

The Makeda Code

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Close call

Four

A Love of Containment

The Makeda Code

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Hélène Tavelle

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A novel

What if a legendary heroine had crossed the millennia?

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Hélène Tavelle

*The whole world is a theatre,
And all, men and women, are only actors.
And during our life, we play several roles.*

William Shakespeare

The Makeda Code

1.

Settlement in Ethiopia

Steve Barns scans the stars in the azure sky, devoid of any stirring clouds. Sitting on the beach, his legs curled up over his face, he feels the need to stop time. When everything goes wrong, he observes the Milky Way and immerses his nostalgic thoughts in this timeless and immutable immensity.

Far behind him are the towering mountains, red sands and arid deserts of Australia. Already in Alice Springs where he lived, he was captivated by the inimitable sky of the arid Australian Outback. In every corner of this continent he lived besides, a unique experience to contemplate the stars which lit up the landscapes full of colors and natural beauty. Buried, his television program on ABC TV, "Fixer Upper"

also called "Total Renovation", broadcast nationally every week, on Saturday afternoons, and retransmitted on foreign channels with voices dubbed in the language of countries.

He shared the antenna with Natasha, his wife. Their exemplary couple was emulated in the cottages of the entire planet.

Accomplices, complementary, lovers, they renovated abandoned buildings, with the wave of a magic wand or almost.

They represented for all, "the ideal couple". Beautiful, friendly, always in a good mood, they passed on great values.

He, the mason-builder, did not hesitate to demolish, to carry, to sweat, to attack these ruins which he transformed into idyllic houses, the time of a 4 — hour program.

She, a charming interior decorator, brought a scent of lightness and elegance to this perilous undertaking. She had a whole hangar of decorative items, crockery, furniture... to give buyers the impression that the house was inhabited. Home staging, in fact.

Their insurmountable labors were punctuated with tender kisses, even amid the rubble and dust. Nothing could discourage them. The more the difficulties there were, the more their motivation grew to overcome each obstacle, each unforeseen event, each hidden defect, and there was no shortage of them ! Together, they were invincible.

Sometimes their children, the twins, Brenda-Mary and John Peter would point their pretty blond heads to distract their famous parents. At 6 years old, they shook up the notoriety of dad-mom with their YouTube channel called "Twins".

They made young and old melt, with their adorable little faces, by simply telling their daily life as children of TV stars. Their lives were sprinkled with road trips and homework. Their young followers adored them while envying them because they did not go to school to follow Steve and Natasha in their multiple trips.

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Night falls little by little on the beach

Steve never tires of admiring the many species of fish, hitherto unknown, seeming to rejoice in this protective climate, sheltered from predatory fishermen.

However, he will have to reach Lake Tana with its green water which shelters all these islands, now sacred "refuges" for Steve. Surrounded by vertiginous mountain ranges, this spot offers an unusual landscape to this Australian, accustomed to postcard settings depicting coral reef, turquoise waters, natural parks and teeming capital...

Steve decides to get back on his tankwa, a canoe he made with his skilled hands, out of papyrus and which he uses to travel from island to island. In search of tranquility, he lets his soul go wild for whole days, far from civilization, seeking isolation at all costs.

The lake, strewn with old caravan centers, stretches over a hundred kilometres. He needs to give himself a lot of leeway not to drown in a night that could be dangerous.

Even though the word "fear" is totally foreign to him, Steve adopts the automatic attitude of a reasonable adult as if genes ruled his thinking. Some sort of survival instinct.

He must join Gondar, one of the ancient capitals of Ethiopia, where he settled three weeks ago.

Arriving around 7 p.m., Steve hails one of the many scooters from the *Selam Bus Line Share Company* that are flooding the city. With his nimble hand, already accustomed to this rite, he shows an indifferent patience. He got into the habit of traveling by bajaj, as these means of transport are called, which are safer and cheaper than motorcycle taxis. One of them finally stops, although already carrying three passengers, European tourists, two English and a French, mixing their languages in a sweet confusion. Steve, as always, does not share their conversation. He remains resolutely hostile to any conviviality with the inhabitants and even less with the tourists, all as superficial as each other, to his taste.

Arriving at Atsé Tewodros airport, named after Emperor Tewodros II, Steve knew nothing of this ancient capital, except that Natasha had often spoken to him about it. He remembered that leather-wrapped trunk, lined with jagged edged postcards, that she took out every Christmas.

She religiously opened the brass lock, with a small golden key that she hid under a pile of lingerie as glamorous as her. She gazed tirelessly, with a meditative air, on the yellowed pictures of her maternal ancestors. She caressed the paper where the faces were. She only knew of them that they had gone into exile in Australia, in the last century, to escape the misery of this African country. Steve had always been amazed at his darling's venetian blond hair and pale even milky complexion, knowing that her ancestors were black. These Australians had emigrated to Ethiopia and mixed, over the years, with natives.

He had had a dream one night that he was living among those people and that he was one of the characters in the photos. He had therefore considered that this improbable dream was a sign of fate. He had to follow in the footsteps of the ancestors of his beloved wife.

