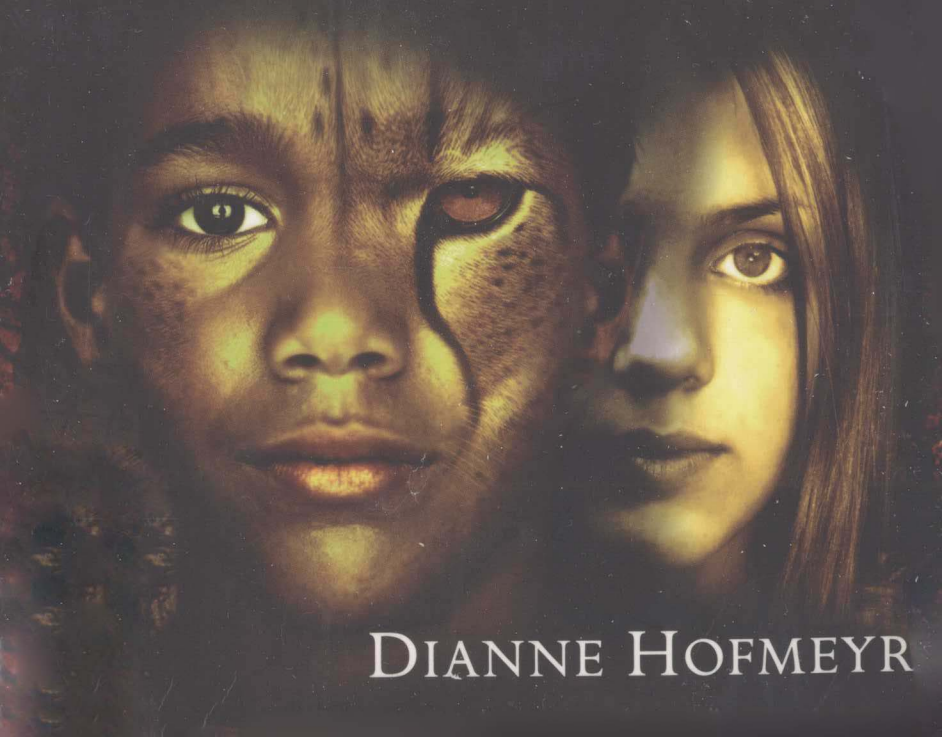


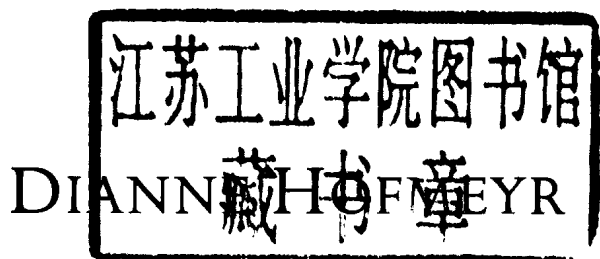


FISH NOTES and STAR SONGS



DIANNE HOFMEYR

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SIMON AND SCHUSTER

*To my friend, Clare,
for inspiring so many
readers and writers.*

SIMON AND SCHUSTER

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Fish Notes

Her delicate skeleton was lifted from the stand on which it had hung for longer than anyone could remember. The leg and arm bones made hollow, musical sounds as they knocked against each other gently. Like bamboo wind chimes in a breeze. For a moment she seemed to be dancing. Her legs moving, her arms lifting and her body swaying to some strange music only she could hear.

She was dancing again after being still for so long.

At least, that's how I imagined it had happened, even though the photograph showed nothing of this.

The heading in the newspaper was in dark print: SARA BAARTMAN HOME AFTER 200 YEARS. Below the heading were the facts. And below them the photograph – the one of her lying in the box she'd come home in.

She arrived with very little. Just the box. And two glass jars. That was all.

When I studied the small details in the photograph, I saw that a great deal of careful measuring and marking had been done to make sure she arrived safely. The precise outline of her skeleton and the exact shape of the two jars had been carved into a piece of sponge that lined the box.

Her leg and arm bones no longer danced. They lay still now, neatly held in place in the grooves made for them. And her skull and hip bones settled quietly back into their hollows in the sponge cushion. The two glass jars were taped securely and lay in separate spaces alongside. One jar was filled with her brain, the other with her insides. All shrivelled and grey and floating.

The old label that had been attached to the stand on which she'd hung had been removed. Now, in the photograph, it rested across the rib bones of her chest. I could see the dark, murky ink strokes of the old-fashioned writing. The card read simply:

Sara Baartman - Griqua

I took out my magnifying glass to have a closer look and to see if anything else was written on the label.

Something I might have missed. But no. It was just that. Just the old yellowed label with a small spray of faded ink where the nib had caught in the curl of the 'G'.

That's how Sara Baartman arrived home. With nothing more than that. Just a box, a few bones, some jars and a label to remind us this had once been a person from Africa.

My father's an anthropologist. People interest him. He once spent a year in the desert studying the people who live there. How they built their houses. How they lived. What they ate.

