



Timber

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Workman on the Sydney Harbour Bridge, 1930.

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His first hare drive. Rows of men and dogs marching abreast, in wide lines across the rolling hills, forcing the hares into the trap, a right-angled fence lined with chicken wire. Hares, being surface dwelling and nesting above ground, were unable to hide below in burrows like the smaller rabbits they flushed out. Dozens upon dozens of the big orange coloured hares, hundreds in the olden days he was told, being driven forward, frightened, to be trapped between the men and the wire. Then the frenzy began. Men armed with rifles, shotguns, golf clubs, cricket bats and whiskey began going berserk alongside their terriers and children. It wasn't uncommon for a man or dog or boy to pick up a pellet wound here or there, so watch out they'd said.

Seven years old and without a rifle of his own the boy spotted a big male hare hiding in a clump of scrub away from the main melee. Without a second thought he leapt shirtless upon the motionless creature and managed to somehow grab hold of one of its strong back legs. The hare kicked and bucked with the sharp claws of the free leg, slicing into his forearms and face so fiercely he risked losing an eye and just when his hands were slipping he switched grip, wrestling into a choke hold with both hands about the animal's neck. No animal dies easily and over the several minutes it took the boy's small hands to choke the life out of it, the hare's back legs ripped savage vertical cuts down his chest and thighs. Eventually he twisted his full

weight on top and only then could he squeeze hard enough, its skin held tight in his grasp, muscles writhing beneath and slowly those goat-like eyes clouded before his. Finally, it lay lifeless underneath him. No one witnessed the contest or saw his struggle and he felt nauseous and revolted but somehow strangely happy. Surrounding him everything seemed to move in slow motion as he dragged the carcass to where dozens of others were piled dead near the chicken wire fence, the foul musk stench of it on him.

Now, some twenty-five years later, he still recalled the haunting dying cries of that big red hare. Not enough cover around for many hares these days. Most of the scrubland was now suburbia, or organic market gardens, with the remaining farms being less wild, every square inch in production and where large populations of hungry hares were no longer tolerated.



One

Skeletal and white, the trunks of blue gums stuck out from the ground at unusual angles. Like the half-buried ribs of a long dead sheep, a forest of dead trees standing lifeless, leafless and sun cured. Approaching the water's course, where the water flowed when it was present, yellow flowered wattle filled much of the open ground between the twisted willow trees and the occasional lofty poplar. A clay coloured landscape, contoured by the meandering flow of occasional water. Barren dry most of the time, the streams here turned into torrents that uprooted trees and relocated the river banks when the rains fell heavy in the catchment area of the Blue Mountains foothills nearby. The boundary between the river bank and river bed was hard to make out just now. There wasn't much water at all. The dry season was longer than usual this year.

Despite the dry weather the poplar and willows trees were still in full green, with their deep roots tapping into invisible water running below ground along the river's course. There was little free flowing surface water today, though sizeable pools remained in the deeper channels of the streambeds, linked here and there by intermittent flows running shallow across the khaki coloured stones. At least the drought made walking easy through the dusty ground of the riverbeds. Along the banks the vegetation thickened with clumps of grasses, spine covered bushes and the spear height shoots of fresh willow limbs rising from

buried trunks and stumps. Tricky to get through carrying a fishing rod, thick enough to make him creep and weave his way forward, enough to block a straight walk, not that it mattered today.

Cicadas were everywhere, in full song and in such numbers that the din was riotous. Every year around this time, in the heat of summer, the little nymphs rose from the earth where they were living, feeding on the sap of tree roots, emerging to shed their skins and transform into winged creatures. It was the wings of the insects filling the air now, surrounding around him with sound. How wonderful, to be given wings after a life underground, to be resurrected he thought. Unlike locusts or grasshoppers that regularly came in plagues further inland, these insects did no damage above ground, just singing and mating. Once their eggs were laid amongst the soil and bark they perished. It was partly the cicadas bringing him out there to fish today.

Stopping for a moment, viewing one of their transparent exoskeletons clinging to the trunk of a standing dead gum tree, he decided on the lure to fish with. A phelp would do today. A small brown blade spinner, the type that agitated the water in a buzzing fashion as they were retrieved. The rotations of the spinning brass blade mimicking the wings of fallen cicada furiously trying to escape from the water of the pools.

Choosing what to fish was part of the art, and the fun. Not a day for fly fishing today, as the warm dry winds were predicted to rise, making fly fishing too awkward. Nobody wanted to spend their day extracting tangled fly lines from the tree branches. The usual choice of spinning lure out here was a black toby,

their movement swimming across stream like a darting brown trout fingerling, and very effective. This time of year, the fish grew accustomed to feeding on cicadas, becoming too lazy to chase fast moving prey, like a surface lure or a black toby. Phelps also made for easy fishing near the surface of the water, away from the hidden snags below that regularly stole line and valuable fishing time.

Late morning, not the best time for fishing. Most luck was generally had at dawn or dusk, at the changing of the light, but now the trout lost their caution, gorging on the winged abundance throughout the entire day. The low water volumes saw the fish confined into much smaller pools too, so the chances of putting a tempting lure in front of one were greatly improved. There was a chance at least but nothing was ever for certain. Fish weren't stupid. Years of catch and release saw some of the bigger ones being caught half a dozen times or more. Hooked, fought, exhausted and landed, extracted from their domain they quickly learnt to spot a fake. A small hook through a live cicada and floating it on the surface would almost guarantee a catch but that wasn't allowed here, too easy, too unsportsmanlike. He'd done it often enough out here as a kid but times change, there were rule books and regulations now and you couldn't get away with stuff like that anymore.

Three fish in a single day was the best he'd ever done out there, legally anyway. Tickling trout you could do much better. As a boy, when his great uncle first brought him here, they took twenty-four good sized trout from this river in a single morning. Uncle Frank tickled those fish with nothing but bare hands, while Kieren stayed on the riverbank, holding the bulging

wriggling sack. Today they would have a person's guts for garters and seize the car, when catching them with a fat sack like that. Still, having worked on the boats he knew that was nothing, not when compared with the brutal greed of commercial fishing. He'd seen oceans stripped bare by trawlers.

Commercial fishermen were a different breed altogether and best kept at sea some of them. When newly landed into port, and with all the money and frustrations that a month at sea bring, they would cause serious trouble on their first few nights ashore. Having just done what they did, fighting oceans, enduring hardships on deck that few in the modern world could know, Kieren and his workmates would arrive ashore on wobbly land legs, feeling twelve feet tall and bullet proof. These strong and wild young men would spend every dollar they'd earned during a month at sea in three days ashore, on booze and girls and amphetamines, before returning to the sea. Back at sea money was irrelevant. The only currencies of value there were tobacco, weed and sleep. It advisable not to run into them as a group ashore until after they'd had the girls and before they hit the speed.

Commercial fishing certainly wasn't for the fainthearted, and Kieren was not in a hurry to return to doing that for a living. Men broke at sea working on those fishing boats, newcomers usually, thinking they had what it took without knowing what they were getting themselves into. Wretched with seasickness they'd give up, call it quits and take to their bunks for the duration of the trip, hard men amongst them, their size didn't matter. It was never a good idea to quit. You would be turned upon by the rest of the crew, like a wounded shark in a school, reviled, hated for

increasing their workload and reducing the catch and everyone's income by their inability. There was no pity for a failed crewmate. Lord knows he'd struggled when first at sea. Working below decks was tough and when poor weather arrived it would make life simply abysmal. Even so, he was proud to have worked on the boats and for the camaraderie that came with it. There was something about sharing hardship, something about enduring adversity alongside other men, it developed incredibly strong bonds. Many of the crew Kieren fished alongside knew only prison, drugs and the boats that kept them away from trouble. Savages some of them, patched gang members, crooks, frightening men and quiet good types, he loved every one of them. You knew a man well after a month at sea in close confinement.

There was a brutality at sea unlike with rivers. Rivers required art, subtlety, a little elegance, and boyishness to wade and explore. When fishing rivers he became part child, part hunter, part entomologist, scanning the grasses and riverbanks to see which insects were in abundance and what the wily browns and rainbow trout were accustomed to feeding upon. Stalking silently in felt soled boots over the stones and boulders, camouflaged and invisible. He loved it.

The dog appeared through the scrub, tongue hanging sideways dripping saliva, panting with excitement, enjoying this opportunity to roam freely, off the leash and away from the city. They came out here to fish often and the dog knew the area well. A working dog once, intelligent, and it could be relied on not to bother cattle or horses when it was away wandering unsupervised. Perhaps not so much well trained as well educated, having the fear of man put in

it at an early age and understanding the consequence of misbehaving as a result. The dog was given to Kieren by a local farmer, a mate of his father, who'd sold his land and lifestyle to make way for a new housing subdivision. Everywhere now, new houses were forever marching out from the city, consuming everything green standing in their way.

The dog turned away, disappearing into the scrub, searching for rabbits to chase it could no longer catch, hips stiffened with age and eyes clouded milky by cataracts. Instead it would dig up burrows, killing the young rabbits inside one by one with a shake of its head. Never eating them but killing for pleasure, returning with the limp wet trophies in his mouth to show its master, proud as punch and with a silly grin on its face. Kieren killed rabbits himself, in their thousands out here as a boy. Riding out on a bicycle with his rifle, like the dog never happier, little boys loving nothing better than killing and burning. It required considerable restraint not to shoot everything he saw on those days alone, but rabbits were considered fair game and sometimes a hare, it was five points for a hare. Often starlings too, which were the only bird his father approved of shooting for fun. Never the native birds and never the blackbirds with their deep black pool eyes.

That first rifle was a gift from his mother's uncle, when down south in Geelong on holidays. The happiest moment of his life, grinning all the long bus journey home, with the rifle wrapped in brown butcher's paper and separated into two pieces and inside his carry bag. Halfway back celebrating by smoking a cigarette his cousin gave him when the bus stopped for tea and sandwiches, making him throw up

sick behind the café. He still loved that gun, a combination rifle, perfect for this kind of country with a mix of light scrub, bush and wide-open spaces. Short and stocky, resembling an over-and-under shotgun with two barrels and loaded just the same. On top was a .22 calibre rifle sitting above a small calibre shotgun barrel, with each barrel holding a single round. Like a normal rifle it had a single common trigger and a flip-switch to choose between each of the barrels when firing. The shotgun was great at close quarters for a quick snap shot in the scrub at a big hare on the run, with the smaller bore .22 more suited to static targets further away. But at a cost of ten bullets compared to a single shotgun shell he'd rarely used the much bigger option below, too expensive, it took a lot of newspaper deliveries for a solitary blast. Plus, as a skinny boy, the recoil of the brass stock would leave bruising and soreness that lasted for days. The stock's brass pattern left little horizontal dents in his collar bone that could be felt when rubbed across. Like the dents in shins after a particularly bruising game of soccer, when playing country kids, not the soft kids from town, and when they saw you'd forgotten your shin pads.

Overhead, in the cloudless light-blue sky a willie wagtail flew past pursuing a moth in flight. The insect took clumsy evasive action as best it could, the bird matching the moth's every move, fluttering and hovering on wings shaped more like those of a classical angel than a typical bird, its flight an erratic fluttering dance holding it still in mid-air. Incredibly spirited birds the willie wagtail, black bodied, white breasted, with long tails feathers and a preposterously aggressive manner for such a small creature. Quite content in tackling territorial intruders or predators

twice their own size, often driving away hawks, crows, magpies and kookaburras, even dogs from their nesting sites with little more than sheer determination. Highly curious creatures too, with larger than life personalities, seemingly possessing no fear of humans at all.

Willie wagtails regularly joined him walking out here, sometimes following along for miles and miles, making him feel like St Francis of Assisi with his sparrows. The birds would accompany any moving object, animal or machine, simply feeding on the moths and insects disturbed by walking feet or a tractor's wheels. With the moth now firmly captured between its black beak the bird landed nearby, perching on an outstretched branch, eyeing Kieren almost challengingly from beneath those upraised white brow feathers. Scuffing his feet through the dry dirt and twigs Kieren continued walking and, sure enough, the bird lifted from the branch, following along. Suddenly he stopped, standing deathly still with arms outstretched. The bird landed, perching for the smallest of moments, in his upwards facing hand before realising the ruse and flitting away, leaving a broad smile and the tingling sensation of tiny talons behind.

Dark guilt rose from within, wiping away the rare smile the interaction initiated. Last time killing a bird, it was a willie wagtail too. Just one of thousands of previous hunts and killings, but this one haunted him, still. Never would he forget the feeling of utter waste, the pointlessness of destroying something so beautiful, so pure. That killing was out here too, but years ago, when much younger. Early summer just like today, but with the river running full of water, braided

streams flowing and interconnecting here and there. The rabbit numbers were exploding then. A person could be excused for thinking it was them being farmed, everywhere were rabbits or rabbit sign. The ground was littered with their dropping mounds, the soil dug up everywhere from their scratching and digging, seeking out buried roots to feed on because grass was in such short supply, due to their insanely high numbers. That shortage of food made for easy hunting, as the hungry rabbits were forced into feeding during daylight hours, something they generally avoided. It also saw them moving out from the riverbeds to nearby farmlands and market gardens, making them highly unpopular. Poisoning wasn't an option then, due to free ranging livestock, so people going out shooting became an encouraged control method. It was guilt free shooting, culling really. They were pests, introduced, causing considerable damage and in plague-like numbers. Not that the guilt of killing or wounding bothered Kieren Walsh much back then.

He remembered it now. On his own, young Kieren with his rifle, immersed in a *Boy's Own Annual* adventure of rabbit hunting pleasure, happy as any child could possibly be. As usual, that day he'd been indulging in boyhood fantasies of war. Fighting imaginary soldiers, Japanese or Germans or Vietcong, crawling on his belly amongst the scrub, wishing the rifle had a bayonet, for close-quarter combat. The winding riverbeds became trenches, the clay banks transforming into pill boxes and machine gun posts to be stormed. Rabbits and the occasional hare took the role of enemy troops for him to snipe shoot, kicking

out the last moments of their lives, bloodied and bleeding, beside a young boy's sandal clad feet.

Crossing a shallow flow of water, he had paused to reload in midstream, taking a single bullet from a cardboard box of cartridges, sliding the bright brass shell into the breech of the .22 barrel. Suddenly, out of nowhere, a willie wagtail flew right into him, the soft wings of the bird touching his face. That brush of feathers startled the boy back from Normandy or the Somme or Vietnam or wherever he'd been fighting. Feet stumbling on wet stones at the surprise, he'd dropped that box of bullets in the stream, those precious brass nuggets scattering into the water around him. Standing midstream, collecting them up one by one he'd placed the damp box of bullets back into his shirt pocket. They were ruined by the water and now likely unsafe to use. There were plenty more back at home but annoyingly, with no ammunition left, that blissful day out hunting was finished.

That willie wagtail which caused the spillage had remained nearby, sitting on a willow branch, ten feet away, twittering noisily. Angered, the boy raised the rifle, flipped the switch down and fired the one remaining round, the shotgun shell in the rifle's lower barrel. The ground shaking shotgun blast sent the boy backwards a full step. That wagtail hadn't stood a chance. It literally disappeared, vanishing into thin air, vaporised without a single feather remaining. Walking back to his bicycle with the spoiled ammunition in his pocket he'd been accompanied by another of the winged cherubs, its soft twittering not accusing him but asking him just one question. Why Kieren? Why? He had no answer in his palpable shame.

After that day he never shot another bird, not one, as even the thought of it became sickening. Strangely, that one act of violence troubled him for years. Even now it felt that somehow it was his own guardian angel dying that day, instead of just a willie wagtail, like the one following along now. Well, so it seemed now anyway. Things hadn't been going exactly ideally in life. It certainly didn't feel like anyone or anything was secretly looking out for his best interests or shielding him from the pains and hurt of life.

Even shooting rabbits soon became something he no longer enjoyed after that. Particularly when the shot wasn't clean, animals escaping wounded into the bush to die a slow and painful death. No joy in that, not anymore. Fishing was different. Using light gear and wet hands to handle them, the few trout he was fortunate enough to catch soon recovered from their ordeal, becoming older and wiser and a little more cautious. There was no catch and release with rifles.

The dog, Rez, was another reason for no longer shooting anymore, even if he wanted to. The farmer the dog originally came from, when selling the farm, tried finding homes for all his working dogs. When the time came to shift he'd been obliged to put down the unhoused animals. Accordingly, he decided on shooting them all himself. Kieren knew the man well, a mate of his father's and a hard old bastard. He told Kieren how much he'd despised himself for doing it, feeling a traitor for what he did. Killing a dog wasn't like killing other farm animals he'd said. When that farmer shot the surplus dogs, he'd failed to separate the ones he had arranged new homes for. The spared dogs witnessed the massacre of their own pack. Now every time that a car backfired, or a builder's nail gun

went off, Rez would just run, then go to ground, hiding for days. The dog would disappear at the mere sight of a rifle.

Approaching the place where they usually fished Rez was there ahead of him, stamping front paws, tail wagging furiously, covered in a thick cladding of dirt, dust and leaves. The dog was happily excited, knowing that for the next few hours it would be free to do as it pleased, to wander and explore, while its master slowly fished. Periodically it would return to check in, stained dark green from the cow shit it was so fond of rolling in and he would wash it off in the river with a few fond swear words. Why it did that he could only guess, perhaps it masked its predator's smell, improving the chances of a successful hunt. At least it didn't eat shit. Dogs doing that made him gag, disease spreaders and really did deserve shooting. He gagged a little himself at the mere thought of it.

Today's fishing spot resembled an elongated freshwater lake. Not an actual lake but part of the river, cut off by the low water. Running along the outside bend of the main river bed, with steep banks and deep water, tree roots held up the walls of stone and gravel, making it a good place for fish. Bordering on one side was a forest of willows and enormously high poplar trees. On the other side stretched half a mile of dry open land, interspersed with patches of bush, where big strong trees resisted the periodic floods, creating wooded islands surrounded by seas of water or stone or both. Fresh and clean, the lake was one of many that developed this time of year when the river was low, when the deeper channels got isolated and cut off. The biggest, like this one, usually formed

against the outside banks of the flood plain, with smaller ones of varying sizes located randomly across.

The plan was fishing from the wooded side of the lake, in between the trees with a short rod, the rod's whip-like action especially designed for casting light spinners like a toby or phelp. Hopefully some big fat fish were sitting in the water below, in the shade of the trees, waiting for a clumsy cicada to fall from the overhanging trees to become a fish's dinner.

Cautiously approaching the water's edge, Kieren was immediately disappointed. The once beautiful waterway looked like a building site. Today the earth was badly ripped up, with the tracks and excavations of bulldozers and diggers working in the river, from building up a flood wall along the bank's edge. Doubtless this work was done to protect the suburbanites in their new subdivisions downstream, from when rains came to the mountain catchment turning this wandering river into a raging and unpredictable sea. Bad as these recent earthworks looked he knew they would only be temporary scars, the river itself regularly made and mended far worse. The real horror however was seeing the addition of a graded gravel road running along the top of the newly built flood wall. That new road would bring every idiot for miles around out there, for weekend picnics, to come swimming or to drink beer, break bottles and burn stolen cars at night. Unrestrained swearing made the dog shy for cover, instinctively shrinking from the anticipated flying stick or stone that accompanied similar outbursts from its previous owner.

There was an alternative spot, like this one before the dozers rolled in, but it was a reasonable march and

the fishing wouldn't be nearly as good. The sun would be on the wrong side, leaving less shade and providing little cover for the day feeders he was after. But he'd be buggered before fishing amongst dozer tracks with rainbows of diesel oil floating at his feet.

Extracting a pre-rolled joint, he lit up, inhaling in a series of short sharp puffs as they continued onwards. With the dog leading the way they entered a light forest, a wooded island of bush bordering the edge of the alternative lake. Stopping halfway in amongst the shade of the trees, squatting down Asian style amongst the long grass, Kieren prepared his line. Tying on a small brown blade spinner, using the joint's glowing ember to trim away the excess line from the knot, coils of smoke loitering in the sheltered air of the forest around him. Rampant cicada song filling the trees above bode well for the choice of lure. Courtesy of marijuana and nature the whole place was radiating a soft green light and raucously loud with insects cranking out massive guitar solos all around him.

