

A SEASON OF CLOUDS

When only your past can save your future

Dedicated to Richard.

Friendship consists in forgetting what one gives and remembering what one receives.

—Alexandre Dumas

Author's Note

A Season of Clouds is a work of fiction written as a personal memoir. Although inspired by my own long journey through PTSD and mental illness, the book's other main characters are fictional, with no connection to any real person. Like all works of fiction, it is set within the background of the real world, but any reference to an actual place or person or entity is purely for this purpose.

Who in the world am I? Ah, that's the great puzzle.

—Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*

An excerpt from The Search for Martina

By Greta Schumacher

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The old man she had come all this way to see was found slumped in a wheelchair, his empty thoughts lost inside the distant waves that crashed mercilessly against the ruins of an abandoned lighthouse. Although in another time he had walked in the footsteps of the rich and powerful, the man's only companion that day was a tiny grey sparrow, which somehow burrowed its way through a tightly clipped rose bush before perching itself on top of the steel railing next to him.

From where she was standing near the water fountain, it seemed as if the old man was challenging the world to one final duel. But as the afternoon shadows crept menacingly towards his bony legs, she understood better than anyone that his long-forgotten secrets would always find a way to protect him.

The woman slowly turned her head towards the bird pond and watched carefully while the other residents of the nursing home went about their daily routine. There appeared to be a mutual understanding among them—a pact, if you like—that the old man must not be disturbed under any circumstances. As such, they rustled silently in between their deck chairs, chattering softly to each other in excited whispers, determined not to interfere with his daily rite of contrition. Their servitude only strengthened the woman's desire to have him accept her into his heart.

She cautiously took several steps closer towards him and was immediately intrigued by the undeniable allure of his presence. Admittedly, she had been a restless teenager that day in Potsdam, Germany, all those years ago and, therefore, paid scant attention to the grey-haired man sitting in the corner of the café playing with his iPhone. Now in her mid-forties, fighting her own battle with middle age, she jealously marvelled at the radiance of his Mediterranean skin, the raw texture of his dark, hollow eyes, and the feline dexterity

of his long, wrinkly hands. Her mother once said that he resembled a famous Hollywood actor, but she could never remember who. Regardless, it was not hard to imagine that he was the same man who stole her heart in London all those years ago.

As trumpets of fear pounded against her chest, the woman somehow found the courage to kneel beside him, her lips searching for those simple words she had practised so diligently that morning in front of her hotel room mirror. Although she was certain that he could hear the gentle ebb and flow of her breathing, he continued to ignore her, his arms glued to the woollen shawl covering his lap, that endless gaze never losing its intensity.

The head nurse, overcome by her enduring affection for the old man, had warned the woman when they spoke over the phone last week. She explained to her about his good days and bad days, about his long periods of silence, and his dark, fractious moods. He was slowly slipping away and, more than anything, she wanted him to die with some dignity. Only his wife was allowed to visit him now. Perhaps it would be best for everyone if the woman returned to Austria.

Without being overly rude, she had merely laughed at such a suggestion, for that option had been discarded weeks ago. After all, it was his wife who had invited her to meet with him. Surely the head nurse knew this. Hadn't she read the newspapers or followed the hashtag on social media? Everyone familiar with her story understood why she had come to Australia: why she alone had the power to absolve this man, Alex Gerrick, of his sins.

Deep beneath her blue cotton blouse, her skin itched and burned. It was a family trait that only reappeared when she was extremely nervous. 'Mister Gerrick,' she began, hoping that her strong German accent wouldn't confuse him. 'My name is Greta Schumacher, and I have travelled from Austria to meet you.'

For some reason, Greta had always imagined that at this very moment, Alex would unscramble his brain just for her and then leap from his wheelchair into her arms. So when things didn't quite go to plan, the desolation of his ongoing silence only succeeded in breaking her heart.

'Mister Gerrick,' she repeated, this time more firmly, 'I want to help you.' Of

course, Greta knew that this was nothing more than a bare-faced lie—the only person she wanted to help was herself because everything about this obsession was tearing her apart. It had destroyed Greta’s marriage to the man she still loved and alienated a proud and doting mother from her precious children. Overnight, before she even had time to understand the consequences of her behaviour, Greta had become a parody of the woman her family once admired. The only thing that now sustained her was a steadfast commitment to her mother’s dying wish.

‘I am Eleanor’s daughter.’ She pressed her face closer to him to see whether there was any reaction, even a mild flicker of recognition. ‘Do you understand? My mother was Eleanor Kuhn—the Austrian woman you met in London in 1999.’ She waited impatiently for a response, her nose twitching at the smell of fresh eucalyptus that clung to her scarf. Then out of the corner of her eye, something caught her attention.

Yes! Right there! His legs! They are moving!

Greta’s moment of jubilation, however, was remarkably short-lived. The puffing of his cheeks, the trembling of his hands, that peculiar dilation of his eyes, suddenly convinced her that Alex was having a stroke.

By Christ, that dreadful head nurse will blame me—just you wait and see.

Suddenly, Alex’s brittle fingers managed to grasp the side of his wheelchair, and he slowly cranked his neck around to face her. ‘Eleanor? From Salzburg?’

Oh my God! He remembers her!

‘Yes, Mister Gerrick,’ she replied, gripping herself ever so tightly so she didn’t fall on top of him. ‘Before she died, I promised her that I would come to Australia to find you. Your wife and I have been corresponding for nearly three months.’

‘My wife. She is a wonderful person, is she not?’

‘Yes, she is.’

His mouth began to tremble—a warning sign, perhaps, that he could slide back into purgatory at any moment. ‘Mum wanted me to pass on a message,’ she continued. ‘And to give you a present.’

