

NEVER LOSE HOPE

When he heard the crescendo of the approaching sirens, Klaus knew he would have to move quickly. As he clung to the wire safety fence, he contemplated the dark water below that seemed solid in its depth but which could swallow him in one leap. Because he had been unable to bring himself to jump in front of the train as it approached the station, he decided to board it and see where it would take him. Unfamiliar place names passed, strange names that bore no similarity to any language he knew, either English or his own. Slashes of sunlight streaked across the carriage as the train sped past the iron girders that formed a bridge. At the stop after the bridge, Klaus alighted and retraced the track to where it parted from the sloping embankment and where, he presumed, he could slip through the fence unnoticed.

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It had been almost a week since he had left Hamburg. The loss of his job, the break-up with his girl-friend and eviction from his apartment convinced Klaus that now was the time to fulfil his dream to visit Sydney. His meagre savings bought him a one-way air ticket and, with careful planning, would provide a few days' pleasure. Klaus had no intention of returning to Germany where his sister, Inge, still lived with her family. Although they had not seen each other since their parents died just before the fall of the Berlin Wall, they had maintained sporadic email contact.

Klaus was surprised at how easy it was to embark in Sydney and pass through the immigration channels, providing only evidence of a hotel

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booking and a credit card with his passport. He had rehearsed phrases from a tourist guide book to give himself confidence in an unfamiliar country where he spoke and understood little English. On arrival at his hotel, he opened a beer and lay on his bed to plan the next move.

In the "*What's on in Sydney*" guide in his hotel room, a performance of "*La Bohème*" was advertised for the following afternoon. Klaus had never seen a live production of the opera but he was familiar with Puccini's music and the tragic story of the consumptive Mimi whose tiny hand was frozen in perpetuity. Following the map he had picked up at the airport, Klaus made his way to the Sydney Opera House. The towering sails were overwhelming and he was confused as to how one climbed to the top. Using the phrases he had practised, Klaus found the box office and bought a ticket with a "Restricted View" which meant he was unable to see the English surtitles, of minor importance given his lack of proficiency in the language.

The tuning up of the orchestra reminded him of his childhood in Berlin when his mother would take him and his sister to the Konzerthaus. He loved the thrill of a concert beginning and now waited with anticipation for the red curtain, with "*La Bohème*" illuminated on the velvet, to reveal the tragic love story with which he was so familiar. He tried to suppress signs of any emotion as Rudolfo's declaration of love for Mimi reminded him of his own lost love. Before the curtain fell and the lights announced interval, he regained his composure. In the Northern Foyer, Klaus felt happier than he had for a long time as he drank a beer while watching a parade of yellow and green ferries, and yachts with their pregnant coloured

spinnakers competing across the Harbour. He had completed the first part of his bargain with himself: to see a performance at the Sydney Opera House. Tomorrow he would accomplish his mission.

The evening was still warm as the sun was sliding behind the Harbour Bridge, bringing a balmy spring day to a close. While Klaus strolled along the promenade at Circular Quay, he pondered the significance of the bronze plaques set in the stone pavement. What did they mean and whose names were they, he asked himself, and then decided it didn't really matter. Of greater interest was the huge cruise ship that seemed to occupy an enormous part of the Harbour, almost obscuring the famous Bridge. Klaus was reminded of Hamburg where the harbour was dotted with cranes and container ships, their black hulls coaxed into port by small tugboats. It was the first time he had thought of home since he had begun his journey but immediately he dispelled any sentimental thoughts of ever seeing it again.

Unfamiliar with Australian food, Klaus was reassured by the appearance of a restaurant inviting diners to eat "a genuine Italian pizza". He was able to order from the menu without too much difficulty, discretely noting the multinational mix of people around him and contemplating the irony of them united in eating a meal that bore scant resemblance to its Neopolitan origin. Sitting on the terrace, a glass of wine in his hand, he felt as if he were not only in another place but in a different time. Anonymity wrapped him in a comforting cocoon, like the familiar blanket he had pulled over his head as a child when his mother read him the terrifying

story of “The Erl King”. He felt that he could stay here forever and no-one would miss him.