Another noise came to his attention, reverberating at a lower frequency than the high-pitched cicadas, a lazy passive humming. Familiar sounding, he knew without looking that it was the collective drone of great number of flying insects. Bees, maybe, he thought. Or nesting yellow paper wasps, the ones he was constantly attacking as a kid, armed with an old copper weed sprayer filled up with petrol. He would fill it, pump it, add a cigarette lighter to create a highly functional and portable flame-thrower to battle wasp nests. With tape or string tied around the legs his short pants so he wouldn't get stung on the cock it was tremendous fun. Diesel wasn't so good, it didn't burn well in the sprayer and he'd taken plenty of painful

stings during that experiment. Remembering that day brought a rare wide smile to his face. How wonderful it was being young and stupid.

Drawn by the slow humming sound, he turned his head upwards and there, attached to a pair of light-weight urban tramping boots, was a man hanging dead by the neck. The face was blue black even without the swarming flies, the eyes bulging with a tongue sticking out sideways from an awkwardly tilted head. Dozens of sluggish fat blow flies buzzed contentedly, feeding on liquid running from the mouth and eyes, with others circling and zigzag flying around the corpse.

Hanging there motionless it looked like any number of the people he knew in the city, an everyday guy from appearances, clean shaven and well groomed. Most noticeable of all, despite the golf ball eyes, swollen tongue and plague of flies, was the neck. The open collared shirt worn by this thing revealed hideous weeping purple marks, like tyre tracks, running from low around the collar bone to up underneath the jaw. Badly torn and twisted, the neck was imprinted with repetitive replicas of the braided rope's pattern, suggesting the nylon cord started out low and moved brutally across the skin. The cord's sliding upwards must have been very slow, Kieren assumed, to leave such a distinct and impressive imprint.

The rope and knot were now buried deep beside the right ear, forcing the head sideways, the left ear down low against the shoulder. A hand was there also, clinging to the rope between the ear and shoulder, fingers wedged between the skin and the rope. He'd been fighting the cord, pulling on it. It appeared to Kieren as though this man decided on not wanting to

die after all. How awful to be swinging there having changed your mind and being unable to do anything about it. Doubtless it would have hurt tremendously and there must have been a protracted struggle. This was not an easy death.

At the base of this old twisted willow tree lay a jacket, neatly folded with a single heavy stone placed on top. A lightweight outdoor jacket made of cotton or canvas with a brown corduroy collar, neat and tidy, a bit outdoorsman and a bit city. The corpse was attached to a branch perpendicular from the trunk, about fifteen feet up, a hangman's branch, like something taken straight from a spaghetti western movie. Lacking any lower branches, it would have required considerable athleticism to get into the tree and considerably more effort making it across the branch to where the noose was tied. Directly above the rope a thick cluster of smaller branches would have prevented anyone standing upright or walking out along the main limb. It seemed likely this man crawled or shuffled out sideways on his backside, tied the rope to the branch as he sat, put the noose around his neck and jumped. Surveying the scene, it occurred to Kieren that the length of rope between the man's neck and the tree branch above was very short indeed. The head hung less than three feet down below the horizontal limb. It looked unlikely there was enough free rope length to have stood fully upright and jumped. More likely the guy just slid off from a sitting position. Not much of a fall at all. It certainly would not break a neck. The shock of such a short fall wouldn't be powerful enough to render someone unconscious either. With such a short rope the guy could almost reach the branch above from where he swung, almost but not

quite. There was also a dreadful hangman's knot, the sort of monkey knot he personally would be embarrassed for someone to see, good enough to get the job done, but where was the pride in that. He hung himself very badly indeed.

Feeling absolutely nothing was the real surprise to this unexpected turn of events, no shock, no repulsion, no concern, nothing. It could be a kite hanging in that tree for all he cared, except a kite would not require calling the police. Taking a phone from a pocket of his fishing vest, he made the call. A strong sewer smell filled the air while describing the location to a female police dispatcher.

- *We've had quite a few out there recently. City folk, they like doing it out in the country, said the police dispatcher.*
- *Drive to the very end. I'll meet them there and walk them in.*
- *Oh, it is lovely out there isn't it. Lucky you, being outdoors on a nice day like this. I'd give anything to be outside in the fresh air and sunshine.*

She could talk a glass eye to sleep this one, thought Kieren. What to do now? How long would they be? It could an hour or more until the police arrived and he wasn't planning on spending that amount of time in the company of a fly blown stranger reeking of shit. Picking up the fishing rod and whistling the dog he walked the last short distance to the water's edge. There, between the trees, the water was surprisingly sheltered from the growing wind, the surface glassy and still with a littering of yellow willow pollen and

the occasional fairy of a dandelion seed drifting along on the surface tension of the water.

The first cast, high and long, was immediately harried in its arcing flight by a pair of darting swallows. Charging in from nowhere, it looked certain they would take the lure in mid-air, thinking it really was the insect it mimicked. An inch from the barbed triple hook the birds realised the sham, darting away in their impossibly angled flight. With each cast his heart beat rose. Time and time again the swallows came, buzzing the lure in the air but never actually taking it. Hooking a swallow really would spoil today but fortunately the birds moved on, allowing him to relax and fish in peace. A dozen more casts without sighting a fish and he stopped. It was time to go meet the police.

It occurred to him that while walking to retrieve the police or ambulance, or whatever came to collect a dead man, that body would remain unattended. He decided on covering the face before leaving, somehow it seemed the right thing to do. He would cover it with the jacket so neatly folded at the base of the tree, very gently though, not wanting to disturb those bloated flies least they venture his way. Snapping a long branch from a nearby poplar, as thick as a broom handle and twice as long, he returned to where the dead man hung.

Rolling the stone away with his foot, then using thumb and forefinger, he raised up the coat by the collar, touching it as little as possible as if it too were a dead thing. Upon being lifted the jacket swung open slightly, revealing a brown paper envelope protruding from the inner breast pocket, and a rectangular bulge

that he instinctively knew was a wallet. Still holding the jacket by the collar Kieren carefully extracted the brown paper envelope, half expecting it to crumble in his hand like some ancient artefact or a dry autumn leaf. Turning it over, written in pencil lead were the words, *To Whom It May Concern.*

Touching that letter was one thing, but there was simply no way he could summon the courage to put a hand inside that deep jacket pocket. The thought that *his* hand had been in there recently was revolting, so shaking the jacket upside down a thin brown leather wallet fell out onto the dry grass. Hooking the jacket over one end of the branch by the collar, he hung the shroud over the dead man's head and it was done. Placing the envelope and wallet into his own pockets he collected up his fishing rod, called the dog and began walking back in the direction they'd just come, towards the new road.

The police arrived earlier than expected. He was still making his way back when two officers strode out to meet him, saving walking there and back again. It was a good way to meet, giving both parties a little time to sum one another up from a distance. They saw a small man, an unthreatening man, a fisherman with rod in hand and him seeing two officers, one older and bulging though still visibly strong and a mere stick of a boy in uniform beside him. Funny, as a youth all police officers once seemed like demigods to him, to be both feared and respected. Now they were just men like him, having to deal with the dead and likely earning scanty little for it. The officers were in high spirits, laughing and joking with each other and both men called out their greetings as they approached.

They all shook hands vigorously, then seeing Kieren's bloodshot marijuana eyes and thinking him upset the officers quietened, automatically assuming a sombre and professional tone.

Walking ten minutes together to where the body hung the conversation was light hearted and friendly. *Any luck fishing and nice dog and what fish do you catch around here* they asked. It struck him quickly that these were good men and he could easily spend time out here fishing in their company. The three of them walked as equals, side by side across the dry earth, avoiding directly discussing the unpleasantness to come, though apparently it was to be the younger officers first.

Coming to the place Kieren told them of the stick and the jacket and covering the face. The officers nodding in approval and understanding. Silently three men stood side-by-side, inspecting the sight before them, rendered less offensive by the jacket covering that fiercely distorted face and neck. Then the older officer broke the silence, talking into his radio requesting an ambulance to meet them to collect the body. They both wrote notes in their little pads. They took his telephone number and name and address, and beneath his name the older officer wrote the word *fisherman*. Kieren handed the older officer the wallet, taken from the jacket, having left it unopened.

- *Hey. There's a lot of money in here, said the older of the two policemen.*

The officer's tone of voice implied that he wasn't surprised there was money, he was surprised it was still in there. Kieren shrugged a shrug that said, I

wouldn't know. The police he guessed were more accustomed to seeing acts of dishonesty than of honesty. Then suddenly something happened that he really wished had not.

- *Michael Joseph Cosgrave, said the officer.*
- *Sorry, said Kieren not hearing him the first time.*
- *Michael Joseph Cosgrave, said the officer, pointing a thumb at the corpse in the tree, reading from the open wallet in his hand.*

He would rather not know that name, preferring it to remain anonymous. Suddenly that thing hanging in the trees became a person, a man, suddenly it became real, it just developed an identity. Little matter, he was dead and that was that. With nothing left to do he shook both officers' hands, whistling for the dog and leaving them to their work. Walking back to the parked car, sweating heavily in the hot midday sun, freckled skin starting to redden and burn, he was thankful not to be carrying the body. It would be quite a workout for them getting a stretcher back to the road in this heat. Maybe they would bring in a four-wheeled drive vehicle or a helicopter, he figured, he didn't really care.

When halfway back into the city, driving along Richmond Road, he reached inside the fishing vest, removing the brown paper envelope. Holding it in his hand for the longest time and reading that inscription over and over, *To Whom It May Concern.*



Two

Like electroconvulsive therapy used on mental patients the water flowing over his body suddenly became freezing cold with the sudden frigid blast dragging him back into the present world. Standing catatonic in the shower had just drained the entire hot water cylinder. He could have spent the entire day in there, as the warm water running across bare skin somehow made it easier to be, washing away black thoughts, temporarily at least. Now it was gone, with the cold water forcing him out of the shower and into the day. Drying off with an already damp towel he paused for a moment to look at the small goose bumps covering his skin, shivering. Running late, it was time for work.

Glebe Point Road, Sydney, a sandstone building with a small garden pond in front and feeling the stress of it, before it even began. Three in the afternoon, with only a black, curling, wrought iron gate standing between himself and his first shift cooking in this sub-average, faux French bistro. First night on the job and cooking sole charge was always a tough assignment. Just walking into a restaurant and producing quality food, without any handover or any time to study the menu was never easy. So many important details were unknown, the fridge layout, what was where, the numbers of diners to expect, the capability of waitresses, how hot the gas ovens ran or which suppliers to call when stock ran out. No, having done this in a dozen restaurants before, he was not looking forward to this shift at all.

Temping agency work wasn't always bad, not all the time. Often it was easy work and easy money, mindlessly manning the deep fryers at some RSL or country pub. Catering functions was sometimes fun, but à la carte, restaurant work, rarely came without numerous challenges. Covering for a fulltime chef having a few nights off could be alright, as good professionals would leave their own kitchens well set up for incoming agency chefs. There would be plenty of prep done and their best staff rostered on to ease a newcomer's pain. It was in their best interests, as their own reputations were at stake after all. However, that was almost always the exception.

The norm was arriving at places already in total turmoil. Often these kitchens were lacking a head chef, or fulltime staff, for quite some time. An endless series of cowboys, a string of agency temps like himself, would have been in there beforehand. Every one of them duly performing the absolute minimum amount of work required to get in, get out and get paid. Most kitchens needed cleaning from the previous shift before you could even start cooking. Generally, the fridges and store rooms were close to empty, there'd be no petty cash to buy anything and he'd be without anyone to help. If there was an assistant, it would likely be an inexperienced kitchen hand, fresh-off-a-boat from somewhere, shamelessly eating or stealing everything they could.

Making it even tougher were money conscious restaurateurs having temping staff arrive as late as possible in order to keep their wage costs down. This gave precious little time to get things sorted before the battle began. Running a kitchen on a busy night was challenge enough but it was simply painful when meal

orders started coming in before getting properly prepared. Without your ducks in a row, things quickly became chaotic. Add big numbers of early bookings and it got stressful very quickly. Often, if you didn't laugh you would cry. All this with a brutal hangover really was earning money the hard way.

Standing there on the hot black asphalt, he wondered if tonight would be any different. Doubtful, it was always best to expect the worst so it wouldn't come as a surprise. *Harden up*, speaking the words aloud to himself, as an unconvinced hand begrudgingly lifted the latch of the black iron gate. It couldn't be any worse than the last few weeks, no way. The last agency job was eight weeks of an endless living hell, a comedy of errors and a constant battle. Last week's restaurant, having been recently bankrupted, was under the management of a receivership team, run by insolvency accountants that worked daytime only, from nine to five. The management team did not do nights or weekends in a night time and weekend business. Instead, they left a busy million-dollar business in the hands of disinterested student waitresses, immigrant kitchen hands and worn out, disaffected agency chefs like himself. They would be there right now those accountants, he guessed, devoting their daytime energy to lengthy discussions about olive oil and the wine list. No doubt it was still in chaos, it deserved to be with those private school fools at the helm. The decent staff had already left, regular suppliers were refusing to deliver due to the poor payment history, while the restaurant's waterfront location and previously good reputation saw it booked solidly

every weeknight and to maximum capacity every weekend.

In his two months working there the accountants employed, trialled and fired a new head chef every second week. To be fair, finding someone who could run a busy restaurant, serve a hundred customers every day and who hadn't photocopied their qualifications before arriving in Australia wasn't always easy. There were a lot of pretenders out there. Each new head chef ceremoniously arrived, making equally lengthy contributions to the olive oil and wine list debate, before holing up in the small chef's office, conducting a recruitment process of their own, growing visibly self-inflated on the power that comes with offering employment to others. Unfortunately, the staff these chefs hired quit their old jobs, serving out their notice period, before turning up there, weeks later, only to find they weren't expected or wanted. They'd been verbally promised new jobs by someone who was now gone, dismissed for ineptitude after the first busy meal service collapsed around them. Some intended employees left very good positions on a handshake promise. Accordingly, grown men, newly unemployed, standing on the back landing beside the rubbish bins looking lost and tearful was a common sight.

Then another new head chef was employed there. This one arriving to work dressed in a business suit, of all things, calling himself the *executive chef*. This overdressed plonker spent all day talking of menu planning, delegation and of course the new wine list, while seventy-five disappointed diners sat in the restaurant, waiting endlessly for meals, all swearing never to return. The place simply needed another

capable set of knives in the kitchen, someone who could roll up their sleeves and get stuck in, to just cook. The existing menu was good enough. Simply employing two capable station chefs, line cooks, would've resolved most of the mayhem, but those accountants were just too ignorant and having too much fun playing restaurateurs to realise. It wasn't like it was their money. Eventually they got the idea that being a chef involved preparing and serving meals and Kieren got offered the head chef job himself, only last week when the contract came to an end. After all, it was him holding the place together pretty much single handed for the duration of his placement. But a fulltime role meant not being constantly hung over and actually caring. That wasn't something he could even pretend to do these days.

At least the pastry chef there had been solid. An earthy girl, with a poor white background who possessed a remarkable ability to smoke heroin laced joints at lunch time and still see the day through, with the occasional vomit in the dish sink. She was incredibly productive and a highly talented baker, so who was he to criticise. She and Kieren worked well together there, but she left the same day as him. She would be difficult to replace, good pastry chefs being hard to find. They'd promised to stay in touch, Kieren and her.

Creaking and groaning the iron gate swung open as he entered this latest assignment, hoping for the best while expecting the worst. At the front door knocking loudly and waiting and then knocking again brought no response. Deciding to try the back Kieren made his way down the side of the building, squeezing past flattened cardboard banana boxes and empty plastic

fruits crates along the way. At the rear of the building the landing was stacked high with what appeared to be several days' worth of rubbish in black plastic bags, tied closed at the top, bulging swollen and fermenting in the sun. Some were holed in the corners by what appeared to be rats or cats or both, the faint smell of decay in the air again. With the back door already open wide, an unenthusiastic chef entered the kitchen, calling out as he went. Suddenly, a ruddy faced man, even shorter than himself appeared from a storeroom, grunting in acknowledgement. Kieren introduced himself with hand outstretched.

- *Hello. I'm Kieren, from the agency.*
- *Let me inform you of a few things before you start my young friend, the little man said in a strong Dutch accent. If I see anything I don't like you can go back to the agency that sent you and I won't be paying them. You can tell them that from me. Understand?*
- *Yes sir, replied Kieren saluting, the intended insult going unnoticed.*

The salute wasn't really all that out of place. Kitchens are martial places, particularly the bigger hotels, where the will of one man was generally imposed upon the many in a military style hierarchy running downwards. Head chef to the sous chef, chefs de partie to qualified and unqualified commis chefs and finally to the lowly kitchen hands. Confirming the order everyone's kitchen rank was often visibly denoted by variances of hat styles and jacket button colour, just like the army.

Being a kitchen hand, a kitchen porter or KP, meant getting thrown the worst of tasks in a rapid and

constant succession. Their world was one of scalding water, burnt pots, rancid grease traps and exploding rubbish bags. Like a gang prospect, they were assigned the dirtiest of jobs imaginable and expected to complete them any without complaints, particularly if they wanted to move up the ranks, to become a chef themselves one day. Every person in whites went through it, had been a KP in their time, including Kieren. It was a rite of passage and a test of flesh and metal. The lowest of the low, but respect could be earned by demonstrating the one essential requirement of cooking, tenacity. Then upon having served their allotted time, they too would be given the nod and rise from the foaming waters of the dish sink. Exchanging a plastic apron for a cloth one they'd slowly begin working their way up, until they themselves dished out the orders and selected the kitchen hands that would begin cooking careers of their own. It didn't take the brightest to cook, but they needed to be sharp and, like a boxer, you needed to take it on the nose, over and over and over. That prerequisite of tenacity was essential. It was a tough job and once you began to shy from the hits your career was on the way to being over.

With tonight's meal service fast approaching Kieren began feeling the familiar anxiety cramping up his stomach. He was reading the menu while simultaneously assessing the kitchen, starting ovens and bringing pots of water to the boil. A large and complex menu that reeked of pretence, overly complex for such a small and poorly laid out kitchen. The book showed plenty of reservations that evening with the busy Glebe Point Road location he'd be expecting a high number of walk-in customers as well.

Bare fridges and without a scrap of existing prep work to get him under way, he was about to get slammed. In a whirlwind of activity Kieren knew he would pull it off. Maybe he would despise every minute of it but that was irrelevant, that was cooking some days. Necessity was the mother of invention and it would take a mother lode of inventiveness to pull a rabbit out of the hat tonight. As always though, it would get done, somehow. At least there was plenty of parsley.

Half an hour until the first booking was due to arrive, the Dutchman owner, who would also be maître d' for the evening, entered the kitchen carrying an enormous, uncooked, rolled pork roast. This was to be used as a tonight's dinner special, he said. Calmly, Kieren explained that at a minimum, a pork roast that size required two or three hours cooking. With the oven space needed for tonight's service, it would be best to cook it the pork the following afternoon, preferably in smaller portions and serve it tomorrow. The little man raged back, wagging his finger, barking out, saying that having already paid good money for the pork it was on tonight's menu, discussion over and you will do as you are told. Kieren wanted to break off that finger. Such early acrimony did not bode well when the stress of meal service began for real. Deep breaths, he forced himself to recite silently over in his mind, just get it done and get out.

Order up, a waitress cried out as she clipped the first docket of the evening to the stainless-steel servery. Settling into the familiar, steady but hectic rhythm bought some peace, calming the anxiety somewhat. He told the wait staff not to offer the roast pork special until after seven thirty, allowing time for the piece in the oven to cook. Push the pasta or the chicken, he told

them, there was plenty and they were quick to prepare. Most importantly, the fish was off the menu because there wasn't any.

Getting busy the restaurant was nearing capacity when the owner, for reasons unknown, wordlessly presented an order that included both fish and roast pork. Kieren's pleas to return to the table, explain the situation and politely request they order something else went ignored. Another rant followed, confirming that this man was unable to cope with pressure and maybe had mental problems too. Generally, they were alright, thought Kieren, except in Africa, but what made a Dutchman think they could open a restaurant in the first place. Anyone whose national dish was roll mops, raw pickled herring, shouldn't be allowed within a mile of a kitchen. Herring weren't even good for bait.

Tenacity was one thing but being expected to magically serve food which didn't exist was something else. Decision made, silently washing and drying his knives, collecting his duffle bag without saying anything to anyone he walked through the swinging doors out into the restaurant. Several smiling diners waved hello, giving their compliments and appreciation to the chef who continued walking out the front door, without looking back. Thirty guests seated in the restaurant and orders waiting. They could go to hell. Yes, he would lose a few dollars in wages, but worth every lost penny. Feeling righteous and freed, an enormous weight suddenly lifting from his shoulders, the stress knots in his stomach instantly disappeared. At that moment he swore never to cook again, but time would tell on that, it'd been sworn to before and beer money didn't grow on trees.

