

Sydney Frankfurt and His Wonderful Cabinet of Curiosities

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Chapter 1: Sydney Frankfurt and His Wonderful Scent

I always remember summers by their distinguishable scents. When I was five, it smelled like honeybees and woollen socks. When I was eight, I couldn't go anywhere without the tenacious aroma of white tulips, peach cobbler, and a hint of glossy magazines. The tenth year of my splendid little life, my summer smelled unmistakably of Sydney D. Frankfurt. At first, of course, I did not know it smelled like Sydney, for I had yet to meet him. Syd had a distinct aroma. It struck me quicker than his appearance, his demeanour, or the way he carried himself. It was a mixture of birch wood and campfire, at once warming and familiar, but familiar in a way that whenever you encountered it, you couldn't figure out how you had gone so long without it. It seeped into my life gently in the spring of that year.

Up until then, my routine consisted of school and summer, learning and playing. Grade five had been particularly hard. The curriculum in 1992 was especially trying. Fractions invaded our minds and homework encroached on our spare time rendering my classmates and I into little exhausted packages of information. We were ready to burst as the school year came to an end and the sun had thawed the last of the winter ice. When the bell rang on the last day of class, we all ran out waving our arms in the air, giving hoots in the yard, and throwing our bags recklessly

on the school playground, feeling the triumph of freedom once more. Our teachers had cunningly loaded us up with candies and chocolate. It was all part of their grand plan to unleash a storm upon the parents to remind them of how grateful they should be to teachers for looking after their children during the year. This summer, however, was turning out to be very different. Val and Kim, my two cousins, were in summer camps in the city. Worse yet, my friends Tracy, Gillian, and Dee were hours away up north, cottaging with distant relatives. My parents, on the other hand, had decided that I should stay home. My older sister Jenny, who had just turned fifteen, no longer had the time nor the desire to play with me, her interests speeding far ahead into maturity. In fact, I held a grudge against her for not watching cartoons with me and insisting on the music channel those first days off. I was left with little to no company, though in part I was secretly thankful. By the end of the school year, Tracy and Gillian had started to gang up on me. It was only the early stages, but I knew the tell-tale signs. It went from making fun of the way I sucked my juice box without a straw, to drawing attention to my ever so slightly over-sized sneakers I'd inherited from my sister. I knew ostracization was waiting on the horizon for me. I had seen them push poor Jamie out of their circle and it began to the same way. I was therefore quite content to be on my own. Being alone guaranteed safety in the social realm of elementary school life. No one can hurt me if no one is around, I comforted myself as I tried to forget the last day of school when I saw Tracy and Gillian arm in arm whispering together as they walked home a few metres in front of me. They didn't even know I was behind them.

I had spent the first two days of my summer vacation hitting the books as my father had instructed me and had barely covered the first four pages of mathematics. They were meant to keep my mind sharp for the impending start of the fall term. My dad was very strict about these studies. He was a firm believer that a lazy mind would wind up a useless mind. And that applied

to all subjects. Therefore, it was not enough to simply study English, but mathematics, geography, history, sciences, and whatever resources he could get his hands on from our local library. In my spare time, I was found running around in the backyard and moping on the couch watching daytime television with my sister Jenny. After two days of math and moping, I was starved for companionship. I found myself befriending a jagged stick I had found in the front yard. It had only been three days after our last class and I sat on my porch, keeping myself mildly entertained by scribbling on the ground with the stick, wishing I had a dog I could toss it to, and feeling unrelentingly suspicious that my preoccupation would soon end in boredom.

This morning however, something different was happening. Perhaps that was why I kept watch on the porch despite my dissatisfaction with my stick companion. A truck had pulled up next door and a troupe of movers was going back and forth between the truck and the house. Our previous neighbours had been a large family of six. They knew they had outgrown their space when the boys' fist-fighting began tearing down walls. I had been friends with the two youngest, but even though we were neighbours, we did not play much together as they were busy with music lessons, tutorials, and extra-curricular activities.

I was drawing the movers as they walked back and forth but, their quick movement were beyond my artistic skills. Undaunted, I began to draw the white truck on the ground before me. The wheels were hopelessly disproportionate.