Alex's eyes circled curiously around her face before they lifted upwards to admire a flock of screeching cockatoos flying high above them. For some reason, their raucous symphony seemed to energise him.

'You are beautiful like your mother,' he said softly.

'Thank you,' she gushed.

'My condolences for your loss. She was a lovely woman.' He sounded very genuine.

'May I ask how?'

'Ovarian cancer. Nine months ago.'

He quietly absorbed this information. 'Poor darling,' he finally said. 'She saved me. Did you know? They all saved me in the end.'

'Who did? Who saved you?'

'Those remarkable women I met overseas. Marlena, Lottie, Eleanor, Danielle, and Sally. And one must not forget, Delilah! Please never forget Delilah!'

'Delilah? Sally?' Greta replied to Alex, but mostly to herself. Her mum had divulged every intricate detail of the story before she died, and Greta had become a walking encyclopaedia on the topic.

Of course, there was Aunty Danielle: everything had begun with Aunty Danielle and her story about a picnic in Stratford-Upon-Avon. Then there was her mother's meeting with a Dutch woman called Lottie, who met Alex in Greece, and Danielle's phone call to an Italian lawyer called Marlena, who told her about a massive fight on the island of Samos involving a young man from Florence. But apart from the main character in this drama, the woman from Alex's past that connected everything back to this very moment in time, her mother never mentioned any of those other names. Perhaps Alex's dementia had invented new characters into his story.

'I can tell that you are confused,' Alex said quietly. 'Your mother would not have known about Sally and Delilah, for I met both of them well after my Lost Week.'

'Your Lost Week?'

'Yes, I wrote about this in my book.'

Droplets of sweat pierced her tired eyes. 'You mean Season of Thunder? The book

you wrote about your parents. It was a bestseller.'

Try as he might, Alex refused to despair at her ignorance. 'No, not that book. I mean the book I wrote about my own life. I never finished it, you see. There was one chapter I could never write.'

A book? There is another book? 'May I ask—'

He didn't allow Greta to finish her sentence. Rather, he quietly pointed to the ocean with his index finger, inviting her to guide his wheelchair further along the freshly cut lawn until he called a halt beneath the shade of a weeping willow.

'I know why you have come.' He stared at Greta. 'It's about her. Danielle told your mum about our conversation, didn't she?'

'Yes, she did,' Greta nodded. 'Before Mum died, she and Danielle discovered something that they wanted you to know.'

'You are wasting your time,' Alex shook his head. 'Nothing can ever remove the guilt. I accepted that a long time ago. Perhaps you should as well.'

'But I can help you,' she implored. 'If you only allow me the chance to explain.'

He found a way to smile at her. 'What do you do for a living, Eleanor Kuhn's daughter?'

'I'm a writer.'

'Yes, of course you are. And what are you writing about, my dear?'

Greta coughed nervously in the direction of the sea. She had not expected this level of scrutiny. Not from him, anyway. 'I'm writing a book about Danielle and my mother.'

'And you think that I can validate your story?'

'I don't know what you mean.'

'There must be something that you want from me?'

'I just want to put things right.'

He laughed at Greta in a way he once laughed at her mother. 'If there is one thing I have learnt in my life, it's that the world is full of well-intentioned people hoping to put things right. Whether they have the capacity to succeed or not is a different matter. In fact, I usually find that their arrogance only makes things worse. But I'm far too old for such platitudes now.'

She blinked wildly at him. ‘My apologies, but you must believe me. I truly didn’t know that you wrote another book before today.’

He said nothing for the time being. Instead, they remained locked together in an imaginary embrace while the afternoon sun snarled at their faces.

‘You need to talk to Brother Rojo,’ he finally revealed.

‘Brother Rojo? Does he work here at the nursing home?’

‘You really don’t understand, do you?’ he said politely.

‘Not everything, no.’

‘Then perhaps I will help you, just like Brother Rojo once helped me.’

A gust of wind tugged furiously at a lock of Alex’s thick grey hair. ‘I have told one of the nurses where I hide all my valuables. Her name is Mary. She can be a right pain sometimes with her fussing and dithering, but I like her very much. Tell her that I have agreed to lend you my book—she will find it for you.’

Greta wriggled her toes in shock. ‘Are you sure you want me to read it?’

‘You’re writing your own version of these events, are you not? If I’m to be a part of your story, I at least want it to be factual. An old man never enjoys being falsely accused of things he never did, especially when he doesn’t have much time to repair the damage to his reputation.’

She didn’t know what to say. This wasn’t how it was meant to be.

‘But my offer is subject to one condition,’ he demanded. ‘Promise me that you will read it carefully. Remove the chains around your heart, just like your mother and Danielle would have done. And when you have finished, if you still think I should hear your story, I will listen to what you have to say.’

‘I promise.’ What else could she do other than give a dying man his wish? Just like she had given her mother.

‘Good,’ he growled, pushing his arms out towards her. ‘Now, leave me alone before I get cranky and change my mind.’

She hurried back to the front office to search for Mary. Not for the first time in her life, Greta Schumacher was tormented by the deceitfulness of her vanity.

It's not fair! There can't be another book! There just can't be!

What about mine? What about all my work—all the sacrifices that I have made?

Do I have to rewrite it now? Will my publisher even give me more time?

If I had known there was another book, I would never have come.

Twenty minutes later, Mary watched Greta as she stumbled down a deserted footpath towards her hire car, Alex's laced manuscript tucked tightly beneath her armpit. Greta Schumacher hadn't realised it yet but hidden within those old, dusty pages lay the pathway to her redemption. By the time she finished reading the book just before dawn, everything she had thought she knew about the world would explode around her. On the day she discovered the secret of the Clouds.