Walking down Glebe Point Road, completely apathetic towards the scene that would be unfolding now, unbuttoning and shedding the white chef's jacket, replacing it with a tee-shirt taken from the duffle bag. he knew it really was about to hit the fan back there, chaos would be unfolding. He wondered if his ears would start burning soon, but they didn't.

Approaching the nearest bar, he wished a wish of being an electrician, or a plumber, or a builder instead. Something with normal hours and weekends off like an ordinary person. Anything but kitchens would have to be better. Cooking meant late nights, rotating rosters, split shifts and only ever dating barmaids or waitresses due to the unorthodox working hours. Never ideal coming home from work at midnight to a girl needing her sleep to get up for work and the train by six or seven. If a chef wanted a life like normal people, with normal hours, without working nights and weekends and every public holiday, then the best they could hope for was a commercial production kitchen, pretty much a factory job. Even being a legitimate executive chef in a quality hotel still had the awkward hours.

Now he was an agency chef, a temp, the final hurrah of cooking for most, before throwing in the towel. If only he could find something else. His heart was no longer in it and those stomach knots of apprehension before every meal service were tell-tale signs that the game was nearly up. Once upon a time he thrived on that pressure. Cooking seemed so exciting in those early years. He'd loved it back then, in his late teens and early twenties. Plenty of work options and the social life was unrivalled, finishing work just when the bars and nightclubs were firing up, with easy access to

good drugs and an entourage of pretty waitresses to accompany out, it was heaven. Not now. Now it'd gone from a dream to a nightmare. Maybe I could drive a truck, he wondered. First things first though, time for a drink and luckily one of his favourite bars in Sydney was just around the corner.

Glebe's Friend in Hand tavern, only two-minutes walking from the restaurant. Entering the bar, newly unemployed, ordering a beer on that early summer evening, Kieren found himself falling in love with that beautiful old hotel. The patterned copper ceilings and the tan coloured tiled walls, the weathered faces of the drinkers seated at the bar sharing banter and friendly insults between themselves. Glebe had plenty of fine old pubs but this one really was exceptional.

Although drinking there occasionally he was by no means a regular and today there wasn't a single face he recognised. No matter in a place like this. This bar was an environment where a man could just sit and have a few drinks, say nothing to anyone with nobody thinking anything of him, neither good nor bad. The clientele extended a mutual politeness to one another without intruding, unless a person felt like talking and then they would be accommodated by someone. Being a small hotel of predominantly working-class drinkers, unemployed and old alcoholics, The Friend in Hand was always entertaining. On Wednesday evenings there were the sand crab races to bet on, sometimes a band and sometimes even poetry readings. The occasional Monday night even had life drawing classes, fully nude, both male and female models, not a common sight in many pubs. With something different every night of the week, colourful

characters for locals and even an old cockatoo wandering freely around the bar it really couldn't get more Australian. Covering the walls were all sorts of things, historical bits and pieces everywhere, photographs, cartoons and old newspaper clippings celebrating patrons past and present. Inside looked like an Irish pub gone mad and there were plenty of Irish sounding people drinking there now. Sitting quietly and listening to them all talking amongst themselves Kieren realised what great drinking partners the Irish made. They possessed goodness and friendship in abundance, no airs and graces to contend with either. With their elbows on the table they took people at face value, accepting them for what they were.

The old black and white photographs on the walls always grabbed his attention, somehow providing a sense of community and mortality. The faces of smiling men, long dead most them, all pictured with raised beer glasses, or sitting astride BSA and Triumph motorcycles. Generations come and gone, their bodies long since rotted away in the ground, just like his would someday. These men in the yellowing pictures had lived and died and been forgotten. It would be the same for him, he knew it. He felt at one with the men framed on the walls, they were him and he was them. He felt in communion with these dead men and with this place. Beer in hand, he sensed himself contributing to the lifeblood of this building and to its story and its continuing history, by his very presence, by sitting and drinking where a thousand other men had done the same before him.

He imagined them standing about him now, the souls of all those men in these black and white pictures,

liking their company. These men once sat where he was sitting now. They'd talked and drunk and laughed and argued and fought and watched girls out of the windows. The wooden bar top registered his name in the unseen guest book that was the essence of this pub and it occurred to him that he had done the same in return. He added to his collective version of home an element of this place. Home could be a collective, something pieced together, when no single place, house, town or person felt as a home anymore. Or when your real home had changed so much it was no longer recognisable.

A good pub was a beautiful thing and this one was open from eight in the morning, what more could you want. He loved that smell, of a bar in the morning, that sticky sweet aroma, the morning after the night before. The mixture of beer and damp carpet, with a hint of wood, all floating on a background of rum, sweat and pine scented urinal cakes. Kieren spent hours in bars for numerous reasons. Like now, two quick beers usually guaranteed a temporary respite from life's cares, softening aching muscles after a hard day at work and in winter the heaters were always on. With a few beers in him he would forget his worries for a time, but deep down it was often the need for companionship, spoken or unspoken, that sent him out in the evenings. Everyone needed friends of some sort and when short of them an establishment like this, with its own community and history could save the day and a person's sanity. The pub was a perfect respite for a lonely man. It was a family lounge room when you didn't have a family or a lounge, when living in some rundown bedsit or council flat. In a place like

this anyone could buy reasonably good company for five dollars a schooner.

He felt drawn to these old establishments, seeking out classic old hotels like this one, drinking in tired old bars for the love it, for the atmosphere they provided. When working all over Australia, to counter the solitude of new towns, he knew to just find himself a pub, with a bit of character and characters of its own. Over the course of a couple of weeks he would begin visiting increasingly regularly. A few quick beers to start with, catch a rugby league match and maybe stop in for a Sunday roast. Spend a bit of money, be polite to the locals and soon enough he would know the names of the bar staff and a few other regular drinkers and they would know his. Then there was somewhere to go and talk rubbish in the company of similar men, first name friendships but friendships nonetheless. Some people joined clubs apparently. A good local pub could stave off the loneliness, a frequent companion of single men like him. They provided a sense of belonging to something that he felt today. Plus, there were always pretty girls behind the bar to look at and to flirt with. It didn't matter where you drank, you always fancied the barmaids.

The front doors swung open, flooding the bar's interior with sunlight, a tough looking young fella entering with a swollen black eye and a scabbed over, bloodied graze on his cheek.

- *What the hell happened to you? The barman asked loudly as a greeting, obviously knowing the man as a regular.*
- *Bloody Koorie got me last night, walking home.*

- *Ouch that's gotta hurt, the barman sympathised.*
- *Jumps out of nowhere and clocks me one without saying a word. So, I gave him one back, swept his legs and just walked on over the top of him. Pathetic. Abbos can't fight for shit.*

A few of the Irish lads headed over to check his eye and hear the story over, everyone liking a good fight, in the retelling at least. Suddenly Kieren's phone rang, snapping him out his trance. It was the temping agency calling, asking about what just happened at the restaurant with Van der Dick, or whatever his name was, he never did find out. They said there was a complaint made, they said it was disappointing and then immediately offered another role, starting tomorrow for slightly better money. These recruiters were just pimps, not to be trusted. Just like anyone working on commission they didn't care about him, they didn't care about Van der Dick either, they didn't care about anything other than their percentage of his money they took when he was working. Just now he couldn't face another minute in a kitchen and doubted if he ever could again. So, lying, he told them about having another job already, dropping the name of one of Sydney's best restaurants, then ordered another schooner.

Leaving the bar the sunshine outside was temporarily blinding, squinting eyes while walking the three blocks to a small convenience store, there buying two packets of cigarettes and a copy of the Sydney Morning Herald. Sitting down out front on a bus stop bench, he did what his mother always did, starting the newspaper from the back page and

flicking forwards until eventually finding the section he was after, the obituaries. Anderson, Batka, Broughton, Bergman, Castelli, Carrington and there it was. *Cosgrave, Michael Joseph, forty-four years old, father of two, loving husband of, son of, will be remembered always.* The funeral was Monday. No mention of cause of death. No mention of a fishing trip spoiled.

What damage had been caused by keeping that man's letter? It was unopened. He was yet to read it. Would anyone know it was missing? Would anyone know it even existed in the first place? No cause of death was mentioned in the obituary, so perhaps the police were treating this as a homicide? Was there a murder investigation under way now, seeing as no suicide note was found? No, the police would have been in touch if they thought it was a murder, he figured. They'd be asking him about his movements that day, if he saw anything, witnessed anything out there that was suspicious.

What about the guy's family though? Maybe the letter contained all his bank accounts and insurance details and the family were now starving without them. Should he take it in now, saying he'd forgotten it because of the shock? Yes, they would certainly believe that. No, screw them he decided, they'd never know it existed at all. Even if they did, it could have blown away in the wind. They should be thankful he'd found him in the first place, or there'd be no funeral. Mr Cosgrave would still be swinging, rotting, stinking.

The real reason for taking it he knew well enough. Somehow deep down hoping, praying, that what he possessed were parting words of wisdom, something profound, something to help turn his own life around.

Something to stop him ending up the same, hanging from a lonely rope, a rope he constantly struggled to deny himself.



Three

Black silhouettes of Sydney's giant fruit bats filled the warm humid skies above, leaving their daytime roosting places in the trees of the Botanic Gardens, heading out in a great dark cloud on their nightly hunt. Down at street level, equally triggered by the setting of the sun, Kings Cross was awakening too. Strip club touts and a few street hookers were beginning to ply their trades to the milling pedestrians. Young men, tourists and city workers that had started drinking back in their offices at four or five o'clock and now by eight were all properly drunk, roving the streets in search of entertainment. Everywhere groups of men stood around, eating pizza slices and kebabs and checking out office girls walking by in their skimpy casual Friday work wear. The delivery girl was running late. She'd already called twice saying they wouldn't be long. It was always the same story, but no complaints, at least they were coming. There were plenty of distractions passing by on the street to keep amused while waiting, a circus of activity was unfolding.

A large group of girls passed by, all of them wobbling on high heeled shoes. Bulging breasts and matching waists overflowed from their small tight skirts. The lead girl was wearing a silk sash saying *Bride* and a cheap plastic tiara perched crookedly on her head. The bride smiled drunkenly, flirting with groups of random guys, handing them sheets of paper that you could see had photocopies of her arse and knickers on

it. *Enjoy*, the bride-to-be shouted laughingly, blowing the recipient men a staggering kiss, running off with her hen friends, all smoking cigarettes and talking loudly of where they should go to drink their next bridal challenge of vodka shots.

The usual beggars were out too. Just up the street stood a weathered looking old man he'd seen around there from time to time. Aged by hard living and harmless enough, the man could have been anything from sixty to eighty years old, impossible to tell exactly through all the wrinkles. The old boy was street busking, playing harmonica with one hand while holding out a small beaten aluminium pot with the words *beer money* written on it in marker pen. Begging yes, but the honesty of it struck him as being somehow honourable. There were plenty like him around, hardened drinkers old and young, addicted to both the alcohol and the entertainment of the area. Characters like them that gave Kings Cross its own character. He found himself tapping his own foot, lightly keeping time with the cheery sounding sea shanty drifting down the street, weakly played on those feeble geriatric lungs.

Between passing pedestrians Kieren stood, continuing watching this old man, intrigued by him. It was skin and bones mostly, with faded anchor tattoos on both of his age spotted forearms indicating he was once a sailor, spending some of his life at sea. Having done the same he automatically took a liking to this old man. Thinking about it as he waited, he figured a tremendous social stigma must have come with having tattoos like that back in the old days. Homemade and highly visible, tattoos like those were once considered bad stickers, reserved for sailors, bikers, prisoners

and unpredictable violent types. Not today, half the young men passing by tonight were proudly sporting their latest body art. Here it seemed there wasn't a person without them, even that fat bride had some cartoon characters inked onto her chubby ankles. These days it seemed tattoos were a must have accessory for fashion victims and footballers alike, everyone had them. Now they were becoming socially conformist, anything but outlaw. Not that he himself was opposed to some strategically placed artwork on bar maids or waitresses, as tattooed young girls were quite a turn on. Once over forty though, most women with tattoos just looked like rough old whores with the patterns and designs becoming stretched and shapeless as their bodies deteriorated. Where was the femininity in that, he thought? Nothing wrong with older women, there was appeal in all women just now, but older girls with visible tattoos were disgusting and sadly an entire generation of them was now looming on the horizon.

Watching and waiting and fumbling to light a cigarette in the sticky humid breeze Kieren was abruptly pushed aside forcefully by three men walking side by side down the footpath. He surprised himself by holding his tongue but there was no point saying anything. They already looked to have forgotten him and they were big buggers with chests puffed out, walking the waddling walk of men who spent a lot of time lifting weights. He could hear them talking, Aussie talk but with the thick accents of first or second-generation Lebanese. Massive bodies and threatening looking men. Professionally big it seemed, maybe standover men or enforcers for some organisation down here, certainly strong and

obviously very proud of it. The first two were dressed in tee-shirts deliberately torn vertically at the neck and *Everlast* brand tracksuit pants, the fashion of boxers and wannabe muscle. The other one was wearing a thin string singlet advertising his traps and lateral muscles and a fight gym somewhere out west in Parramatta.

He disliked most Lebanese on sight, well, the younger male ones anyway. The older Lebanese community weren't bad people, he worked with them, but the more recent arrivals were a completely different story. There were entire streets in the south west, around Lakemba and Bankstown, controlled by frighteningly violent Lebanese and middle-eastern street gangs. Those areas were off limits to him and even to the police. Any Skip like him, foolish enough to wander into their territory drunk at night risked a solid bashing or worse. People needed to watch themselves around them. It seemed to him if they weren't thugs and criminals they were driving taxis. Then they dressed up in suits with gold cufflinks and chains, dressing more smartly than their businessmen passengers, only with more hair product and less deodorant. They were just dodgy and crass to him, putting their feet up on train seats, smearing street dirt and spit exactly where the next decent person was about to sit. What if he dragged the soles of his own dirty boots across them, there in the train, dragging street dirt across those cheap, fake BMW race jackets they loved wearing so much. How much would they like it then, with the filth and dirt of the streets on their clothes? What was it with new immigrants, he wondered? You never saw Aussies spitting.

Apparently, most nightclub owners in Kings Cross paid protection money to one of these groups. If they weren't initially inclined to they'd be quickly persuaded by a dozen men like this entering their establishments, running wild, inflicting brutal beatings on a few of the guests and maybe a stabbing just to prove their point. Then their associates would return later, negotiating a suitable fee to ensure such unsavoury and inconvenient events didn't recur. The owners payed around here, it was the only way of doing business. Plenty just sold out to them. People around here once complained about Italians and Greeks being a menace to society, but not anymore.

Passing by the sailor playing his harmonica, the man in the gym singlet stopped and turned around. Wordlessly he unleashed an enormous haymaker punch into the side of the old man's head, lifting him up and crashing him into the grey aluminium roller doors of the closed store behind him. Surrounded by scattering coins the old man slumped back into the corner looking semi-conscious, jaw visibly broken and blood gushing from his mouth. They didn't look back once. They just waddled on into the evening crowd. The first two men were oblivious to the random assault just committed by their friend and him not stopping or seemingly caring one bit.

Times like this he hated being small, wishing he was ten foot tall, to smash them. He wished for a hand gun to shoot all three. He wanted to blow their heads off, to teach them a lesson. Better still to shoot them in the spine, putting them into a wheelchair bound paralysis for the rest of their lives. Shitting into a plastic bag running from a tube in their stomachs would make them think twice before doing that again. He wanted

to harm those men like they just harmed his kind. A racing mind wanted to plant a fertilizer bomb in that gymnasium out west or maybe wait outside the place with one of his old rifles and shoot the one in the singlet. He wanted vengeance, but did nothing, not until they were well and truly gone.

Moaning and bleeding the old man as Kieren approached, squatting down beside him and collecting up the spilt coins from the ground. Shoving twenty dollars inside a half packet of Winfield Red cigarettes he put them all into the man's top pocket before calling for an ambulance. That blow would take some getting over, old bodies healed slowly if at all. It might put him into permanent care, it could even be enough to finish the old man off. He would have waited for the ambulance to arrive but just then his phone buzzed a text message, his pickup was ready. He left the old boy there, disorientated but sitting upright at least.

What was a haunting thought, while walking down Victoria Road, were the words tattooed below each of that old man's anchors. Distorted and faded, but still legible on the dry freckled skin, *HMAS Vendetta* was written under one and *HMAS Bataan* beneath the other. That man was a retired navy sailor for certain. Likely he fought for this country and had just gotten bashed by immigrants in return.



Four

The Green Park hotel, Darlington, just a few blocks from Kings Cross and finally he arrived, a big man, wearing budget jeans and a cheap River's brand shirt, Geoff.

- *Sorry I'm late Copper. Shit of a day*
- *They all are Geoff, said Kieren greeting his best friend with a wide grin and a pat on the shoulder.*

Copper, a nickname because of the colour of his hair. Filthy ginger Geoff called it, though most people just called it *ranga*, which was short for orangutan. Copper was a name that often turned heads when overheard, people ironically mistaking the reference for meaning an off-duty policeman or a plain clothes detective. Nothing could have been further from the truth. With his mate now there he felt suddenly happier, seeing Geoff always cheered him up. These two men were friends since their teenage years, since doing their cooking apprenticeships together in the same hotel kitchen.

It'd been a while since last catching up and Kieren was making the most of this unexpected night off work. Still, he decided against mentioning the stunt he'd pulled a few hours earlier, back in Glebe, walking out of that restaurant without saying anything. Geoff was an old school chef and wouldn't be impressed by that behaviour, he was tenacious for sure.

- *Talk about getting slammed Copper. My sous chef called in sick and the kitchen hand only started*

yesterday, New Zealand kid. Hard day mate, hard day.

- *Ouch. At least the kiwis speak English.*

It was unlike Geoff to bitch about things. He was solid, but there were days when any chef regretted having ever picked up a knife. Cooking was tough, hard manual labour with the addition stress. It took its toll on a person and restaurant chefs over thirty were considered old. Kieren passed that landmark age two years prior, thirty-two now, with Geoff nearing thirty-five. But the choices were limited if you wanted out of cooking, if that was all a person had ever done.

Geoff, having a family to support, took it on the nose. There was a proud stoicism about him, resigned to his fate of long hours, doing what a father of two needed to do, doing what he signed on for when becoming a parent. God bless him for that, thought Kieren, it took courage starting a family in a big, expensive city like Sydney. Kieren knew Geoff's family well and a better husband and father would be hard to find, the Rock of Gibraltar he was to them. Amazing really, when considering what Geoff's own father had been like, a shearer and a drinker, though not necessarily in that order, who flogged his son every day of his life. Then the boy turned sixteen, then he'd swung back. Being a massive lad Geoff knocked the bastard out cold with a single punch and then the beatings stopped forever. After that blow his dad apparently didn't move for a full ten minutes and Geoff thought he'd killed him. Geoff, respectful as ever, never mentioned the violence of his home life until his father was dead and buried.

- *Your round Copper.*
- *Same?*

- *Yeah, cheers.*

With the bar filling up it took a little time to get served. Returning with the beers Geoff smiled broadly, taking a big hydroponic skunk bud from his top pocket.

- *You've got some paper work to do, said Geoff.*

- *Good man.*

Discretely Kieren rolled a joint underneath their table without anyone noticing and they both headed outside. Being a Friday evening the streets were filled with people as the two men walked back and forth amongst the crowd, smoking the stinky marijuana. No one cared, everybody was wearing a *Thank God it's Friday* look on their faces and probably looking forward to a little of the same.

Back inside the bar the big screen televisions blared out music videos which they both ignored. There was a time when the only thing playing on television in there was football, but not anymore. Darlinghurst was changing before their very eyes. It was cleaning up its act, not entirely but slowly and surely the money was creeping into the neighbourhood. Now small European cars were parked everywhere, driven by young city professionals, and you'd be more likely to see minor celebrities on the street than the all-in brawls of a few years prior. It disgusted him to see the area losing its balls, losing the grit, losing all that was initially appealing. Where he'd once felt at home he was now beginning to feel alien, out of place, riff raff, white trash even. He turned his back on the view outside, focusing instead on a group of office girls standing at the bar, drinking lots and wearing little.

Then Kieren told Geoff what he'd seen earlier that evening, about the old man getting assaulted in Kings Cross.