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Lyn returned to nursing after her children had married and left home. Two days a week in the psychogeriatric unit seemed a safe bet: no technology to worry about and the medications had changed little since she had last practised. Lyn liked “the oldies” and exhibited patience and calmness during their demented outbursts in response to which other nurses reached for a syringe. She always asked the family to bring in a photo of her patients when they were younger so that the person inside the decrepit body would not be forgotten. She didn’t even mind having to shower them when their excreta oozed between their twisted limbs and through their clothing. After all, she mused, she might be like this one day. When student nurses complained about their placement on this ward, Lyn reminded them that this was where *real* nursing took place.

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The police brought Klaus to the Emergency Department where he was diagnosed as mentally ill. A “danger to himself” was the reason given by two medical officers for detaining Klaus under the Mental Health Act, and his mental health assessment was peppered with words such as “psychotic” and “suicidal ideation”. A decision about Klaus’s welfare had to be made quickly even though an interpreter would be unavailable until the following day. In order to quell the uncontrollable sobs punctuating his rantings in German, Klaus was restrained so that a tranquilizing injection

could be administered after which he fell into a deep sleep. When he awoke, Klaus was afraid, confused and unaware of his surroundings, reinforcing the psychotic label he had already earned. The tourist phrases he had learnt in English were of no use when trying to communicate with these people in hospital, and his frustrated attempts to make them understand German only resulted in the further application of diagnostic labels. Through a haze of sedation, he tried to outline his circumstances, but the more he tried the more irrational and thought disordered he appeared. Nothing made any sense to him or to the medical officers who seemed to be interrogating him.

The arrival of the German interpreter allayed Klaus's anxiety somewhat. At least here was someone with whom he could converse and who would understand how he felt. The interpreter explained to Klaus that his consent was sought for the administration of electroconvulsive therapy, ECT, an idea that filled Klaus with terror. Klaus knew all about ECT. His father had worked at the Siemen's factory in Berlin during World War II when the Nazi regime was notorious for administering the procedure to people regarded as mentally defective as well as those in concentration camps. Klaus refused to give his consent.

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Days merged with each other in the psychogeriatric unit. Klaus was desperate to hear some music – Beethoven, Bach and his beloved Puccini – and he longed to read his favourite newspaper, *Bild*. The only respite from the monotony of existence, or “ADLs” as the nurses called

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them, was the large television set that seemed to be stuck in a loop of American talk shows with comperes carrying names such as Ellen and Oprah. When Lyn was assigned to look after for him, Klaus saw a glimmer of hope.

Lyn was the product of a secondary schooling system that required pupils to study a foreign language for one term to “give them a taste”. Lyn’s first choice of Indonesian was of no benefit except when she took her children on holiday to Bali, but her second choice, German, suddenly found a rudimentary use while trying to communicate with Klaus, although “*Guten Tag*” and “*Wie gehen Sie*” proved the extent of her ability. Nonetheless, Klaus was pleased to have met someone who tried to communicate with him and who seemed to care, although she knew as much German as he did English. When Lyn brought in a copy of *Bild* that she had noticed in the newsagency, Klaus felt embarrassed because of her thoughtfulness. It had been a long time since anyone had shown him such spontaneous kindness.

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The idea of taking Klaus on an outing occurred to Lyn when she was discussing him with her husband. Barry hadn’t been too keen on Lyn returning to clinical nursing following a breast cancer scare two years earlier. He would rather she do something less strenuous, or perhaps some volunteer or charity work. Lyn, on the other hand, liked having her own money and engaging in work that was meaningful for her. “Keeping her hand in”, was the excuse she gave. She often wondered what she

would do, how she would be placed, if she were ever on her own, either through death or divorce. Although she could never mention it to Barry, she saw her work as an escape from the routine and invisibility of married life.

