowed down heavy with fruit. When we were in the courtyard we just picked fruits off the trees and ate them as we played. It was all so easy. And although I learned to cook simple things, we had servants to cook and serve our food. I always thought of them as almost friends but I suppose they were nice because they worked for us. But I really do think that some of them felt that they were part of the family as well.

We were never frightened of anything. Our house and courtyard was surrounded by high walls. You could see the sea if you stood on the rooftops upstairs, and see people going about their business outside. Fear and anxiety were unknown to us until the day my father said we had to leave. I saw fear for the first time, in his eyes. Everyone in the family went quiet and I don't think the joy and happiness of being alive ever returned to us. We lived in an oasis of, what? Tranquillity or ignorance? After a long pause, she went on; but now, after all that travelling and seeking, I am happier than I can remember being. This was serious stuff, and I let the silence continue. We both

drifted in the silence like a boat on a still lake. Then; I just keep thinking if it will end just like the happiness of my childhood ended.

Later, I said to Karkani that we had done our 'memories for the day' session at the picnic and so we had a memories free evening, and played simple card games and threw dice. That was one of our creative activities; making up games that involved cards or dice; latest technology or what? And the cheating! Whoever made up the game could easily add rules and say with mock honesty that they had forgotten to tell the other this or that particular rule. It was always hilarious and it was the simplicity of everything that made it so funny.

Chapter Five

There had been an addition to the outdoor course I was training. It had been decided that because participants fantasised about real survival and conflict situations, we should have a session on that, sure in the knowledge that none of our students would ever find themselves in such a situation. It was called the 'fantasy survival' module by us, although we didn't tell the students that. I was helped by professionals on the staff but wrote the module myself.

I began; when you light a fire there are a few things you need to be aware of. Firstly, there will be smoke and secondly a fire at night shows light. If the enemy is on one side of you, you should test the direction of the wind before lighting a fire. If the wind blows towards the enemy, don't light a fire because they will smell the smoke and know there are combatants near them. If the wind is blowing away from the enemy you then have to worry about the light emitted by the fire. It's best to dig a hole and have the fire in a pit. Around the pit you can stack stones to hide the odd flame that might rise higher than the top of your pit. Keep the fire as small as possible. Don't use the fire for warmth but only for cooking. After you have finished, extinguish the fire immediately. If you are in enemy territory and there is a chance that they might be anywhere around you, simply don't have a fire. It is perfectly safe and acceptable to live on cold rations, and at night you can use natural shelter, like rocks and wear extra clothing to keep warm. Also, if you have a fire and are not immediately detected, it is possible that a future action by the enemy will let them see the pit and then they will know you had been there.

There are lots of give-away signs of your presence. In addition to the fire pit there will be flattened areas of grass where you lay down to sleep. The enemy can count the number of bodies flattening the grass. So, choose rocks if possible. The most important one is going to the toilet. You should do all your business into plastic bags, knot them, and bury them. Urine has a smell but what comes out of your other end smells very strongly. Also it has a distinct identity. It is easy to tell how many people were there by the amount and by the differing colours and consistency of your waste.

Finally, when marching, walk in 'Indian style', which means one person behind another in a single line. The Indians I refer to are the American Indians. Stay about ten metres apart and walk in the footsteps that the person in front made. I say ten metres apart because, if attacked, the enemy can only hit a few people because of the distances between each of you. And walking in the footsteps of the person in front

means that the enemy doesn't know how many of you passed by. They will know that you are at least two because the footprints will not be clear as one boot doesn't fit the one in front exactly. And, they might be able to estimate how many people you are by how deep the footprint is, if you're walking on damp or wet ground.

The participants, particularly the men, loved this module because they could imagine themselves as SAS or Special Forces.

Karkani thought it was so funny, that I was teaching people about combat and survival and said perhaps I should have more food to keep my hugely muscled body in shape. I took it all as it came, in good humour, and told her she was lucky to have me just in case we decided to run away from the world and live permanently in survival mode. She just raised an eyebrow and said that the cottage was about as much survival as she could take.