- *What is it with those guys Geoff, the random violence I mean?*
- *Sexual frustration probably. They can't shag their cousins 'til they marry them. It all builds up, drives them frigging crazy. We're lucky mate.*
- *Go Cronulla, remarked Geoff, fist held high in the air.*
- *The Shire, they toasted with raised beer glasses, then draining them.*

Cronulla, The Shire that they toasted was a mostly white, working-class suburb on the beach in the south of Sydney. Unfortunately for Cronulla it was the only beach in Sydney with a train line running directly to it. On weekends those trains brought all types of people to Cronulla, not all of them good, not all behaving as would be liked.

Groups of young Middle Eastern men began causing havoc, bashing a life guard, calling white women in bikinis whores and generally being arseholes kicking sand in the local people's faces. Eventually the lads living there, surfers mostly, grew tired of the violence from weekend visitors and they took a stand. The media called it race riots. The locals from Cronulla called it defending the beach. Violence raged for several days as convoys of cars came in from the west, laden with angry young Middle Eastern men, descending on Cronulla. There were bloodied noses all round and half the country wanted to buy those

Cronulla boys a beer for what they did. True blue Aussies.

A game of rock-scissor-paper decided who was buying the next round, sending Geoff to the bar. Predictable as ever, Kieren read him like a book, the big guy always alternating between paper-rock-paper-rock, never doing scissors and never able to work out why he lost so many times.

The bar was becoming increasingly raucous around them. Like most Friday drinkers, much of the clientele in The Green Park looked to have begun their drinking several hours ago and now, with bellies full of liquor, the scene was transforming. Small groups of loudly laughing girls were beginning to dance and the two men turned their stoned bloodshot eyes towards the alluring female patrons. A sense of anticipation was starting to build. It usually does when the dancing starts, when day gives way to night, when pub gives way to club, when suddenly wearing short pants no longer feels appropriate, when little black dresses come out from under jackets, when it feels good to be alive. Bar staff moved away several tables with the vacant space becoming the dance floor, quickly filling with groups of girls jiggling to the music. Now, for the first time in a week, women outnumbered the men in the bar.

Without saying a word Geoff left him alone, floating his bigness into the midst of them all, the only man dancing and with a grin large enough for two. Kieren gave his mate thirty seconds to enjoy it all by himself before summoning the courage and joining him, glass in hand. A beautiful thing being surrounded by the dancing girls. That immediate feeling of calmness taking effect, that peaceful sense of being that

accompanied the company of women, the soothing peace their presence provided. He could feel the anger and hate fading away and wondered if his body was somehow absorbing oestrogen, or some other femininely hormone, that brought the calmness and temporarily smoothed away the violence and war in his heart. Was there a secret chemical compound design to tranquilise agitated men when in the presence of the frailer and fairer? It didn't seem illogical.

They had it all to themselves, even if the girls ignored the small, orange haired man dancing badly in their midst. He felt invisible at times, no one ever seemed to notice short men like him. Their dance floor monopoly was eventually thwarted when a group of office workers piled in noisily through the front doors. The happy drunk businessmen ordered shots and immediately joined in the dancing. Not so the stern looking women arriving with them, they were not so eagerly embracing the evening's festivities. Standing rigidly motionless, power dressed, too corporate ladder for casual Friday wear, they looked decidedly uncomfortable in such a low brow setting. Their mother-of-pearl haughtiness was so obviously out of place. Here their human resources or accounting department job titles, man handshakes and booming voices carried no power whatsoever. They looked like they were sucking lemons when the men left them standing, to go dance with the pretty girls.

Geoff suddenly stopped bouncing, pulling his phone out, endeavouring to talk to the caller amongst the noise of the bar, a finger stuck in one ear. The following conversation changed his face from its pink colour to a bright red. It was Geoff's wife calling, giving him an

earful about not coming home. Not a bad woman but certainly no fan of Kieren. He was a bad influence, a liability even, she'd recently said. He didn't hold it against her. She wasn't a bad sort, really. Something of a stress-head at times but not surprising, not when being stuck at home raising their two boys. They were lunatics the pair of them, massive like their dad and born completely wild.

- *She's not happy Copper.*
- *Dog box tonight, is it?*
- *Hell hath no fury my friend.*

Kieren pointed out that maybe he shouldn't have married the first girl that let him shag her and suggested one more drink for the road, but Geoff pulled the pin, saying no. Downing beers and making their way outside, it just didn't seem right to be leaving so early. Things were really starting to heat up inside, but unfortunately time and wives wait for no man. Out on the street Geoff took out his phone again, calling his wife back, saying he was on his way home and seeming in better spirits, things having been smoothed over.

- *She's OK. Her sisters were over tonight anyway.*
- *How are Selma and Patty? Enquired Kieren, using the code names for the sisters in law, both highly unattractive and heavy smokers.*
- *They just about live at our place. You would think I married all three of them.*

Geoff's car was parked around the corner, they walked together, Kieren making the most of the company. Maybe Geoff shouldn't be driving, he thought, but not saying as much. The original plan was

only stopping for two quick beers, they'd had plenty more than that. Unlocking the boot of the car, Geoff took out a white foam box, opening the lid with a Styrofoam squeak, revealing a sizeable whole salmon laying on a bed of ice. It must have been three kilograms or more, a beautiful fish, taken from work, pinched.

- *A present for you mate. Seeing as you had no luck fishing yesterday.*
- *Thanks, that's a beauty mate. Appreciated.*
- *Better get home, or I'll be shot. Night mate. Good seeing you.*
- *Good night Cinderella. Drive safe.*

Kieren waved goodbye as his mate drove off, struggling with the seatbelt, headlights finally coming on two blocks down the road. He decided, grudgingly, on going home too. He wanted to stay out longer but it wouldn't be the same, a guy needed a wingman. Being on your own late at night you were just odd. People were mistrustful of lone drinkers late at night, unless they had tits.

Walking alone along Liverpool Road towards his own house, with the box squeaking constantly, Kieren's mind continued the night in a parallel dimension, imagining how it might have gone and which girl he might be taking home, if he'd only done this, or maybe said that. If only. One girl smiled when they first started dancing. Maybe he should go back, maybe she was still there. Maybe he would go and find himself a prostitute instead, he debated with himself. There was a cheap massage parlour not far. He knew it well enough, damp and seedy and just this side of

Kings Cross. God knew he was overdue. It had been a while, quite a while. No, he was drunk and tired and carrying a salmon and the girls there were all old or Chinese. It was moments like this he wondered if he'd ever have a woman again. Not a hooker but a real girl, someone who wanted him for nights and weekends, not just by the half or full hour.

A sexual drought changed a man. Being in the middle of one he knew only too well. For weeks now, he'd been finding himself slowly and surely becoming all tensed up, his mind becoming obsessed with thoughts of women. Short, tall, fat and skinny, even the ancient and horrid ones, it was shameless where his mind would go. He'd seen it working on fishing boats. Guys slowly getting aggressive, gradually getting grumpy and starting to argue, falling out with one another after a few weeks at sea. He felt a couple of months were the maximum a grown man should go without, for their sake and the sake of everyone else around them. After a month his shoulder muscles tightened up. He got that awkward feeling that just couldn't be shaken, a mixture of frustration and boredom. He became cranky and angry, began knocking the plumage off the other males, in his mind at least, the beginnings of hazardous territory. There was a direct correlation, he was certain. The crankier and angrier a man was, the less sex he was likely getting. Maybe that was why old men were grumpy, he figured, maybe old men were just like that, he didn't know.

Whenever it got to this stage, beyond a few months without sex, you were screwed. Somehow, subconsciously, women could sense when you weren't getting any. Girls want the top dog, they wanted the males that other women wanted. So, if other women

weren't interested in you, why should they be. It was as though there was a brand on his forehead and the brand said *Desperate*. Now only possible way of shaking the curse, losing that brand and redeeming the situation was employing professional services in a knock shop somewhere. Expensive yes, but how good was the feeling afterwards, standing tall again, shoulders back, all that tension gone, the frown lines vanishing, face muscles relaxing, the invisible thorn removed. Quicker than a chiropractor and priced the same for an hour. Then he'd catch himself smiling for the first time in weeks, cleansed. Suddenly those *get away from me* looks from passing women were suddenly replaced with held stares and meant-to-see glances. There was no cologne that worked quite like *Freshly Fucked*. But his trouble wasn't meeting girls, his occupation provided plenty of opportunity, it was one of the perks of the cooking trade. The trouble for Kieren was the girls he did meet never gave him any attention at all.

Approaching home, a two storied, three bedroom Darlinghurst terrace house, accompanied by squeaking Styrofoam box noises, all the house lights were on. That didn't necessarily mean his housemates were home. Leaving the lights on was a security ploy as there were still plenty of untrustworthy types in this neighbourhood, regardless of the recent gentrification. Fossicking one handed through pockets, eventually finding the single key and opening the front door, he hoped for someone to be there, for some company.

Inside, from the melting remnants of vodka cranberry drinks on the coffee table, the still playing

music, the smell of weed and most tellingly the small bathroom mirror laid flat, he guessed the girls only just left to go clubbing. Nocturnal creatures they were, social professionals, with a different body clock to his own. Night owls, heading out when most people were returning home. They were always out at some gig, club night or party, it was what they did. Their routine always the same, partying away their weekends and wages, then living off pot noodles and his cigarettes for the rest of the week. Not that he cared, they were interesting, trustworthy, never judgemental and always entertaining. He was particularly lucky to be sharing a house with them and knew it. The alternative, for this money, was a depressing bedsit all alone.

The housemates, Anna and Bella, were together as a couple. Anna was a second cousin from his mother's side. Years ago, she'd come to live with his own family out in Richmond. Not for long, just a few months after temporarily falling out with her mother. She was like a sister, or a brother, a bit of both really with her flat chest, cowboy shirts and Adolf Hitler shaven head haircut. Her girlfriend Bella was the feminine one in the relationship, a short haired brunette with light olive skin, fond of flowing dresses and of Maltese heritage. Kieren thought Bella to be absolutely gorgeous, unrivalled, possessing a considerable crush on her, if he was honest. But Anna and Bella were so inseparable he had difficulty treating them as individuals rather than a single entity made up of two parts. AnnaBella, one word, he called them sometimes as a term of endearment, which they seemingly quite liked.

An advantage of their living arrangements, and them being gay, were no boyfriends staying over. Quite the opposite in fact, with many Sunday mornings seeing their women friends sleeping sprawled about the place, with him the only man in the house. It was a bit like having a harem, albeit an asexual one. The house always smelt nice too. Another bonus was the girls sharing a room, leaving a spare room available for visitors to crash in. Geoff would sleep over after a few beers on occasion, but not often. Drinking together like tonight wasn't as common an occurrence as Kieren would like. When Geoff's sons were younger their mother regularly took them away for weekends, up to her family's place, giving the men a free pass to play up a little. But the boys were bigger now and no longer enjoyed staying weekends away at their Nana's house. Now all they cared about was rugby league and which girls liked who. Shame really, Kieren always felt better for the time spent with his mate. The girls, Anna and Bella, loved Geoff too. A lot of people did. He was easy to like, kind, gentle, funny and as big as a horse. People felt a sense of security around him, protected somehow in his company. So, if Geoff was his wingman then Bella and Anna were his wing women.

While the inhabitants of the house worked well together some of the neighbours could certainly be improved upon. Behind the house ran a long narrow walkway, opening out into a landing area directly over the fence, just across from their back door. The walkway and landing area were avoided by most local people, having become an area where many neighbourhood addicts would go to inject heroin, or split their methadone. Religiously, at nine o'clock every morning, just moments after the local pharmacy

opened to dispense them their daily methadone rations, the same faces would be there loading up. Occasionally from the upstairs windows they could see a person flaked out there, lying unconscious on flattened cardboard boxes, but generally it was just a discreet place to load up and then move on. Junkie chicks sometimes performed tricks out there too, street prostitution, so combined with the needles there was a fare bit of fluid exchange going on. Not a particularly appealing area, but the issues were cosmetic more than anything else. Rez did a great job discouraging anyone from climbing over their back fence with his fierce bark and intense dislike of the homeless. The house was well secured, but the girls admitted to feeling better when he and the dog were home at nights. He could say the same about them, for different reasons.

There was only one house rule, no smack. If you wanted to do heroin, then go and live on the street with the rest of the junkies. Everything else was acceptable but heroin and heroin users were forbidden from the property. After all, it really was the drug of losers. Brown heroin, China white, morphine sulphate, codeine, opium, whatever, it was all the same, they were all opiates and they were all on the house's prohibition list. The girls happily admitted having smoking opium when travelling together around Laos, but they'd thought it was a shitty drug and those two would know. Apparently, they'd tried smoking it more than just once, but it had made them vomit uncontrollably and assume the foetal position in bed for the day, they'd said. Not a particularly social drug and these girls were social professionals. They'd said it seemed exotic at first, the house boy at their

hotel arranged it for them, turning up one night with a piece and a pipe. So they tried the opium after their daily massages and reckoned they were ill for three days solid.

There was the snob value too. Taking Ecstasy, LSD or cocaine was fine, socially acceptable and even trendy. Coke was the perfect pub drug. Great for talking up a storm, for ranting and swapping yarns and it only lasted about an hour where most drugs kept a person wide awake until daylight, not always ideal. Like adrenaline, snorting a couple of rails quickly made a person realise why drugs are banned in sport. Bigger, stronger, fitter, faster, being on coke made a person better, saw queues at the bar disappear, blacks sunk on pool tables and one hundred and eighty thrown on the dart board every time. Yes, it was physically addictive, but it was that feeling of being superman, that feeling of being invincible that got people hooked. It was tough returning to being a mere mortal again when its effects wore off. Expensive and highly fashionable, plenty of people the girls hung out with wouldn't consider socialising without it. But just try mentioning using highly unfashionable heroin to people and watch the conversation stop cold. Apart from extended periods of catatonia, the bad reputation largely came from how people saw heroin users inevitably ending up. The long-term prognosis for heroin addicts wasn't the greatest and the crew congregating over the back fence were certainly not Australia's finest citizens. Using disarming names like sugar, horse or brown made it sound slightly less offensive but for most people heroin still conjured images of a needle filled junkie flat in Cabramatta. Still,

it attracted its new recruits and there were plenty of users both young and old around the neighbourhood.

For the junkies though it probably wasn't the junk doing the damage. What was ruining them was paying for it. With a hundred dollar a day habit, that prevented you from working, the only realistic options to fund a long-term addiction were theft, prostitution, drug dealing or any combination of the three. Prostitutes in the mainstream sex industry could make excellent money. But massage parlours, where the working environment was safe and controlled, don't want girls nodding off on the job. Punters weren't keen on having sex with girls covered in visible track marks either, there were understandable hygiene issues. So that meant working the streets and encountering all the dangers of violence, extortion and standover men extracting a cut. Drug dealers faced the same threats. Theft remained the only other option, usually beginning with family and friends with isolation soon following. Heroin was nothing but a terminal downward spiral. Other drugs had their downsides too, but they were rarely fatal. Opiates killed a lot of people around here.

Luckily though, most the crew gathering over their back fence had the luxury of being on state funded methadone. These methadone programs remove the financial pressures other junkies faced and as a result they weren't necessarily committing daily burglaries and petty crimes to fund things. So, while they were eyesore, they never caused any real problems in the neighbourhood. Let them all have it was his view. The more tax dollars going towards funding treatment programs the better. That way the stereo might still be in his car outside.

Taking a seat in the lounge and smoking a roach left in the ashtray provided something of a second wind. Close to midnight now but with no work tomorrow he decided on cooking Geoff's stolen salmon. He wasn't hungry, but it would be something to do and with no one home it was a good time to stink the house out with fish. Having cold salmon ready for brunch in the morning and making the girls eggs Benedict would certainly score him points, Bella would love it. He toyed with the idea of poaching it but instead decided on an easier option, slow baking it whole, skin on and lightly seasoned with a stuffing of fresh chopped herbs. Childs play and prepared in minutes. With the fish in the oven and a house to himself he could now do what he'd forbidden himself a dozen times over.

The first thing to hit him was the taste, that horrible taste. Even with a cigarette to mask the flavour it always tasted so was foul. Flicking the lighter a second time, heating the tiny pile of brown powder on a piece of aluminium foil, tentatively inhaling the rising coils of smoke, chasing the dragon from the blackening and bubbling tar through a rolled up twenty-dollar note. That taste, you could never grow used to it. Maybe nature intended it to taste bad, perhaps as a warning to keep away, he thought, before that warmth arrived, then the sweating, followed by all-consuming nausea and a half crawl, half walk to the bathroom. Then on hands and knees, vomiting and convulsing. Smack always made him sick but today, with a belly full of alcohol, it was reacting badly. Potentially a fatal mix, he should've known better. Finally, once nothing was left inside the heaving subsided, he staggered back downstairs from the bathroom, collapsing on the sofa to dream.

Flying through the clouds, over mountains, rivers and past a snowy white glacier was thwarted by the strangest of sounds waking him. He fought to remain airborne in the skies, but the sound called him back to earth, back into a blurred reality and back to Darlinghurst. What was that noise that stole away the dreams? Ting, Ting, Ting, Ting. Standing groggily, with a dry mouth, following the sound lead into the kitchen, and the oven timer doing its job as intended. The fish was ready. Opening the oven, removing the roasting dish revealed a salmon perfectly cooked, before the hot roasting dish burned deeply into the fingertips of his bare hands. Surprised by the opiate delayed burst of pain and unable to hold on any longer the pan dropped from his hands, upside down onto the kitchen floor before bouncing, spinning round, spraying bare feet with splattering boiling liquid, driving him from the kitchen. The fish remained, steaming in the middle of the floor as he climbed the stairs to his room, collapsing on the bed. Friday night was over. Standard stuff really.



Five

Thick dark blackness, that familiar self-loathing, consuming all thought with a terrible vengeance. The broken record, going around and around inside the mind, playing a track focussed on nothing but how to disappear, how to accidentally die, for the pain and this darkness to end. He wished for being back at sea cooking on the boats, that way he could simply step off the deck and into the abyss of water and finish it. Why hadn't he done it when having the chance? Why hadn't he done that when at sea? Anything but this, this was hollow and bleak and cold. It was a hole he couldn't climb out of, he wished for the sides of it to collapse on him and squeeze the air from his lungs. Hangover and heroin guilt weren't helping much either. He wished for the courage of Michael Joseph Cosgrave.

He was also out of weed, the one thing with potential to clear the mind, bring a little joy, some of the time at least. This was desperate. Whoever said marijuana wasn't addictive was talking through their arse, he'd said that a hundred times. But today it seemed Sydney was facing a marijuana drought and he'd promised the girls to get some in. They were taking him to a party, in fact they'd insisted. Not only was it the first Saturday night off work in months, but a fun night out would do him a world of good, they'd said. So, he'd been assigned a mission and now, after unsuccessfully contacting everyone he knew, it was time to try another angle. Leaving the house, hoping to find a

street dealer around The Cross or maybe down at Central Station, the mission began.

The short walk to Darlinghurst Street in Kings Cross answered the question before. Too early in the day, the streets were almost bare, which left trying around Central Station. Arriving at Pitt Street near Central Station, homeless people and victims of excessive alcohol slumped in the shade of the sandstone archways, some in the recovery position. Starting conversations required handing over a few cigarettes but soon lady luck smiled, a fella knew a fella. Go and wait outside Central Café, he was told, and your man will come over shortly.

Sitting outside the café Kieren ordered himself a beer and soon enough two young white men, both wearing tracksuit pants and baseball caps, joined him at the table. Apparently, it would take five minutes to go score. No problem, they said, they needed to go for themselves anyway. No, he couldn't go with them. Their guy was slightly paranoid the one wearing a fake gold chain told him, but his mate would stay and have a beer with he while he waited, while the other went shopping. Nice guys, they understood what it was to be a weed smoker in need. After giving over fifty dollars he sat and talked with the one staying behind, not bothering to exchange names, inappropriate that would be. Sure enough, in a couple of minutes his man was back. Slipping him a tightly wound ball of kitchen cling film with the green colour of the marijuana clearly visible inside. Shaking hands everyone went happily on their separate ways. Now life could continue. He didn't care about the quality or the quantity, there was something for the hangover and the party. Mission accomplished.

In the men's room of Central Café, the tightly bound parcel took forever to unwrap, but the eventual opening revealed nothing but a handful of grass clippings, twigs and leaves. From the yellowing whites of their eyes he should've known they were junkies and not to be trusted. Down fifty dollars and now back to square one.

Outside the station, along Pitt Street again, a scruffy young beggar under a blanket, with a cardboard sign reading *Homeless and Hungry* called out, asking for a cigarette. What was it with train stations and beggars, he wondered? They were everywhere.