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Klaus was waiting with a mix of anxiety and breathless anticipation for Lyn to arrive. This was no ordinary working day because approval had been granted for her to take him on escorted leave. He barely recognised her when she entered the ward, not wearing her regulation navy scrubs and running shoes. In his mind, he wished that he had some flowers to give her but then checked himself as he remembered the distinctions imposed by the roles of patient and nurse.

They had decided to go to Manly, although this involved a train trip along the same route where Klaus had made the previous journey that resulted in his suicide attempt. A walk along the promenade at Circular Quay reminded him of where he had spent his first day in Sydney, a day that now seemed so long ago. Lyn had brought her iPad onto which she had loaded an app for translation. Klaus and Lyn found great amusement in tapping messages on the screen in German, seeing them translated into English and vice versa, and laughing at the linguistic discrepancies and incongruities that occurred. As they crossed the Harbour, they carried on their conversation via Google Translate, oblivious to this electronic intermediary.

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Their arrival at Manly was a revelation for Klaus. As a child, he had been on a beach holiday to the Baltic coast, but nothing compared with what he was seeing, smelling and feeling as they walked along North Steyne on a perfect spring day. Waves carrying surfboard riders broke on the shore causing Klaus to marvel at the agility and skill that must be required for this feat. Lyn suggested they buy fish and chips – “My treat” she said – and they ate them while sitting under the Norfolk Pine trees that shadowed the fine white sand so unfamiliar to Klaus. Seagulls screeched as they swooped greedily to snap the morsels of fish in their red beaks that Lyn and Klaus hurled into the air, laughing to see who could throw the furthest. As they walked back along The Corso to the ferry, Lyn wished she had the courage to hold Klaus’s hand as she would if it were Barry who was walking beside her.

On the ferry they sat on the outside deck to avoid the curious glances of other passengers. “*Vielen Danke, Lyn*” said Klaus. “*Vielen Danke*” again and again. On her iPad he wrote, “I come to Australia to die. You give me hope to live. Thank you. Would you please send an email to my sister and tell her I am OK?”

As the ferry approached Circular Quay, Klaus looked up at the looming Opera House where he had realised his dream. He wanted to tell Lyn about seeing “*La Bohème*”, but changed his mind: this was part of a former life which he had left behind on the railway embankment near the river. Overwhelmed with the memory of the opera and the warmth of Lyn’s kindness, he put his arm around her shoulder and kissed her, softly and shyly on the side of her head. Without thinking, Lyn turned her face

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towards him. The remainder of the trip was filled with a profound silence until they delivered Klaus to the psychogeriatric unit and Lyn went home to Barry.

When Lyn returned to work the following week, Klaus had gone. The German embassy had organised and paid for his return trip and he was looking forward to going home to Hamburg. His hospital Discharge Summary recorded: "Patient has made a full recovery. Happy with the care he received and has returned to Germany."

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That summer in Sydney was unusually hot and humid. Lyn was preoccupied with her family's preparations for Christmas and the imminent birth of her first grandchild. Occasionally her thoughts crossed to Klaus: what if things had been different between her and Barry, or she had been alone? Might she and Klaus have had a relationship, enabling him to stay in Australia? Of course, she told herself, this is fanciful; these are the silly delusions that your patients have!

The unexpected email arrived just before Easter, and, not being from an address that she recognised she almost deleted it. Instead, she copied and pasted the German text into Google Translate to find that it read:

"Dear Lyn, I am Inge, the sister of Klaus. I am very sad to tell you that Klaus has died in his sleep from a bad heart. He asked me to tell you how much hope you gave to him when he wanted to die. You gave him hope to live. Until you sent the email from Klaus in Australia, we had no contact

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for many years. I am very sad that I never met you but you meant more to my brother than you will ever know. Respectfully, Inge Heinze”