“Hello!”

Though I had been absorbed in my dirt drawings, it had not escaped me that a shadow had fallen over me. I looked up. A young boy stood in front of me. He was slightly pudgy. He had a sharp nose, plump cheeks, round spectacles, beige shorts held up with suspenders, and a

button-up short sleeved shirt. His right hand was lodged in his pocket, but he stuck out his left hand.

“Sydney D. Frankfurt. Nice to meet you.” He did not smile but spoke sincerely and with a proper British accent.

“Hi, I’m Rose Tang.” I included my last name to mirror the way he’d given me his.

I shook his hand, feeling instantly a kind of firm insistence in his grip.

“So, you been out here long?”

“Since after lunch.”

“No, I mean, how long have you been living in this neighbourhood?”

“Oh. All my life.”

“Alright. Well, my folks and I have just moved in.”

“I can see that.”

“This is fantastic though: move in during the summer and I don’t have to start school for another couple of months. Gives me tons of time to play.”

“You and everyone else.” He paused as if caught in a trap. “Well, we should think on the bright side now, shouldn’t we?”

I shrugged, and then realized that perhaps I was coming off as somewhat distant. Before I could remedy this, a woman’s voice rang through the distance, “Sydney Delhi Frankfurt! Get over here now! A half hour in, and you’re already running off!”

“Sorry mate, I got to go.” He ran off with every appearance of a boy determined to ease his mother’s mind.

Though our first encounter was cold and curt, we became inseparable immediately after, the way children find some friendships an easy fit, like a tailor-made glove. There was no need

for small talk or generous gifts like chocolate chip cookies. Sydney had no problem re-introducing himself the next afternoon; he showed up at my front door, knocked, and asked Jenny if “Rose, that girl from the porch” was in. My sister, of course, looked at him with indifference and called me down. I could have run off with a dangerous kidnapper for all she knew or cared. I later found that Syd didn’t have a single shy bone in him when it came to meeting strangers; subsequently, he seemed to introduce himself all the time to anyone we met. Most of our activities consisted of what I had already been doing, but now, with a friend. We threw rocks at plastic bottles, poked the ground with sticks, watched squirrel from a safe rabies-free distance, climbed trees, and embarked on a never-ending quest to make the perfect lemonade.

Living in our Toronto suburb allowed for these diverse activities. We were a short walk from the local convenience store, Chester’s, where Alex, the owner, let us put up a lemonade stand provided we bought a candy bar each at the end of the day. It was our little market place, where we could find anything from chocolate to the occasional Cortland apple in the fall. Cortland apples were my favourite. If we walked twenty minutes or twenty five if it was a hot day and we were feeling sluggish, we reached Stephen Leacock Park where we could throw away hours on a swing or invent as many uses for a see-saw as Syd could possibly imagine. What was even more fortunate, and also a strange feature for a children’s park, was a ravine that to us youngsters was a river in an enchanted forest. As committed as I was to the math books my father had intended for me to read, such a fantastic geography slowly began luring me to an education of a different kind.

Chapter 2: The Lost Uncle and His Curious Cabinet

Most of our days consisted of a visit to almost all the neighbourhood locations: Syd's house, the convenience store (even long after we were through with our lemonade escapades), the park, and the ravine. They became the background for our summer and for some rather intriguing discoveries, the first of which happened about four days after we met and led to many more discoveries thereafter. We were down by the ravine trying, but failing, to find fish. The afternoon sun was stubbornly beating down in all its glory.

"Come on then," Sydney called when the heat reached its pinnacle. "We should go back."

"But there's nothing to do." I grabbed at my shirt where my stomach was, as if boredom was giving me physical pain and that I would prefer to be out in the heat pretending to catch fish.

"Don't you ever get in trouble for being so lazy? Come on! I've got something to show you!"

He got up from crouching and began hiking up the ravine. I watched his legs, which often reminded me of baby legs, though far stronger and far more capable. I followed a small distance behind him, huffing and puffing out of exhaustion from the heat and from the uphill climb, waving my arms at invisible honeybees.

