

THE WHITE ROAD AND OTHER STORIES

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THE
WHITE
ROAD

and other stories

TANIA
HERSHMAN



CAMBRIDGE

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To James

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THE WHITE ROAD

What's long, white, and very, very cold? The road to the South Pole is nearing completion . . . this road will stretch for more than 1600 kilometres across some of the most inhospitable terrain in the world.

—'The Highway at the End of the World'
New Scientist, 7 February 2004

Today is one of them really and truly cold days. You're probably thinking cold is cold is cold, either everything's frosty or you're sipping margaritas by the pool in Florida, but let me tell you, there are degrees of freezing. New York got pretty cold in the wintertime, especially for a southern gal. But all the way down here by the Pole, Antarctic minus forty ain't the same as Antarctic minus twenty-five. You need damn hot coffee in both, that's true, you got me there, but there's a different smell to the air, believe me. When I open up for business in the morning of a minus forty, I stand on the doorstep and sniff, with Fluff beside me. I say, Fluff, it's a damn cold one today and she barks, clever damn dog. Then I turn the sign from

‘Closed’ to ‘Open’ and set the water boiling for the first lot, who won’t be too far down the White Road.

That’s what we call it, because that’s what it is, all white. Some days, you’ve got to wear those special glasses that they gave out on the Induction Day. Two pairs, in case one got broke. They said, Don’t look at that snow when it’s sunshining or we’ll be putting the patch over your eyes, and that’ll be enough seeing for you.

Some things the eye shouldn’t see. No, some things are just too much for it.

Last Wednesday was one of them sunny days they were talking about. It was a real busy morning. I saw the first ants coming down the road around seven am. That’s what I call them, Ants, ’cause that’s what they are at first. I’m looking out through my big glass windows, the ones with the special coating on so they never freeze or get misty with all the heat inside. It’s like you’re watching a big white TV screen, it’s all nothing, nothing, nothing—and then, sudden like, little dots appear: the Ants. They get bigger and bigger, and soon you see them, heading straight for me and my coffee machine. Big red trucks, with all their fancy equipment they carry to the research guys at the Pole a couple of miles past us.

It’s probably Phil and Eric, I was thinking, and yeah, they pulled up and stomped in through the snow, stamping their big feet all over the floor, rubbing their hands.

‘Whassup, Mags,’ shouts one of them, Eric or Phil, never could quite tell the difference.

‘Cold, boys?’ I ask, same as I always do on a Wednesday when they make their run.

THE WHITE ROAD

'Freeze ya soon as look at ya,' says the other one, getting stuck trying to pull his snow jacket over his big head.

'Coffee?' I say.

'You're the best, Mags,' they say together, and while they're arranging themselves in a booth, I start the pouring and bring over the cups and a couple of menus.

When I first started, half a year ago, it was quiet; everybody was just wanting to speed down that White Road and get to where it was they were going. But then slowly, they take notice of me and Fluff and our little sign for 'Last Stop Coffee', and they start coming in and making our acquaintance. They find us pretty friendly, the coffee's hot and not too bad, and I make the best damn scrambled in about a thousand white miles. I add things to my menu now and again, depending on the supplies I get through once a month when Les brings me a truckload. Sometimes it's fruit he brings me, he got hold of a box of mangos once and you should've heard how everyone was over my mango and sweet potato pie, they just loved it. Sometimes it's nothing more exciting than a whole truckload of tuna and I get to see all the different dishes I can make out of that. I can get pretty inventive with what Les hauls down here. I always was good in the kitchen, my kids'll tell you that, if you can find them. The one who's gone, he loved my scrambled the most. Ate it before it touched the plate, I used to say.

Back to last Wednesday. 'What'll it be,' I'm asking Phil and Eric. They *umm* and *ahh* and stare at the menus like they ain't never seen them before, like this ain't the only

place for hundreds of miles and they haven't been coming here and eating my food once a week for I don't know how long.

I love doing this, chatting and feeding the hungry. In between one lot and another, Fluff and I'll sit down for a breather, me with my thirty-third coffee of the day most probably, and we'll stare out into the white. You could get lost in all that white. I never knew an outside could look so clean. I thought before I got here that I would miss the colours, the greens and the blues, the yellows and the browns. Not red. I would never miss red.

