

Chapter 1

The way in which we see ourselves is not always congruent with the way in which we judge others. We tend to have much more leniency with ourselves- for subconsciously we are aware that no matter how suffused with despair or malevolence we are, we shall never escape ourselves. This is unlike all other people, whose experiences and ideologies aren't as inalienably attached to us as our own. One can live his whole life by avoiding individuals whom he is morally indebted to, and will seldom have to face his wrongdoings. It would not be erroneous to say that I somewhat half-admire such people, for their ability to make amazing efforts to achieve such unhealthy goals- but for the most part I try to have as high standards for myself as I do for other people.

However, inevitably, not everyone will abide by this philosophy- because not all people possess the resilience to resist impulsive living.

This behaviour was exemplified greatly by my grandfather seemingly with every action he executed. He was the sort of character to get wound up easily watching other people do what he condemned, and would often get himself into trouble for his outbursts. Many considered him ill-mannered, and he was sometimes caught doing the very things he complained about. This seemed to be a popular opinion about him.

However, call him a hypocrite I cannot, for though he was ignorant to his own actions it would be unfair to place all the blame on him- because I often doubted his sanity, and when I think about our memories together I clearly remember the care and love he showed to me. But forget the awkward moments I also cannot do, and one in particular never escapes my thoughts.

It was the first time he had ever bothered to show up to a school event- which was the fayre in my final term at primary school, to which my parents also came. Located in the main hall, rows upon rows of stalls loaded with clothes and fresh produce greeted my eyes. The decorations were stunning, for they had been funded by the council- meaning the hall was by far the most opulent it had been since the forty-fifth president's inauguration. It had a pacifying effect on me, because I hadn't seen much that was grand or beautiful for years. The rows of shops intersected each other every six metres, so with six horizontal rows and seven vertical rows there were forty-two places where the paths intersected.

In every intersection was a marble statue of an important Nivillian historical figure, each one about three metres tall (the same height as most of the stalls). I only recognised three of them, however: David of Nuboja (a military officer whom we had learnt about in history), Marius Terveyn (the founder of the modern Nivillian republic), and Hobus Din (a traveller from southeast Asia who founded the important port city of Asinga).

I had always admired Hobus Din- for I saw myself in her. She had been portrayed in countless films about her journey across Africa, escaping from tyranny in her country and finding freedom in Nivillia. However, that was 200 years ago and I knew that our country had changed since then.

Each statue was on its own circular podium with a wooden bench around it. I decided to give myself some rest, rather than traipsing around pointlessly, so I sat on the bench by the statue of Hobus Din. My grandfather had not yet arrived as he lived twenty minutes away, and my parents were picking him up so they weren't there either. I'd walked to school on my own for the first time and I felt a bit drained, but I was proud of myself for doing it. I waited a few minutes there for them to come and I settled down by Hobus. She was wearing a long, simple dress that I imagined was made of the finest crimson red silk, which tapered in at her waist- displaying her beautiful figure. I imagined her hair to be a dark brown, reaching her back in undulating waves that juxtaposed the rigidity of her dress. I saw that her eyes were a deep brown, bold against the warm hue of her skin. Her countenance expressed a down-to-earth nature and a love for all, and I felt increasingly comfortable as the statue became more real every second I looked at it. Being next to her was like being protected from all evil forces, and on that bench I felt like no one could touch me.

After six minutes of gazing at Hobus Din I found my parents standing right in front of me, my grandfather mumbling something behind them. My mother was beaming down at me with all teeth showing, clearly saying: 'Let's get this done quickly.'- as my grandfather had only come under the condition we get him home by six O'clock, and he always considered himself the most important thing. Therefore we had a very tight schedule and had to prioritise his interests over everyone else's.

To keep him happy we headed straight to what he had come for, which was the shop my mother's friend had set up. He had a strange fondness for middle-aged women, and after my mother told him her friend April was running a grocer's stall he seemed more enthusiastic than ever about going to my school. I found it rather repulsive, for it was evident he hadn't come for me, but for April- she would be bringing in lots of women around her age to help with the stall.

The only communication between us was an exchange of looks, before he bolted to April's stall. I didn't even get the usual 'Hello Alice.' He was off before he could say much to anyone- and my mother insisted we not catch up with him. We had no idea how he knew where it was, but we turned up at April's stall about half a minute later to find him already mid conversation with a woman who seemed to be at least three decades younger than him. My conclusion is that he must have had a special sense for detecting women, which was how he found the stall so quickly- probably one of the many results of his wealth of experience.

Despite their blatancy, Mother's naivety meant she was completely oblivious to her father-in-law's real motives, which meant I had to be on guard- already put on edge because I knew there would be lots of chances for things to turn dire.

Without suspecting a thing, my mother approached my grandfather and the other woman, whom she called 'Tracey,' and they started conversing for a bit. My grandfather grunted.

All along the shop were dozens of old crates filled to the brim with the Earth's goodness. Piled on classroom tables was an endless supply of sacks, abound with onions and potatoes fresh from nature's grasp. Tall columns on which bunches of bananas were suspended could be seen on either side of the stall, and as I mindlessly gazed upwards, I spotted a pole hoisting the Nivillian flag. It was a miserable sight, for I knew it would have been put up there willingly- not just as some act of compliance. April was not one to question, and was much like Mother in this regard. She was of an optimistic, naive character and could not differentiate between truth and lies. Again, much like Mother. For a while I was transfixed by the flag, attempting to think of an excuse for their senselessness.

It took a few seconds to see what was in the corner of my eye, and even then, my vision was interrupted by the striking orange pigment of the *Drapeau de la Niville*. All that was perceptible was a skin-coloured blur, which gradually became more clear as my eyes focused on it: some sort of limb, reaching into a box of onions.

It was too late- I should have known better than to leave him on his own. I sighed at the sight of my grandfather scooping a small loose onion from a torn sack. He put it to his face and grinned- seemingly proud of himself, leaving me to watch in frustration. Unfortunately there was very little I could do to stop him.

I turned away impulsively, not wanting him to realise I'd noticed, as that would only make it worse. However, this was a grave mistake. He was highly volatile and quite literally anything could trigger him. In fact, when I saw what happened next I knew an incident was coming. There was no chance of mitigating it.

A small girl of about six years had watched my grandfather steal the onion, which prompted her to do the same. She scooped one up with her fragile hands, not realising her mother would condemn it. Evidently pleased with herself she started to turn around and show everyone behind her who was interested. She received chuckles and comments as she proudly showed off her new acquisition, until after a few seconds her mother realised. The girl was seemingly shocked by her sharp gesture to put it back, but she instantly complied. As this was taking place the mother tried to muster a faint smile at my grandfather, who was staring from a few metres in front.

This made him seething.

He was like a bull, but an old one: for he maintained his youthful passion but was physically disadvantaged. However, although he was weak, his passion made up for it, and it was irrefutably the most dangerous aspect of his character. It could overcome any barrier. It was the fuel that gave him strength to fight those who had done wrong in his corrupted mind. Suddenly, but yet predictably, he was off. His wrinkles smoothed out as he smacked himself through the air, instantly becoming years younger. In seconds he had confronted her with his walking stick, aiming it at her face, making sure everyone was not anticipating a brawl of equal strength.

She was a mouse and he was a bull- a primitive beast guided by impulse. Knowing no shame it dropped its stick (which now seemed more like a prop to indicate some nonexistent weakness than a walking aid) and brought the mouse to the floor by its legs in the most unnatural position. Savagely it restrained it, again by the legs, and punched it in the chest multiple times.

Unsurprisingly the girl started whining- while the mother screamed harshly in his face. It was an inaudible slur of hateful words, which alerted everyone who hadn't already noticed to what was happening. Soon enough the attention got the whole family escorted off the premises. None of us got home before six O'clock.