We journeyed through the exotic landscape of the ravine and park and returned to the drudgery of the suburban sidewalks. Sydney's porch was rather dilapidated and in desperate need of repair. We always had to keep to the far right side, even when we went quickly, to ensure we

did not fall through the rotting wood. Today, however, we were slow, tired, and taking our time with our heads down staring at every step we took. Sydney took the lead and walked into his front hallway. It was one of those hallways that had been badly wall-papered. I was always tempted to find some renegade corner to peel. Its dull blue floral print was anything but a point of interest except on the days when I was waiting for Syd and didn't want to go in. Presently, we walked into the kitchen and Syd filled us two glasses of cold water from the tap.

“Here” – he handed me one – “bring it downstairs.”

I had never been to the basement and eagerly followed him, wondering if it was a finished basement or a hole dug in the ground. We descended a precarious set of stairs, but the warm yellow glow of the bare incandescent light that Syd had turned on welcomed me. I got to the bottom of the stairs and looked around. The concrete floor was grey and cool to my feet. The walls were unfinished and mostly hidden by rows and rows of heavy duty metal shelves. Upon these shelves were rows and rows of cardboard boxes. Syd was on his knees, bent over one such box, rummaging.

“Check this out!” he cried.

“What is it?” I came behind him. “Unpacked boxes?”

“Yes, unpacked, never to be unpacked perhaps.” He did not turn up to look at me. “*They* would not be interested in these boxes at all.”

I soon learned that Syd typically referred to his parents as *them*.

“So who do they belong to if not your parents?”

“My Uncle Rob, of course.”

“Who?”

“My Uncle Rob.”

“Oh, of course.”

He heaved a big sigh, as if slightly annoyed by my slowness even though it was no slowness at all.

“Uncle Rob was the most interesting of my uncles, you know.”

“Actually, I didn’t know.”

“Oh well, perhaps for the best, otherwise I would be boring you right now by telling you something you already knew.”

“All right, so what made him so interesting?”

“Oh!” He lit up. “Uncle Rob! He’s my father’s youngest brother. He was a world traveller, you know? He went to all the most exotic places in the world, from Ngongoro to Indonesia, from Chile to Scandinavia. He told sensational tales of his travels. Once in a while, he would return home to trusty ol’ England herself, and stay with my grandparents until he was ready to go out into the world again. I was living with my grandparents at the time so I got to hear all the stories.

So what about these boxes? Well, by the time my grandparents were both gone, and my parents came to reclaim me,” he said the last bit in a low tone, almost muttering it, “Uncle Rob had left all these things to me. I kept them at my grandparents’ place, and it is bloody well the only thing I wanted to bring over. We packed it all up in these boxes, and shipped them over.”

“So really, it belongs to you now?”

“I suppose. This *Wunderkammer*’s so big it practically fills our entire basement.”

“This what?”

“*Wunderkammer* – a cabinet of curiosities.”

“But this is bigger than a cabinet! Much bigger!” I exclaimed.

“It’s just a name. What do they teach you in Canada? Although to be fair, I learned it all from my uncle and not our school system either. Anyway, people back in the Renaissance were already collecting interesting artefacts in a room and creating cabinets of curiosities. It’s almost like reading an encyclopaedia, but having actual objects rather than just pictures in a books. Many rich and famous people had them, even royalty. My uncle was not rich and famous, at least not in these parts of the world. He was, however, an explorer extraordinaire and his collection came purely from his travels. Here, look.”

He handed me an old photograph of a room filled with shelves strewn with a plethora of random objects.

“This is what it looks like when it is unpacked – at least the way it looked in my grandfather’s basement.”

I pulled it closer to my nose, trying to distinguish what the objects were. I certainly could identify antlers and a gold vase, but there were many tiny trinkets I couldn’t make out. I had a sudden urge to rip all the boxes open in search of those antlers, and to put them upon my head and dance around his minimalist basement. I was elated. I had fallen into a world someone else had travelled, braved, and risked their own lives for and not the treasures sat categorized and shelved for display.

