

The Dunes of Àrd-Dhìthreabh



Wim Vanderbauwhede

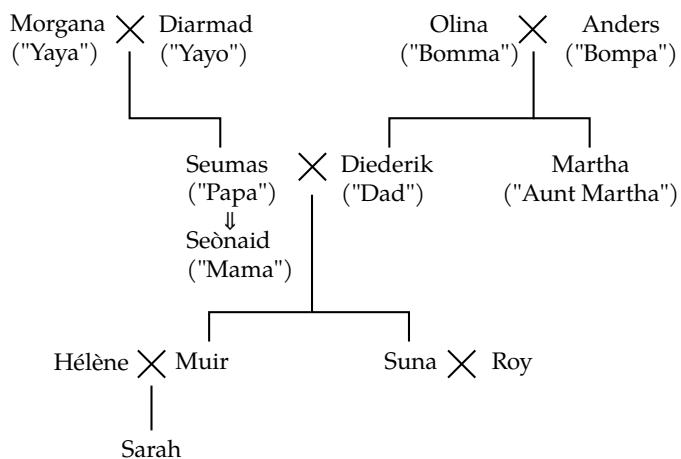
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Chapter 4. Autumn

Wissant, November 2061

Late Autumn was Muir's least favourite time of the year to be on the beach. The dark days and the interminable blanket of low grey cloud made him feel melancholy; and for some reason it always made him think of the battle that had been fought here. Which was now a hundred and twenty-five years ago, and still the beach was strewn with corroded bullets and age-blackened shells. The concrete bunkers had all turned to sand though, only their rebar remaining, like cubist whale skeletons.

Yesterday, a new message came from Dad. As usual, it was an old-fashioned memory card with pictures of sand and a few cryptic notes. With Mama's program, it turned into a long letter.

Despite his resentment, Muir had to admit that Dad's letters were fascinating. His descriptions of his trek through Georgia, Azerbaijan and Secular Persia were eye-opening. And his account of reunified India was perhaps the most uplifting of all. India had seen a real green revolution. It was of course a well-known story how their local fascist regime had fallen in 2034, in fact it was history: the fall of the regimes in the US and India had started the domino effect that was now known as the Global Fascism Collapse. But, in contrast to what had happened in most of the rest of the world, the far right in India had not managed to stage a comeback, probably as a result of the reunification. Instead, they had what was arguably the most proactive government in the world when it came to tackling the climate emergency. As a result, India's economy had suffered a lot less than most other countries. The concrete rot had also had a relatively minor impact, because from the start the government had invested massively in the railways, and India's rail infrastructure was now the most extensive and amongst the most modern in the world.

Still, Muir thought, Dad's train journey through India from Mumbai to Agra, just to see the Taj Mahal, was simply crazy. For starters, Muir had thought that that area was now too hot for human habitation. But when Diederik asked in Mumbai, they had

assured him he could get to Agra, by train. So people were still living there, and enough to make maintaining the high-speed rail connection worthwhile.

Indian long distance trains were clearly more weather resistant than Scottish ones. Or maybe Dad had simply not found it worth commenting on the quality of service. What he did describe was how, when they got into the hotter regions, the land was extremely arid but more like a steppe than a desert. Clearly, some of the vegetation could withstand the heat and prevented a dust bowl effect. He also saw from afar several large, milky white, translucent dome-like structures. As they became more frequent, some were closer to the railway line and he saw that they weren't domes but clusters of huge umbrella-like constructions made of wooden or bamboo frames with what looked like plastic sheeting. His fellow passengers explained that these were plastic solar panels with adaptive transparency. They ensured a constant level of illumination and warmth underneath by controlling the absorption spectrum. Large parts of Agra were covered in this way, and the microclimate underneath those canopies was indeed liveable, and suitable for growing crops. They called them *suruj-phool*, which meant "sun-flowers" in Urdu.