Chapter 2

The school kicked me out after that, and thus I missed out on a crucial period of my life. Despite my mother's best efforts to convince the school committee, I was prevented from completing some of the essential steps that dictated the place at which I was to be educated the following year. The most essential of these steps was the completion of my end-of-school exams, for which I had diligently prepared for the past three years. This was what made the incident so significant- my lack of participation in the exams effectively gave me a score of zero out of four hundred: which was not the slightest bit useful for applying to state schools. Because of this, the only options for me were private schools and homeschooling- the latter of which I would have been completely happy with. The former seemed to be my fate, however, because I never got much of a say in such matters.

Despite sounding like the sorts of places attended by the wealthiest, private schools were quite the contrary. While they were once the epitome of quality education, since the government allocated a larger amount of funding to its state schools for the new millennium in 4000 the standard had deteriorated. Parents had ceased to fund them and almost every child who wasn't a useless uncreative brick went to one of the many thousands of state-of-the-art government facilities across the country- which when we visited on open days, although ubiquitous in design, were magnificent. They had spacious foyers with clean canteens, massive classrooms and even larger windows. They were modern structures of concrete, metal and glass, which surprisingly gave them a homely ambience rather than making them intimidating places to learn in.

Before the incident I was all-prepared, because I knew I was competent enough to be educated at one of them. My passion was palpable. I felt as if it were imperative that I go, as if it could not be that I wouldn't go, but unfortunately my destiny didn't agree with my desires and I ended up going to a private school.

It was called 'New Lines Community Secondary Academy', or 'NLCS' for short.

So that was that. I had lost my chance and luck's existence seemed like a fictitious notion that would never bless my life. I spent the last week of the holidays dismally purchasing uniform and gathering stationery for the coming academic year, dejected and pessimistic, while most children my age were as optimistic as can be.

Moreover, to bring more dull tidings to the story, my new school was going to be almost an hour away by bus.

I would be going to a nearby town called Ne'hállda, a small settlement of about ten thousand people famous for its fresh produce markets. Since NLCS was a small school, located in a small town itself, there existed not many uniform shops that sold the correct attire; out of the six shops that sold NLCS uniform only one was in Elistone, in the city centre (which was fifteen minutes away from where our house was located at the time). Luckily it sold all the necessary garments, so there was no need to make any trips to Ne'hállda.

One could buy everything there, from the grey and red cotton ties, the annoyingly loose-fitting jackets with the school logo on and the low-waisted trousers that insisted on falling down one's legs, to the long orange cotton P.E. socks and the school-specific boxing headwear and gloves (boxing was the country's most popular sport). Thus on the Wednesday of that week Mother, Father and I set out on a shopping trip *au centre-ville*.

I remember the journey lasting for hours. The council had not long commenced construction on new motorways connecting the outer suburbs of Elistone and other towns in our conurbation to the central area. It seemed as if they made journey times slower, if anything, and I had never been in support of their construction. I even wrote some letters to the mayor to urge the council to consider cancelling the project, but I knew there was no hope. The council always seemed to worsen the city with its new innovations and this was no different. The roads were good for nothing, and they ripped through some of my favourite parts of the city. As we sat in our car on one of the newly-built strips, I became as seething as my grandfather during the incident. I could barely recognise my home city and it gave me an uncomfortable internal urge to vomit, which manifested itself on my face as frustration.

My father had a strong bond with me, but sometimes tried too hard to put me in a comfortable state of being. Often, it would work the other way and make me more agitated. This was a perfect example of such a scenario: he promptly noticed my facial expression and connected it in his brain to an emotion that I wasn't feeling. From the driver's seat, he turned round almost one hundred and eighty degrees to ask me, 'Is anything the matter, Alice?'

To which I responded with a faint 'No.'

I felt like that was too little for him to go on, so to settle his paternal instinct I said: 'I'm just contemplating how many P.E. socks I should buy.'

It wasn't what I was thinking about at all, but it seemed to satisfy him, and he didn't respond after that. In fact, we had had quite a quiet journey, for I would usually talk anyone and everyone's head off whenever I had the chance to do so, but on this particular day I was so overwhelmed by my thoughts that communicating them was impossible.

The shop was a three minute's walk from the car park, so it was only natural that out of all of the places we wanted to visit we went there first. We departed our Lemur 299e SUV and walked on the rugged pavement to the uniform shop. Straight out of the exit of the car park, one right turn two left turns and we were there.

It was two floors, but only occupied the ground and first levels of a five-storey building. The façade of the shop was completely glass, which although obscenely filthy was transparent enough for us to see through. It comprised twelve panes fastened onto a rusty metal frame, which was tilted so that the first floor extended slightly further out onto the street than the ground floor, by about seventeen inches. Above the shop were three floors of flats- the lowest of which having a small terrace above the shop. The top floor's front was covered in grim lime ceramic tiles that looked as if they had been there since the 3970s, and the third floor had been masked by wood panelling, perhaps saved from the dire state the others were in. It was at first glance that I knew the shop was going to be atypical: for the building in which it was located had a completely chaotic appearance. It blended in well on the old street it was on, which was decorated with large glass windows and 70s-style tiles, but no sensible person would say it was designed in a normal fashion. I wasn't fond of the building and in fact found it rather horrid, and focusing on the whole picture I realised that the appearance of the uniform shop portended the terrible school experience that was to come. If the only shop that sold the uniform in the city was as bad as this, I dreaded to think what NLCS was going to be like.

Underneath the door frame was a concrete beam that I placed my left foot on before entering the shop. It was cold on my feet, even though I was wearing my *bettis* shoes, which were magical when it came to insulation. I was the first to enter, and I gave the tatty wooden door a good push to get through. It triggered a bell to sound, which was quite unusual then. A fairly plump woman in a long dress with red plastic glasses gave me a friendly smile and shouted, at a volume I think even she was surprised by, some sort of greeting. (She spoke in a very colloquial fashion, so I couldn't decipher exactly what she said.) My parents followed promptly, and shut the door carefully behind them. I was about to start talking to the woman when I got cut off by my mother.

'Hello, I'm looking for some NLCS uniform for my daughter,' she said, turning her head round to see me. I think the plump woman knew I had been interrupted, because she directed her response at me, 'And what items would you like?'

After giving my answer, she hurriedly left the customers' area and went to the storage room to retrieve what I wanted.

It was not long before she came back and gave me some different sizes to try on. She walked up close to me, and I could see all her wrinkles in detail. I could smell her odour as well. She had obviously tried to mask the scent of her perspiration with perfume, but a slightly foul smell was still detectable, permeating the pleasant scent of the perfume.

When she showed me what she had brought, I was pleased. It seemed as if the uniform had been updated, and it was surprisingly decent. Even though I could not find a jacket that fitted me well, and my trousers would not stay on my legs, I adored the luxurious crimson colour and the velvetsque fabric of the jacket's lapel, that made me feel like someone of importance: a queen, perhaps. We agreed on sizes and purchased ten pairs of trousers, three blazers, the P.E. kit and four ties.

I think we were all happy to get out of there, and after shopping we completed our trip by having lunch at a quaint crêperie near the car park.

Chapter 3

Soon enough my summer holiday had come to an end. I hadn't long before I started at NLCS, and though I still had some days to go I was already filled with enthusiasm. I had developed a strange sense of excitement-embracing the naive philosophy of 'Whatever happens happens,' and was neither scared nor anxious, but rather fueled with the desire to explore and adventure.

This excitement had deluded me into believing that NLCS would offer me anything in the way of advantages. I was convinced that I could make the most of things and waiting for my first day to come became painful- so in those last few days before school I kept to a very strict routine, which was the most effective solution for taking my mind off it. I occupied a large portion of my schedule with gardening and activities for which much mental effort was not requisite, which offered a lot of relief. The hours spent gardening were mostly for weeding, since I was in charge of a large area at the end of the garden which had been left to nature before I took it on. As it was completely abandoned, my parents had given me the liberty to do whatever I wished with it because I could not make it any worse than it was. I had only had it for a few months, however, so I'd really only just got started with it- and yet I was unrealistically hoping that before the end of my first term at NLCS I could finish it completely. By the end of the summer holidays about half of it was completely barren. I had only another forty square-metre patch to clear.