“So where is this uncle of yours?”

“In the Mediterranean Sea somewhere.”

“*In*? Did he go for a dip?”

“No, no, no. He’s scattered. Dead and scattered.”

“How did he die?”

My newfound friend got up from hunching over the box and sat down on the floor to face me, though he kept his head down and handed me another picture before his hand went back absentmindedly into the box. He took out a rock and began investigating it as he spoke.

“He died on a towing ship on the way to Papua New Guinea in search of the Queen Alexandra’s Birdwing Butterfly.”

I shuddered. I was, perhaps, the only person on God’s green earth who had an inexplicable fear of those fluttery insects.

“Why’s it called Birdwing if it’s a butterfly?”

“That’s because it’s the size of a bird, silly!”

I glanced down at the new picture as he spoke. A reedy man with a moustache and greased down dark hair stared back at me. I remember looking and thinking that if I put a long ruler straight down his middle, his hair and moustache would be perfectly split in half. He had an empty look in his eyes as if he forgot why he was staring into the camera. Despite the facial hair and dressing up, his face was youthful, just as though he had tried to look older but failed. Behind him was a palm tree. He appeared to be on a beach for a special event, for which he was wearing a tailored suit.

“Yes, he left in quite a hurry the last time he was over at my gramps’. Once we heard the news that he was dead, we were informed of his last request to be cremated and scattered over his favourite sea. Look here at this rock! Look at its molten black colour!”

I looked, but in my mind I was trying hard to picture this cavalier Uncle Rob who was badly named and badly dressed, I might say, for an adventurer. I wondered what he had left behind. All he had was those boxes. There was no grave to visit, no urn to hold his ashes in his ancestral home. Perhaps he feared following the same fate as his collected treasures: the long

dreary days being stared at as an oddity, gathering dust on a quiet shelf. I held the picture, and rubbed it with my thumb as if a genie would come out of the bottle and tell me the great mysteries behind the man in the picture or give me a key to unlock the details of his life. But after a few seconds, I knew I would have no such luck. I gently laid the picture down, as if laying a child into a crib, and turned to examine the rock my new friend had handed me.

Chapter 3: Rose and Her family

We reckoned that if we took our time, it would take the entire summer to unpack and re-categorize the cabinet. It was a convenient idea, really, to have an excuse to stay indoors in the cool basement, unfinished though it was, and away from the flaming sun. We had no brilliant plan or intensive schedule, but we seemed to work often on the *Wunderkammer* project without taking away from our many other interests and pursuits. In the evenings I made sure I was home by five-thirty to help set up for dinner. It was my chore to set up, and help with dishes afterwards. I have to admit I had particular pride in setting the table. I had learned how to do it last year in school for a unit on the family. I was convinced that the skillfulness I had put into this particular chore would ensure that it continued to be my high and holy calling. On the issue of washing dishes, however, I was bewildered as to why I was still put on the task. I consistently sloshed water all over the counter, left dry tidbits on dishes, and was slow as a snail. My father always complained, though he did not seem to think that these complaints merited taking me off duty. Often, my father would have the food prepared or pre-cooked so that all my sister had to do was stick it in the oven an hour before dinner. Of course, she was there to ensure that I had set the table properly, and she was there to dry the dishes I had washed.

“There’s water everywhere!” my father let out. “I honestly don’t understand how it’s possible. I have to clean up after you clean up.”

My father usually got home from work around six o’clock. He worked as a technician, setting up computers for companies. Beyond the most general of descriptions, it seemed that he

had little interest in sharing the day-to-day functions of his occupation with his family. He usually went straight upstairs to my mom, who was in bed. The content of their conversations was hidden from us, but we could hear the low murmurings resonate from the ceiling as their room was directly above the kitchen. A few minutes afterwards, the creaking stairs would signal their descent; my mother in the arms of my father. He carried her down as if they were just married and crossing into their new home, except it looked more as though he was carrying a child. My mother had seemed to shrivel up ever since she had been sick three months ago. She pre-emptively shaved her head in the inevitable wake of her hair falling out eventually. Her head was beautifully shaped; her nose and her fingers were fine and delicate. Despite her frailness, her eyes were clear and telling. After the surgery, she still seemed well, but her therapy sessions brought her back smaller and thinner every time.