But I don't miss a thing.

In the evenings we'll watch the TV. We get so many stations on that satellite, my fingers hurt from all that channel-spinning. Fluff'll bark if I do it too much, gives her a headache. She barks and I stop right there on that channel and we watch some soap opera with guys with square chins and names like 'Ridge', or a bit of the news from the real world, all them disasters and stuff. Then we hit the hay, early to most folks, but we get up when the sun does. I don't mind it, I always was an early bird. Don't want to waste your life, I told my young 'uns, but they didn't listen. Never do. Then, before you know it, it's too late.

Phil, or maybe it's Eric, asks for waffles and maple syrup, and the other one wants toast and jam, and they both drink the coffee like it's coming off the trees tomorrow and that's the end of it.

So I go back into the kitchen and set about it. I stand in front of the toaster and I close my eyes. I reach with

my left hand and feel about on the counter top until I find the bread bag. I grab it and take out two slices with my right, put the bag down, trying to picture in my head where it is, and feel over to the toaster. Toast goes in first time! It's because I've been practicing. For about two months, I've been practicing with my eyes closed, a little every day. Now I can do it. I know where everything is.

It was hard at first. I dropped things, I cheated and opened my eyes to clean up eggs and stuff that slid through my fingers. I put the grill on the wrong settings, nearly burned us down, or left things so raw they could walk. But now I got it down, I can do it.

I take Phil and Eric their food, and while they dig in, I sit at the next table and we chat for a bit.

'We got two tons of gloves today,' they say. 'I don't know what they do down there, all those rubber gloves. Boxes and boxes of them. Some cutting up of stuff, I bet.'

'What else you got,' I ask, sipping my coffee.

'The week's newspapers, like always,' they say. 'Bit old now, but they get so excited when we come in. Doc Baxter, he does all the crosswords. Those guys, they're real smart.'

'They're doing important work,' I say. 'Got to have someone in these out of the way places, learning about what's going on, increasing the world's know-how, don't you?'

They nod at me, grin, stuff food in their mouths. Few minutes later, they're pulling their layers back on, paying the cheque, and out the door.

The rest of Wednesday morning people are streaming in: different delivery guys, like always, some regulars, some new, all needing serious coffee. And something special: a group of young scientists on their way for a visit to the Pole. One of the boys, he looks so much like . . . I have to stop myself going over and saying, Hey . . .

That's when I know. It's a sign. This is the day.

The afternoon was quiet. Anyone who comes down here comes through real early, in case the weather starts with its howling and rough stuff. The sun was out, it's one of them days they told me about. Dazzling, spreading light all over the white.

'It's time,' I say to Fluff. She's real quiet, smart dog. I put on my glasses, snap on her leash, open the door and we step out.

It still amazes me, like it did the first time. I don't think a body would ever get used to it, the soft clean cotton-wool of it all, stretching on and on and on. The road don't cut through it, it's part of it, just flattened out a bit. A different white, a little dirty from the cars, but not so that it gets in the way of the beautifulness of it all. I cried the first day I got here. It was like I thought peace would be.

Fluff is stood by me, her head resting next to my knee. I move a few steps towards the sun, making sure I know where the door is that I just came out of.

'It's OK,' I say to her. 'We can do this. It'll still be me. You know that.' I bend down, take hold of her leash, and straighten up. Then I take off my glasses.

At first I see everything so sharp. The white looks like gold. My eyes see little bits of gold shining all over the

ground, and then it starts moving, like fishes swimming in and out of my head. Then the blurring begins. I'm dizzy, there's a pain behind my eyes, but I keep on staring. I'm not going to shut them until it's done.

I don't know how long I stand there. Slowly, slowly, someone is dropping a cloth over me and this mist comes down in front of my eyes.

Then it's all over. And it's all just white.

That was Wednesday and I have to tell you, I'm pretty used to it already. That sure happened quick. I had thought, when the idea came to me, three months after finding Josh like that and everything, that it'd be a shock to the system. Not-seeing sounded so different, like another world. But five days of whiteness and it already feels comfortable, like home. Sure I move around a little slow, with Fluff always there, giving little barks and rubbing up against me. She leads me around, pushes me in the right direction, makes sure nothing burns. She's a better person than some humans, that dog.