I imagined a Mediterranean landscape. In my vision, the soil was pale and loose, so you could walk on it as comfortably as if you were getting into bed. The understated colour of the soil grew more intense as it rose up to a circular stone platform upon which fruit trees grew in large clay pots. When the oranges ripened, they seemed to elegantly roll down the mound of dirt towards you, almost waiting to be eaten- and then when you opened them you were greeted first by their fresh scent, and then their intense colour that contrasted the muted backdrop. In front of the planted area was a large bar, with a barbecue and a granite table that would be able to host parties and gatherings, making the garden something to enjoy.

None of that vision had been achieved as of then, so I worked hard in those days before school to get as much done as possible.

The day before I started, I woke up instinctively at four O'clock in the morning. Hyper-aware, I could sense the summer breeze outside. Somehow I knew of its presence, yet I wasn't feeling it at all. I never seemed to feel the cold and was boiling- nestled inside my bed, which felt like it was doing its job too well. After about five minutes of being conscious I shot up and felt the need to stretch my legs. The air was still sultry, but my mind felt free and I let it think. When this happened, I would usually want to find a notebook and pen to write my thoughts down- and this day was no exception. I rushed downstairs to the table with some paper and immediately started scrawling on it.

It was far too early for my parents, but like most children, when I knew something exciting was happening the next day, I found it impossible to sleep my normal amount. This meant I woke up before six O'clock quite often, until I completed adolescence, in fact.

While in some ways I was a lot like other children, in others I was completely unique. For example, I was too impatient to sleep well, but in contrast I was very mature and put my spare time to good use. Most children would have been happy lounging about for two hours, but I liked to make the most of my time in the morning.

I had acquired some cooking skills (enough for my parents to trust me to use the hob on my own), which I applied that morning. After writing for a few minutes I put the kettle on to boil and fried three eggs in a wok, which was the kind of pan I always used- it appealed to me.

Thinking they looked a bit bland I added a few blueberries to them and poured some more oil into the pan. The insides of the blueberries seeped out into the eggs and gave them a whimsical appearance that I was sure Mother would appreciate. To finish, I poured half a tablespoon of pepper on each egg and made sure they were as crispy as possible. I cut them into strips and arranged them in a lattice on a large plate.

It took a few more hours for my parents to wake up, and they seemed a bit less excited than me. In fact, they weren't anywhere near as complimentary about the breakfast as I thought they would be. While they did enjoy it, it felt like something they expected me to do anyway, and nothing special. I'm sure they did appreciate it, but they were still half asleep and were in the phase of waking up- only just regaining full alertness.

After about an hour indulging in my eggs, and then some cereal, we began to have a proper conversation- there was nothing of sustenance being said, just Mother blabbering on about that night's dream about going on holiday with my grandparents, while Father reminisced about his youth. However uninteresting it was, I enjoyed being able to talk to people and was happy to be around the ones I loved most.

Chapter 4

It was time. The moment had arrived, but somehow I had managed to sleep in. I was woken by a faint call from Mother, who had just seen Father off to work. She was in a much better mood than she was the day before, clearly due to her excitement for me. She would always put my interests first, and was clearly overwhelmed by her elation. This was how she functioned, prioritising me over all. Thinking of this, I got up as soon as I heard the call and went downstairs.

As always, Mother had lovingly made me my breakfast. I sat down and started to indulge in the bowl of fruit she had prepared. I was biting into a segment of nectarine when she started the conversation.

‘So, Alice,’ she coughed, ‘What are you most looking forward to doing today at NLCS?’ I honestly had no decent response to give, since I had missed most of the induction days so had no idea what I would be up to once I got there.

‘I don’t really have a clue, honestly. They haven’t told me a thing,’ I said as an answer.

This is where she revealed something to me that I didn’t know before.

‘Well, Mr Gatwick e-mailed me this morning, do you know him?’ Mr Gatwick was the teacher involved in transitions. I had only met him a few times, but more than any other staff member.

‘Yes, he’s the one you had a conversation with in the north hall, while I was taking the EPC test for French and English.’

‘Oh of course! Anyway he sent me some information that he wanted you to read,’ she said way too enthusiastically.

It was merely a breakdown of school expectations and rules, with a brief explanation as to what I was completely clueless about before. I was to meet my peers in the south hall, where we would be assigned our form tutors and given our full timetables. The schedule for my first day was on the e-mail, and when I looked at it I was disappointed to see that lunchtime was only half an hour long, a lot shorter than at primary school. Each lesson was forty-five minutes and we had four of them. This is except for the last one, which was to last an extra half hour. On my first day my last lesson was Russian, which was extremely exciting as I had never studied it before. I had a natural proclivity towards languages- so I thought I would probably learn very quickly.

Russian was certainly the most interesting thing I would be learning about that day, but I was also looking forward to my three other lessons. These were: history, which didn’t intrigue me quite as much as geography; art, which I found relaxing and was a strong subject for me; and maths- which I had improved significantly in during my last two years of primary school.

After devouring the fruit, I drew my attention over to the mug filled with yoghurt that stood in front of me. It was one of the sour-tasting ‘healthy’ ones that Mother encouraged me to eat more of. She had put some strawberries in it and I was actually starting to get used to the taste- though it was still sharp in my mouth and I wasn’t really keen on it. I ate it all appreciatively, though, and decided it wasn’t too bad in the end.

I had finished breakfast quickly and was up in two seconds to get ready for a shower. Even though I had had one the night before, I wanted to ensure I was clean on my first day and I thought it would help to wake me up properly. For these reasons I jogged up the stairs (so as not to fall over) and got my towel. I subsequently ran back down, forgetting that our bathrooms had been renovated and our shower was now upstairs.

The water was cold. It attacked me before I knew I had turned it on. It hit me right on my sternum, then innocently trickled down my torso to the floor. It had attacked once, and that was enough. Soon after it warmed up and became my friend again.

‘*Water, like Mother Nature, is the enemy, but also our sustenance,*’ I remembered from a book I had read. I scrubbed it on my arms, which were still muddy from the garden (I obviously hadn’t noticed them the night before), and set the temperature to the lowest it could be so as to not be shivering when I got out.

I exited the shower along with a plume of steam that created a mystic fog as I wrapped my towel around myself. I was stripped of all uncleanliness.

Once dry, I put my uniform on for the first time since I had bought it at the shop. It still fitted well, however the trousers seemed even more loose than before. I decided to wear a belt with them, as they were non-refundable and Mother would be quite annoyed if she had to spend another 300 ishwis on new school trousers. I did my tie and ensured it was long enough for my liking before fastening a metal pin badge onto it. The badge had an enamel French flag on the front- for I had bought it when my parents took me on holiday to Marseille the previous summer, so as to add to my collection. Each badge in my collection represented a country that I had visited. However, with my French one I found I could often be quite egotistical as I used it to remind myself of how good I was at speaking French. Truthfully, I wore it that day to remind myself to show off my skills with the inhabitants of Ne'hállda. I really wasn't a person to oversell myself, but my linguistic competence was a skill that I struggled not to tell people about.

At least two thousand of the residents of Ne'hállda spoke French. It was used more for academic and official purposes than for general conversation. What people spoke other than English were languages descended from French, however the standardised form recognised by the government was still reminiscent of how people spoke 2,500 years ago.

The existence of so many French speakers was due to Nivillia's history of French colonisation, followed by its being part of the People's Democratic Republic of Algeria, which became its own state in 1962. It was in 3776 when American and British settlers were allowed to populate the southernmost region, leading to its independence and renaming to Nivillia.