Karkani was quite good on her bicycle by now and only occasionally got into a wobble. But it allowed us to cycle into town, about eight to ten miles away, or just go for a ride to the village, or past it, to new places. I told her to ride in front of me when we were on the road, and I cycled behind and just wide of her so car drivers would have to go further over the road to pass us. This new freedom of transport let us explore further away and it was good to be out in the fresh air. We talked with Mr Wallace about places we could visit up to about twenty miles away and he said we would be spoilt for choice. We visited him quite regularly and he was grateful for the company. Advising us on places to visit allowed him to feel important. He lived on his own, and like the man who had died in the cottage we now had, Mr Wallace had no relatives nearby. I took a notebook when we went to see him and he would divulge details of new places we could visit each time. Karkani and I decided to go out for a good ride at least once a week on top of the trips we made to the village or to town. We were settling down nicely.

Chapter Six

When my father and I arrived in the Panjab, we landed at Amritsar airport. It was in the middle of a state of emergency, as the army clashed with Sikhs who wanted an independent state.

I was just starting my recollections. I continued; It was only a small plane and had bounced around in the air pockets and brought us over the Himalayas. There were about twenty five seats for passengers and the rest of the plane was full of cargo. I was first off the plane. We were surrounded by a ring of soldiers with rifles drawn. About fifty yards out, there was another ring of soldiers, probably there to shoot anyone trying to make a run for it. I don't think any terrorist (freedom fighter) would be stupid enough to travel here and then run!

We were treated like criminals and all baggage was minutely checked. We had a relative outside who had paid a bribe and as soon as he identified us, we were rushed through quickly; some security! Driving to our destination, we were all too aware of the changes that had taken place since the last time we had been here, a few years ago. There was hardly anyone on the streets and the shops were shuttered. The army

patrols were everywhere; jeeps, each loaded with about six fully armed soldiers screeching round the streets, disappearing, and then appearing again further along. The rules were simple. There was a shoot to kill policy on groups of five or more people gathering in any one place or in a vehicle. No reasons or explanations were required. We were four; the driver, our relative, my father, and me.

After a few days, I needed to go to the nearby town to buy some things for my bride to be, my first wife.

I sensed Karkani stiffen ever so slightly and felt that her attention was now complete, waiting for the next bit. She had wanted to know about my first wife but I had not told her anything. I let her know, that in this account, I would not be referring to her again. She relaxed, or so it seemed to me.

My uncle and I went to the town on bicycles, about a three mile journey. All the shops were closed but strangely, there were a few people idly wandering around outside the shops here and there. My uncle told me they were the shopkeepers who would open the shutters a little, to supply anyone who came along. There was a heavy army presence everywhere but we were not troubled. When we got to the town we went directly to the goldsmith's house. We waited whilst the goldsmith had a shower and then all three of us went to his shop. He opened the shutters as an army jeep raced down the narrow street. We were safe though because there were only three of us. Suddenly two women walking along stopped outside and we were five. Shoot on sight! The goldsmith pushed us into the shop just as an army jeep returned up the road. They didn't see that we were five and raced by as the goldsmith pulled down his shutters from the inside. He was furious with the two women but his business head got the better of him as he sensed a possible profit. After we had finished our buying, we were let out separately to avoid being shot at. We did a bit more shopping in the same way and went home. We were relieved.

There was another strategy used by the police during this time. People in villages often have long feuds and this kind of emergency is a good way to settle them. The Indian police is very corrupt, although no-one had a bad word to say about the honesty of the armed forces. This may well be because the army didn't come into close contact with ordinary citizens, and the opportunity for corruption didn't arise. The police policy was to take someone in for questioning, after taking a bribe from someone, rough them up and leave them in a cell, the door of which was 'accidentally' left open. Then the police would take up positions outside the police station and the suspect seeing the cell door was open, would try to escape. On stepping out of the door of the police station, everyone would open fire and it would be recorded as an attempted escape and no further action would be necessary.

And on that sad but true note I ended my Panjab recollection. Karkani silently made a warm drink, gave me a reassuring hug, and we took the candle upstairs with us. Karkani said that I didn't have to tell any more war zone stories if I didn't want to, but I said it was a good way to get the pain and dread out of my system, a medicine. I must say, recollecting these things was having an effect on me; I was feeling much less burdened by the past, day by day.