“I bet the doctors are all aliens and they use their ray guns on her!” I told my sister one time.

“Don’t be ridiculous. It’s called chemotherapy.”

“Che-mo-ther-apy!” I wiggled my fingers and strained my voice to make it eerily extra-terrestrially.

I imagined my mother strapped down, in a domed room with a green glow, and buggy-eyed aliens wearing Dracula-like capes with upturned collars, ready to do their worst. There is a massive ray-gun inches away from her nose. One alien, wearing goggles, pulls a large red lever. The ray-gun powers up, zaps my mother, and she shrinks slightly. Now, to be fair, even as a child, I knew the unlikelihood of such a scenario, but it was the best explanation I could come up with at the time by process of elimination. I had considered magic potions and a witch’s spell but

they seemed rather illogical, fanciful even. On the other hand, there was an eighty-five percent possibility of the existence of aliens. Or so I had worked out.

Since my mother was sick and my working father had to cook, our meals often consisted of casseroles, crock-pot stews, and quick and easy meals. My mom ate very little, although it seemed crucial to her to be downstairs with us during dinner, even if she had next to nothing.

“Rose, what did you do today?” was the inevitable question she popped.

“We were looking at old photos,” I answered dutifully between bites.

“Oh?” my father would cut in. “What about your studies? Did you cover the unit on mammals today?”

“Oh give her a break,” my mother excused his question. “And how is that boy Sydney?”

“Fine.”

“That’s good to hear. I heard the heat was unbearable today. Make sure you keep cool indoors. Invite him over if you want.”

I always felt a sliver of guilt when she pulled this line. The truth was I didn’t want him over. I much preferred going to his place. I did not want to explain why my mother was in bed all day, and besides, there were far more things to do at Sydney’s and no adult to bother us. This is not to say that I spent all my days at Syd’s house, or even with Syd for that matter. Sometimes, I would accompany Jenny and my mother to her appointments. Other days I would be called away to lunch with my grandparents. And of course, every morning, I had my studies.

“You take care of your sister now.” My mother would turn her attention to Jenny, who by now had learned to roll her eyes quite effectively and keep her mouth shut. My mother either did not notice or chose to ignore her eldest daughter’s mannerisms, which bothered me ever so slightly. Jenny got away with everything.

After supper, we would all sit in the living room for a while. Even my mother sat in her old armchair, often nodding off as the summer sun flamed and died down in the distance, like birch wood burning in a campfire. My sister had almost near domination of the remote for the television, and settled most nights for tiresome off-season re-runs. My father would be cleaning for the first while, which nearly always distracted me as I drew pictures with my thick stubby crayons, or read. Mentally, I prepared myself for any questions my father might throw at me later that evening. Just in case. I had to remind myself that the readings were preparing me to do well in the future. How my sister got away with *not* doing the same was yet another mystery of universal injustice. When my father was finally finished cleaning, he would settle down with his glossy magazine, *Technology Today*, and thumb through it systematically. He had creases in his face that had not been there a few years ago. They were accented in the light and shadows of the night as he furrowed his brows or raised them, reflecting how he felt about his readings.

It was a secret competition I had: who would fall asleep first, my mom, or me? My regular curfew was eight-thirty, and I seldom could stay up past it. My daily adventures, I am afraid, made me quite fatigued in the evenings. All in all, I had quite an even game with my mother. Sometimes my father carried her up to bed before me, and other times, well, I can't even recall what happened except that I woke up the next morning in my bed. Sydney would always complain that he had tried to get my attention the night before. Our bedrooms faced each other, and were just a few metres apart. When we could, we would signal each other with flashlights, open our windows, and talk across to each other. However, as I often slept quite soundly and he often had too much going on in his little mind that he wanted to share, he was always the one doing the signalling, while I was dead as a log. Fortunately, this meant that on the rare occasion

that I needed his counsel or company, I could easily call him, for he was rarely, if ever, asleep until nine-thirty.