I was soon ready, and I rushed down the stairs with haste. My mother was waiting in the hall and had placed my newly polished black leather school shoes on the bottom step for me. The hall was illumined with sunlight, every corner was flooded with it and the walls radiated it upon us. I was dazed by its positivity, and for a moment could envision nothing but cheerfulness ahead.

It was with such cheerfulness that I posed in front of the front door, having a photo taken for day one of my first senior year. This sort of thing was highly important to both my mother and me: so we had to make sure we were both happy with the photo. Afterwards, she led me out of the door and we got into the car.

I did have a strong preference for walking, however I never had time for it before school, and the bus stop was on the way to Mother's work- meaning dropping me off was of no inconvenience to her. It took about a minute to get there from our house, on the same road that Mother had to take to get to Elistone City Centre: which was where her work was located. The bus stop consisted of nothing but a sign and a bit of marked-out pavement, and I found it surprising that the school had decided to pick us up there, as there was a sheltered bus stop just a bit further up the road. I thought perhaps that one was owned by a private company, so was prohibited for our use, because otherwise it would have been much more logical to be picked up there, where we were in the shade and protected from the North African heat. There was a row of

shops that ran parallel to the road where the bus stop was, and there were some free parking spaces there where I got out of the car.

I was the only one at the bus stop that day, for the first year students always had a day to themselves before everyone else came back to school. This was to get accustomed to secondary school life, mainly for the sake of the vast majority, who were usually very nervous. I never understood this, as I was an incredibly confident person who rarely got anxious. My mother even mentioned it as I left the car for the bus stop, commenting that I 'looked like a further student.' (A further student was a type of student at a Nivillian school, who had completed their first qualifications at sixteen and moved on to study at a higher level.)

The bus came at its scheduled time and I sat at the back with three other first years, whose names I learnt were Kristinus, Trenise and Carlotta. Our conversation was much like the one I had had the day before at the breakfast table with my parents- nothing of sustenance, but still a pleasant discourse; eleven year-olds were rather different at that time, as discipline had been lost and we constantly interested ourselves in meaningless pursuits.

For example, almost half of what Carlotta's mouth produced were words relating to make-up and the poster she was making for her imaginary beauty brand which was destined to lose her interest within two weeks. Kristinus was like it too, boasting about his apparently 'massive' hat collection. At first I thought it to be pathetic, but then I assessed that it was healthy for children to engage in their ephemeral interests, and that I was quite unique for placing such an importance on the future.

Another girl joined our conversation, after she had got on at the bus stop after mine. I later learnt that her name was Betty, but she told us to call her 'Bethymall' instead, her reason being that it was 'cool' and 'exotic-sounding.' So as not to knock her spirits that is what we referred to her as, and I actually found it to be quite a fitting nickname because she seemed, to put it informally, quite wild. Her hair was in an absolute state and she had drawn black fineliner circles around the spots on her face, as if proud to show her acne. Her jacket was torn, obviously intentionally, in multiple places upon her sleeves. She must have cut the bottom of it, as well, since it was fastened with elastic at her chest. This made it clear to see her waist- where tucked behind her gothic belt were off-cuts of fabric that she had fashioned together to make some sort of skirt. Pinned in a variety of locations on her shirt, which was black (not at all in accordance with the uniform policy), were metal brooches of horrid vulturesque birds that must have gone extinct at least 50,000 years before then.

She might as well have been wearing a witch's hat, which would have completed her look perfectly. It was quite safe to say she was unique (at the very least), and to this day I still have no idea how she got away with it. I suspect she might have been told off, since that was the only time she ever came to school in quite a state. She didn't add much value to the conversation, surprisingly, but she seemed keen to learn when Trenise taught us some Twi, which was the language she spoke with her parents, and talked to us about her holiday to Ghana where she met her relatives.

On that day, it only took around forty-five minutes for the bus to get to school- because we managed to pass through the busiest roads just before rush hour. Once we got out of Elistone, the roads became narrower and most of the journey was on country lanes until we reached Ne'hållda. These rarely got congested.

The passage into the town was a concrete tunnel, which was typical in Nivillia. Ne'hållda was situated within a shallow valley, and the tunnel took us to its basin on a more gradual slope than it would have been if we had driven over and gone down the steep valley side. The tunnel was very old, with large, hopefully superficial cracks in its ceiling and ancient graffiti covering its walls. None of us trusted it, and I joked with Trenise that it was about to collapse.

Once out of the tunnel we were welcomed by the image of Ne'hållda's most historic buildings, chaotically piled in front of the other side of the valley, covered by a mystic haze- that stretched across the whole town and encased us. Transfixed by our view, I think we all forgot we were in a bus, and I was drawn to the outside. I vividly imagined the wetness of the air and the fresh feeling it brought with it. This type of weather was rare in Nivillia, so it was a fantastic experience- symbolising a new start, the beginning of my next chapter.

In a swift motion the bus pivoted and drove to the left, where we passed a run-down supermarket and some rows of shops. We continued on the same bumpy road for about a minute, and gradually descended the remainder of the hill upon which the road to the town was located, which was made of smaller slopes that slowed our speed going down. The bus juttied out a bit from one slope, and then fell fast until it reached the next. This was how it got to the bottom, happening ten times before we took a turn into the lower part of the town's centre and had to go slowly. We crossed the river at an old stone bridge and made our way to NLCS.

The school was slightly out of the town centre and located in a small estate: which looked lovely at first, centred by a central avenue with large *Nessorian* homes and a clean cycle path, with backstreets full of newer, smaller houses and corner shops. However, as the bus continued along the same avenue I saw the cycle path stop abruptly along with the nice-looking houses. Their replacements were quasi-abandoned mudbrick flats that were overgrown with vines. The streets between them had seemingly not been laid for decades, made with grey asphalt that was cracked and disintegrating. We had entered what Carlotta called a 'dump,' meaning any hopes of things not being so bad had gone out of the window.

And there it was, shimmering in the distance: a resplendent palace on a hill, NLCS.

We drove up to the school and got off the bus, making sure to thank the driver for being brave enough to take us there. It was split on two sites, one on either side of the road, with some subjects being taught on the north side, such as history, and others being taught on the south side, like Russian.

It was interesting to see once more what the school had emphasised on induction days, which was the bridge that straddled the two sides. It was designed by the great-great-great-great-granddaughter of Xavi Vidal, who was the planner of Novila, the town in northeastern Spain that was Nivillia's namesake. Every year on the 1st

of October the school would decorate the bridge with flags to celebrate the anniversary of Vidal's death: which was a national day in our country. It was a very important day, so every year the street would close and host a fayre there. This garnered a substantial amount of money for the school, because every resident of the town went there for the fayre. That is what they told us, anyway.

On the first day we had to go straight from the north side car park (where the bus dropped us off) to the south hall. This was where we would usually have free time before lessons started, but this day was an exception. Therefore, we were directed by some teachers to the south side. I lost Kristinus, but with Bethymall, Trenise and Carlotta I went over the bridge and towards the south hall.

The main entrance was in the older of the two buildings that made up the south side. It was opposite the bridge and almost directly aligned with it, which meant that nothing was obstructing the view of it from the north side. It was clearly designed this way intentionally, though I couldn't understand why because nothing about the main building deserved such respect. It was dilapidated, with off-white walls whose colour was vomit-inducing. Furthermore it was covered in cracks and dents and looked like it had been through at least a thousand wars. The gleaming NLCS logo emblazoned proudly beside the entrance provided a perplexing contradiction to every other aspect of the building, and I struggled to make sense of everything my eyes were telling me I was seeing.

Despite their direct alignment, there wasn't a path between the entrance and the bridge. We had to journey across the south car park to get to the entrance, which wasn't very convenient when there were also tens of cars trying to get out at the same time.