Chapter Seven

I looked into getting a small generator. There were petrol and diesel ones and lots of different sizes. I went to Mr Wallace's farm to get some eggs and, in passing, mentioned it. I thought he might take offence because we had been using his electricity supply, but especially because he enjoyed our visits. But he was OK and asked me a few questions about the proposed usage. Then he said, and he saved us lots of money in the long term, that we should go for a diesel powered one because diesel for agricultural use is very cheap. When he told me, I did remember reading about it years ago. Mr Wallace also said that we could get the diesel out of his supply tanks if we wanted to. That would save time and effort because I had been thinking of how we could transport so much fuel from the town much further away.

We decided on one of the smaller generators because we only needed it for lights and charging things up. The bigger ones are only needed if you want to use them for heating or cooking. When I got it home and started it up, the generator was surprisingly quiet, and according to the manual it would also be quite cheap. Karkani was impressed, although she doubted it would be enough because it looked so small. Trust me, I requested. She smiled and withheld her judgement. We decided that we should save even more money by planning when we would use the electricity and set up the phone and the laptop for charging each time.

As an extra, and a present for Karkani, I told her I had a surprise for her. She wanted to know what it was but I told her first she should pour me a drink and then look especially pretty for me. She wore her Rajasthani earrings. She knew how to press my buttons. I gave her a box in a carrier bag. When she opened it up she discovered a radio. More things to charge, she was thinking, at least that's what I thought. Take it out of the box, I said. She did and then I told her it was a wind up radio that needed no batteries or charging. That pleased her, and in the days to come we had music on all the time. It made quite a change to the atmosphere of the cottage. Her tastes were radio two. She said she used to listen to it on her radio at her flat. I gave her a sheet of paper. This was information of how to tune in to various shortwave foreign stations. She was engrossed by Middle Eastern radio stations and promised to educate me in Arabic music. I always liked Arabic stuff but didn't understand much. We used to have lots of music in Fujairah, she said, but then left everything behind. She also said she could dance and we did, to a few songs on the radio. She is a good dancer! I would have to get practicing.

My past memory reflections that evening were about my experiences in the separatist struggle by Muslims in Indian Kashmir. The travelogue already appears in the autobiography, *Hamara dil aap ke paas hai*, but for the benefit of readers I reproduce it below.

We arrived at Srinagar on the 16th November and were met as expected by Colonel Prehar. The airport is very small and there were only a few security types about. As soon as we stepped outside it was like a war zone. We were escorted by a protection force; not because of us but because of the colonel.

The first jeep had a driver who didn't have any heavy armaments and a soldier in the passenger seat with an AK47. Behind him, in the open top jeep, there was a soldier standing, pointing forward with a fixed machine gun. Also in the back were four more soldiers with AK47s. In the second jeep there was the jamming equipment. The driver and armed passenger were accompanied by a soldier in the back with a large rocket propelled grenade launcher. The equipment jammed all radio signals for about a hundred yards. It is designed to stop people detonating roadside bombs as vehicles pass, apparently a common occurrence. Behind that jeep was ours, and then behind us, an army truck with two mounted machine guns and about 10 or 12 heavily armed soldiers.

The first jeep was very fast and kept overtaking and then ordering every vehicle to the side of the road so we could pass quickly. At one point there was a traffic jam and all the soldiers jumped from their vehicles and deployed around our jeep, AK47s at the ready, to protect us from attack. It was very shocking to be in such a situation. The colonel casually told us that they send on average 4 body bags back to loved ones every day! And that was just the soldiers; civilians and locals not included.

Whenever we went out, we would switch vehicles and use civilian ones and every time we went out we would use a different vehicle and different driver so there was no chance of intelligence being passed back to the guerrillas.

We went to Dal Lake which is very large but didn't go out boating because it was too late in the day and we didn't want to get caught outside the cantonment at night. We visited two beautiful gardens. Srinagar is a collection of lakes and gardens mostly inspired by the Muslim rulers of centuries past. Coming out of the second park, we were surprised by two Commando jeeps that screeched to a halt and all the soldiers deployed around the area. Luckily it was a false alarm.

The next day we went to the front line to see the line of control. The colonel had phoned ahead from home that he would be passing, so that we wouldn't be delayed too much by security. As we got to the main security check post, the officer in charge wouldn't let us pass until we had joined him in tea and biscuits! He casually told us that they had just disarmed a road side bomb left during the night.