At first, everyone was real taken aback. I couldn't see their faces but I could hear it clear as day. But, you know, they didn't ask too many questions, and I didn't offer any answers anyway. I think most of them knew my story, about the blood, the bits blown open, the staring dead eyes, the things that I saw, things no one in this life should see. I think they heard, the way people hear everything, nothing spreading faster than a sad tale, nothing worse than a mother losing a child. Down here, everybody's got a story, everyone's got their reasons for being

so far from the world. Mine's just one more to add to the pot.

Les says there's some young girl wants to come help out for a few months. Sounds good to me, she'll be mighty welcome when she gets here. But even with just me doing the serving, they keep on coming, and I keep on scrambling and dishing out the coffee.

I still sit and watch for them, only now I don't see the Ants, I hear them. It's not so different really. It's just very white, and that's the way I like it.

HEAVY BONES

'It's me bones,' I say. 'They're real heavy, I've always been like that. Honest, it's not you.' But he just stands there looking all washed out. Only a few minutes ago, we were still tipsy from the bubbly at the reception, our heads fizzing, and now I'm standing here freezing on the doorstep in my big white dress and he's looking like he's failed his first big husbandly duty and what does that say about all the rest of it and why don't we just call it quits right now. I sigh real loudly, look up and down the street a bit, rubbing me arms warm, but he's just staring into space and looking like he might cry, my skinny new hubby, with all of him drained away.

Suddenly I know what to do. I grab him under the armpits and heave him over the doorway. 'How's that, eh?' I say, puffing and sweating under all my frothy meringue. He's shocked, staring at me boggle-eyed. Then he grins and once he starts he don't stop grinning. 'Not bad,' he says, 'not bad at all, wifey.' And he plants a big

one on me, right on me lips, with all the neighbours who think I don't know they're there, watching, going Oooh, look at that, bit cheeky, eh. He pulls me right in and slams the front door in all their noseey faces. 'Last one to the bedroom's got heavy bones!' he shouts. I pick up my skirts and start running.

SELF RAISING

Coronal mass ejections . . . are billion-tonne balls of plasma spat out by the Sun. On arrival at Earth they can damage satellites, disrupt electrical power grids and even kill astronauts.

—‘3D Space-Weather Forecasts on the Horizon’
New Scientist, 4 November 2006

I make them out of flour, sugar, eggs, like you would any cake. But they’re not any cake, they’re lab coats and test tubes, DNA and petri dishes, just like in Science at school, when I used to get things right and the teacher would say, Excellent, Madeleine, that’s exactly what happens when magnesium oxidises, and he’d smile at me and I’d grin at him, and the rest of them’d laugh and throw things and call me Swot. But I didn’t mind about the names they called me; I knew what I knew and I wasn’t going to pretend I didn’t.

The Lab Coat: chocolate cake, marzipan, chocolate buttons. Marvellous, they said to me, sent photos from the party, showed the

professor cutting it, cutting my cake, all the scientists standing, watching, while he's slicing into it, right down the middle, right through its heart.

I kept on going, onto University, more stirring and mixing in the labs and learning about neutrinos streaming from the Sun, about quarks and electrons and protons, charge and spin, nuclear fusion, potential energy, about stars and supernovas. I was loving it, but then I met John. He was studying engineering, it all happened quickly, he proposed, I said Yes. What did I know? Didn't know then that I'd get pregnant right away, that I'd have to drop out, always meaning to get back, always meaning to. But after the first one, we had two more, and it turned into me snatching a bit of time here and there, turning on Radio 4 and maybe getting five minutes of the science program on a Sunday, or a quick look at the newspaper, see what's up with new particles being found or global warming or gene splicing. Going back to university became like a dream, something I sort of remembered but couldn't really see anymore.

DNA: column of vanilla sponge standing on a base, dyed strands of orange peel, one green and one red, wound around it. Graduation party, PhD in molecular biology, they told me, and I pictured her in that cap and gown, beaming, knowing so much about what goes on in our cells, her with time to learn and learn and keep learning.