And as it wasn't made of concrete, the Taj Mahal still stood there, imposing as ever. There was an obscure reference in the letter about how he'd better leave the description of that magnificent building to Uncle Rory. Muir assumed it must be a character in one of those old novels Dad liked so much.

From Agra he'd gone to Sri Lanka. There he'd managed to join the crew of a sailing boat bound for Phuket. From there he'd taken the train to Ho Chi Minh City and then via Hanoi and the Friendship Pass into China. "I would have loved to take the high-speed train all the way from Hat Yai to Kunming, just because it's such an amazing thing: a five thousand kilometre long high-speed rail trajectory. But of course I didn't. Seeing the train go past in the station was enough. Instead, I took the slow trains and walked. I walked from Ho Chi Minh City to Da Nang, and from there to Hanoi. There I took the train to China. First I went to Nanning, the Green City. It had always been lush but in the past decades had

adapted from a city with lots of trees to a subtropical forest where people lived. From there I went to Kunming, the City of Eternal Spring, just so I could watch the high-speed train from Singapore arrive, half a year later.”

“I had been fascinated by Vietnam from an early age. It started with an old movie I watched as a teenager, *The Scent of the Green Papaya*, set near the end of the French occupation. It was so beautiful and moving. I wanted to know more about this place so I watched more movies, both French and American. Films like *Indochine* and especially *Apocalypse Now* left a deep impression and I started to read up on the country and its history, in particular the war. I was appalled at the use of chemicals like the napalm incendiary and the agent orange defoliant and the other rainbow herbicides. I couldn’t understand how people could apply their ingenuity to create such horrible weapons. I understand that better now, but it was partly to show I could do better than that that I decided to become a biochemist. I also read a lot of fiction set in Vietnam. The one book that stayed with me always was *The Quiet American* by Graham Greene.”

“That atmosphere of the country captured by Greene a hundred years ago is still very much the same, a combination of climate and culture, even though the climate has changed for the worse and the culture has evolved a lot over the course of that century. What he wrote about human nature still applies as well: ‘Sooner or later, one has to take sides. If one is to remain human.’ and ‘I never knew a man who had better motives for all the trouble he caused.’ I recognise myself in there. Maybe, despite trying very hard to be as different as possible from a CIA agent like Pyle, the eponymous Quiet American, I had ended up becoming more like him in my mind.”

“Ho Chi Minh City was a very green city. It was almost entirely covered by a near-unbroken canopy of very tall trees. I talked to the people, mostly in French or in Chinese, sometimes in English. In a move to resist the linguistic imperialism of both the Anglo-Saxons and the Chinese, after the glorious revolution the new left-wing government had gone back to promoting the language of those

occupiers and enemies of long ago, the French. They had also started the campaigns to plant the tall canopy trees that were typical of the Vietnamese jungle. All over the country, they told me, the cities were now covered in those. It had taken thirty years for the trees to reach their full height.”

“Here as anywhere else, all the tower blocks had fallen. On the whole, it seemed people were not much bothered by the destruction of the skyscrapers. ‘Nobody except the very rich was living in them. People want to live under the canopy.’ The bridges had been another matter, especially in a city so veined with rivers and canals, but like everywhere else, people had been resourceful and inventive, and the famous flows of bicycles had long been restored.”

As usual, Dad’s letters minimised the effect of the concrete rot. If you had to believe him, it had almost been a blessing. Muir frowned. Looking at it soberly, that had of course been the case. It had caused the huge drop in emissions that had stopped global warming from getting totally out of control. He sighed. Still, it had been a global disaster, and somehow he blamed it for his father’s absence. He wondered why that was. After all, it had started when he was in jail, and that had nothing to do with it. Maybe it was because he left in the period when it was at its worst? Muir shook his head and continued his walk along the beach. He stared morosely at the grey sea and the gloomy sky, seeing instead the tropical light and greenery evoked by the letter, and he had to admit that right now he’d rather be there. And they even spoke French!