

CLAIRE AMAN

*If There Are Zebra Finches*

If there are zebra finches, you will find water nearby. On the third day we crested down to rolling plains of fresh spinifex, making camp a short way from a tor. A bird watched us from the highest rock.

“Black kite,” said the ornithologist from behind his binoculars. The geologist walked around the tor while Alessandro and I unpacked the panniers.

It was softer country, with a breeze streaming across from the north. Sometimes a place will make me want to restrain our presence. Alessandro collected rocks to anchor our tarpaulins, but I would be shifting them back in the morning before we left.

I was relieved to stop for the night. All day the surface had been red with endless corrugations and patches of deep sand. We’d had to read the track ahead like sailors read the water. It was always changing; no sooner did I think I understood it than the motorcycle would suddenly squirm and I’d feel the ornithologist’s hands grabbing my jacket. Ahead, Alessandro would still be upright with the geologist clinging on behind. We had to pick our way, often on the wrong side of the road if the surface was any better. If we saw the distant dust plume of a road train coming from the other direction we had plenty of time to cross back over before it blared past in a red cloud. Like an explosion, as Alessandro said.

As agreed, we’d pull over whenever our passengers tapped us on the shoulder. They were always needing more photographs, new specimens, extra notes. Off with the helmets again, on with the hats. They’d wander into the distance with their notebooks while Alessandro and I squatted on the dirt to wait, fingering the stiff grasses and waving flies from our faces. There was never any shade. Sometimes it felt as if they were gone for hours. When they returned, I always had the water bottle ready. The ornithologist was liable to forget to drink, I soon discovered, and could become flushed and vague.

This work is tiring but there are advantages. In that red desert for example, there were so many tiny birds and star-shaped flowers, and the milky way streaking across at night. The ornithologist and the geologist were paying us well, and I was learning about birds and rocks. The word tor, for example, or that zebra finches are found near water.

Alessandro and I are Two-Up Tours. We carry pillion passengers on day trips from one tourist spot to another along the tarred roads of the northwest, taking on as many jobs as we can before the rains come. But when the ornithologist and the geologist came to us, we were doubtful. Two passengers for a thousand kilometres on the dirt road across the desert? Because they’d be able to see everything better from the back of a motorbike? The whole sky, the ground and everything in between: that was how the ornithologist put it, with a helpless smile and a sweep of his arm.

We knew then we’d find a way to take them. We’d minimise the gear, carrying necessities only. The ornithologist would ride with me while Alessandro would take the

geologist. (He is something other than a geologist but it's unpronounceable. But to call me a geologist is fine, he said kindly on the first day when Alessandro stumbled over the word.)

At our camp with the black kite perched above, Alessandro prepared couscous with dried fish, and chilli. Everything had to be lightweight. Luckily our passengers were of slight build. But then there was the spare fuel, water, bedding, tools, tarpaulins and cookpot, not to mention all the instruments, cameras, specimen cases and notebooks.

"There is too much weight," Alessandro kept saying. With a heavy bike you can't go speeding over the corrugations. Often we could only trickle along. But whenever we struck deep sand we had to be ready with our throttles. A sailboat in such conditions would turn itself to face into the wind. Boats are designed to depower this way in order to avoid a knockdown. But a motorcycle can't slow down in sand. We have to power through, accelerating even when everything is too much and the handlebars are swinging from side to side. Unladen, it's easy enough and even thrilling. Now our loads were forcing our wheels deep into the sand, threatening a capsizing.

Yet so far we had stayed upright, and our passengers had shown themselves to be game.

It's true about travelling by bike. Not only do you see more, you feel yourself passing through the air. You can feel the slight change in temperature if the country dips down, and the morning can be delicious in your nostrils. In a car you jolt along in the fumes, staring out at a rectangular landscape.

At our tor camp we served their dinner before sunset. They sat on a flat rock, looking out over the plain. Alessandro and I would eat later, passing the pot back and forth. "Thank you Dolores," said the ornithologist as he handed me the plate afterwards. It was scraped clean. For someone so light, he had a good appetite.

We slept under blankets on tarpaulins. The sky was so dense with stars it was hard to see normal constellations like the southern cross or the saucepan. Often there were shooting stars. Nights were cold and days were hot. The birds started at five in the morning; by five-thirty it was light and I'd find the ornithologist sitting some distance from the camp, a blanket around his shoulders, reminding me of a termite mound.