Walking through the doorway to reception we found ourselves in front of a large imposing desk. It was a metre high and was also fronted by a metal NLCS logo, so as to not let us forget where we were. It was very impressive, however it did not fit in its dull setting. The walls behind it were covered in a horrible textured cement that looked to be an imitation of the sea, with indented rows of small ripples that gathered into large waves. The ceiling was only just taller than me and the only light in the room was provided by two small gaps in the wall. The darkness made some places seem black which created an ominous shadow over the desk. What was supposed to be impressive and inspiring was actually a disconcerting presence that occupied the whole space. The front desk looked so out of place that it made the south entrance feel more like a storage room than anything else, something we weren't supposed to see, with tatty old carpet and furniture that was too big for the space. It felt cold and chilling in there, and I was quite glad when we reached the much more well-illuminated south hall.

I was the first to enter, along with Carlotta, Trenise and Bethymall. We had to wait another ten minutes for everyone else to start filing in.

When some others did come, Trenise introduced us to three boys, who also came from Elistone but weren't on our bus. They joined the huddle we had formed and we started to detail the important events in our lives that had got us to that point. Most of them, Like Bethymall (whose appearance didn't seem to stir anyone), had come to NLCS in order to get away from the people they knew, for they wanted a new start- which I too

adopted as my reason, because the truth would mislead them into thinking badly of my grandfather, whom though in serious trouble with the police, I did not want to be seen in such a manner.

When there were about fifty students in the room Mr Gatwick, accompanied by the headteacher Mrs Heldin, strode into the hall through its back entrance and assumed a decisive stance behind the microphone stand. Before, there had existed nothing that resembled any sort of order, we were gathered together in small groups and were dotted about the room. However before Mr Gatwick started his discourse Mrs Heldin lined us up in horizontal rows, as order appeared to be her favourite thing. She was extremely petite and physically not very intimidating, however her severe expression made up for her lack of physical dominance and along with everyone else I hurriedly went to where she directed me.

Mr Gatwick had obviously not yet mastered the art of communication. His monotone style of speaking made us instantly forget his words and all I could do was pick up the flatness and bland quality of what he said. His inability to enthuse us left us all about to fall asleep, apart from a small selection of boys at the back whom I knew were going to be troublemakers. Simultaneously they bursted out laughing and drew Mr Gatwick's attention to them.

'What are you lot laughing at?' he exclaimed.

There was no answer from them. They simply looked down to the floor and smirked.

This was until Mrs Heldin made her move. She swiftly rose from her chair on the stage where she jumped onto the floor. The hard soles of her shoes hitting the ground when she stepped created a clacking sound that made me realise how intimidating she could actually be. She made a scene as she marched over to the boys and took them out into the reception. We could hear her voice for ten minutes. She was having a good go at berating the troublemakers. I had finished deducing exactly who she was, and I found that I liked her quite a lot.

After Mr Gatwick's futile speech we waited, sat with crossed legs on the floor for our tutors to call our names and take us to our form rooms. I knew that I was in form 1KAB, however I had no clue as to what those letters stood for and to who my tutor was going to be.

When my form tutor finally came after being called by Mrs Heldin on her walkie-talkie, he took no time in getting us ready and registered. He called all thirty names in our form group as soon as he had entered the hall- but because none of us were expecting it, and he spoke extremely quietly, he had to read our names out again and go a lot slower. Once everyone was ready, he led us to his classroom by the maths department.

On the first day, there was no seating plan in the classroom and we could choose where we sat. However, somehow I had ended up far away from Trenise and Bethymall, who were the only people I knew.

The room in which we were sitting had two walls that were completely made of glass, and we could see down to the bridge, which looked more impressive from higher up (though the window panes were covered in grime and so disrupted our view of it). Our teacher interrupted us while we were all simultaneously gazing outside, and introduced himself as Mr Bektediyev. He was a teacher who specialised in statistics, but he

should have taught geography too because he was more keen to inform us about his origins than he was about maths. I found this sort of thing highly intriguing, so I didn't mind him going on about it at all. In fact, I thoroughly enjoyed it when he informed us about his life in Qarshi, which was the city in Uzbekistan that he came from.

We were only in our form room for five minutes before we had to leave again- the time spent on our introduction to school had eaten into our first lesson, which had fifteen minutes left and had only ten when I had made it to the north side.

The north side was a lot more perplexing than the south- I could make out two distinctive parts, one being built in a traditional Nivillian style and the other being more modern, but very dated still. Though it was in two sections, it was made up of an array of different buildings- which were packed together so as to make a right angle, the inside of which hosting a playground and the land on the outside of which being the car park.

In our first year all of our lessons were in our form groups. Therefore, when I got to our history classroom on the fifth floor of the tallest building in the school there was already a crowd of fatigued first years from my form whom I could tell were neither used to waking up so early nor to climbing so many flights of stairs.

Our teacher for history was Mr Fournier, who gave interesting lessons but should have been in retirement as he was certainly over eighty years old. He seemed to have lost his ability to control his students and the whole ten minutes were spent with him inaudibly talking about something while the class erupted into mayhem.

The second lesson was a lot calmer. The general opinion was clear to see, which was that art was a lot better than history. The mood in class was a complete contrast, because everyone was engaged in their work. We were doing pencil sketches to go on the covers of our art books. The teacher, Mrs Merveille, was incredibly laid-back and there was no tension in the air when she strolled round to get a sense of our skills.

In my breaktime I engaged in a game of football on the south playground, since everyone else was participating. It wasn't my favourite, however, and I ended up leaving to sit on a large tree root and think about the multitude of interesting things I would be able to tell Father when I got home.

Soon enough the bell rang and I made my way off to maths, which was in the same corridor as my form room, in the smaller building on the south side. I had two maths teachers in my first year, and on that day I was taught by Mr Bridge. He was extremely tiring to listen to, and his lesson dragged on for ages- it seemed like a day-long lecture and it felt like I had to wait an eternity to eat my lunch.

The queue in the south hall, where we had had the preparation talk, was massive. Every student in the first three years had to eat on the south side, which led to a seemingly infinite crowd blocking everyone from efficiently paying for their food. I was one of the unfortunate ones located in the middle of the crowd, making me the most vulnerable to the shoving and pushing coming from either side.

There were three counters available to choose food from, one selling pasta and beans, one with cooked food, and the other with cold food and snacks. I went to the latter because I wanted to escape the hall as quickly as possible. When I had finally paid I came out with a baguette, a waffle and five minutes to eat them.

I would have brought my own food, but Mother had insisted that the canteen food at secondary schools was much better than at primary schools. She was right, however I wasn't certain about the manageability of the queue situation.

I had sat down on a bench between the two south side buildings to eat my lunch, when I noticed Trenise walking by herself. She was looking around, with obviously nothing to do. I called her over to sit down beside me and once I had finished lunch we went to Mr Bektediyev's classroom in time for the bell.

He was dressed smartly, wearing a fitted black suit, and as soon as he spotted me and Trenise waiting by the door he glided from his desk towards us and welcomed us in. He was a very passionate man, and I found him to be very philosophical. He would always encourage thought and interaction between his students. Mr Bektediyev had the biggest influence on me out of all of the teachers in the school: he was my mentor, and helped foster my growth as a person- even though I don't think he ever quite realised his value. (Amongst his many qualities was modesty.)

Mr Bektediyev knew exactly how to teach. He used stories to show us concepts and could captivate us easily. On that first day he told us the story of Amos, in which the protagonist was faced with different pathways towards success, and made poor decisions that rendered his life more difficult. He took quite a while to tell it to us and his performance of the story took us right up to the bell. When we all started filing out of the classroom he had an extremely disappointed expression, probably because he didn't have time to finish the story to his normal standard of eloquence. When I went I made sure I said 'Thank you very much,' to show appreciation for his session. He produced a smile which I reciprocated.