We climbed for ages until we got to the snow line. We ordered lunch from the army there, and said we would have it on our way down. We climbed until the snow was too deep. Then we took cable cars until we reached 10,000 feet. We got to within 4 kilometres of the line of control but heavy snow prevented us from going further. Life in the cantonment is very comfortable. The colonel's family has been out of it only once in 11 months. Of course, he has to go out regularly. There is a shopping centre, a school, a large hospital, horse riding, cinema, restaurants, squash and tennis courts, and most things that people need for a good life. If you go out for an evening walk there are speakers fitted to every third lamp post with soothing music to listen to. The real purpose of the speakers, however, is to warn people if there is an incursion. In such an instance the soldiers are warned where the attack is happening so that they can deploy. There is an officer at the reporting station 24 hours a day. As in all army cantonments, everything you buy is heavily subsidized.

The size of the cantonment is that of a small town. You can drive around without getting to the end of it. We went to the army museum on the third day. It is very large and you could easily spend a whole day there. We were served tea and biscuits and got our own personally guided tour. It is an excellent museum and well worth visiting. I went out walking and was very surprised. Because of my age, all the younger soldiers thought I must be a senior officer. Everywhere I went I was saluted. I soon learned how to respond; a swift nod of acknowledgement was the right thing to do.

Soldiers usually say “Jai”, or “ram ram”. I got quite used to being thought of as a senior officer and strutted around appropriately (and probably looked stupid). There are lots of civilians on the cantonment; shopkeepers and the like. All the shops close at 6 pm and all civilians have to be out of the cantonment by then. After that, all entrances are sealed.

There is one main entrance and that is dangerous in itself. Everyone going out is visible. The guerrillas have spotters. Everywhere you go there are groups of young men at street corners. No-one knows who is a civilian and who is a guerrillas. There is no doubt that we were monitored. We went out at the same time for two days and had to vary the third day because we were too regular and also too obvious.

I wanted to go to Roza Bal, the burial place of Jesus, but no-one was interested. The army personnel will only venture out where the place is very secure. No-one goes anywhere that is vague or insecure. So I had to miss that opportunity. If I had insisted, it would have meant the deployment of the rapid reaction force, putting lots of lives in danger.

People who know me know that I like to do things on time and the army is the same. On the day of our departure, the colonel said “breakfast at 8.15 on the dot, and we leave at 9 on the dot”. We were in the jeep at 8.58 am . We drove to the main gate where the protection force was waiting and set off immediately at high speed. The roads were busy and the front jeep was more aggressive than before.

We came across a very long army truck convoy that was moving slowly so we simply commandeered the other side of the road. In Srinagar, the army is everywhere; sometimes there are more soldiers than civilians, and every other vehicle is army. When we arrived near the airport, there was a huge queue of traffic, and in true cavalier style we simply took the other side of the road and pushed in at the front, soldiers deploying in defensive positions until we entered the gate. The run in to the airport is the highest security area of all. About one mile before the airport all cars are checked by mirrors placed under the vehicle and all baggage is screened, including hand luggage. Once that had been done we drove to the airport. There is another luggage screening there and then you can check in your cargo baggage. At security check all hand luggage is both screened and hand checked, down to the last item and passengers are frisked. Once you go to board the plane passengers are frisked again and all hand luggage is hand checked again. It is so detailed you couldn't get a paper clip through without notice.

Overall, the Srinagar trip was fantastic, frightening and very unusual. I wouldn't recommend anyone to go as a tourist although we did see a few western tourists on our travels. The tourist areas are very highly secure but then you only have to take one wrong turn to be in the war zone. Being the guest of an Indian army colonel was great. The army certainly knows how to live, even in such adverse conditions.

As for Kashmir, there will never be a military solution to this problem. All the senior officers I spoke to agreed that force will never work. Diplomacy and tact are required. I hope one day there will be peace because Kashmir really is paradise on Earth.

Chapter Eight

I realised that our sessions of recounting memories was beginning to get a bit gruesome and mentioned it to Karkani. She said it was important to get these things out of our systems. Once told, these memories would start to fade and we might not need not talk about them again. I was reassured and told her there weren't many more

to tell anyway. It is strange how outpouring of memories can make you feel so light and free afterwards. I could certainly feel the knots of my life loosening and I was beginning to relax much more than I could ever remember.

And there is something else I have been thinking about, she started.

Tell me, I said.

Well, I was thinking that you could teach me how to cook Indian food, and I could teach you some Omani cooking. It would be fun and we would get more varied tastes and diet.