“What now, Tang?” he whispered, opening his window in response to my rapid signals.

“Do you think that aliens have taken over the hospital?”

“Now that’s an idea!”

“This is only through a process of elimination.”

“Don’t you think robots took over the hospital?”

“How do you figure that?”

“I dunno. It just sounded more fun and way scarier.”

“This ain’t a laughing matter, Syd! My mom’s real sick, and I’ve got to find out whether it’s aliens that are doing their worse to her or something else!”

“All right, all right.” He tried hard to placate me. “Tell me why it couldn’t be robots?”

“Well obviously, we don’t yet have the technology to create such advanced robots. But aliens have all sorts of technology. They could be disguised or cloaked as doctors and nurses as they zap people one at a time, until there’s no one left with the strength to fight them off.”

“Makes sense.”

The night breeze was blowing my window curtains.

“But if they have such great technology, perhaps they wouldn’t need such a complicated ruse,” I thought aloud.

“Plus, aliens never quite get the colour of their skin right when disguising. There’s always a hint of green. Maybe, I’m saying just maybe, the aliens made some robots and put them in the hospitals of the world. So both theories are true. Aliens are cunning like that. They never

put themselves out on a limb or risk their own lives. Always better to use a clone or a robot. One time...”

That was the last I heard of Sydney that night. My father found me the next morning asleep on the chair beside my windowsill and scolded me for keeping the window open.

“Even summers can send a cold our way,” he said.

“Well? What happened that ‘one time’,” I finally asked Sydney when I saw him that afternoon. We were once again in the basement, sitting on the dirty ground, elbow deep in boxes.

“I’m sorry lass, you snooze, you lose.” He turned his nose up.

“I don’t care anyway. I just wanted to give you a chance to say your peace.”

“You know it has nothing to do with aliens, right?”

“Fine.”

“Fine. Well then, pay attention.” He uncrossed his arms, stood up, and cleared his throat.

Chapter 4: The Grecian Urn

“This story involves the legendary king, Alexander the Great. He was born to King Philip. All the other Greeks made fun of Philip of Macedon. They even had a nickname for him, Philip the Barbarian. But his real problem was his terrible bad accent. It made him sound very silly. Worse yet, he had an awful bad temper and would wave his arms up and down whenever he was angry, which was all the time. He just wasn’t very cultured. No one took him seriously, ever. He was a bright fellow though, so when he finally had a son, he decided that things were going to be different. He was going to give his son a *cultured* future, a future where he didn’t have ‘barbarian’ attached to him like a last name. So he went to the smartest, most cultured of the Greeks. He travelled all the way to Athens where the great philosophers gathered and found the smartest man among them. This man was named Aristotle, and Philip offered him a job. Aristotle was always up for a challenge, so he went back with Philip to Macedon and taught little Alexander how to speak properly and how to be smart. The problem was Alexander had inherited that nasty little temper of his father’s and no matter what Aristotle taught him, he did not seem to be able to keep his wits about him when he got angry. After trying *five thousand three hundred and fifty one* methods, none of which seemed to work on little Alexander, Aristotle set out to find a way to help his young pupil to control his emotions. He read books, he travelled the world, he talked to all the best of the best. Doctors, philosophers, teachers; you name it, Aristotle was there and he found every last person he could talk to.

“Meanwhile, Alexander was growing up. He was skilled in everything. He won first place in the javelin throw. He won the speech arts award. He won the spelling bee. He aced math leagues, and he got gold for long distance running. But even all these accomplishments paled next to Alexander’s biggest achievement: horse racing. It was the one thing that he did well because he was passionate about it. Everything else he worked hard at because it was expected of him. One day, when Alexander turned ten, a man sold a horse to his father Philip. It was a beautiful black horse, ten years of age, born, in fact, on the exact day that Alexander had been born. Philip had the horse for a total of three days. By the third day, everyone in the kingdom admired its beauty and majesty, but Philip was ready to get rid of the poor beast, for none of the horse tamers in the land could ride him. Feeling cheated, Philip was willing to sell the horse for eight talents; five less talents than he had originally spent on it. Alexander, however, had taken a liking to the horse. He had seen plenty of horses in his young life, but he had never seen one so brilliant, so beautiful, so sublime. On the day before Philip was to sell the horse, Alexander went to see it one last time. It was right after lunch and the noon sun was right above them. Alexander brought out the horse. It came out, but ever so skittishly, as if frightened of its own shadow. And that’s when Alexander figured it out. He realized that the horse was afraid of his own shadow! So Alexander started to direct the horse just so, making sure it could not see its shadow, and began to train it. Through that afternoon he slowly, but surely, got the horse to overcome its fear. When his father came the next day, he found his son asleep next to the horse and he shook him on the shoulder to wake him up.