What people eat doesn't interest me. When I saw the photograph of Sara Baartman lying in her box, I didn't think about what she ate. I thought of who she was. I thought of her body. And I thought of her spirit. Without a spirit where was the person?

I looked at the photograph with the bones fitting so perfectly into their sponge cushions. And I looked at the grey things floating in the glass jars tucked alongside. Where exactly in all of this was the real Sara Baartman?

Where was her spirit? In her dusty, brittle bones? Or in her brain in a bottle? Or had her spirit stayed behind

in the long, dark galleries of the Musée de l'Homme in Paris where she'd hung with the other bone collections? In the dark corridors with their drawers of skulls and rounded hip bones and delicate finger bones, collecting fingerprints and dust?

Perhaps her spirit had never left Africa in the first place.

The answer to this – and much much more – I found in the cave. In the cave things happened – mysterious, marvellous things – which will disappear from the earth, if no one tells of them. And, once gone, they will be lost for ever.

So I've written it all down in a book, from the very beginning. And across the cover I've written: *Fish Notes*.

But a label isn't enough. It can't tell us all. So the pages of my book are thick and bumpy and curled with everything that had to be written.

On the cover of the book I've painted a fish. What sort, I'm not sure. It's just any fish. Not as ugly as a puffer. But not as pretty as a butterfly fish. It's greenish-pinkish-silver, with yellow dots down its side and fins that stretch out like arms, with a spiny back fin and a small, fanned tail and a dark eye, watching me.

It's just Fish. Like me. That's my name.

But Fish is not my *real* name. It's a name I took.

My father says there are names for different times in our lives. That it doesn't matter what your name is, as long as deep down inside you know who you are and where you come from.

Sometimes I whisper my other name. My real, true name.

I wonder if Sara Baartman ever whispered her true African name. The name she was called in her secret language of clicks that only her own people understood. A name no one knew or even bothered with, when they took her so very far away from home.

For a time none of us knew each other's real names. Why we got them and how we changed them is part of this story. But it's not the *whole* story. There is much, much more.

We knew that day – when the four of us left the paintings and turned our back on the cave – that things had happened there. Things no one will ever be able to explain. In the cave we left behind not just the paintings, but something even more wonderful and mysterious.

On that day, we stood high on the dunes and we

watched the waves crashing in solid lines of foam along the long curve of beach. Then we turned and faced south towards Whale Point. We gave our last look towards the dark shadow of the cave's entrance and the white water licking the rocks below.

We saluted the cave. And all that was hidden inside it.

We stood for a long time, each with our own thoughts and the memory of what had happened there. While we watched, the setting sun caught the cliff-face of the Gap between Whale Point and the beach, and sent back a pink shimmering glow.

I knew then that the mysteries of the cave were still alive.

The Arrow

From a distance I saw the thin shape of the arrow against the silvery sand dune. Long and narrow with its tip buried in the sand.

I crept in closer. Glanced over my shoulder. Sea mist brushed my face like a soft rag. Moonlight skimmed the dunes. But no one was hiding in the wavering grasses. And the only sound was the sea sighing softly as the tide went out.

The arrow shaft was damp with sea dew. At the tail end drops of moisture were caught in the feather barbs. They reflected like jewels in the pale, lemony light. The four wings were made of spotted guinea-fowl feathers. Wedged into grooves in the reed, they sat at a stiff angle to the shaft. Four evenly-spaced blades. Not left ragged but cut precisely.

It was an arrow made by hands in no hurry.

A shiver ran through me, reaching right to the tips of my fingers. Who had made it? Were they watching now? Were they out there, somewhere in the strange lemon light between the shadows wavering in the grass?

It was getting late. Already the moon was floating free against an oyster-shell sky. I held the arrow close, turned quickly and ran back along the beach, past the locked-up holiday houses with their blind window-eyes staring out at the moonlight and their tight-shut unspeaking doors.

The air was filled with mist and sea smells. The breath of a million sea creatures. Somewhere out in the bay, the whales were calling. I could hear them. *Ffishhh . . . Ffishhh . . . Ffishhh . . .* The sound came swirling into my ears as I ran.

Out of the corner of my eye I checked the boat still lying at the edge of the lagoon. Stranded, upturned and silvery on the sand. Like some sort of beached sea creature that would never have life pumped back into it. Slowly breathing its last breath in the moonlight.

Across the lagoon below the cliff was the house. The wooden house that stood on stilts. Rockwood. With its garden of pebbles and driftwood and seashells. Built long ago with wood and stone and bits and pieces washed up from the sea by the old Sea Captain, so that it grew in all directions.

Light shone from the windows.

I ran along the wooden walkway, threw open the door and banged it tight shut behind me to keep out the cold sea breeze and the whispering grasses. The ships – painted on pieces of cardboard held up with tacks – bobbed up and down in full sail, jibbing along the walls in the draught.

My father glanced up from his work and smiled. ‘You stayed out late!’

The pansy shells leaning up on the shelf and the row of green sea urchins marching from big to small all seemed to smile as well.