That's a great idea, I said.

It was uncanny how easily we agreed with each other.

You know how you said we should get our memories out of our systems, I said a few days later. Well I have one I want to get out and I think I will be able to drop it after that.

You know you can tell me anything you want to, and I want to listen, she said simply. I took a deep breath, and began.

This memory is one that I have to deal with very carefully. I am not going to name the warlord or the country involved, for reasons of my own safety. I was in an Asian country. Before I left for that country, I had been approached by some community leaders with a request. They had been collecting money throughout western nations and sending it to a third party country from where arms and supplies were being diverted to a warlord who was fighting the government of his country. I was asked to just find out if the supplies were getting through. I agreed to do it simply because it would give me access to places I otherwise would not be able to get to, and because the request was only for information. I would not have done it if it required direct gun running or active involvement, and it was a cause I personally didn't support.

I arrived in the city without incident and noticed at once that there was a heavy army presence. I was just a tourist doing tourist things; sightseeing, shopping, and enjoying the culture. I was contacted as agreed and taken to a six storey building. On entering I noticed a large amount of weaponry, mainly rifles, stacked up against the walls. My contact led me up the stairs. It was very hot and there wasn't a lift, so I was beginning to sweat. On every floor I witnessed the same scene; the large rooms were full of single beds. On nearly every bed there was a young man, usually cleaning and inspecting rifles or handguns. Surprisingly, I was not at all nervous or uncomfortable.

When we got to the sixth floor, there was another set of steps up to the flat roof. A huge guard stood at that door with an AK47 assault rifle. He looked menacing. On each corner of the flat roof there were armed men, scanning the area designated to them. The warlord was seated near the middle of the roof with a cloth awning hung over, for shade. I sat down and waited my turn. Representatives from the west always get preference because they usually stand for big money to help the cause. I overheard a local man, speaking with the warlord. He was poor, he said, and needed money for his daughters wedding. After hearing the request and the amount, the warlord asked the poor man if he knew how many rifles that sort of money would buy. Then he waved casually to a man standing to his side and told him to pay the man. Then it was my turn.

He was mesmerising. It was his eyes that seemed to draw me in to the cause. I could easily understand how young men would want to join and perhaps lay down their lives for this man. I had never seen such a charismatic person before. He listened to my question, then called someone and whispered something quietly. The man went off and I waited. The warlord called for tea and sweets for me. He was a really good host, friendly and even funny, despite the gun holstered at his side. The man returned after about ten minutes and whispered something back to him, and the warlord confirmed that the money and supplies were being received. He then went on to ask how much more we could supply and I told him I was only a messenger but I would pass on his request to my people. He scribbled a note and gave it to me. It was in a language I didn't understand but I could have had it translated easily. I didn't though.

As I left I was given two cassettes with pictures of the warlord on the covers. They contained speeches and religious songs. They were of no interest to me. Before I returned, I removed the paper casings of the cassettes so I would not be questioned or arrested at the airport. I read in the newspapers, a few months later, that the warlord's compound had been attacked by the army. Everyone I had seen on that day had been killed. Apparently, it had been a 'take no prisoners' kind of mission. I felt sorry for the young lives lost, for what? And the warlord; a nice guy on the wrong end of a bullet.

Chapter Nine

The Omani diet includes fish, sheep, goat, rice, and dates. Karkani was educating me. We didn't have fish much because that is only really available near the sea. It might be a bit different now that lots of people have fridges, but I don't think so. You see Arabian people generally like very fresh food, unlike here, where people stuff their freezers. And to drink, coffee is the main beverage, although I have got used to tea since I came to this country.

Are there really sheep there? I asked. Because in India they call the meat mutton but it is always goat meat. I don't mind because I prefer goat meat in any case.

Yes, there are sheep, and like you I prefer to eat goat. She replied. And the main production for export is dates, she added, which I could live on. They are lovely.

We found it difficult to get all the spices we needed both for Indian and Omani cooking in the nearby town, but there were dried spices available, in little bottles, that we could mix and try out. So when I cooked Indian food, it lacked something in the spices and Karkani also said her cooking wasn't quite right either. We thought that if we found ourselves in a larger town or city we would make it a priority to stock up on them. The problem remained, though, that we still couldn't get fresh herbs, like coriander, mint and thyme.