Indeed, his entourage, friends and family, had dissuaded him from choosing such a remote destination and above all so risky for a white capitalist.

— There or elsewhere, what does it matter! he had retorted, to them with a distant glance.

And so Steve Barns made the opposite journey of Natasha's family, taking refuge in Ethiopia.

He had only taken one outward flight, telling himself that he would let himself be carried away by circumstances. He had amassed enough resources with his rents and his material goods, to last for a long time.

Apart from this plane ticket, total uncertainty reigned. No hotel reservations, no prospects for work or holidays. And so Steve Barns made the opposite journey to Natasha's family, taking refuge in Ethiopia mixed, over the years, with natives. However, he had the intimate conviction that things were going to happen in his life. There was a before and an after. In any case, dying assassinated was completely unimportant to him. He no longer projected himself into the future.

Before Ethiopia, he had tried several times to end his life. One Sunday morning, he had taken his car in an apocalyptic deluge. He had closed his eyes, while pressing on the accelerator, to aim at a stone wall which he discerned in the

distance. Alas, this wall happened to be that of an ultra-connected property. The gate had opened and the two side walls had parted as in the crossing of the Red Sea of Moses and the Hebrews.

Hearing no crash, he opened his eyelids, slamming down mechanically. The vehicle had ended up on a lawn in the middle of a more than welcoming carpet of flowers. Airs of paradise. The owners were celebrating a birthday. Very hospitable, they had invited him and offered him Champagne and a piece of wedding-cake so that he could recover from his emotions.

The other suicide attempts had all ended in bitter failure, through lack of courage or clumsiness. So he found himself there, bewildered, not knowing what to do with this life he no longer wanted.

He is no longer afraid of anything. Choosing a dangerous country is a godsend for him and could perhaps help him have the courage to disappear. Confronting this kind of country is perhaps a subliminal message.

Two possibilities are available to him:

- Achieve something strong, to perpetuate the memory of his wife and children.
- Or, die and join them.

When he arrived in Ethiopia, a land he was treading for the first time, he had asked the taxi driver to drop him off in front of the first hotel he came across. This man must have had acquaintances with this rowdy style palace which in no way corresponded to Steve's desires. However, he had taken

up residence at the Haile Resort Gondar, 4 kilometers from the city center.

The only memory he had of the photos of Natasha's ancestors was the clumsy pen inscription on the back of each photo with the year and the name of the city "Gondar". Hence the choice of this particular destination.

He felt inhabited by a last mission: to go in the footsteps of the loved one, before her birth, like a fantastic journey in search of what created her and of those without whom she would never have seen the light of day.

Each time he arrives at his hotel, he is greeted by the bellhop, dressed like Spirou, with the same respectful solemnity. Now, this stylish host still allows himself such familiar phrases as "How are you today sir?" to which Steve responds quickly with a cold "fine", without further details.

His nights are restless and filled with the immaterial presence of these beloved beings, now erased forever from his sinister destiny.

He replays over and over again, the trailer of his show that he provided for five seasons. He and Natasha have restored 76 homes in 5 years. Tremendous !

During a real estate project, what happens when you have a crush on a house but it is unsanitary? The only solution for future buyers: call on Steve and Natasha Barns, the real estate expert couple who will carry out a total renovation of the house.

The twins' laughter echoes in his repeated insomnia. The warmth of Natasha's body, snuggling against him, seems so real that it takes him a good quarter of an hour to wake up, to rummage in the bed, to find that this soft presence is the fruit of his imagination. Bitter disappointment repeated daily.

Nope ! They won't come back! How to live without them?

Strangely, he never sees the terrible scene that cost the life of what he cared most about in the world, his family, his blood, his guts, his reason for living. Probably an unconscious way of erasing this part of the past which forever darkened this existence so rosy and so blessed by the Gods, until this sudden stop.

They had to go a hundred kilometers from their home and the small family had settled in its massive, exotic and spacious motorhome. Steve was behind the wheel and his good-natured driving did not bode well for what was to come. He just remembers that they all sang the hit, number one on the charts, at the top of the playlist recorded by Natasha, "Dance Monkey", from Tones and I. on their long and steady journeys across Australia.

When Steve woke up after a long coma of several days, psychologists supervised him. They told him, little by little, that his family had been decimated in a terrible accident. They were cut them off by a huge truck. Steve must have turned around for a second to see his children singing, all laughing. The driver languished behind bars but he had broken Steve's destiny forever.

As for him, he finally didn't get a scratch. The doctors wanted to reassure him that they had all died instantly and that none of them had suffered.

Between the guilt of having survived and that of being responsible for the death of what was most precious to him, the world had collapsed. This accident obviously made the front page of the Australian tabloids and Steve threw in the towel. He closed his renovation and decoration company "Orchidée" and put an hand to his contract with ABC TV.

He liquidated the industrial wasteland, a silo that served as their decor and headquarters.