"Good morning Dolores," he'd say when he came for his breakfast. "Spinifex pigeon," he'd say, squatting over footprints. He had thoughtful brown eyes. One morning when I rolled up his bedding I discovered a small, well-worn bear.

In the mornings Alessandro and I made toast and honey for them. Then, while they organised their notes and samples, we packed the panniers. Everything had to be packed in order, with heavy items at the bottom and the weight evenly spread. We'd taken people on difficult roads before but this was the worst. I tried not to worry whenever I looked at the ornithologist's fine wrists. I told myself: if we are going to fall off it will be on sand, which at least is soft.

So far our passengers had been solemn, polite. They were not like our usual customers. They hadn't even asked us to take a photo of them lounging on the bikes. Tourists pay good money for the two-wheel experience, and there is nothing wrong with good-natured swaggering or mirthful discussions about who should ride with who: will the man sit behind me, and the woman behind handsome Alessandro? Or girls on together? But this trip was different. Alessandro and I were not required to pose or clown. We were the crew on a scientific project.

And scientific they were, heads bent over their notebooks by torchlight before bed. You could never say Alessandro and I are highly educated. Our skills are mostly to do with

determination. We are from families whose hands have held crucifix, whip or tiller ever since the great-grandfathers stepped off the Santa Rosa onto the Fremantle wharf. There have been missionaries, whalers, drovers, fishermen, rough riders, even a lapsed Benedictine monk. But never a scholar.

The geologist had a bear too, according to Alessandro.

We left our camp and set off again, dirt rippling ahead. This was the worst day yet, battling through the edge of dune country. But to the ornithologist it was the best day yet because of the painted finch he'd seen after breakfast. "Just what I hoped for," he told me, and as he spoke a small wind passed through, making the dry spinifex bend and whisper all around us in a wave.

"Dolores, you and Alessandro should eat with us," he said that night. We sat in a circle, shy at first with our spoons on our plates.

"Travel is easier in modern times," the ornithologist remarked after we finished eating. He told of an expedition in 1896 across the western part which ended in disaster. "The ornithology collection had to be abandoned," he said longingly. We all fell quiet. I thought of a bleached leather satchel buried in a sand dune. Inside, feathers and bones.

Late in the afternoon of the fifth day, we stood at the turnoff to a lake. The sign said thirty kilometres. "And thirty back," I said to Alessandro as we looked at the finely dotted line on the map.

"It's an important site," the geologist told us. "There is still very much to understand. An ancient river course."

"And there'll be birds," added the ornithologist.

I saw they both had their fingers crossed.

I didn't recall any mention of a detour when they engaged us to carry them along this desert road. I suggested leaving the camping gear at the turnoff and visiting the lake for the day. But they shook their heads. "A day is not enough, we need to stay overnight," said the ornithologist. "For birds."

"The track will be bad," I said to Alessandro.

"We'll stop here tonight," he said, "and camp at the lake tomorrow."

I ran my hands through my hair. It felt like a wreath of kelp. My hands were stained red-brown. I slapped my leg and a cloud of dust rose up. I wanted a shower, cold wine, a pillow. In only two hundred kilometres there would be plenty. But here everything was spare and necessary, the hummocks of fine grasses, a wagtail catching a fly—snap!—in mid-air, the slow-milled dirt, the silence at night. I knew my own fears and exertions were overwrought. It was only that our passengers were so pale and young, and us so responsible for protecting them.

That night they sang to us in high, clear voices, a love song from the radio. We clapped, but the song was not yet over—they'd only paused to remember the final verse—so we clapped a second time.

"Everything in the universe is made of the same elements," the geologist called out as we prepared to sleep. "We are stars."

The next morning, we set our course. "Hang onto your hats, boys," said Alessandro. Their helmets nodded.

Stories are always about gales and reefs, not about the silver progress of a craft moving across a map. But I had no time to think about that. There was a sea shanty in my head and I let it sing. It steadied my mind as I went through the rough patches. And it was one long patch, Alessandro.