I don't think I stopped smiling until I got to Russian. When I reached the door of the classroom my expression turned into something that resembled a frown. I wanted to appear as competent as possible, and I was apprehensive that I wouldn't give a good impression, so I wasn't unhappy at all, I just wanted to make sure I had a good relationship with the teacher of what was to be my favourite subject.

He rushed down the stairs with large bundles of sheets in either hand- apologising for being late when he got to the door- which I opened for him because his hands were full. His quick 'Thank you' that followed this deed became the first word he ever said to me. I was pleased, for we had got off to a good start.

Our first lesson, to my disappointment, was more of a history session than a language one. The man who was our teacher was called Mr Karenin, and he came from St Petersburg. He was of the opinion that it was essential to cover the linguistic history of the Russian language before letting us learn it. I enjoyed it, but I would rather have spent more time on grammar and learning new vocabulary.

I was stunned by the severe lack of enthusiasm for learning languages, as towards the end of the lesson we started to learn some words and almost the entire class either drifted off, sighed, huffed or grunted or made some sort of gesture to indicate that they were displeased with the fact they were there. I, on the other hand, was quite chuffed that I had filled the first page of my exercise book.

After the lesson, I showed myself up by continually repeating sentences on the way to the car park. I didn't even know I was doing it, but when I was crossing the bridge I was tapped on the shoulder by Kristinus (whom I hadn't seen all day), and he told me that some others were laughing at how silly I sounded.

This wasn't that embarrassing, however, and I didn't feel too distraught about it- though when I got on the bus I tried to restrain myself. The journey back was much quieter, and I never experienced a school bus ride quite as good as my first one.

I had to walk back from the bus stop and I got home for quarter to three.

1 ishwi \approx 0.76 pounds. Subunits: micorent, bwá, sabth, rin.

56 micorents in 1 ishwi, 27 bwá in 1 micorent, 23 sabth in 1 bwá, 123 rins in 1 sabth.

Chapter 5

In Nivillia, the school day was generally a lot shorter than in most of the Occidental world. It had used to be no different, but in the year before I started at NLCS, campaigns to reduce school hours succeeded in making it verboten to submit children to many hours of schooling without ensuring they had a chance for independent activity. Therefore, I would always have a lot of time available before sunset each day.

I got changed and made my way to the park nearby. It occupied a rectangle-shaped plot and was accessible by walking, cycling, driving or boating. Opposite it was a dock for canal boats and surrounding it were rare tall trees that made it a very natural environment. Despite the fact it was encircled by things, during the hours before sunset it felt very open. It was the *lieu parfait* for making the most of the sun and admiring the blue sky. There was lots of equipment there also, which rendered it paradise for an eleven year-old girl. Being one

of such, I amused myself on the climbing frames and the swings, doing all sorts of childish things that adults wouldn't dare to be seen in public delighting in.

The name of the park was 'Sir Tirol Ekydari Park,' and I wondered what its namesake would have thought about its current usage, for there were young children darting all about the place who clearly had no care for the damage they could cause to the park and the people around them. Seeing as I didn't wish to be hurt by one of them I got quite apprehensive when I was sharing the monkey bars with a rough-looking seven year-old boy, whose age was brandished on his front with a large pin-on badge. Swiftly I got off and was approached by a mother who asked me to use a see-saw with her toddler called James who had no-one else to play with. I did this with pleasure, but afterwards I walked away from the park to a grass mound by the canal adjacent to it. I crossed my legs and simply relaxed there for a while, and did little more for the next hour. Afterwards I had a calm stroll home.

I arrived to find my parents on the sofa in the living room. They had a joyful air about them and were lounging on either side. There was a large space between them that I was about to sit myself down in, but Father prevented me from doing so, exclaiming quite loudly, 'We're going out!' He then made me go and get dressed.

They had planned a surprise for me, and had kept it secret for a while, which was impressive seeing as I hadn't the foggiest idea about it. When I had donned a nice dress and come down the stairs (after having another shower) they informed me that we would be taking the tram to the cinema.

We shortly left our house and journeyed down the street as daylight was showing the first signs of dwindling. It was still warm, however the sky was going slightly darker. For most of the way, the footpath was wide enough for us to stand side by side, to hold hands- me in the middle. It reminded me of when I was little, of a rare time in which we had snow. We had just moved in and my parents were equally as surprised as me to wake up to layers of glistening white on the ground. We ran out and had snowball fights and played with the neighbours' children all day long. It was so wonderful, and I wondered if my recollection of it was a sign that that night might be just as lovely.

There was a tram stop on every major street in Elistone. Not only that, but they were frequent also. Our road was a cul-de-sac, and when we had left it and come to the end of the adjacent street there was one right by the junction. We got onto it via the frontmost entrance, beside the driver's compartment. He waved at us and we paid the ticket lady before setting off. It was a short ride to the centre, and only lasted a sixth of an hour.

We descended onto the platform at Panaji Plaza Station, directly in front of where the cinema was located. Panaji Plaza had a two-dimensional form that is quite difficult to describe; it was not a square, nor was it any type of regular shape. On the one side it was rather straight, and was dominated by a gargantuan 2000s building that housed the cinema. However on the other side, it was a chaotic jumble of megatall contemporary buildings whose distribution created a plethora of other, smaller, public spaces. I quite liked it in fact.

We went to a souvenir shop beside the cinema for a reason which I can't quite remember, and picked up a china model of Panaji Plaza before my father bought us tickets to see the film. It lasted for two and a half hours and I think we all amused ourselves. Unfortunately cameras were prohibited so the only means by which to remember my experience was my memory. This was adequate though and I was content when leaving.

My mother persuaded my father to let us have a drink at my favourite pub, thus our trip lasted for quite a long time. We spent at least an hour chatting on a high table by the window together, and I had a few glasses of cherryade while my parents had of course every alcoholic beverage under the sun. This was why Mother was especially keen to go on the tram.

After one glass of pop my shoes had somehow come untied so I bent down to redo them. It was easier to get off the chair to do so, so I crouched down on the floor and tied my laces.

I stood up in time to hear a cracking sound from the adults-only floor upstairs. A subsequent quick glance drew me to the stairs where Mr Gatwick was hammering a picture onto the wallpaper. This was quite a surprise, and I decided not to draw any attention to myself. However, as soon as I had thought to do so, he became illuminated with an energetic charge and rushed down the creaky wooden stairs to me and my parents.

Mr Gatwick was alright. He was neither the most amazing teacher nor the worst. He had a particular talent in transitioning the first years, and was helpful in that regard, but there was nothing remarkable about him in regards to his teaching. He wasn't one of those ultra-dedicated teachers either. I could never imagine him working beyond the bounds of necessity, and I found I could respect that. His lack of dedication for teaching gave him a lot of free time, therefore he told us he was often at the pub, doing voluntary work refurbishing the top floor. I found it funny that I had never seen him there before.

He was good at blabbering on. He had an extensive conversation with my mother and father about how I apparently possessed 'real potential', and that he was looking forward to seeing my progress. Not that he knew what he was talking about (he barely knew me at all), but he kept going on and on monotonously and even the still palm tree outside was more interesting. I heard him compliment my parents' child-raising abilities while the wind picked up a bit and the palm tree moved. Now this was interesting.

It was still and then not, bouncing about like an audience member at a metal concert. It seemed to move to a certain untouched rhythm, that no human could hear.

By the time Mr Gatwick had finished talking the tree outside had gone still again.

After that, we went home by tram largely problem-free.

Chapter 6

The rest of the week went well- I quickly became used to the school and figured it wasn't too bad. There were some clever people there, who had simply chosen to go to a school close to them and not have to leave Ne'hállda. It was true that some students didn't know the difference between left and right, but the majority were actually alright. I had met multiple people with whom I could easily be friends.

During the first week I drifted away from such people as Carlotta and Trenise, as they were simply the first people I had met- they didn't share a great number of interests with me. Instead of talking to them, I interacted a lot more with the locals from Ne'hállda who were there because they wanted to be. In particular, I had met a boy in the year above who, much like Mr Bektediyev, never failed to be talking about something philosophical. Because of this I found myself frequently close to him during my first week.