I loved the kids, 'course I did. They were little monsters some of the time, but I enjoyed myself, I really did. I tried to get them interested in what I loved, bought them chemistry sets, the girls and the boy, tried to show them about the world, how we should ask questions, look inside things, find out how it all works. It was the other mothers I couldn't stand. Never wanted to talk about anything that mattered, never interested in anything that needed a brain, just chattering about teething and schools and Oh look at her, she's crawling backwards, isn't she clever? Whoopee, don't they all do that? Yours is nothing special, I wanted to shout at them, nothing special now, but maybe she could be, maybe she could be great, if you gave her clever books and toys that got her thinking instead of dolls and hair ribbons. But I never said it. They wouldn't have known where to put themselves, and then they would've left me out.

The Test Tube: rectangular sheet of caramel wrapped into a column, covered in marzipan, little meringue balls stuck on the edge, like liquid bubbling over. At the school Science Fair, they put it on the stage, and I sat and watched little boys picking off pieces of the marzipan while everyone else was looking at the experiments. Weights hanging from pendulums, chemicals heating over Bunsen burners and turning into something else, prizes given out, parents clapping, and me sitting there, watching.

John wasn't sick for long, it spread quickly, and I sat there in the hospital and saw him leave me. I held his hand and wondered what other life I knew, after all these years. The

kids left home to go to University, medicine, architecture, engineering, getting lives of their own, and me now with time to listen to Radio 4 for hours, time to read every Science page in every newspaper. But all I wanted was have him back, grumbling at me from behind the Sports section, drying up what I'd washed, tickling my feet when we watched telly. I'd have given anything.

The Petri Dish: round cake iced in white with a raised edge, and tiny coloured marzipan shapes, red and green and blue, cells swimming around. Some professor's retirement party, he almost won a Nobel Prize it says on the Internet. Dedicated his life to science. His wife and kids probably never saw him, Daddy's at the lab again, but proud, so proud.

I made cakes because I didn't know how to do anything else. I might remember how magnesium oxidises, but that's it. I can bring up kids so they turn out all right, but I'm no scientist, not any more. It's all too late. So I set up Lab Cakes, got myself little business cards and stuck them on the University notice boards, put ads in the local paper. I keep myself busy. Everyone oohs and aahs, but it's not hard, not really, when you've got all the time in the world to think about it. Anyone could do it.

The Sun: chocolate cake ball made in Christmas pudding mould, orange icing with brown smudges for sunspots, angel hair spaghetti mesh for the solar clouds, blue-dyed pasta as plasma shooting out from the solar storm.

The minute I step out of the lift and those smells hit me, I feel at home. I walk down the corridor past all the labs, wheeling my shopping trolley, and I take deep sniffs and part of me wants to push open a door, peek inside, shake a test tube, look into a microscope. But I don't. They don't want me in there, messing with stuff. I just keep pushing the trolley with my cake inside it until I get to the Common Room.

The guy is there, Dr Williams, who ordered it for the party. He shakes my hand, shows me the table where he wants it, and helps me lift the box. Then I get the cake out very gently and set it down on the table and I turn around and when I see his face I can't stop myself from grinning. My goodness! he says, and his mouth's dropped open, he's mumbling something about sunspots and solar clouds. I know what he's talking about. He sent me pictures and links to the Internet and I read more, about coronal mass ejections and plasma. I start to say something, I've got some questions, I want to ask him about his research. But he's just staring at the cake, he's forgotten about me, so I push the trolley back out of the door and down the corridor to the lift.

When I get there, I'm about to press the button when I stop. I can see him in my head. There he is, with all the other scientists, and they're watching while he takes his knife and cuts into my Sun, plunging that blade all the way through, solar clouds splitting into tiny bits, orange icing falling all over the table, chocolate cake bleeding crumbs. I let go of the trolley, my heart is beating like its jumping out of my skin, and I turn round and walk fast,

and then I'm running back through the Common Room door.

He's still sitting there, gazing at the cake like he's in a daze, and when I grab it he stands up, says, Hey . . . But I'm over at the window, it's already open, and before he can stop me I lean out and with both hands I throw my Sun as far into the sky as I can. And when, instead of doing what gravity says it should, it floats up and up, orange and brown, dancing and spinning, into the clouds, I'm not surprised one bit. I watch it climb higher and higher until it's just a speck. And then it's gone.