That's something for the vegetable garden, Karkani said and I 'advised' her on coriander planting. You should divide up your coriander plot into five or so strips. Then sow the seeds straight onto the first strip. Repeat one week later with the second strip and so on. By the time the first strip is ready, the second one is well on its way. By the time you have used all the coriander in the first strip you can sow that strip again and start using the fresh coriander from the second one.

Doesn't the coriander just grow back like mint? She asked.

No, it doesn't, I said. You harvest it by pulling up from the roots and then you have to plant again. The good thing about it, though, is that it is very easy to grow and it's a long season, from mid spring to the beginning of autumn. If you have too much, and don't have a freezer, you can dry out the leaves, crumble them up and store and use them over the winter.

You are full of interesting stuff aren't you, she was impressed.

All my ancestors were farmers, I said, and my father planted all sorts of things in the garden. He also had an allotment. I learned from watching him.

What else can we grow in our plot? She asked.

It's easy to grow anything from the marrow family; marrows, courgettes, and so on. And also anything from the pea and beans family; garden peas, runner beans and stuff like that. The easiest to plant and grow are tomatoes. As long as you make sure they are very well watered, a half a dozen plants can produce hundreds of fruits. The problem with tomatoes, though, is that they tend to ripen all at once and you have to do something with them immediately. I used to give them to neighbours and family members. Onions and spring onions are pretty easy to grow as well.

We started alternating cooking the evening meal; one night Indian, then Omani, and on the third day something else. Of course, we weren't bound by this order. Karkani still made breakfast and lunch, and I liked that idea. I did ask her if she wanted coffee, since she had grown up with it, and she said it might be a good idea to get some, in case. I asked her if she could make real coffee, like the Turkish coffee I loved so much. She said she could try, but it had been so long ago and, that coffee is not the same as the coffee commonly available in this country.

It was Karkani's turn to reminisce. After all, I had done most of it in recent weeks. When we were in Fujairah, my father used to cook the meat on special occasions, she began. We would get a goat locally, and it would be killed in the Muslim tradition by one of our servants who knew the prayers required for Halal. Then the servant and my father would prepare and cook the meat together. It would be a feast. Meanwhile, my mother and all the females, including me, would pick fruits, cook vegetables and lay out the blankets. Everyone sat on the ground, on big blankets; the men on one blanket and the women on another. Even though we were not Muslims, we followed the local traditions.

The feast would be served in large platters, placed in the middle of the blanket, including a huge tray of rice. Everyone ate from the same platters. It was really great. Then, once everyone was full, someone from the men's side would start off the entertainment by telling a story. We had some stories which everyone knew, and as the day progressed, the men would start new ones. Sometimes, when one person finished telling a new story, someone else would continue with it, even though they had never heard it before. Soon, the stories would get too funny and difficult to believe and everyone would just laugh and roll around and bang their fists on the ground.

The women never told stories in these kinds of parties, but sometimes we had female only get-togethers which were just about the same except there were no men. I think our stories were more believable. They were about families and marriages and people mainly. The men's stories could be about anything but usually involved camel caravans in the desert, impossible bravery, and supernatural experiences.

Seven Days – the third collection for Karkani

Life goes on
Running from one day
Into another
Whilst our laughter
And happiness
Know no boundaries
Of time.
The ticking of
A clock
Replaced by the spin
Of a bicycle wheel.
Easy pedalling
On soft gradients.

It doesn't matter what we
Cook with our chicken.
It's not the spices
Or herbs that matter
But the hands of care
That love the meal
To perfection.

Filling bellies.
There's hardly room
In amongst the other
Ingredients, of love
And simple pleasures.

We can spray the
Handfuls of desert sands
Across our lives
And turn off the
Safety catches on our
Recollections of guns.
The Scottish hills call
Us now, to another truth.

It is so easy
To pick life up
Once your hands

Are free
Empty
Of the sand and the
Memories of another life.

Ease into me then
And I will envelop you.
There need not be a tomorrow
And today continues
Like the wheel of a bicycle
Spinning over and over
And never striking
A note of the hour.
Time is for others now
And we can live
Free of the encumbrances
Of the mundane day.

Somewhere there is
A desert clad outline
Wondering where the
Caravan of camels
Has gone.
No tracks or clues
No burnt out fires
Or oasis.
But there is a
Scent of perfume in the air.
Karkani.

The end