‘Father! I have tamed it! Come and see!’ Alexander showed his father and his men what he had done the day before.

‘Well, Zeus almighty! I suppose if you could tame that horse, you could tame an empire!

The horse is yours child, a reward for your hard work!’

“Alexander named the horse Bucephalus, to show off the complicated Greek he had learned. The two were inseparable. There was not a day that went by where Alexander did not ride his trusty friend.

“Meanwhile, Aristotle was in far off distant countries, still in search of a cure for his student. He had been travelling for years but to no avail. Finally he journeyed home to Athens, but still, he could find no logical cure. He had already been to Athens several times, combing through the land but there was nothing. Discouraged, he went for a walk in the countryside right outside the city. Forests and fields are breeding grounds for the imagination. Poets go there for inspiration, couples for kisses, villagers their mystical rituals, and shepherds their superstitions. Aristotle was uncomfortable with non-rational touchy feely things, but he loved nature, loved investigating it and he couldn’t pass the chance up. The countryside was quiet, and Aristotle did not encounter anyone for the first hour. He knelt to see the ants, stood on his tiptoes to reach branches, and wiggled himself into holes and cracks in his search for little critters. He carried on his investigation for a while and when he grew tired, he sat on a rock, gazing into the horizon as the sun began to set.

‘What are you doing here, good sir? It is almost dark and there are lions and wolves that hunt here at night.’

Aristotle looked up to see a very old priest. ‘Oh, I’m just thinking, but I’ll be on my way. I lost track of the time.’

‘Pray sir, what were you thinking?’

‘It’s nonsense really. If I could solve it, I would be the cleverest man in the world.’

‘Do tell.’

‘Well, I don’t know...’

‘Come now, walk with me back to the city, back to safety, and tell me your story as we go.’

So the two men travelled together as the sun began to set and Aristotle told the priest all about his remarkable and impossible quest.

‘I should be turning here,’ said Aristotle as they began entering the city.

‘See here friend, before you go, about your dilemma: I’m afraid you are looking in all the wrong places for your solution.’

‘Oh?’

‘What say you to trying something a little less explainable; that is, if you don’t mind coming with me?’

Now, you have to believe me when I say that Aristotle had a hard time with this. His main task had always been to rid himself, and those around him, of old superstitions. However, he also desired above all else to come back having succeeded in his mission. He had spent many years now with Alexander, and knew that the boy had the potential to become one of the most important people in all of history. But Alexander’s anger would be his undoing if he did not learn to rein it in. Aristotle was willing to try anything. So, he agreed to go with the priest.

“A few weeks later, Alexander and Bucephalus were riding on a hill when from a distance they spotted a man hobbling along hugging a vase.

‘Oi! Who goes there?’

‘Alexander? Is that you? You have grown so much. You are no longer a boy, but a young man.’

‘Sir!’ Alexander recognized his teacher and dismounted from his horse. He ran to Aristotle. ‘You have finally returned! You look well. Now tell me about your journeys and what you found.’

Alexander’s eyes gleamed and Aristotle knew that he wanted to know if a cure had been found.

‘Your majesty, I - -’

‘Out with it!’

‘I failed. There was no cure in all the land.’ He clutched the vase in his arm. ‘All I have is this urn and I doubt it will do anything. In fact, it is contrary to all that I’ve taught you. But perhaps there are things that even these old eyes have yet to see. So I thought it could do no harm to bring it back.’