- *Yeah sure, replied Kieren. Taking out a single cigarette and handing it over with a lighter.*
- *Mild eh, better give me another one then. You're not gay smoking these gutless things, are you?*
- *Careful now. Beggars can't be choosers mate.*

Passing over a second cigarette Kieren noticed the hands, filthy with street grim and shaking, trembling back and forth. Beside him was backpack propped up against the brick wall. Not the pack of a tourist or traveller but the stained and overstuffed bag of a homeless person. This was a genuine child of the streets.

- *You wouldn't know where I could score something to smoke would you?*
- *Yeah, for sure. Get you anything you want. Have to wait for a bit though, not long. You can keep me company.*
- *Yeah, righto. I'm Kieren.*

- *Jason.*

Taking a dirty synthetic nylon blanket from the backpack, Jason put it on the pavement beside him, patting the ground, encouraging Kieren to sit. So Kieren sat himself down, back to the wall, looking every bit as homeless as his company. Surprisingly it was a lot of fun, sitting, chain smoking, playfully heckling passers-by for loose change and collecting surprisingly good money in return. Jason was definitely crazy, no doubts, but in a mad scientist kind of way, possessing a highly sharpened sense of humour. Most impressively though, he could beg and thank people in numerous languages.

People's generosity was startling. A constant stream of pedestrians slipped them coins and other practical gifts including Indonesian clove cigarettes, a bottle of red wine and a takeaway pizza from a fat man. He didn't really need it, they told him laughingly in return. Thirsty, Kieren crossed over the road, buying two cans of beer from the bottle shop, returning to drink them together from brown paper bags, just like true homeless. All the while Jason purposefully counted the ever-growing collection of coins and it became apparent a financial objective was to be achieved.

- *How much longer, before scoring? Asked Kieren, beginning to get bored but still having his objective in mind.*
- *Nearly there. Four more dollars.*
- *Four more dollars for what?*
- *Our medicine.*

A few more generous pedestrians, a few more coins, and then they packed up the blankets. Humping the backpack Jason entered a Seven Eleven store, converting the coins to banknotes, before leading the way to a basement car building where apparently they could score their smoke. Reaching the carpark, descending a steel staircase, accompanied by the smell of urine, there they met a middle-aged white man, homemade prison tattoos on hands and neck, with a pock marked face from what must have been terrible acne as a child. Not someone to mess with, no sir. The dealer looked at Kieren, who looked at Jason who exchanged money for a small plastic bag that clearly see did not contain the desired product. Instead of green organic material there were translucent crystals, pure methamphetamine, ice. Luckily, on enquiring, Scarface sold grass too. Everything was now sorted, and a handy backup dealer had been found too, a double win. Even before the weed deal was done, Jason was already hunkering down behind a concrete pillar, glass meth pipe already loaded in those filthy, trembling hands.

While walking back to towards Central Station, Jason began looking in all the rubbish bins they passed. Worse still, the good humour of earlier was gone, replaced by crazy talk, about working as rent boy and someone owing him money for it. This was all getting too weird. Lying about an imaginary girlfriend waiting somewhere, he headed off towards home, leaving Jason muttering, fossicking through bins like the crazy ice head he was. That shit was the devil's drug, plain and simple. A shorter road to hell would be hard to find.

Home. Every light in the house on and music thumping out, Eddie Grant's Electric Avenue playing at speaker distorting volume. The girls, he knew, would be inside readying themselves for the night's activities, phoning friends to make plans, putting on makeup and deciding what to wear which was generally very little. He'd learned from experience that it was deciding what to wear that took the time, not their actual dressing. Too easy being a man. A clean tee shirt was all it took. Feeling soiled by the encounter with Jason he was really looking forward to a decent scrub in the shower, if he could only get into the bathroom.

Opening the front door, music soared to deafening point. Somehow they heard him coming in, above the din, or perhaps an excited dog's skittering sliding across the wooden floor alerted them. Rushing downstairs, the two girls came to greet him with the little butterfly kisses he loved so much, battering their eye lashes softly against his cheeks, one girl on either side.

- *We've got something for you, sang Bella, immediately dragging him into the kitchen with a Swiss army knife in her hand, scissors extended.*
- *These take a while to come on, informed Anna.*

She was grinning like Alice's Cheshire cat and acting as mad as the Hatter. They were off their nuts, bouncing off the walls. Obviously, they'd taken LSD and already made quite a dent into a large bottle of Smirnoff vodka on kitchen bench, drinking their usual sea breezes. They must have dropped a while ago by the look of them. It was a good plan, taking it early.

Acid could last for up to twelve hours and the first few hours were often a little scratchy and awkward feeling, before it settled in properly.

Tiny scissors cut off one of the little squares. Bella carefully passed it over, placing it in the palm of his hands, extended together as though receiving the eucharist at mass. The face looking up from the cardboard was an evil looking clown. LSD tabs were generally produced with cartoon designs printed on them, a tradition of sorts. Amen, he said, before placing the cardboard on the tip of his tongue. Time would soon tell if the clown's malevolent grin was justified.

To fill the time before lift-off Kieren began rolling a large spliff on the cluttered kitchen counter. Mixing pot with cigarette tobacco, twisting it to perfection and passing it straight to his cousin Anna, who seemed to be in greatest need of some calming down. Her eyes were startling just now, literally rolling about in her head. There were more treats to come, acid was only part of the parcel. Tonight's plan was candy flipping, taking LSD and ecstasy together. The girls' personal favourite combination and impossible to top as far as they were concerned. Acid by itself could be tormenting at times, a little too much madness without the E.

- *What are the pills like? He was asking the most important question of the night.*
- *Pink doves. Apparently, they are wicked. Pure love. Two each for later and one to crush up now, informed Bella.*
- *You're lucky we waited for you. Do you want a line now? Rhetorical question I know. Come on man*

chop chop, directed Anna with crazy looking acid eyes.

Of course, the pills would be good. Hairdressers always got the best drugs and both girls cut hair for a living. Unlike acid, which only varied in strength, ecstasy was different as you never really knew what you were getting. A complex synthetic drug, ecstasy was very difficult to produce. Accordingly, genuine MDMA probably wasn't present in half of the many thousands of pills sold as ecstasy each weekend in Sydney. The financial pie of recreational drug use in Australia was enormous so entrepreneurs, dealers, came up with ingenious combinations of other more readily accessible chemicals to sell as ecstasy instead. They weren't all bad. Some were great but if the evening involved dancing then genuine MDMA was essential. It was guaranteed to take a person from flat footed to Fred Astaire for forty dollars a hit. But these days people could never really be certain what was in them. Smart kids no longer referred to them as ecstasy. They just said they'd had a pill, describing it by how it made them feel, either speedy, trippy, smacky or loved up. A pill could contain anything. Ketamine the horse tranquiliser was a common ingredient, which could be fantastic. Speed, MDA, MDEA, mephedrone, BZP and a dozen other potential elements could be in them. Dance floor shopping was risky business but that was all part of growing up these days. Baden Powell would turn in his grave.

The effects of ecstasy on an evening out were not to be underestimated. Without it there was no way he would personally consider attending something like tonight's gig, a warehouse party with a DJ. These were the girl's people, the beautiful people, not his usual cup

of tea. He loved ecstasy for the confidence it provided even though it did mess with a person's head a bit. What went up must come down. There was always that blue Tuesday following a big Saturday night on pills. Post ecstasy Tuesday meant feeling flat and emotionless, sometimes crying for no reason whatsoever.

Crushing the pink entrée pill into a fine powder and chopping out six small lines he snorted two up the same nostril, immediately feeling the sting, like a cricket bat blow to the side of the head, it burned putting pills up the nose. The girls didn't flinch doing theirs nor did they complain when he used the opportunity to beat them up the stairs into the bathroom, locking the door behind him. It would take him ten minutes in there, they would take hours.

- *Turn the music up, he shouted from the bathroom.*
- *Let the games begin, screamed Anna, cranking the volume.*

On the way to their party the train began falling apart around them. It only got worse, or better, from there. Walking the short distance from the station to the venue, tracer light surrounded them generated by anything that shone. Purple electric flashes filled the air, corkscrewing outwards from the metallic eye shadow worn by Bella and Anna who were smiling incessantly by his side. An absolute Guy Fawkes light show unleashed and they hadn't even dropped their other pills yet. This would be massive. Several trees transformed into people as he passed by but thankfully the acid demons were staying away for now.

Laughing hysterically the three of them entered the warehouse, handing over their tickets, passing the fortress of security guards on duty. Inside they each immediately took a single pink dove and before they could say *water please*, were all taken from manic to ecstatic. Convulsing waves of pleasure washed over them, vision flickering at a hundred times a second. Ten minutes ago, they were all enjoying the non-existent fireworks but not anymore. Now they were strapped to a rocket ship, vibrating, shaking, quivering, fitting. Standing near the speakers, facing the stage, the floor trembled and contorted. Pumping base beats momentarily grounded his awareness, bringing him back to down earth but only for a moment, before all concept of time and physical location was lost again. Too high to know that he was high, in orbit for real, fading back into an oblivion of light and sound. Hallucinating took a person into a maze that frightened those who were unfamiliar with the territory, and not everyone was comfortable being this out of it. Kieren and the girls though were at home.

Returning from orbit now and focussing on the surrounding crowd, his own insight was overwhelming. Forty minutes ago he'd had trouble recognising a wall, now his vision could actually see inside of people. He saw what they really were, he saw the alter egos of the heaving pumping sweat soaked crowd. Girls in boots, tiny shorts, black string tops were now all surrounded by the flowering branches of non-existent trees, spiralling and blooming. They were no longer people but Elvan warrior women, witchlike seductresses, humanoid snakes. Then herds of charging beasts were projected onto the dance floor by a hidden VJ, video images digitally presented using

a smoke machine's haze for the screen. Wildebeest, springbok and gazelle running through everyone and then violent images of big cats, leopards and lions making savage kills projected and appearing and occurring in amongst the wild throng of the dance floor, teeth sinking into animal flesh. This was Heaven. Two hours dancing, Kieren dancing, which involved jogging on the spot, left his body drenched from pouring water in and out, literally soaking wet. Everyone there was in the same state, off their boxes, dripping wet. Everyone except the security guards that were keeping two worlds apart, politely locking the guests indoors for their own wellbeing until dawn and clarity arrived.

Then that bitter sweet feeling, coming back down to earth. What was really needed now was a spliff and he regretted not having the foresight to prepare a couple before leaving home. Finding a place to sit took every ounce of concentration he could muster then even more to focus on rolling one up.

- *Favourite Australian film? Said a voice from the darkness.*
- *Sorry, what?*
- *Favourite Australian film, said the voice.*

With considerable effort he focused on the voice, working hard to decipher who and where the sound was coming from. She'd been sitting there smiling for several minutes now, coincidentally the exact length of time that he'd been rolling the spliff. It was a good question, Kieren knew movies.

- *Bad Boy Bubby.*

- *Not exactly a cheery choice of movie, smiled the voice.*
- *You should've asked my favourite happy Australian film then, replied Kieren to the shape in the darkness.*
- *And what would that have been then?*
- *Happy film? God, not Mad Max, the original, my next favourite. There's an old 1950s film I loved, Smiley it was called, about a kid earning a bicycle. That was a happy movie.*
- *So, what happened, does he get his bicycle?*
- *Yeah, except his old man is a drunk. Kept raiding the poor kid's savings for beer money and two-up debts. Accidentally hits his father in the head with a cricket bat and somehow gets a bike. There was another movie called Smiley Gets a Gun, where he gets a rifle instead, similar plot.*
- *Interesting choice. So, was it the film's paternal violence that struck a chord with you? Said the voice laughingly.*
- *No. Just the simplicity of it, I guess, and the outback setting.*
- *Quite the boy, aren't we.*

It struck him that these were the most words he'd spoken to woman in a long while, outside of a work environment anyway. Holding out her hand Kieren passed her the spliff, instantaneously realising that she was extending her hand to shake his own.

- *That will either fix you or finish you.*

- *I can feel its restorative benefits already, replied Sonia in a voice that made him feel suddenly warm all over.*

He worked hard focusing his eyes on the girl in the darkness, small framed, petite and fragile looking. Dressed entirely in black with a short skirt, light cardigan and three-quarter length boots, brunette with a Gothic look and shoulder length dark brown hair. She was almost invisible through the drug fog clouding his mind, camouflaged in the darkness and as she slid ever so slightly closer Kieren could see a fine-featured face, high cheekbones and the faintest hint of a dimpled chin. It was a face that wore sadness, he thought with his acid induced intuition. The most striking thing were those eyes, dark and deep, like those of a blackbird. She was an attractive woman regardless of the ecstasy that, like alcohol, made everyone temporarily appealing. This was what his afternoon's effort was all for. Getting ripped off, dealing with suspect characters in a dodgy car parking building, hanging out with that freak Jason. It was all worth it, all for this moment right here, to be sharing a big spliff with this girl all to himself. He stared at her smiling as she stared back doing the same.

What a night. Whoever organised that party deserves a medal, thought Kieren as they all three arrived home together in the taxi, Bella, Anna and himself. Nearly seven in the morning and he was exhausted, but not the girls, they hardly stopped at home. Instead, grabbing towels and bikinis they headed straight out the door again, to the beach this time, taking the bus and their last pink dove to split between them on Coogee Beach, to have a swim and a

just lay around they said. He didn't have their energy. Drinking water directly from the kitchen tap and letting the dog inside, collapsing on the sofa, he laid a tired body down, feet up on the armrest. He needed sleep, but there was no way to switch off the violent kaleidoscope appearing whenever he shut his eyes. That little clown's evil grin was justified, the potent acid was reluctant to let go. There was nothing for it, and much to his own disgust he returned to the kitchen to get some aluminium foil before climbing the stairs to his room, opening the window and finishing off the last remnants of the brown heroin stash. Unsurprisingly in under a minute he was on hands and knees in the little bathroom being violently ill. At least it got him to sleep. That light show was driving him insane.



Six

Already on the train before realising this was the same tee shirt, from last night when they met, without even washing it. Too late, at least she would recognise him. Not a full-on date, just drinks and maybe some bar food to provide a distraction and help the conversation along. Initially he'd wanted to take her somewhere special, to a Japanese restaurant maybe, or yakatori barbeque where they cooked on little charcoal fires right there at the counter. Japan sure new how to cook. He felt he could be Japanese quite happily. Such respectful people, they brewed outstanding beers and he loved their food. So did everyone else it, there seemed to be a sushi bar on every block in the city. Australia had certainly taken to Japanese cuisine, though the Anzacs would be rolling in their graves. But when asked Sonia said no dinner, she was a little jaded from last night's party, so just drinks at a bar she liked, over in Newtown where she lived.

What exactly did she look like? In all honesty, he could hardly remember much about her at all, except her small size, hair colour and those deep dark eyes. Maybe she was feeling the same. Perhaps wearing the same clothes was a good thing. She'd seemed easy going enough, down to earth, a bit alternative and she certainly wasn't unattractive from memory. Surprisingly he'd asked for her number and even more surprisingly she obliged.

Quite some time since being out on a date, on a formal date anyway. Getting lucky usually involved stumbling home with something close to nameless, something random met drunk down at the pub, Friday night fun, then never seeing them again. Sometimes maybe a rematch, but only ever twice, that was enough. It was always possible to walk away after sleeping with someone twice and just calling it a bit of fun, but never after three times. Three times or more guaranteed tears at some stage. Three times and you'd gotten yourself a girlfriend and all the psychological warfare that went with it, the *Do I have a boyfriend* questions and *where do I stand* text messages. His was a hunter-gatherer type of sex life, never knowing where the next one was coming from, just making the most of it when it did turn up, that or hookers. When was the last time he had sex sober? There was a thought.

Climbing the concrete stairs out of Newtown Station, it was a nervous three block walk along King Street. Entering the bar, Sonia was there already sitting at a high table, with her back to the main doors. She looked at him, smiling in the reflection of the mirrored wall of the bar. She had gotten there early.

- *Favourite Australian film? Said Kieren coming up quietly behind Sonia.*
- *Chopper. Hi. Nice to see you.*

Chopper, that was a guy movie if ever there was one. He guessed she selected it to appeal to his tastes rather than her own. It was flattering to think she wanted to make a good impression, on him.

- *Chopper? Are you sure you're a girl?*

- *Yes! Lots of my favourite films are a bit gritty. I'm definitely not into chick flicks!*
- *Example, said Kieren, stealing a line from Pulp Fiction.*
- *Well, Fight Club was brilliant, and Daniel Craig in Layer Cake was so cool. He was gorgeous as James Bond. Sean Connery was the best though.*

She was impressive, having seen every Bond movie made he agreed whole heartedly, Connery was the best Bond ever. They smiled back and forth for a moment until Sonia took the initiative.

- *All this talk of James Bond makes me think I'll have a martini. How about you Kieren? Would you drink a martini with me?*
- *Yeah why not.*

Kieren waved the waiter over to order drinks but Sonia had apparently already opened a bar tab, insisting on getting this first round at least. Surely this was too good. The martinis arrived and he reminded himself of that classic rule on martinis, where two were recommended and three were not. Checking the size of Sonia, he wondered if even one wouldn't leave her drunk on her arse. Time would tell. Great choice of drink though. Usually he would just have drunk beer, litres of it, but the strong martini was instantly uplifting and he felt calm and confident in the company of this woman.

The conversation flowed freely, partly thanks to the vermouth and vodka, with Sonia talking about her job, about working three days a week in a government health department doing administration stuff,

processing patient files. She reckoned her workplace should be renamed though. Calling it the Department of Health was a bit ironic, she said, as everyone working there seemed to be cigarette smokers, obese and took sick days from work at the drop of a hat. She worked there fulltime before cutting back her hours recently, she said. She was planning some part time study, finishing off a university degree she started years before and never quite completed. Lazily she never got around to enrolling the start of the year, so was just taking it easy and working part time. Three days a week was just enough to live on she reckoned. She also had three brothers, she told him, which likely went a long way to her being such easy company.

- *Being a chef sounds quite dashing. I imagine it being a lot of fun.*
- *Yeah, when you first start off I guess. I'm just over it for now. Fourteen years is a long time in kitchens. They're not very scenic places.*
- *Well a week or two off and you might feel different about things. Call it a creative sabbatical.*
- *Yeah, that's one way of looking at it. Sounds better than, can't be arsed just now.*

Funny how people viewed his trade as being artistic and creative. Perhaps writing a new menu could be creative. Once it was written though, the creative feeling was quickly eclipsed by then making hundreds of copies of each dish, as fast as you possibly could, night in night out. Would Picasso feel creative if he painted two hundred copies of every work? Don't think so. The repetition could be maddening. There was also the pressure, no postponing things when

restaurant cooking, it was now or sooner please. Plus, you were stuck inside, working in a windowless underground much of the time, the claustrophobia of it got to him sometimes. Even working on the boats was below decks mostly.

- *I feel like doing an outside job for a while. Maybe driving a truck, said Kieren, meaning it.*
- *Well why don't you? My dad drives a truck long haul and loves it. He gets away a lot, mum goes with him sometimes. You should give it a go. Talk to a training school.*
- *Yeah maybe, I'm just enjoying having some time off right now.*
- *Well after all this time you deserve a break. How old were you when you started cooking?*

She was asking his age, indirectly. Cooking began years ago, when still living out in Richmond, shortly after losing interest in school and immediately after his parents lost interest in him sitting around the house doing nothing. Kitchen hand work was all he was qualified for then, meaning having no qualifications at all. His life could've taken any number of directions on leaving school. Could've been a carpenter, brickie or a plumber, not an electrician though as his maths at school wasn't good enough for that. Somehow, without any thought, he simply drifted into a life of frying pans and burnt forearms and working late, drinking and drugs.

- *I was a dish pig, a kitchen hand I mean, for a year. Then started in whites when I was eighteen. I'm Thirty-two now.*

- *Twenty-eight and counting here. Men are lucky they get better looking with age.*
- *I must have been a pretty ugly kid then, laughed Kieren.*
- *I bet your mother didn't think so, said Sonia smiling broadly. Are your parents still together Kieren?*
- *Yeah kind of. Mum lives out west in Richmond, where I grew up. It was country living then, now it's like a suburb of Sydney.*

Richmond really had changed. The lifestyle was becoming unrecognisable from when he grew up. As a kid he roamed the hills beyond town, with a fishing rod or a rifle, or scrambling on a dirt bike wherever he felt like going. Now the hills were all fenced off into pony paddocks for the new country folk and their polo horses. Now it was Volvo four-wheel drives that never used low ratio, driven by blonde women with hooped ear rings and pony tailed hair that refused to so much as look at him. *Private Property* and *Keep Out* signs were posted where children and wallabies once roamed freely. Those hills were his home. Kieren once felt a part of that landscape, indigenous even. Now he had an idea how Aboriginal people felt, them being displaced from that same land before him, watching it change before their eyes too. Even the small towns dotted amongst the surrounding hills were different now. The old stores and buildings that once housed the local butchers and bakers were all coffee shops and craft stores selling scented candles, bowls of potpourri and candleholders to the tourist.