He isolated himself on a farm for a few months while walling himself in almost total silence. Fruit-picking, growing and raising animals emptied his mind for a while. Then, it seemed essential to him to flee this land which had brought him so much happiness and where he could never find harmony again. Besides, did he really want it?

Dragging his carcass of a lost and lonely man became the only vision of a macabre future of which despair had become the driving force.

By the time to settle the current business, he packed one day. He was determined to join Natasha, going back to the origins of her existence, even before her birth. An ultimate act of love that gave him the courage to face each new day. An almost supernatural quest to be loved and disappeared. She would have liked so much to discover these mysterious and remote lands in which her family had lived for centuries.

This exile became a tribute to the three people he loved more than anything and whom he would no longer touch, kiss or see.

Apart from the destination, he did not plan anything in advance. This journey was made on a whim with audacity, willpower and unconsciousness.

Hotel staff nicknamed him *Kangaroo Dundee* making a double allusion to the film *Crocodile Dundee* and his Australian origins. Dark brown with a solid stature, he passes for a giant, near the Ethiopians he meets and to whom he hardly deigns to throw a greeting, just courteous and respectful.

Steve's admirers would be surprised to see such a change of personality. His exuberant and enthusiastic style, at the time of his TV show, clashes with this dark, silent and secret being who crosses corridors like a ghost. The only similarities are his incomparable clothing and look which stick to his XXL size of gentleman farmer not hesitating to get to work. Large oversized beige linen shirts with rolled up sleeves, khaki shorts revealing curved legs and a cowboy hat always screwed on his head. His adventurer appearance is impressive. His three-day beard has metamorphosed into a full beard. Even if he remains very attractive, the forty-year-old now displays an unusual negligence of his personality.

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Back to his new home sweet home, Steve is taken aback by a cardboard sign on what he analyzes as a ruin, just opposite the hotel.

He remains perplexed by this announcement roughly written in black paint. Taken over by the demons of renovation, he immediately thinks about a possible project. After all, he has no intention of returning to Australia. This new country, far from from everything, is ideal to be forgotten and pursue a life, away from prying eyes.

He enters the lobby of the palace. He walks with long strides towards the concierge who almost chokes when he sees him tumbling, he had only been passing since his arrival.

— You can tell me more about this ad, right across the street? Steve said, pointing to the object of his request.

— It was a fashionable restaurant, La Mandoline. The boss, a Frenchman, retired. He did not find a buyer. As a result, this sign has been there for several years. Time passes and the front is frightening, so much it is damaged. It is

about demolishing it. In any case, that's what our boss asked for because it's overshadowing the hotel, replies the concierge, very knowledgeable and rather surprised by his client's question.

Steve doesn't say a word to this flood of information. However, he immediately consults *Google* in search of this address and finds rave reviews about the place.

The best restaurants near me

Restaurant Guru

The Mandolin

In front of Haile Resort Gondar - Ethiopia

In the street of backpacker hotels, this excellent French restaurant is acclaimed for its quality cuisine. Beef tartare, duck breast, onion quiches, cheese plate, chocolate soufflé, and bottles of Bordeaux, the great classics of French gastronomy are there. Good for breakfast too. Elegant setting (spacious villa with garden), outdoor tables and very warm owner. Attentive service. Be careful, the bill goes up quickly!

Steve is standing on the oriental rug in the living room, hand-embroidered and oversized. The lobby is the size of an airport hall. He glances at his Rangers, big buckets with earthy soles. What does it matter ! Tourists return everyday from expeditions and do no hesitate to tread luxurious floors.

A dozen Americans are waiting for the departure of the group by shuttle, not without regularly checking the gigantic clock in reception. They are equipped as if for crossing the desert, bermuda shorts for the men, skorts for the two women, and multi-pocket and unisex safari jackets for all of them. In front of them, a sign « Visit the picturesque ruins of Fasil Ghebbi, fortification from which the emperors once ruled. » announces their program.

Standing up, with a haughty and detached appearance,

Steve dials the number announced on the sign.

An individual answers, at the first ring, in French, language learned at school by Steve but absolutely by Steve. He interrupts him to ask if he speaks English.

After a quick exchange, the two men agree to a meeting the next morning around 10 am. And for good reason, the Frenchman had to despair of being able to sell his establishment one day.

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At least 80 years old, Daniel Bertrand hangs around, from 9 am, in front of his restaurant or rather in front of what remains of this place which was a trendy place.

At the sight of the business look of Steve, the owner blushes with pleasure. He finally has it, the one that will embellish his purse.

He greets him with a soft handshake which annoys Steve, a frank and self-confident man with an energetic grip.

— You're in luck. I just came back to Ethiopia to settle some business.

After the preambles of courtesy, he shows him around.

— Well, obviously, the door wasn't secure, so we had to put up with a few squats. But look at the kitchen... A good cleaning and here we go again !!!

Steve is absolutely not fooled by the mumbo jumbo of this cunning man who must have scammed more than one in his career. His schemes which are obvious, don't bother Steve. He doesn't really know why, but he absolutely wants to acquire this location. It's as if a voice from beyond was whispering: " Go ! Take it!" Take it ! ".