I called him 'James,' which was his first name, but often he addressed me with my full name. I couldn't figure out why he did this, but I sensed that he preferred it when this action was reciprocated- thus I called him his full name also. This was an unfamiliar convention for me, and it wasn't something anyone else did in Ne'hállda. I figured it might have facilitated his method of compartmentalising the people he met, giving him multiple markers by which to internally categorise individuals. I thought this because it certainly wasn't in order to express politeness, as he took no consideration towards that matter in other aspects of his life.

I spent large portions of my day with him, and it was only during lessons that we would spend more than an hour apart. Despite this, I still interested myself in things other than him and I stayed dedicated to my hobbies. One of such was writing. When I was at home it wouldn't be unusual for me to write poetry, and I found myself quite apt for it. It was a form of amusement, however, and it was merely that. It wasn't something I wished to pursue.

I was contented greatly when on the Friday Mr Bektediyev let us do as we pleased during our form session. I took the opportunity to write something- the film I had watched on the Monday was still fresh in my mind, so I took inspiration from it. It wasn't quite finished at the end, but I figured I could complete it another time.

That was not the only thing I enjoyed that Friday. Since it was my favourite day of the week, I found I was joyful throughout the entirety of it. I had chemistry as my first lesson, in which the class was introduced to the basics of atomic structure. The teacher was engaging, and it was a decent lesson.

Subsequently it was Russian again, and fortunately we got to look more at the language and the lesson was less focused on history and geography. My third and fourth lessons were both English, and we were made to write descriptive paragraphs.

Instead of taking the bus back to Elistone, I waited by the bridge for my father. He finished work early on Fridays and had the idea of cycling home with me. The plan was that he would drive to Ne'hällda with Mother, with our bikes on the roof rack, and my father and I would use the cycle paths and occasional roads to get back while Mother drove to get her nails done.

I decided to sit myself down on a grass mound beside an NLCS sign. That wouldn't have been a good idea if it were a week before, as we had had some rain, but on that Friday the grass was again dry and dying as usual. Thus it was fine to sit on. It took a few minutes for my father to get there, but it wasn't an intolerable amount of time. I looked up at the sky and appreciated its blueness for a while.

When the car did arrive I saw that my bicycle was strung on top of it with rope so frail I could not help laughing. It was easy to imagine my father all grumpy and frustrated trying to find something to attach my bicycle to the car with, rummaging around in the shed and finally finding it without questioning its ability to perform the task, just wanting to get going. In my head I heard him say 'That'll do,' and I thought of how much I loved him.

That wasn't the only thing- it was so haphazardly strung onto the car that it provided a hilarious juxtaposition to my new expensive bicycle. I found such contrasts extremely amusing: where formidable objects were paired with flimsy materials in a way that defied my logic. Luckily, my bicycle had managed to stay on by the time the car had pulled up next to me and my father had got out. We loosened the rope, which surprisingly took some force, before I took my bike and he got his which was underneath. He had put his on with a chain, and I helped him get it down.

We both stood aside on a verge as Mother waved and drove off. Within a few seconds she was out of our sight and the reality of our imminent journey confronted me suddenly. I had never done such a thing before, and my father hadn't either. We both loved cycling, but usually only drove to destinations and travelled around. We never used our bikes to transfer between distant locations. It seemed like my father hadn't thought much of it though, as he was quick to get on his bike and start doing loops on the road beneath the bridge. He was completely oblivious to my anxiousness, and due to this I found it went away quite quickly

when I started riding. Often, dwelling on concerns leads to prolonged unsettlement, so I was glad that he didn't take any notice of it.

We reached the end of the part of the estate called the 'dump' on the first day by Carlotta. The disintegrating asphalt became a separated bicycle route parallel to the avenue of well-preserved Nessorian homes. The mudbrick flats had passed us and the many corner shops made the street a lively, pleasant place to travel through. We were encased by moringa trees throughout the entire stretch through the town centre and I never encountered any obnoxious noise, which made it rather pleasant.

Father was in front of me for most of the journey. This meant I could see him, however it was difficult to communicate with him as we were not facing so we did not exchange many words at all. Despite this barrier to conversation, I managed to communicate to my father (by shouting) that I had no wish to cycle through the tunnel. (Not only was there a risk of being crushed if it caved in, but also there was a good chance of getting squashed by all manner of massive vehicles that were too big to be there.) Luckily for me, another pedestrian route existed that was gradual enough for bicycles. It took us up the cliff and gave us a great view of the town. The clustered buildings that made their impression on me when I first came to Ne'hállda looked delicate from further away, much unlike the fortresses they seemed to become when one stood close to them. Their brownish white walls looked to be now as pure as the white of paper, which made visible the plethora of shades of red belonging to the rugs that were draped on balconies ready to be sold at the market. The buildings backed onto the market square, which was adjacent to the cliff on the opposite side. I could see it well, along with the palatial façade of the old indoor market that was carved onto the cliff face.

Our ascent was a slow one, but it was more than enjoyable with the view of Ne'hállda. We did make it to the top, where we encountered a drastic barrenness that shocked me. The lush fields that I saw every day on my way to school were not omnipresent, but rather in certain areas. We travelled through sandy cactus plains for a few minutes until we went to what I was familiar with: the fields owned by farmers with crops growing in them. Cycling through a few of these took us to the main road. I needed to cross this despite my reluctance, for there was a cycle route on the other side. When it was clear I ran over, quite petrified, and afterwards I couldn't watch my father walk over as calmly as he did. We then cycled on, and he regained his position in front of me. It was a mixture of paths and roads between Ne'hállda and Elistone, but after some assurance from my father I got used to being around all the fast-moving cars. It took two hours in its entirety.

We stopped by the welcome sign to Elistone in order to take a picture; it was safe to say that Father was not as proficient at taking photographs as Mother, as his confusion with the camera angles meant it required at least twenty attempts to get a picture with both our faces on. When he finally managed though, we were both in the picture along with the chain on the Elistone coat of arms and the name of the city above us in bold. My father also took this time as an opportunity to have a drink from his bottle. I hadn't brought one as I found it impossible to drink out of them due to a feeling of disgust I found when looking at them. I made sure that I turned my head away. The final stage of the ride took us past the park I had gone to on the Monday, up the street a bit and to our house. When we arrived on the drive my legs were not aching as I thought they would be, but my father said his knees hurt.

As soon as he could he plummeted down onto the sofa and told me to leave the bicycles outside for him to put back later. I knew he would forget, and just put them both back in the shed for the sake of alleviating a burden. I was commended by Mother, who was putting the washing out at the time, for helping Father. Subsequently she gave me a big hug and brushed her fingers through my hair as though I was still a little girl. I figure she wanted me to know she was there, as she surely felt some discomfort at my undertaking of such an adventure. She had a relieved air about her because I had returned.

‘I hope you were careful,’ she muttered in a soft voice, before kissing me and taking me inside even though she hadn’t finished with the washing.

We all sat together and watched television. This was something I looked forward to every day, as being in comfort near the ones one loves is always very lovely.

After half an hour my father left and retrieved the takeaway which was customary for us to have on Fridays. On that day we had kebabs, and they tasted even better than usual because I felt I had worked hard for them. Both my father and I had large kebabs with naan bread, but Mother had a smaller one because she had less of an appetite, and was also not greedy like me.

Chapter 7

When I received my school planner on the Tuesday, nothing about it interested me. I had a flick through the pages and found some fact files, house point tables and maps. There wasn’t much else at first glance. However, at closer scrutiny I found a map of Siorissa, the county in which Ne’hållda was situated. Admittedly I hadn’t noticed it until Kristinus showed me, but after I had looked at it once I couldn’t stop

thinking about it all week. It depicted what seemed to be a lake, about five kilometres away from the school, which was marked in blue and was surrounded by dense contour lines, suggesting it was hidden by hills. Its enchanting mysteriousness was not enough to get my parents to come along, but they permitted me to go with Kristinus on the weekend.