- *And your father, do you still see him? Sonia asked.*

- *Yeah, but he doesn't see me.*
- *Sorry? Sonia looked puzzled so Kieren explained.*
- *He's got old timer's disease, Alzheimer's. He's in a home.*
- *I'm sorry to hear that Kieren. Do you visit him much?*
- *He wouldn't know it if I did. He's been sitting in a chair staring at the wall for years now. He's lucky I guess. He's not all stressed out like some of them in there. For some it's like a bad LSD trip every day. It was weird watching him slowly go though.*

Usually his father was off limits as a topic, usually, it was embarrassing, but tonight it felt good to talk about it. He hadn't discussed his father in a very long time, having already buried the man in his mind. He chose to mentally sidestep it but tonight felt compelled to discuss it, perhaps more for his own sake than for Sonia.

- *It's a bit weird, the half dead thing. I mean, he's gone but his body is still there. Mum says it's his purgatory on earth, so straight to heaven for him when he does die. She's visited him every day for years. Her purgatory too I guess.*
- *Your family is Catholic then? The purgatory thing I mean.*
- *Yeah, I guess. Drink and confess, drink and confess that's my mob. We went to church, it wasn't bad. Mum's still into it.*
- *A toast to your father then Kieren.*
- *Cheers.*

As they clinked cocktail glasses Sonia, to Kieren's surprise, leaned forward kissing him gently on the cheek, with her hand lightly touching his face as she did so. It was the most intimate moment he could remember and the first time they physically touched.

- *Fancy another drink on Tuesday night? She asked him.*
- *Wednesday night would be better, replied Kieren, knowing what Tuesday had in store.*
- *Sounds good.*



Seven

North Ryde Funeral Chapel, hardly an imposing building, not exactly an impressive structure. The red brick construction, surrounded by untended gardens and withering bird of paradise plants, looked more like a school than a place of worship. The black hearse parked beside the front doors confirmed that this was the place. Standing on the opposite footpath in white trainers, long sleeved shirt tucked into black jeans, he wasn't entirely convinced this was an appropriate thing to be doing. He wasn't a friend or family, but doubtlessly he saw the deceased more recently than anyone else, except perhaps the undertakers when preparing the body, and whoever did the identifying. What if someone challenged him? What if someone asked him who he was and why he was there today? No, funerals were rarely completely private. After all, they'd advertised this service in the Sydney Morning Herald obituary pages.

Covering the open ground from across the street and through the asphalted car park was almost frightening. Feeling strangely exposed, avoiding eye contact with others as he went, walking in the slow half steps expected of funeral goers, he passed through smoked glass doors, entering a featureless chapel foyer. Into the main chapel, instinctively looking for the holy water but seeing none, making the sign of the cross anyway, as Catholics do upon entering a church, though this time without traces of holy water leaving small wet circles in the cloth of his crumpled cotton shirt.

An aisle seat, second row from the back provided unobstructed views of the nineteen seventies, purple carpeted, drab décor interior of the funeral home. Such a humble building, the absence of any grandeur was striking. The only exception was a stained-glass window depicting a mountain stream and a few floral arrangements, otherwise this place was noticeably unadorned. No marble features or painted ceilings, no statues of Patron Saints or the Virgin Mary. No alter, no Christ on his cross, nailed and bleeding. Noticeably agnostic and completely secular, this was a room for all religions and none at all.

Resting on a chrome gurney near the front of the room lay the coffin. Dark timber, mahogany perhaps, with bright brass handles and a bouquet of lilies on top. The flowers' beauty starkly contrasted the grotesqueness he knew was residing within that coffin, a tortured and torn figure looking anything but peaceful, looking nothing like a man at rest.

Small groups of respectable looking people, all particularly well dressed, slowly made their way inside. Nodding sombre acknowledgements to one another, exchanging half smile greetings, these unknown people took their seats as piped organ music played on an invisible instrument, unhappily filling the air. Part of him, the self-interested part, wanted to tell someone here about finding their man up there. An element of celebrity was to be obtained in doing so. There wouldn't be any funeral if not for him, but today wasn't about him, deep down he knew that much, remaining silent instead. The room gradually filled with people squeezing past his knees, seating themselves in the pew beside him.

Then she came, impossible to mistake in her complete and total grief. Being physically supported by a grey-haired couple, a young boy's hand in each of her own, she could only be the wife of the deceased. Blonde, tall and lean, wearing an expensively embroidered jacket and sobbing uncontrollably, it struck him just how beautiful she was. From the back of the room Kieren watched as the woman and two small boys seated themselves, front row. Convulsing intermittently, she tended to her sons, distracting herself in straightening their shirt collars, fussily tidying their hair, seemingly ignoring the box to her left. The boys however, blank faced and sullen, could hardly take their eyes from that coffin. Meanwhile Kieren who could hardly take his own eyes from their mother, loving her, pitying her, silently wanting her.

What if he told her? Would it ease her pain? Would she sleep more easily knowing what he saw hanging from that willow tree? Should he tell her that he'd seen the remnants of a man fighting to stay alive? Did she need to know that her husband, the father of these two boys, ultimately recognised his own desire to live, but was unable to do anything about it? Should he tell how her husband fought that nylon cord? Would that knowledge bring her peace or pain?

Suddenly, strikingly, with the audible echoing click of a portable plastic stereo, the music stopped. A grey bearded man, with hands clasped together, approached the lectern, tapped the microphone once and with the slightest hint of a gay man's accent began to speak.

- *Family and friends, welcome here today on this saddest of occasions. Our loved one Michael chose to leave us early...*

That was all he needed to know. Four silent steps and Kieren vanished, through the foyer, out into the glaring sunshine and the striking heat of a Sydney summer's afternoon. *Chose to leave us early*, those few words confirmed it, suicide was accepted. The brown paper envelope was now his to keep, forever.



Tuesday was as expected, perhaps even a little bit bluer. Fortunately, this sadness was only temporary, a comedown that would soon wear off just like the ecstasy pills that caused it. Not rising from bed until after midday, outside filling the dog's water and biscuits, not even sunshine and an enthusiastic greeting from Rez were enough to force a smile.

Returning inside to the shade of the house felt comforting, drawing the curtains even more so. Watching movies was about as much as could be managed this afternoon, that, a few beers and feeling rather sorry for himself. The day passed by watching two films, Clint Eastwood westerns, *A Fist Full of Dollars* and *A Few Dollars More* for the third and second time respectively. Bella and Anna arrived home from work together halfway through the second film, carrying takeaway food, grunting a greeting, before going straight into their bedroom without surfacing again. Blue Tuesday for everyone.

Wednesday saw an uncharacteristically excited man on the phone arranging a date. Japanese was agreed, at a cheap and cheerful restaurant close to Sonia's place in the nearby, hipster suburb of Newtown. Sonia laughingly pointed out the count, which was two. This was only their second date, Saturday night did not count, so don't be expecting too much action she said. Good on her for being up front, he thought. Now he wouldn't be making a dick of himself with untimely advances. He could still feel where she kissed his cheek on Sunday, he would gladly settle for that again.

Deciding where to take her caused significant stress for such a small decision and he really hoped she wasn't vegetarian. It would be no fun being at a Japanese restaurant with a vegetarian. He had no idea. They never bothered with food on Sunday night, sticking with martinis instead. She'd drunk two before switching to water while Kieren moved on to Budweiser, not the usual draught beer. He never drank imported beer, except on dates, not often.

Inside the little Japanese restaurant, it was quickly apparent that Sonia was anything but a vegetarian. Ordering at random, everything and anything, they drank hot sake and cold beer and laughed together continuously. Beef tataki, sushi, sashimi, battered tempura fried fish, barbeque chicken livers and cow's tongue, the little plates of delectable morsels arrived one by one. A bowl of raw diced octopus arrived along with a bowing waitress. Looking aghast at the prospect, who was to try eating it first was decided by playing rock scissors paper. With raw octopus hanging from her chopsticks Sonia looked like she was about

to throw up, so, with him insisting, the bet was promptly cancelled.

Leaving the table briefly to smoke outside, he couldn't get back to Sonia's company quick enough. Power smoking half a cigarette, then crunching on a breath mint bought especially, he promptly returned inside. Slightly drunk now, he asked for the bill, refusing Sonia's pleas to contribute and when it arrived they weren't charged for the octopus dish they'd left uneaten. Japanese were very cool Kieren decided, next life maybe.

Outside the restaurant they counted all the species just consumed, with the total being seven different animals, five which were vertebrates and two that weren't. They both agreed next time to be more certain about what they were ordering. Neither of them would ever forget the Japanese words for that raw octopus, tako wasabi, ensuring never to accidentally order it again.

Walking Sonia home was a much shorter distance than he would have liked, the night soon to be over. He could've stayed out drinking for much longer, but it was a work night for her. There, outside Sonia's house, it looked like her smile was going to split her head in half when asking for the same kiss on the cheek again, feeling silly in hindsight for telling her why.

- *Sunday? Kieren asked*
- *Sunday. Sonia agreed.*

Sunday morning arrived with a throbbing head and a fragile brain wracking itself, thinking of something to do on tonight's a date. He could barely lift his head let alone think. The previous evening was damaging, meeting up with the pastry chef before getting absolutely smashed at the Irish pub on Brougham Street, O'Malley's. It was a rundown affair without much atmosphere and the dank smell of damp rotting carpet. The only decent thing about O'Malley's was how absolutely liquored they let customers become before cutting them off. He'd been so drunk when arriving home, he hadn't even bothered having a taste of the brown powder, managing to be sick enough without the help.

Where could he take Sonia tonight? The only decision he felt fit to make was postponing or cancelling altogether. Wearing only underpants, staggering downstairs to the kitchen, there was some good news, there was tinfoil in the bottom drawer. A lighter, a rolled banknote, the familiar foul taste and immediately the hangover departed. The day vanished in blissful dreams of swimming in rivers, snorkelling tropical reefs and flying through clouds.

They never did make any plans and Sonia was there, already waiting, outside her house as he arrived on foot from the train station. Kissing his cheek in a friendly greeting, Kieren began wondering exactly when things would progress further and become more physically satisfying. Holding hands was all well and good, but ultimately he was there for a reason and it wasn't for the tako wasabi. Good things come to those who wait, he told himself, as they randomly chose a

direction, beginning an aimless Newtown walk together.

A light rain began falling, forcing them inside a nearby hotel, making their destination decision for them. Inside, chicken schnitzel and chips were ordered, along with draught beer and house wine. The meals arriving fast and decidedly average, plates of brown on brown, fresh from the fryers, a little wilted looking salad greens for garnish.

Walking the longest way possible back to Sonia's home she pointed out that this was the most of her neighbourhood she had ever seen. There was no way, she said, that she would ever walk around Newtown on her own at night. In here mind, she said, there were freaks and ice heads lurking around every corner, waiting to rob her. Probably not true, he thought, but being so small and frail her slightly paranoid viewpoint was understandable.

- *I'm a bit of a scaredy cat, really. I'm always afraid. It's alright with you here though, she remarked in a confessional tone. I wasn't bothered about that stuff growing up, she continued. We lived outside Newcastle, it felt safe there.*
- *Would you ever move back, to Newcastle, enquired Kieren?*
- *Maybe one day, if I had kids and all that. It just seems so small now after living in the big city.*
- *So, you want kids then?*
- *I think most girls do, eventually anyway.*

Making her feel secure, he liked the idea of that. Suddenly he began walking more upright, shoulders

back, inflating his stature in response to her confiding. He wasn't always keen on walking home late at night either. It could be dodgy around his own neighbourhood too, but not wishing to deflate himself in Sonia's eyes, he wasn't about to mention it now. Coming to Sonia's street, Kieren realised he hadn't been inside yet. The closer they came to her front door the slower and smaller their steps became, neither wanting to end the night and neither wanting to deal with the awkwardness of the moment they both knew was fast approaching. Sonia, sensing his next move before Kieren himself, initiated things by getting in first. Stopping, she took both his hands in hers and spoke.

- *I like you Kieren, I enjoy us, and I do want to sleep with you, just not tonight eh.*
- *That's cool, was all he could think to say.*
- *We'll get there, she told him, encouragingly.*

Well, half a green light was better than none. He'd already known this one would take time. Then, again it was Sonia making the first move, with her lips going from smiling to kissing him for what seemed the longest and most enjoyable seconds of his life. Only breaking into an enormous boyish grin eventually ended their kissing. Opening her front door to go inside, Sonia turned, suddenly acting very serious, apprehensive even. Something was coming, he could feel it.

- *Kieren, we need to talk.*

His mind raced. Was she dumping him? Was she gay? They hadn't had sex yet, so she wasn't pregnant, not to him at least. Maybe it was AIDS or hepatitis or

something. He wasn't sure what was coming, but judging by her tightening and twisting body language, it certainly wasn't going to be happy news. Things were going so well. There was always a landmine waiting to explode when it was this good, he might've known. Uncomfortable moments like this were exactly why it was best calling it quits after two dates, that way no exchanging of life secrets was required, none whatsoever. With her head lowered, facing the ground at her feet Sonia began slowly speaking.

- *I have to tell you a couple of things about me, that you may not like so much. So, once I'm finished, you can just leave, if you want, OK.*

Pausing, she sighed deeply then slowly began rolling up the left sleeve of the cardigan she always wore, revealing a butcher's block of white crisscrossed scarring. Sonia's olive-skinned forearm was covered in light coloured scar tissue, the remnants of clean cuts, immediately recognisable as knife or razor wounds. He already knew what they were. He already knew how they'd occurred, self-inflicted. He wanted to run but remained there, calm and quiet and if anything, curious.

- *The past three years have not been good for me, certainly not the best time of my life. I don't do it anymore. I handle things a little differently these days but maybe just as harmful. Sonia paused again for what seemed an eternity, before continuing. I'm not sure you want to hear this, she said.*
- *Go on, said Kieren.*

- *I haven't really gone out much these last few years. Saturday night, when we met and this past week, well it's all been an exception. Something happened that made me go a bit nuts for a while. Shall I go on? You can go if you want to. I won't hold it against you.*
- *Carry on, Kieren said encouragingly, wishing he was somewhere else, anywhere but there.*
- *Here goes then. Three years ago, I was in a bar and the next thing I remember was in the back of a van being held down. I was drug raped, by two men. They took turns... and got violent with me. I really thought I was going to die. My head got pretty dark afterwards. For a while I avoided people altogether.*
- *I could imagine, remarked a boy, not knowing what else to say.*

Tears began rolling down her cheeks unwiped, and from how Sonia appeared oblivious to them, Kieren sensed she was very accustomed to crying. Poor girl, it wasn't the news he expected, it was far worse. She continued through the tears, with her voice remaining firm and unaffected.

- *This self-harm stuff has stopped now but, I guess, I've been replacing it with other kinds of harm. I've been hiding myself away, with drugs, addictive drugs. All sorts of things Kieren. As far as drug use goes, well, I've pretty much done it all in the past three years, ice, heroin, everything. Shall I keep going or do you want to take off now?*
- *Keep going, if you want.*

- *Officially I suffer from a post-traumatic stress disorder, PTSD, which makes me a little bipolar at times. Well, not officially bipolar but I can get pretty down some days. Things can swing from mania to depression fairly quickly.*
- *Who can't? And as for the drug use I am not exactly one to cast stones on that, Kieren told her.*

He felt stupid. This was about her and not him so shut up and listen he told himself. How much of an idiot did he feel for saying that? This was uncharted territory. Desperately he wanted a cigarette but instead just held his hands, biting his lip to physically prevent him opening his mouth and putting a foot in again. Sonia was remaining amazingly composed, except for the rolling tears. It couldn't be easy, telling him what she just did, this must be a strong girl, he decided. Feeling there was more to come he steered the conversation back to her.

- *Well, you seem alright, to me.*
- *Thank you Kieren. Thank you. I'm not really nuts or anything. I'm not medicated for it anymore, well not clinically medicated anyway, she said laughing nervously.*
- *I was on anti-depressants for a while but I'm trying to move away from all that. I guess that's the part I am really trying to tell you. What I'm really trying to say is that in a couple of weeks I'm going away, to a residential rehabilitation programme, long term rehab. Eight weeks if all goes well, maybe ten. I'm terrified, but it's the only option that I think will work. I'm hoping it will work for me anyway. So are my family. I'm lucky*

how they've stuck behind me. It was a long time before I could tell them about what happened. They just thought it was drugs and that I was a junkie, which I was, which I kind of still am, but they've been amazing. She paused. There, that's about it. I'm sorry if I've made you feel uncomfortable. So anyway, if you are still interested after all that, let me know. I can understand if you're not though.

They stayed together that night, sleeping entwined in her king single bed, holding one another but going no further. In the morning, over instant coffee and toast, Sonia told Kieren about how for the first time in a long while she slept peacefully last night, not having those awful terrible dreams. Usually she was forced to take a sleeping pill or something stronger, like morphine sulphate or smack, as the dreams were so bad she'd become afraid of sleeping. To sleep meant reliving her ordeal over again, having them hunt her, to feel their hands upon her, to be stupefied and unable to flee, to feel the tearing, to be raped again. Holding both his hands in her own, she thanked him for being there, thanked him for sharing her bed and the sense of protection he brought to her. He could not know how good that felt, she said. For the first time in a long while he too felt good, truly good, for having helped someone. Perhaps there was a purpose after all.

Together they shared her bed in Newtown every night for the following week. On the third night they had sex, began to have sex anyway, before Sonia transformed into a shaking convulsing mess, a flood of inconsolable tears right in the middle of it. Two nights later they tried again, this time both sober and with

the lights on, it changed things tremendously. *Don't get too used to it*, she told him afterwards. One more week and she would be going away, and his newly found purpose for being would go with her.



Eight

A Cold Chisel song prompted the idea. *Khe Sahn* or *Last Plane Out of Sydney* some mistakenly called it, one of the most frequently played songs on Australian radio and with arguably better known lyrics than the national anthem. Entire pubs broke into song whenever it was played by rock cover bands or slowly vanishing juke boxes that were once a staple sight in every bar. It was all about DJs now, cheaper than bands and expecting less free beer, so publicans had taken to them, as had the new breed of kids. *Seven flying hours and I'll be landing in Hong Kong* the lyrics went, only it would be nine hours in a plane and he would be landing in Bangkok instead. No matter, he would be hitting some mattress tonight regardless. After a full week binge drinking and finishing most evenings with smoking heroin, he was listening to the radio and the *Khe Sahn* lyrics summed up his current lot in a nutshell, except for the Vietnam stuff. He was flying out late tonight, Sydney to Bangkok direct. If two weeks of bar girls and cheap beer couldn't cheer him up, then nothing would.

At the Green Park hotel in Darlinghurst, enjoying a farewell drink together, Geoff was in his usual fine form. Not having been overseas in over ten years, since the birth of his first son, Geoff was insanely jealous about Kieren's little getaway, telling him so three times at least. Kieren would love for his best mate to join him, but married men weren't allowed to holiday unsupervised in Bangkok, not with their morally

challenged drug using bachelor mates. Geoff didn't have the money anyway, he never did, not with having giant hungry children to feed.

- *So, no boiled bunny yet? Or are you expecting the car to get vandalised? Geoff was teasing Kieren about Sonia.*
- *She's actually kind of cool Geoff.*
- *You sure do attract some nutty ones Copper.*

Geoff only knew half of the Sonia story, about meeting her and the dates and her going away into the residential rehabilitation program a week ago. Not the other stuff. He was only teasing and Kieren knew it, nothing much bothered Geoff. It wasn't like rehab was anything special these days anyway, if you were famous it was an absolute must.

- *Twenty-eight eh. Stick with her and you'll have kids soon enough. Her hormones will be crying out for babies soon. Can't really see you with kids though. Maybe you should get a younger one?*
- *No. I hate texting.*
- *Anything doing on the job front?*
- *Not even bothering until I get back. Just been enjoying having beers in the sunshine this week.*

True, there'd been some hard drinking over the last few days, but no sunshine was involved. The drinking was indoors with curtains drawn and heart broken. Except for twenty minutes walking down to the travel agent Kieren hadn't seen the sun in a week. Sonia's leaving simultaneously triggered a binge of self-pity

and self-indulgence with a whole lot more now planned offshore.