THE HAND

Her elbow twitches. He doesn't know her, her father, her community. He doesn't know that her long skirt, long sleeves, means that she doesn't, can't . . .

His hand floats between them.

Will you be warm, soft, cool, moist, strong? Will you take mine gently like Rivky on the way to school? Or will you be firm, squeezing, crushing? When our skins touch, will I jump, gasp out loud? Will you know that I haven't . . . ever?

And afterwards: will you be printed into my palm, an impression in clay?

Elbow twitches, wrist jerks, and her fingers move stiffly into the air, reaching for his.

SPACE FRIGHT

Daring aerospace entrepreneurs race for the X Prize, a \$10 million reward for the first private vehicle to fly passengers to space . . .

—‘Space Fright’
New Scientist, February 14th 2004

‘I’ve heard of men being hard to pin down,’ said Agnes, ‘but this is ridiculous. Didn’t you read the gravity section in the manual?’

Bill floated helplessly above her.

‘I’m really sorry . . .’ he said from the ceiling. ‘I had no idea that it would be so difficult to, well, you know, keep one’s feet on the floor, so to speak. The sidespin is intended to compensate for the, umm, gravitational deficiencies, but of course I should have activated the trip-switch to alter the undercraft sensor system. I’m sorry, I just don’t know why I didn’t. It all happened so fast.’

He looked so miserable that Agnes smiled broadly to cheer him up. She gripped the two handles on either side of her on the wall that she had flung herself against when

Bill had decided they could undo their seatbelts without having first checked the settings. In this position, with her arms pinned back against a control panel, she felt rather exposed. But then, on the positive side, Bill was getting a good view of her breasts.

Well, thought Agnes, this was certainly different from other dating adventures she had had: Nanospeed Night, where you had two seconds to make your mind up about a man before he moved on and was replaced by number twelve out of two hundred suitors; the Dinner in Space Darkness fiasco, where you were supposed to interact with various men unprejudiced by their facial drawbacks, around a table that none of you could see, trying to eat food when you had no idea where the plate was. She had apologized profusely to the man on her right, but wasn't sure he had heard her as he was rushed away screaming, taking her fork with him. She hadn't met anyone that night either.

With his head grazing the ceiling, Bill felt like he might cry. How long had it taken him to get this woman—any woman, for pity's sake—to take a spin in his new XCOR 5000, which had extra comfort features and a dual spin turbo backdrift with built-in stabilisers; how many times had he run through his space seduction scenario ('look at that view of the cosmos'—slide arm around shoulders; 'doesn't it make you feel small and insignificant?'—go in for the kiss)? And now here he was, suspended in an awfully unmanly way several feet above her, unable to get to the bottle of perfectly chilled Australian white in the mini-fridge (a new feature that many had complained

earlier XCORs were sorely lacking), too far from the stereo button to even mellow the situation with a little Van the Man. He would have whacked his head against the wall in despair, if he had any control over it his body at all. Well, he was getting a good look at Agnes' untouchable bosom, at least.

Agnes was staring out of a porthole at Earth.

'I think I can see my house,' she said.

'Blimey,' said Bill, 'you have great eyesight.'

Agnes liked this about Bill. He was quick with a compliment, but not in the sleazy way of some of her dates, whose praise seemed to ooze. Bill was rougher, it was true, and he certainly didn't know when to stop talking about mind-numbing technologies and how they functioned on a molecular level, but he had a certain inelegant persuasiveness, otherwise how would he have managed to get her here? Agnes always believed she had vertigo, but staring out of the porthole, she felt a great calm.

Bill, on the other hand, was becoming increasingly frustrated.

'Agnes,' he said, in what was almost a wail. 'Could you help me down somehow?'

Agnes was transfixed by Earth.

'Agnes?' Bill said, a little louder. 'Agnes!'

'Oh, sorry,' said Agnes. 'What?'

After some discussion and much cajoling on Bill's part, Agnes, keeping tight hold of the handle on her right, let go of the left and tried to propel her body towards the control desk. On first go, she started moving upwards.