It was calm enough to begin with. But then Alessandro, I saw from your wake that it was treacherous ahead, so I shifted my weight back. I told myself to keep my hands light, to let the thing find its own way forwards. I felt the chop as we crossed onto the sand, flailing through to a channel that offered a narrow purchase. Drifts of fine powder tried to swirl us around and flip us over. Was it rocky waves ahead or wind-blown sand ripples? There were crossings with rounded stones and slippery stuff I didn't dare look down at. I powered through, I changed down, I reefed, I jibed, my lips as dry as dust. The ornithologist was a featherweight behind me with his fingers twisted in my jacket. My only fear was for him. There was nothing to do except keep going, so on we went.

But just when we saw the flash of salt on the lake bed, the saints of travel cut us loose. Hooray and down she goes. Then it was the ornithologist and me lying at the bottom of the sea, snagged in the rigging.

I couldn't get out. There was a faint peeping in my ear. It was the ornithologist. I slid off my glove and opened his visor with my fingertip. "We're tangled, matey," I said, "but Alessandro will come looking for us." I took his hand, fearing to damage the small bones. His grip was stronger than I'd imagined.

"Let's watch the sky while we wait for rescue," I said.

In the inland sky, something is always circling. Kestrels, falcons and kites work all day. There is nothing like lying on your back if you want to see birds of prey.

"Cheery-wheet," said the ornithologist. "Peeeeeeep. Drut-drut-drut." His fingers curled around mine.

I waited. I thought about the road and the wind. "I'm sorry," I whispered to the ornithologist, "I'm not sure where we are."

He said nothing, only panted.

For the wayfarer, sighting a large group of birds—a birdpile—is a more reliable sign of land than one or two stray birds. Other indications of land include drifting wood, clouds piled up over islands or distinctive patterns of swells. Something large was coming. A Landcruiser. I turned my head to see a wheel and two boots.

"Our legs are jammed," I said. "If you could just lift the timbers off us."

We wriggled out. "Tee-did, tee-did," said the ornithologist, and he hopped away under a mullah mullah bush.

Gabe, for that was his name, pulled a towel from the Landcruiser. He draped it over the ornithologist's head. "It'll relax him," he said. "Leave him alone for now. He'll be alright, they're tougher than they look."

I shook my legs out. I'd been waiting for my ankle, twisted backwards, to snap. But it didn't. I must be made of sappy wood after all.

"I righted your friends too," he said. "There's a spot by the lake. My mother's people belong here, they have their own name for it. But you have to tell the water in this country that you're here."

I did. Then I unloaded the bike and piled everything into the Landcruiser. The ornithologist pulled the towel off his head. "At least my binoculars aren't broken," he said, and climbed into the passenger seat. I squeezed in next to him. Gabe started the engine and we went bumping along towards the lake.

That was how the ornithologist came to be in the news for sighting the rare parrot. At dawn the next morning I threw my blanket off and followed his footprints. When I offered him the water bottle, he held out his camera screen to show me a green and yellow bird standing next to a tussock. It's what I wanted in the whole world, Dolores, he said.

By the salt lake was our last camp. We ended up paying Gabe to drive our passengers and their luggage for the last two hundred kilometres to Halls Creek. We gave him what he asked, and it was fair. They'd be safer in the Landcruiser, and we were too exhausted to lug everything much further. Without the heavy loads our motorcycles were easy.

In Halls Creek there was a delegation waiting. The parrot was important. Nobody had ever reported seeing it in the northwest before. Photos were taken. Then they had to catch a plane from the airstrip.

Our farewells felt sudden after the desert with all its expanse of time. Do you remember, Alessandro, how my father used to cry without shame at the Christmas table over the bones of the roasted lamb? He'd cry about the sheep, his paper crown slipping sideways. It will be a relief to cry like that one day. But when we parted from the ornithologist and the geologist there were others waiting, and we only shook hands and smiled at the ground. I hoped with all my heart they understood we had tried our best to look after them.

They sent us the book the following year. The last page was bookmarked, where it said thank you to Dolores and Alessandro and thank you to Gabe. We are not great readers, but we placed it in our glass case with our sailing ships and brass spurs and bells.

Even now I think about the ornithologist, who wished to be immortal so he could fly among all the birds that ever were. I think about the geologist calling out from his blanket that we were stars. And I think about Gabe, how he righted us. I wish I knew more. I only know there are pleasures and frights in all our journeys across land and water, and I tell you the country never treated us badly.