- *Drinking with you could damage a person without the proper training Copper.*
- *It is a gift, nodded Kieren, aware of his own ability to outdrink almost anyone in his weight class, featherweight.*
- *Anyway, got to go collect the boys. Have a couple for me and I'll see you when get back. You take it easy over there, understand.*
- *I'll be good Dad, joked Kieren.*
- *Make sure you are. I don't fancy smuggling cigarettes and lube to you in an Asian jail. Oh, and a simple lesson for you. Thai girls don't have boobs. If she has boobs, she's most likely a bloke.*

The plan was to travel light, taking the absolute barest minimum. A small bag of clothes, sunglasses and toiletries would do fine, and with the packing completed he was rather happy with himself for reducing everything into a single carry on bag. There was even space left over, so he stuffed in the fishing vest, it looked like the kind photographers used and middle-aged Americans wore on their vacations, it could be handy when travelling. He could always buy anything else he needed there, but shopping wasn't exactly a high priority for this trip.

Packed and ready and time to go. Half way out the front door it occurred that giving everything in his bag a final once over would be wise, in case something accidentally incriminating was stowed in there, like

half a pill or a big fat roach. Wouldn't that just rip your jocks, he thought, having Thai customs tip his bags on arrival and finding some long-forgotten contraband. Sensible idea, he was forever saving half-finished joints in the weirdest of locations for rainy days. On inspection the toilet bag was clean, apart from a couple of old aspirin with the logo worn off that could be mistaken for anything so into the bin with them. In the back pocket of his jeans was a packet of Rizlas, cigarette papers, not illegal but no point advertising that he was a pot smoker, bin. The small pocket knife in his fishing vest would have to stay behind too, yes it would come in handy but it wouldn't get past airport security in Sydney and it would be a shame losing it. Then sure enough, in the same pocket as the knife, inside the plastic wrapper off a cigarette packet was a dirty stinky roach. He was half tempted to take it for the holiday, but surely there would be some Thai sticks in Thailand. Getting busted for something so measly would be lame. Quickly repacking, racing outside, right now was time to move, or that last plane out of Sydney would be gone.

In the bar of the Landmark Hotel, looking out through the tall glass windows onto Bangkok's Sukhumvit Road, the first thing that struck him was the bustling vitality and the multitude of colours on the yet-to-be explored street outside. Watching the hordes of people, the little tuk-tuk taxis with their noisy two stroke engines, the smoke rising from the charcoal food stalls, the decorated trees of the avenue and the vibrant life taking place just outside, the absence of colour and vitality in his own life struck him. Strange, he hadn't noticed its absence before.

When compared to the dynamic feast before his eyes his own life was totally static. Thinking about it, there really was no colour in his life back home in Sydney. Looking back now it was a sea of grey. It was good to be out. Already he knew that coming here was the right move, with the flood of activity making it difficult to focus on worries, the constant blackness, an absent girl and a broken heart.

The twenty-five-year-old, damp smelling, Toyota Corolla taxi that just brought him from the airport, with a noisy wheel bearing and a dashboard covered in Buddha statues, seemed starkly out of place pulling up into the forecourt of such luxurious and well-presented hotel. Arriving at the hotel, only moments earlier, the warm smiles and bowing, hands pressed together greeting of the bag boys, the concierge and white suited doormen of the Landmark immediately suggested that Bangkok was the right destination. A breathtakingly beautiful receptionist confirmed it. What wonderful people these Thais were. Just as the lack of colour in life back home had struck him, he now felt the lack of warm humanity back there too. Here though, when looking out across the road from the hotel, you could feel it, life happening on a massive scale. This was exactly what he was missing.

Two hours and four pints later and still drinking in the hotel bar, hesitant about heading out into this new world outside. He was not alone in the Landmark's house bar, and it would be rude not to say something, so overcoming his usual social reservations, he introduced himself to the only other patron.

- *Hi, ummm Kieren, Kieren Walsh.*
- *Hello Kieren, Louisa. Nice to meet you.*

This Louisa was not something Kieren enjoyed the good fortune to meet every day. Long and lean and beautifully dressed, a cut above for sure. Everything about her oozing a stylish simplistic femininity, from her light summer dress, manicured nails and the single giant pearl pendant that he guessed cost more than his car. Louisa ordered a Campari and soda, a drink he'd never heard of before. Jameson's on ice for him, the size of which was intimidating on arrival, a tumbler of whiskey nearly three fingers deep. This was fantastic, feeling more and more like an international jetsetter by the minute. James Bond, in a swanky bar with an absolute beauty. Chatting away, with a whiskey loosened tongue, she seemed genuinely impressed when he mentioned being a chef, her saying how artistic and creative that must be. She was flirting shamelessly, he couldn't sit any taller or straighter on the bar stool if he tried. She was gorgeous.

- *On holiday Louisa?*
- *Actually, about two more hours and I'm off back to London. I've just checked out. Work trip, I buy for a department store chain, curtains and things. Nothing exciting. I come here three times a year. Manila too. Everything is made in Asia these days.*

This well-groomed woman immediately brought the widow to mind, at the funeral. So smartly dressed, so feminine, so unlike other women. Momentarily his mind fantasized that this really was her, travelling together with him, that she was now his, that he was her new man, her lover, her new Michael. Dreaming, wishing of touching her long lean body, of taking her upstairs and being loved.

The hotel concierge came over, apologising to Kieren for the interruption, informing Louisa her driver was now ready to take her to the airport. She was leaving much sooner than he would have liked, which was never. While kissing him goodbye on both his cheeks, in a very European farewell, he thought he would physically melt at the jasmine sweet scent of her perfect perfume. Then with Louisa's departure there were no more excuses, it was time to get outside and see something other than the hotel bar. Thailand beckoned.

Early evening, stepping outside into the sticky humid and exhaust fume filled air of Sukhumvit Road. Street stalls lining the footpath were immediately intriguing, selling cigarette lighters, binoculars, Maglite torches, small cross bows, brass knuckle dusters, punch knives, samurai swords, electronic stun guns and ninja throwing stars. Nothing here to entice the group of heavily sun burnt, loudly talking, late middle-aged English women he was forced to squeeze through on the tight side walk. Close to sixty years old, their breasts stretched low with the splits of their tops equally lowered, forced to follow their sagging tits down and down. All wrinkled cleavage, peroxide-blond dry frizzy hair and pink lipstick tastefully matching their sunburnt bodies. Not the stuff of Bond movies at all. Suddenly he was saved. There was a reason the street stalls selling wares for a distinctly male target market. One hundred metres, and a single left-hand turn from the hotel's front doors, stood the red-light entertainment area of Nana Plaza. Booking into The Landmark Hotel had been no mere coincidence.

Sitting in Big Dog's Bar, at the entrance way to Nana Plaza, fleets of motorcycle taxis came and went in convoys, delivering a seemingly inexhaustible supply of scantily dressed young women, each one more beautiful than the last. Nothing jaded about these princesses and right now he couldn't think of anywhere else in the world he would rather be. Sitting back, watching fishing shows on the big screen television, drinking cheap Tiger beers, while beautiful tanned-skinned young women soothed away the heat of the city by rubbing ice cold cloth towels on the back of his neck. White guys riding past on Harley Davidson motorcycles, with shirts off, tattoos out and local girls riding on the back, so very beautiful. What a way to spend an evening. Hot, hectic, noisy and perfect.

Leaving the bar, walking into the inner plaza area, rain began pouring down while a dozen competing stereo systems blasted into a fragile, jet lagged head. Beautiful women competed for attention from each of the many small bars. *Hello sexy man* they cried, every one of them smiling, seemingly so happy to see him. Entering a ground floor Go-Go bar and taking a seat, before he could say *beer please* three ladies were in his lap, ladies he would kill for, or at least seriously hurt for elsewhere. On stage, in the centre of the bar a dozen girls danced, all wearing plastic numbers and little else, pumping and gyrating suggestively to the blaring sound of classic western rock songs. No big screen television required in here. A more tasteful district than Patpong Road, Nana Plaza had a topless only rule for the twenty or so bars within its confines. No full nudes and no live sex shows. Nana aimed to satisfy with pretty girls and good music. All the bars

here, even the katoey or ladyboy bars, operated to the same Go-Go style format of girls dancing on stage. If you wanted to see anything more than half a bikini allowed, the idea was to take one, or two, home. The girls competed mercilessly for attention.

- *There are worse places eh, said the man seated beside him, in an easily recognisable Australian accent.*
- *Yeah, its heaven, replied Kieren unable to take his eyes from the girls dancing on stage.*
- *Sure is.*
- *What do you do if you like one, if you want one I mean? It's my first time, asked Kieren.*

Grey haired, mid-fifties in age, wearing short pants and a Bintang Beer singlet, with two girls and a beer gut perched on his lap. The fellow tourist explained the rules of the game, apparently being something of a Bangkok regular, and Kieren got the necessary information required for a holiday of Bangkok whoring. He learned that the girls danced on stage in shifts, changing every half hour or so. Tipping the dancing girls was highly encouraged, resulting in special attention for the generosity displayed, as it did in strip clubs around the world. When off stage, the girls then flirted freely with men in the audience, hoping to be invited to join them at their tables. When they did get invited, the men were equally encouraged to buy drinks for them, as the girls made a few baht, the Thai currency, from every drink bought for them, as it was with hostess bars worldwide. Apparently, the Go-Go girls received no money except the tips and drink commissions unless, as was the whole point of

it, a punter like himself chose to take a girl away for sex. Then he would be obliged to pay the girl's *bar fine*, money which went to the house for hosting the show. What he negotiated to pay a girl, or girls, for their time was between themselves and the girls kept all of that. The cost of the bar fine varied, depending on whether a guy wanted the girl for the entire night, or just for an hour. Between tipping dancers and buying drinks for girls Kieren began shedding money quickly. So much that his Aussie advisee pointed out he was throwing it away, to take it easy, but no matter, this was the time of his life.

Making his pick he headed towards the cashier, paying the bar fine for his choice of dancer, number sixteen, who squealed with delight before heading out back, beyond the beaded curtains, to change into some clothes and collect her things. It must be happy hour, thought Kieren, as not one but two girls joined him. Dresses on and purses ready, number sixteen arrived accompanied by another, much less attractive girl, stick thin and with a mouth full of thick metal braces on her teeth. The three of them introduced themselves to one another as best they could through the heaving noise of the bar. Sixteen was called Oon and her friend's name was Pai. Oon looked mid-twenties maybe, he couldn't tell for sure with Asian women. Dressed in a short black skirt and a glittering sequenced strapless top, Oon had curves to die for, with a large tattoo across her lower back and slightly crooked front teeth. She'd easily score a nine-out-of-ten back home, he figured, only losing the one point for the teeth. She certainly was the quiet type though, leaving the talking to Pai instead, who pronounced his own name as *Keen*. Oon pressed into Kieren, snuggling

her warm flesh tight against his own. Together they ordered another round of drinks and when Pai suggested leaving the bar and going dancing across the road at Nana Disco he was all for it. Why not, there was no hurry in getting her to the hotel. She wasn't going anywhere, not until she was paid anyway.

Leaving a bar with two girls, for the first time ever, was an incredible feeling. Just outside in the doorway another smiling bar girl stopped smoking on her cigarette, handing them a sheet of newspaper each which they held above their heads, protecting themselves from the wall of warm water pouring from the skies. Then, much to Kieren's surprise, Oon stopped briefly on the way out of the plaza area at what appeared to be a small shrine to Buddha and after saying a short prayer she made an offering of a small necklace of fresh white flowers. Seeing Kieren's confusion Pai explained.

- *Keen, she say thank you Buddha. For good luck. For you. Not get man every night, only sometime. She very happy.*

Touching. Still, he wondered if he shouldn't have stopped and chatted first, before picking this girl Oon solely on her looks. Oon's English was minimal at best. His Thai was non-existent. Communication was limited, and he was struggling with the urge to ditch her, to find another girl that could talk a little bit of English. Crossing the road, entering the disco and paying cover charges for all three people it occurred that money could be saved, a fortune in fact, by just selecting a girl off the street. They were literally everywhere. These girls milling about them in the foyer of Nana Disco didn't require bar fines paid or

drinks and tips either. Too late now, he'd already made a deal and ditching these two could be inviting trouble. As much as he wanted to dump Oon and switch girls, as much as other options presented themselves from every direction, he figured he would stick with this one for tonight. Fortunately for everyone Pai spoke reasonable English, helping sooth the communication difficulties and Kieren realised that was exactly why she was accompanying them. But it also meant buying drinks for three people and soon the noise of the club prevented conversation of any kind anyway, with him resorting to writing simple notes on paper napkins that Pai would translate into Thai for Oon's benefit.

- *How are you? Wrote Kieren to Oon.*
- *Sabai dee mai, shouted Pai through the noise in translation.*
- *Dee, replied Oon.*
- *She say, she good, returned Pai.*

Kieren learnt to say beer, cigarettes and chicken, all handy words and after that stopped bothering learning. Sketching a drawing, a world map, showed where Sydney was, and he wasn't, before giving up trying to communicate any more. It was easier just watching the other girls dancing.

Bangkok was not turning out to be the cheap place initially imagined, but being the first night he couldn't care less. Still, he made a few mental notes on stretching tourist dollars further in future. For tonight though he chose to relax and enjoy himself, secure in the knowledge that sex would follow. Tonight, he would stick with these two, have a night on the town and make two friends in the process. Having a friend

somewhere when on a serious bender in Bangkok wasn't a bad thing he figured. Tomorrow night however would be different, he would not be so quick to choose, but for now they guzzled beer and whiskey and with a little cajoling the girls even managed to get him up dancing. Then, with arms finally wrapped around Oon's perfect body he soon saw good value in the money spent tonight. She was a surprisingly good drinker for her size, they both were.

Morning and seated in Big Dog's Bar outside Nana Plaza again, enjoying a wet lunch and checking out the foot traffic heading back and forth. Things were much quieter on the street this early. He recalled eating deep fried frogs by the bagful last night, it was what the girls ate. McDonalds Thai style they'd joked, except there was a MacDonald just across Sukhumvit Road which he'd have preferred, but the girls thought it far too expensive. Vaguely he also recalled eating a deep fried scorpion and a bunch of crickets too. It might have been creepy but, as a chef, he was secure in the knowledge that no bacteria could survive a deep fryer. A person took their chances gambling with salads and soups washed in dodgy local tap water. That was the real enemy of anyone's Asian getaway. Best sticking with fried food and bottled drinks unless eating in a decent restaurant, that was another tip provided by the fellow Aussie in the Go-Go bar last night. Today he did feel slightly guilty for spending so much money, but it was always the same on the first few days of a holiday, before getting to know the ropes. His tipping everywhere was ridiculously excessive, but he certainly received a warm greeting today, returning to where he began the previous evening. Likely he would

move to a cheaper hotel in a couple of days too, that would bring the cost down. The Landmark was great, but the girls pointed out a reasonable hotel just down the street on Nana, where he could stay for an entire week at price he now paid for a single night. It even had a pool bar they said.

The board shorts, fishing vest and rubber thongs he wore today were certainly more comfortable than the clothes from last night. The denim jeans, running shoes and a long-sleeved shirt from the flight had been nauseatingly hot. Thankfully today, rain showers were coming and going intermittently throughout the morning. The rain was cooling but ultimately adding to the surrounding humidity as the water evaporated on the hot concrete slabs of the uneven footpath nearby.

Learning, he'd already stopped by a bank that morning, exchanging large denomination notes for numerous smaller bills which he'd then secreted in smaller amounts into various pockets. These he would use for tipping girls and buying food from the stalls and carts lining the street in front him. He felt a bit of a dickhead flashing great wads of cash around in such a poor place. When slipping tips into the G-strings of dancing girls last night he'd almost started a riot, until getting his head around the local exchange rate and being more sensible. Two weeks of total decadence was still the plan, but some fiscal prudence was in order. He was wising up. On the bar's big screen television an English premier league soccer game was playing that held no interest, contentedly ordering another Tiger beer.

- *Hello sexy man.*

- *Hello sexy man.*

He was sexy in stereo. It was the Oon and Pai from last night, his choice from the Go-Go bar and her friend the translator. He wasn't completely certain about Pai, the one doing the translating. With her flat chest and braces on her teeth Kieren was suspecting that maybe she wasn't a *she* after all. Standing on the pavement the two girls looked decidedly uncomfortable about joining him at the bar when he asked. The cashier lady scowled at them and Kieren quickly understood why. This was not their bar. This place had bar girls of its own and charged its own bar fines. These girls did not work there and in effect were poaching clientele. Ordering three beers the cashier lady in the corner seemed slightly happier, there being at least some revenue from them being there.

- *Girlfriend, said Kieren to the cashier who looked back at him disbelievingly.*
- *You hungry? You want Kop? You want she get, enquired Pai on Oon's behalf.*
- *No. Eat big breakfast, said Kieren lying and shaking his head at the same time.*

Kop, the girls were referring to the fried amphibious treats he'd been gorging on so keenly twelve hours ago. Now, without the benefit of a drunken man's hunger, he felt slightly green at the mere thought. Still, it was nice of them offering. There seemed a real desire with these bar girls to serve their men, to treat them in a manner he'd be hard pressed to find back home. Earlier that morning, while showering in his room after sex, Oon joined him in the shower, soaping and washing his body down. Coming out of the

bathroom his clothes were all neatly folded and the room tidied without the cleaners having been in, her good work again. He wouldn't get that from a hooker in Sydney. Still, he was feeling a little crowded by their intrusion, with the girls just turning up uninvited like this. Oon only left a few of hours earlier and he would have preferred to have shaken them off, feeling a little smothered by their attentions.

Finding him today was no mere coincidence. They were looking at him with big, cash cow eyes. He knew he played a good game the previous evening, likely better than most punters, having been more than generous, loyal even. From Oon's reaction when paying for her services earlier in the hotel, he was aware she'd done better than usual. Overhearing her making a telephone call before leaving, ecstatically discussing the baht she'd received confirmed it. Between that money, the bar fine, cover charges and drinks it cost a small fortune getting laid, even more than a working girl in Sydney charged, but they were good company. She was a nice girl, they both were, and it wasn't often he received this much attention from women and the inexpensive beer prices were softening the overall costs.

They small talked via Pai translating over drinks. Oon and Pai were apparently ethnically *Isan*, a Thai people from the north east of the country, where the most beautiful girls came from they said. She and Pai moved to Bangkok together three years beforehand, initially working in a plastics factory, which their parents still believed them to be employed in. Her mother would die, said Oon via Pai, should she ever learn the truth, that her daughter was a bar girl, sleeping with *Farang*, foreigner men. But unlike

factories this work enabled them to send money home, much needed to pay for the schooling of their younger siblings and covering their families' rent. It wasn't a sob story and they weren't bending his arm for money, they were just telling him of their lives.

He was still trying to count the ribs on them both, to see if the translator had one extra. He didn't want people thinking he was into that. It seemed funny to be keeping up appearances when he was unknown and so far from home. Curious as he was, he wasn't about to ask her outright if she a guy, just in case he was wrong. He knew better, having learnt that lesson by congratulating a friend's wife on being pregnant when she wasn't. They'd never spoken to him again.

It wasn't what he wanted. He tried to wriggle out of it, feeling completely railroaded when agreeing on meeting them later that evening, to go out to a nightclub they knew. He would like it they said. They recommended it highly and, as the club paid the police, it stayed open well past the city's regular closing time of one in the morning for bars. Bangkok, the city that never sleeps got plenty it seemed. With plans agreed upon the girls left, saying they would go now and meet him back there later.

Meeting later wasn't a problem. he didn't move from that chair for the remainder of the day, loving every minute, chain smoking, chain drinking, being pestered by little girls selling flowers, young boys selling watches and grown men selling Viagra. Oon and Pai arrived back, looking visibly disappointed at seeing him so scruffily dressed, still in shorts and vest and they had no reservations in telling him so. They

themselves looked fantastic in small dresses, high heels and glittering handbags.

- *We go nice place. You change clothes, yes. Pouted Pai on Oon's behalf.*
- *OK, righto. Kieren conceded.*
- *White shirt, long pant. Smell good, yes.*

Walking quickly back to the Landmark Hotel to change clothes, he caught a glimpse of himself in a shop window and immediately understood why the girls were unimpressed. Yeah, he was looking feral. No girl anywhere wanted to be seen out with a slob. Here more than anywhere a lack of presentation showed a lack of respect, making it plainly obvious to anyone and everyone that the relationship was financial and physical. Showering and changing clothes, he was back in twenty minutes, looking and feeling and smelling like a man going on a date, rather than just someone hooking up with a whore. It was back into the hot jeans with a short-sleeved polo shirt. He didn't bother shaving.