‘I’ve found an ancient arrow!’

He rubbed his fingers over the shaft. Then shook his head.

‘You mean it’s not treasure?’

‘Treasure, perhaps. But not old.’

‘Not from an ancient tribe?’

‘No. The cuts are too new. The feathers too fresh.’

‘How do you know for sure?’

‘No arrowhead. Look – just sharpened reed.’

‘So?’

‘Ancient arrowheads were made of stone. Sometimes bone. Sometimes iron. First, a strong reed had to be found. Then scraped and checked for straightness.

Perhaps warmed over the fire to help it straighten. One end of the reed split. Then strong wing feathers chosen.'

'Like these?'

He nodded. 'Yes. Perhaps guinea-fowl. But in ancient arrows, the tip of the quill is cut off. The feather is split carefully down the middle, then cut and trimmed to make four blades. The blades are pushed into the splits in the reed and tied with a leather thong dipped in sticky berry juice to keep the thong tight.'

'And the arrowhead?'

'A flint polished thin and sharp by rubbing against a wet stone.'

'And the poison?'

'Venom – from poisonous snakes!' He pulled a fierce face. Made snake fangs with his fingers and jabbed at my neck. 'Puff adders!'

I brushed his hand away. 'So if the arrow's not ancient, who made it then?'

He shrugged and opened the doors of the Sea Captain's cabinet of curiosities – with the rusty chicken-wire netting tacked across the frames – and laid the arrow down. 'Must fix these doors or the meerkat will get at the bones.'

‘You say that every day!’

He placed the arrow on a shelf alongside all the other things. The rocks with fossils trapped in them, the leopard tortoise shell, the ostrich-eggshell necklace, the row of shark’s teeth, the collection of long white bones and the dusty journal with its blue and red marble-edged pages.

He picked up the journal, banged it against the palm of his hand to dust it off, then flipped through some pages and began reading.

*Thursday August 9, 1894 – Fine weather.
Wind light easterly. 65°F. Spied a vessel
coming around under Whale Point. Went up
the hill to the signal post. Hoisted signals to
bring her in and show her where to drop
anchor. She signalled back that she was the
schooner, the Alfred. From Swansea, Wales.
Come to pick up a cargo of wood . . .*

Over my father’s shoulder I read the scrawled note with another date written in pencil in the margin.

*No more wood to fetch now. All chopped down
to build houses.*

‘Why did the captain do that?’

‘What?’

‘Write notes one on top of the other in the margins of his journal?’

‘That’s what scientists do. They’re always discovering more.’

‘The old Sea Captain wasn’t a scientist.’

‘No. A discoverer.’

I looked back at my father, reading his eyes and the smile that touched the corners of his mouth. Was *he* a discoverer? Would a discoverer know where the spirit of someone went? ‘Dad . . .?’

‘Yes?’

I took a deep breath. Then shook my head. ‘It doesn’t matter . . .’

‘What? What is it?’

‘Nothing . . .’ I made up my mind then. ‘Tomorrow I’ll paint the old Sea Captain’s schooner. With double masts and seven yellow sails. A mainsail, a foresail, two topsails and three jibs. Up against a dark sky.’

He nodded towards the canvas bag in my hand. ‘What else did you find?’

I tipped the shells onto the table. ‘Not much. The tide’s not right.’

‘List them then, while I make mussel soup for supper.’

'Twenty-three shells with holes.'

He scowled. 'Scientific names.'

'Twenty-three bivalves with holes. Seventeen molluscs. Mostly *Conus*. A starfish as well.'

'A starfish?'

'Phylum Echinodermata.'

'That's better!'

'A broken pansy shell – *Echinodiscus bisperforatus*. Five *Spirula*. One *Sepia officinalis* from a large cuttlefish.' I tossed the names into the air. There was something magical about saying such words. I tossed them across the room to my father. It was a secret language between us that made us smile.

The wooden floorboards bounced and creaked under my feet. I pulled back the strands of shell curtain that divided the cabin into sleeping and living. The shells made a soft *shirr . . . shirr . . .* sound, like music. From my bunk I could see up into the stone tower lined with shell patterns and tiny broken pieces of mirror that reflected the stars.

My father began to sing the names. He sang them out like an Italian opera into the steamy room. '*Bisperforatus*. *Conus*. *Spirula*. *Sepia officinalis* . . .' He stirred them into the soup like flavouring. Then he laughed. 'And an arrow found in the dunes.'

The Dune-riders

The girl stood on the crest of a dune. Her eyes as green as the sea on a clear day after the south-east wind. Her hair red against the sunlight. Wild and as straggly as the bushes covering the back-dunes. Wild, as if it had never seen a brush.

‘This is our place! You’re trespassing!’

The eyes blazed down. She was all in black. A black T-shirt. Torn black jeans. Heavy black boots. Too thick and heavy for wearing on a beach.

‘Don’t you speak?’

‘What?’

‘Are you stupid?’

I shook my head.

‘Where d’you come from?’

I pointed back towards Rockwood.

‘You mean the house at the bottom of the