This is why I set off on Saturday morning to get the bus. Kristinus wasn't with me- his mother was dropping him off at the pub where we were to meet each other. I didn't mind doing this and going by myself, although I was quite cautious with my bag (which I didn't want to get stolen). When the bus arrived I noticed that it was quite unusual. It was painted blue and cream, like the old buses that used to be around when my father was little. Its window frames had no glass panes, which was a very sensible decision because usually Nivillian public transport was scorching, and glass windows would have made it like a greenhouse.

The roads to Ne'hållda formed more or less a straight line that the bus followed all the way. As we went along, my slight elevation let me see the cycle paths I had journeyed on with my father the day before. Often they ran parallel to the road, but sometimes they deviated and went through forests where I couldn't see them. I found them quite pleasant to look at, and I thought of how useful they were. They connected Ne'hållda with Elistone and provided a healthy way to travel that helped the population stay fit and in good form. Surprisingly, despite their utility, they had only been there for a few years and were quite new.

About halfway through the journey, the bus pulled over abruptly in a manner that at first made me think it had broken down. I didn't panic because it wasn't in my nature to do so unless the situation was serious. However, I still felt frustrated. This was until after a few seconds the engine had started again and I noticed that a man had got on. The bus was rather crowded, and there was only one seat left; it was the one beside me, thus I put my bag on my lap and let him sit there. It wasn't terrible at all though, because he was very pleasant to be next to. He was wearing a very nice aftershave that I had never smelt before.

My stop was the first one in Ne'hållda, as the pub was on the road perpendicular to the tunnel, just past the hill. The bus pulled up to a parking bay and I got off to find I was facing the pub's car park. I stood for a bit and stretched my legs, but then sat with them crossed on a brick wall.

I only had to wait there for a minute because he arrived swiftly. His mother's old, pallid silver car pulled up on the curb, dropped him off and was gone in two seconds. I didn't even get a 'hello' from her. This was explicable though because she was foreign, and I figured it wasn't customary for her to greet and make a fuss about matters. I wasn't put off by this as others would have been, because Kristinus had told me about her before and I knew what she was going to be like.

Even though I was fond of Kristinus, and he liked me also, we hadn't got accustomed to each other. This is to say that at first it was difficult to converse, and it took a while to get a fluent discussion going. We said 'hello,' and spoke about the fact that the bus only cost two ishwis and twenty-eight micorents (which was cheap) but not much else as we walked to the river.

After we had got to the bridge, we started talking properly. We spoke about how it had appeared to us on our first day. It seemed very unstable and worryingly weak. On a bus, one feels immense, due to an elevation above everything else. This diminutises objects on the ground (like the bridge) and makes things seem more fragile than they are. On the Monday this effect occurred and the ancient-seeming bridge across the river did not look like it could hold us. We were thus relieved on the Saturday, as our walk across it told us it was very safe. The pillars were thick, and so were the blocks that the bridge was made out of. Up close, it was fine, and Kristinus and I discussed our delight at the fact that we wouldn't be falling in the river anytime soon.

At the end of the bridge, we turned left onto the street that led to NLCS. The footpath was surprisingly narrow, but it was fine to walk on as the road wasn't wide either. Just like the cycle path that ran parallel to the street, the footpath was lined with moringa trees. They were carpeted by layers of small white flowers that looked like individual angels, lined up densely in order to *inbeavinate* the path we were walking on. Kristinus didn't seem to appreciate the beauty of it all, however I was transfixed by it. He simply walked calmly along while I skipped gleefully with utmost content. Flowers always pleased me.

Before the turning that would have taken us to NLCS, we went the other direction and walked up some stairs to get to the top of the valley. There were lots of these in Ne'hállda, because in the 3800s camel riding was a popular activity and companies built them so people could move about with them easier and more efficiently.

Kristinus was not as fit as me, so he was losing his breath and his legs were aching when we got to the top of the cliff. He therefore leant on a wall for a bit and I looked around. There was a very large Nessorian home with a garden on the right side, and on the left there was a cemetery that looked to be quite new, with a sand floor and a few lustrous black graves.

After Kristinus had regained his breath we walked a bit more through a housing estate and then through the countryside along a straight road. There was no path, but cars were not frequent and we felt safe enough. It was not as pleasant as the road on the other side of Ne'hállda, because it wasn't as developed and there weren't many people there. This was quite striking for us, because we were used to seeing crowds of people in Elistone. We were definitely not accustomed to the quietness of the countryside.

We decided to go the long way through some fields- it was Kristinus's decision really, but I was happy to do so as it was less boring. There wasn't much growing in them, and what was growing didn't seem to be a crop of any sort. For this reason we took little caution as we went through.

After a few fields we found a small forested area. Kristinus found a swing tied up on a branch, and he managed to get it down in order to use it, while I sat on the floor as there was only one swing. We had stopped because we realised that we hadn't been checking our planners at all. Therefore, we thought it best to check we were going the right way, which it seemed like we were. Before setting off again we took turns on the swing and climbed some trees- all children perform childish behaviour sometimes, regardless of their maturity.

After a few more fields we again joined the road and walked on it. It was busier, however there was also a footpath, which we were grateful for. It wasn't long before this path widened and swerved away from the road in the form of a broad curve, which we followed. After this it changed from brick to gravel and there stood a wooden post which we looked at.

It read 'Tasley Lake,' which was a promising sign. We had both begun to doubt whether there was really a lake and we had quite low expectations. However, upon seeing the sign we started running excitedly.

The area became much less sparse and was planted with banana plants and tropical trees. In fact, it was becoming a jungle. We continued running, forgetting about our need to breathe, and didn't cease until we reached the end...

The floor became sandy and we stepped onto a vast stretch of beach. The sand was yellow, not like the desert type seen elsewhere in the country. It was light on our feet, with abraded grains that did not hurt us. It was cold too, not scorching as one would have expected. The sandy stretch finished naturally where the water started. From the beach, a great lake emerged, whose expanse seemed endless, it was a plain of crystalline beauty underneath which was a sandy bottom that one could see for miles. No fish were there, the lake was too beautiful for them. It felt as if it were inviting us, and us only, to wade and dive in its stillness, to feel the warm-fresh air above it as we lay on top, floating, drifting peacefully. I took my t-shirt off and placed it gently on the sand, and Kristinus did the same. We had both decided to wear swimming clothes underneath, so we took no time in entering the water.

Tasley Lake was larger than Ne'hállða, and was as expansive and vast as a large town. It was a peculiar phenomenon, because, despite its scale, we could not see a single other soul there. One would expect it to be populated, chaotic and noisy with people boating and doing water sports. However, it was as if no one knew of it, because no one was there and no one came.

After a while we got out and let the sun dry us off. We subsequently retrieved our things and went to explore the surrounding area. It was intriguing, for the topography was flat, completely unlike what our maps had depicted. Luckily this made it easy to walk around without stopping. I cautioned Kristinus not to go around the whole perimeter of the lake, because it was massive and the day was not infinitely long. Therefore, after covering around a sixth of the lake's circumference, we stopped and turned around. The surroundings were ubiquitous, they were planted with the same trees everywhere and I had no desire to continue.

Kristinus felt much the same way, so we agreed to head back to Ne'hállða after having a wonderful experience at the lake. We said we'd go back soon, and when we arrived at the pub his mother was already waiting there for him. I got the next bus and went home, where Father greeted me with a hug and we all sat and watched a film.

Chapter 8

Humans are hypocritical by nature. It's

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Chapter 36

On the Friday after the announcement, I chose to enjoy a relaxing stroll rather than sit cramped in a taxi for ten minutes- it was the second time that week I had chosen to do this.