‘What is it?’

‘It is an urn. Legend has it that this urn can hold the deepest and most violent of emotions, be it hate, love, or even anger. But beware my son, the greater the anger, the more life it will take out of you. The angrier you are and the more often you use it, the more it will draw the life out of you, sap all your energy, until, in the end, it will take you in completely, and destroy you, and all that will be left of you will be ashes.’

Alexander laughed for he had been taught well.

‘Your travels have made you mad, old man! Go home and get some rest before you lose your mind completely. Hand me that vase. You’re clearly under its spell.’ Alexander took it out of his hands and slipped it absentmindedly into the pouch on his saddle.

Aristotle, clearly a little dazed, shuffled off into the distance, shaking his head as if to rattle confusion from his mind.

“Now, what Alexander didn’t know, of course, was that magic certainly did exist and that it is far more powerful than all of the skills that he could acquire. He left the urn in his pouch and forgot about it. It came with him to war. He conquered more lands than his father or anyone in the past. And every time he got angry and was about to make an unwise decision, he seemed able to control himself better than he did in his childhood, so remarkably so, that Alexander began to believe that something miraculous had happened to him, that he was in fact an invincible, immortal god. He was unaware that the secret to his success had been the urn, long forgotten in his pouch. Alexander did not know that the urn was taking in anger on its own without Alexander doing anything on his part. Aristotle did not keep back the disdain he held for Alexander’s claims of divinity, and wrote many letters to scold him. But what emperor would care what an old man thought?

“One day, Alexander was riding into battle against King Porus, one of his greatest enemies. They had been fighting for days, and by the fifth day the men and their horses were covered in blood and mud. After a long day’s battle, Alexander spotted King Porus from a distance, and made his way through a sea of soldiers and trampled over fleshy dead bodies until he was right behind him.

‘Turn around and face your death!’ he called, for it was dishonourable to kill a man behind his back.

King Porus turned around, alarmed to see Alexander’s sword pointed straight at his throat. In a blink of an eye, Alexander slit his throat, but not before King Porus thrust his own sword blindly, in a last act of desperation. The blade tore right into Bucephalus and the horse fell, tossing his master off and the Grecian urn out of the saddle.

‘No!’ Alexander cried. ‘My kingdom for a horse! My kingdom for a horse!’”

So you can imagine how angry Alexander was – the only thing that had mattered to him in his life, the only companion he felt he truly had, and now Bucephalus was dead! His rage was unstoppable. He rose up ready to slaughter every man and horse in his way. But it was one too many times that he gave in to his rage, and just as he was about to rise up, he fell ill with a fever. Days later, he was dead. He was cremated and his ashes placed in that Grecian urn that he seemed to like so much and carried around with him everywhere, and eventually his ashes were scattered over the Mediterranean Sea. And *that*,” my friend concluded as he pulled out a black and gold dusty urn from one of the boxes, “is the gospel truth.”

“Wait a minute Syd,” I had to say, “‘My kingdom for a horse?’ Isn’t that a quote from Shakespeare?”

My mother was an avid Shakespeare enthusiast who often threw around her favourite quotes to us as life lessons, or for no reason at all, and this was not the kind of quote one forgets.

“Way to ruin my story, Tang. It was perfectly and wonderfully dramatic at that climax and all you go do is poke holes at my story.” He stuck his tongue out at me.

“I don’t believe this story of yours,” I said.

“Well, believe it because here it is.” He pulled out the vase.

“How did your uncle get it?”

“He found it in an old church, where it was being used as a flower pot.”

“And your uncle just took it?”

“Yes.”

“Just like that?”

“Well, yeah. What do you want? Another story? I already told you one today.”

“Is the urn still magical?”

“No, don’t be daft. Once you use it as a flower pot, it loses all its magic. But isn’t it wonderful, this old thing that lasted longer than even the life of glorious Alexander? Imagine the many people who have come after him who have seen this beauty.”

I did not have the energy to reply. Instead, I took the urn into my own hands and marvelled at its splendour.