The tuk-tuk ride was exciting, all three squeezed in together, a girl on either side, roaring off into the mayhem of traffic. Arriving at the nightclub, a few blocks away, being greeted with a bowing *wai* from the doorman made such a pleasant change from the staunchly threatening bouncers of Kings Cross back in Sydney. The maître d' seated them at a table near the dance floor, the table itself having a glass terrarium set inside it, housing small turtles and lizards for their viewing pleasure. Enormous fish tanks were built into the walls of the club, holding schools of black tipped reef sharks circling the entire room. Oon and Pai were

showing their value tonight. No way would he find such a memorable place like this on his own. That fish tank was the highlight of this trip so far, he could also get used to everyone calling him *Sir*.

They drank volumes and ate little. The girls danced to a Filipino band, alternating between playing perfect covers of western rock songs and local Thai pop hits, their play list allowing the Thai girls in the nightclub and their mostly western male dates to all hear music they liked, intermittently. Gorgeously attractive unattached Thai girls filled the dance floor, far better looking than his company. Again, it seemed to be taking coal to Newcastle having a date in a place like this. He wanted to jump ship, to jump something other than Oon and fought the swelling urge to dump this uncommunicative girl. He wanted out now, wanting to freelance it in this exotic city. He also knew he was still learning the ropes. Until finding his feet, having this one mosquito sucking from him was still better than wandering the night alone, getting taken advantage of by everybody. They were also bringing marijuana tomorrow. It was a good enough time, but again the pigeon English became exhausting, especially in the noise of the club. There was only so much nodding and smiling a man could do.

In the morning, when the Viagra wore off, Kieren explained to his date that he no longer wanted her company. Paying her and showing her the door Oon cried what appeared to be genuine tears, pleading and pleading. Perhaps she genuinely liked him after all, but sticking to his guns he said, no. This was Bangkok and he wasn't about to take bread to a buffet again. Last night he'd learnt a new word. The word was *butterfly*, meaning a tourist who flits from girl to girl, rather than

opting for a semi-permanent girlfriend for the vacation duration. Yes, he would be like the butterfly.

ACDC, his favourite Australian rock band, blasted out in deafening volume between Muay Thai bouts. *Come on come on listen to the money talk* went the song's lyrics. The tourist bars he'd encountered seemed to all play heavy rock music, which was fine, suiting his personal tastes nicely. The music seemed a strange choice here though, where the audience were mostly mature Japanese men, sitting ringside, smoking heavily and drinking Johnnie Walker Black Label whisky. Sitting further back was the judging panel of older Thai men, incredibly strong looking with jaws and cheekbones chiselled from solid granite. It was they who decided the winner of each fight based on the points they awarded.

For a fight night this was a surprisingly civilised affair. Everyone intently watching the exhibition matches fought in the central ring and what a refreshing change, taking a break from those ever-persistent bar girls. For what seemed the first time in three days, Kieren ordered a single drink, just for himself. There was a finesse and beauty to this violence. Each contest went for three rounds of two minutes. At the end of each fight the audience tipped both the winner and loser and he guessed this was the sole source of money the fighters received for their display. It had to be. There wasn't any cover charge. A few drinks were being sold but not that many, unlikely enough to pay wages. With more fighters than guests they couldn't be earning much apart from tips.

Suddenly a dozen fully grown cobra snakes were emptied from a sack into the centre of the ring. Perhaps the fighters were planning to box amongst them in the ring, he didn't know. Being Australian does not automatically make someone a snake expert, but to him, these reptiles looked somewhat lifeless. A little man with a long bamboo stick approached the ring, poking and prodding. A couple of snakes rose up, arching tall with necks flared in anger as only a king cobra can. Other snakes remained prostrate and motionless despite the provocation of a light cane whipping and those ones were quickly retrieved back into the sack and carried away. Intensely animated discussions followed in both Thai and Japanese as groups of men pointed and debated about things. Intrigued, he hailed a waiter over ordering bourbon and asking about the snakes.

- *You want? Make you strong, the waiter informed him proudly.*
- *Sorry, no understand, said Kieren.*
- *Jungle food. Eat heart, drink blood. Dee. Very good.*

So that was it. Declining the offer, he continued watching, enthralled, as the biggest meanest looking snake was pinned down with a stick on the head, before being dragged to a table ringside. There, the head was quickly severed. The butchery continued until the heart was removed and the blood drained into a shot glass. Placed on a tray, the shot glass and still pumping heart were then presented to an intimidating Japanese man, with dark glasses and the heavily tattooed forearms of yakuza. Using chopsticks, the man placed the snake heart in his mouth, chewed slowly as if savouring the pleasure of it, before

washing it down with the shot of snake blood. The Japanese man solemnly nodded approval, while a Thai wearing a white cook's jacket came out, retrieving the metre-long headless creature, taking it back into the kitchen.

The waiter returned carrying two shot glasses and a large bottle of amber fluid with another of the reptilian creatures pickled whole inside, the snake peering out angrily from within.

- *Snake whiskey, the smiling waiter informed, pouring two shots, passing Kieren one and holding the other up for himself.*
- *Chok dee.*
- *Cheers, replied Kieren downing the glass in one as the barman had done. It was good whiskey.*

In the ring the fighting raged on. After a particularly gymnastic encounter Kieren showed thanks and admiration by giving the winner a sizeable tip, receiving a grateful bowing *wai* in return. The whiskey was making him overzealously generous. Still, it was less money than he'd been tipping most dancing girls recently and these boys were earning it. Considering himself honoured, the next contender took time to stop by while making his way towards the ring. Undersized, with roped muscles of steel, the fighter spoke surprisingly near perfect English, simultaneously performing warm up exercises while exchanging pleasantries. Standing a full head taller, this man's opponent was already in the ring, throwing lightning fast kicks high into the air to warm up. Facing significantly longer reach in both arms and legs, it was apparent the smaller contender would be fighting an

uphill battle to score points and defend against such lengthy weapons. The little Thai man appeared unfazed and as the fight was being announced in Thai, English and Japanese he asked one thing of Kieren.

- *I knock him out, KO, you give same tip give last man? Same money last fight, yes?*
- *Yeah OK, sure, of course. Good luck, said Kieren giving a little bow of his own, combined with two thumbs up.*

The little fighter left, stopping to recite a small prayer before entering the ring and warming up with kicks and air punches of his own. Pouring another round of snake whiskey, the waiter informed how the prayer the fighter chanted was a traditional mantra to *Hanuman*, the monkey god. The prayer asked that should a boxer be knocked down, that a wind would blow, lifting him back onto his feet gain. Kieren reckoned it would need to be a particularly strong wind. The mismatch was apparent, his money was safe. Not that he cared, it wouldn't be losing money anyway, quite the opposite. He felt proud to support such a noble sport and such noble men. Funding these fighters felt good. Knowing all the rules would also be nice but asking someone here to explain them now would blow his newly found cover, his self-assigned persona as a patron of this wonderful and ancient art. A bell rang. The anticipation in the hall was electric.

From the outset the smaller fighter was outsized. With every determined approach the little man was peppered with strikes from the long-range weapons that were his taller opponent's shins, feet, elbows, forearms and fists. When the bell rang signalling the

end of the first round the man's face was already swelling badly, sporting a ballooning left eye.

The second round started. Courageously the smaller fighter advanced and advanced, in a seemingly suicidal fashion, into the never-ending wall of blows. What he lacked in stature was more than compensated for in heart, but this was becoming a savage beating, more than anything administered in all the previous bouts combined. Kieren willed him to win, instinctively supporting the underdog, the smaller guy like himself. Middle of the second round and the fighter's face was now a festival of wounds, a gruesome sight. Still he pressed on, time and again into the crippling barrage greeting him. The little man's tenacity was admirable, even his opponent looked sympathetic towards the ordeal, but obligingly defended himself from the steely determination that stalked him, seemingly without any thought whatsoever for self-preservation. Half way through the third round a timeout was called to wipe away the blood.

With the fight nearly over the smaller man exhaustedly held his opponent close. Intervening, the referee separated the two and, in the millisecond that they restarted, a flying kick to the taller man's head crumpled him, immobile on the canvas floor of the ring. Perseverance prevailed, persistence beat resistance and the little guy got the knockout. The winner, if he could be called that, held fists aloft in victory, wearing wounds that would likely cause scars for life, while the other man was carried from the ring, still unconscious. Unlike the previous displays, focussing on point scoring, this man was working to a different plan of action. All he wanted was to get in

close and deliver a single knockout blow to his unscathed opponent, claiming Kieren's prize money in return.

Paying that big tip to the winner of one fight changed the game for everyone and a man was knocked out cold in direct result. Exchange rate ignorance left two men bloodied and broken, turning a scored boxing display for tourists into a last man standing affair. The sensation of witnessing such an ordeal would have been quite surreal were he not personally aware of the realities of such a full scale beating, the loosened teeth, the facial cuts and jaw fractures and the hideously uncomfortable weeks to follow. What just occurred was a cheekbone cracking blood bath, resulting from the cold cash thrown to a winner by a fiscally unaware traveller. *Listen to the money talk*, that young fighter came close to being seriously damaged for the price of a dozen beers back home. Then suddenly, before realising what was happening, he was somehow again convinced into agreeing to the same deal with the next two fighters entering the ring.

This next fight started out as a different contest altogether. Previously at least one man still worked towards a points decision, based on style, blows landed and such. Not this time. Both men just made themselves a lucrative deal for a knockout and there was no point in bothering with anything other than headshots powerful enough to render their competition unconscious. No body shots, no highly scoring combinations. Two men stood four feet apart, with incredible strength and accuracy they began kicking each other in the head with everything a lifetime of training gave them. A nasty bloody fight with noses broken and cheekbones collapsed. The

judges looked disgusted. The ringside Japanese were going crazy. Even the snake eating, blood drinking, yakuza guy was excited, hollering war cries and fist pumping the air with a carp tattooed forearm. A man fell, staying down motionless on the canvas floor of the ring. Kieren paid both fighters' managers equally, before turning and leaving immediately.



Nine

Convulsive retching, stomach muscles aching with every pointless contraction. Actual vomiting stopped hours beforehand due to running dry and fortunately now the visibly recognisable pieces of frogs and crickets were no longer coming up. Chunks of them, thoraxes, wings and legs blocked the chromed drain of bathroom sink, trapping the bile and unnerving him at the sight. Feeling sorry for himself he stared at the reflection of an almost unrecognisable man in the hotel bathroom mirror. Only other people might have difficulty recognising this man. The face staring back was all too familiar, this man greeted him several mornings each week, every week, for as long as he could remember. Harshly he massaged the face and head with both hands, in the vague hope of kick starting a foggy brain.

Extending shaking hands, revealed the tremors of an enormous night of indulgent abuse. Maybe forty cigarettes, a dozen bottles of strong Chang elephant beer, Sam Song whiskey, a handful of amphetamine diet pills, one hundred milligrams of Viagra and some other shit snorted with a bargirl. She, the bar girl, left just earlier. He'd been unable to perform, so easy money for her. A small axe was buried in the front of his head, or so it felt. Pain in the upper left lung felt like a hole was burned right through, from the tobacco smoke of cheap Asian cigarettes and the phosphorus of matches. The stale tasting mouth was amplified by the unfamiliar cigarettes.

Five days now and he hadn't gotten himself more than a kilometre from Nana Plaza. The new hotel was located even closer to the decadence than The Landmark. Feeling disgusted he looked deeply into those blood red eyes, sporting permanently broken veins in each. The nose and cheeks were bordering on becoming permanently broken veined and ruddy too. Work colleagues were regularly mistaking the flush of redness, thinking it was caused by some outdoor adventure or a sporty weekend, getting some sunshine, when really the rosy colouring came from sunless, indoor drinking. Nowadays working was the resting period, work was when the body could recover, like weekends were for regular folk.

Tired, so completely tired. There was a time when three hours sleep was all it took to bounce back, but not anymore. Everything hurt. Sucking in the stomach and flexing pectoral muscles in the mirror he figured it could be worse. At least he wasn't fat. The absence of a beer gut was surprising considering all that drinking, but eating was one vice he never did have. When food was a job it somehow became repulsive, surviving instead on coffee and cigarettes, the diet of many a chef. Maybe he wasn't looking too bad at all, considering.

Obese white men, wearing bandanas and clichéd Harley Davidson tee shirts, sat directly behind his window seat. Hardly dangerous riders, more mid-life crisis than notorious outlaw bikers. Enjoying every minute, they taunted the waitresses serving them with the smallest of tips, using their tourist dollar powers to the maximum. When a member of their group began booing a slightly less attractive dancing girl he came

very close to smashing a metal framed bar stool into the guy's face, just to teach him a lesson. Maybe those speed pills were making him cranky. Still, who were they to belittle anybody for their appearance when they themselves were fat, ugly and shabbily dressed. Horribly drunk and in someone else's country too, the losers. Feeling soiled by the company and turning to leave he was suddenly stopped in his tracks, by an offer that could never be refused.

- *You want game? Asked a big man at the pool table in a thick European accent.*
- *Yeah sure.*
- *Me Jonas, my break eh.*
- *Me Kieren. Fire away.*

Pigeon English continued, the language of the world, as small talk and hand signals revealed this new bar acquaintance was from Lithuania, wherever that might be. Forty-five minutes, two Singha beers and a whiskey later, they were already good mates despite the language barrier. It felt good shooting pool and talking shit, a couple of lads being lads. Jonas insisted on playing pool for drinks, but Kieren automatically knew this man could be trusted.

Something wasn't one hundred percent right with Jonas, hard to tell exactly. Well over forty years old, heavily tattooed, a lazy eye and slightly slow moving. There was a noticeable sluggishness about how he operated. A stroke maybe or perhaps he just doesn't handle alcohol well, thought Kieren. His gentle nature and massive stature reminded him of Geoff back in Sydney.

- *Kalashnikov, M16, M1, Ouzo, Bren gun, Glock, Luger, everything. Barrett. Barrett best, big gun, shell like this.*

Jonas was gloating, smiling broadly with hands held apart, demonstrating the size of the Barrett rifle's enormous round. He'd spent the morning, and two hundred dollars American, at a firing range on the outskirts of the city. An instantly jealous Kieren wanted to go there right now. That sounded like money well spent. There was nothing quite like firearm therapy. Blasting away with a shotgun the sense of power and release was tremendous. It was even a thrill letting rip into puddles or mud with a small semiautomatic .22 rifle. But what Jonas was describing now was an entirely new level of recreation. A high-powered Barrett, a heavy calibre pistol or a light machine gun, that really would be a rush.

Listening to Jonas, the place sounded fantastic, every weapon under the sun available, including a mortar. Apparently, people could even pay to kill a water buffalo with an assault rifle, it was expensive, but how good was that. Not wishing to appear completely ignorant Kieren told a few hunting and shooting stories from his youth, about dropping rabbits, the odd wallaby or a hare. About going spotlighting, shooting from the back of a flat deck truck, drunkenly cruising country roads with everyone armed to the teeth like a Somali militia. His stories didn't stand a chance, being immediately outclassed by Jonas' own tales.

One dead, one paralysed and him with the side of his head torn apart. Jonas was particularly familiar with firearms. Sitting in a fox hole in Bosnia as a French

Foreign Legion soldier on United Nations peacekeeping deployment, Jonas contacted his commanding officer three days running to request they be withdrawn to a safer location. Bosnian Serb militia spent several days making them fully aware they were unwelcome, delivering both verbal and written threats for them to withdraw, or else, action would be taken against them. Unfortunately, it was a UN operation under a shared, joint military command and due to a requirement for consensus, political wrangling and general buck passing at headquarters, it proved impossible to get a decision back from above. Adding to the confusion, the three troops stationed in that foxhole were all different nationalities and serving in different armed forces. The farce went further because none of the three soldiers spoke a common language and a Tower-of-Babel comedy of miscommunication prevailed over the deployment in general. The comical nature of the situation vanished as a fragmentation grenade was dropped in their midst. Jonas never saw Bosnia or the other two men in the foxhole again.

Jonas now lived on a small military pension. To make ends meet on such a meagre income he was based in Thailand, having married a local woman, shifting between Lithuania and Thailand, avoiding northern winters as much as possible. According to Jonas there were thousands of ex-servicemen enjoying the cheap beer and warm climate of Thailand in a similar manner to himself. Most of them were unable to survive financially in their western homelands on what, if any, military pensions they received.

Jonas reckoned that young single men were sent to war for three reasons. First, and most obviously, they

were physically able. Older men just didn't have the required energy, all the fighting would have to happen before ten o'clock in the evening or the combatants would all fall asleep. Secondly, young men generally didn't yet have families, so few orphans were left behind when they were killed. Most importantly though, in his opinion, was that once you had started a family with children of your own, it became very hard to kill and butcher others' children and combat soldiers that hesitated in killing, that couldn't pull the trigger when it mattered, they were no good to anyone.

He was envious of this old soldier's experiences but took considerable comfort in the memory of a small brass plaque, screwed to the bulkhead of commercial fishing boat he once worked on as ship's cook. The plaque read "*Every man thinks meanly of himself for not having been a soldier or not having been at sea*". At least he had been at sea.



Ten

- *She is dancing, she is dancing.*

She was not. Running her hands under the mattress, opening bathroom cabinets and wardrobes, she searched the room for money and wallets. The other one was using her body, fake breasts thrust into his face, distracting him from the robbery.

Paralysis spread slowly over his body and he knew exactly what narcotic they were using on him, liquid fantasy, or GHB. Small doses of the stuff produced a sensual and sexual euphoria, where the pleasure of touch and physical contact were heightened immeasurably. Larger doses induced physical catatonia with the mind remaining strangely active, conscious in a hallucinatory and disorientated way. Having messed up on this stuff before he knew what was coming. The inability to move muscles was beginning and was increasing by the second. In several minutes time he would become completely immobile and be at the mercy of these two thieves. All he wanted was a threesome. He already agreed to pay them particularly good money, but it seemed they would not be content with the deal on offer.

The girl pretending to dance was now rifling through the travel bag searching for valuables. What a bad idea, picking up a couple of street girls just to avoid paying a measly twenty dollar bar fine. He met them when walking home, when the bars were closed for the night. They came and chatted, flirting and

suggesting drinks in his room, suggesting more and more and he quickly capitulated. When stopping to buy liquor on the way home, the whiskey and coke cost five times the usual price when they shopped for him. He'd let it slide though, blinded by the visions of communal flesh they promised, blinded by the descriptions of dirty sexual acts they were whispering into willing ears. By the very particular manner they poured and passed that last drink he ought to have noticed something was up, but who spikes a guy's drink. Terrified now the realisation was upon him, these two were pure evil.

Bangkok hotels made great efforts in protecting tourist men from this very thing. It was standard practise, maybe even law, for all local bar girls accompanying men to a hotel to produce their identity cards to the hotel concierge. The details were recorded in a ledger for future reference should anything go amiss. This was in everyone's best interests, except maybe the girls. Visiting men took a lot of newly-met girls home and any petty crime that might accompany them was not good for tourism, the men or the hotels. Arriving back a few minutes earlier it was already very late, with the front desk was unattended, so no record of who they were had been recorded. Likely it wouldn't have made a difference, not for determined criminals like these two, fake identity cards were for sale everywhere in Bangkok.

Luckily everything of value, passport included, were currently locked away downstairs in the hotel safe. His wallet though was still firmly lodged in his back pocket, currently remaining inaccessible while sitting upright in the bed. Regardless of his diminutive stature in the west, Thais were a slight people, these

two particularly, so for the time being he held a physical advantage. Not for long though. In a few minutes he would become defenceless and they would roll him over and roll him. Meanwhile, the taller one continued pretending to dance and search while the other jiggled plastic breasts, oversized on such a small frame, all the time waiting for his lights to go out. He could feel consciousness fading by the second while fighting the GHB or whatever the sedative was they spiked him with, but not for long and he knew it. Summoning every ounce of strength from deep within, out came an almighty roar, stopping them in their tracks.

- *Police! Police! You steal from tourist. I call police.*

Startled, they immediately bolted, grabbing their handbags as they fled, leaving the door of the room swinging wide open as they left. The door would stay that way for the night. He could no longer lift a finger, unable to even swallow back the saliva running from the side of his mouth. In this drugged and drunk state Kieren would swear that his last vision of the night was real and not induced. A lingering golden spirit creature, hovering above the doorway where those girls just exited, a gilded Asian demon, like the carvings on the temple walls. Was it with or against him? He couldn't tell. It just hung in the air observing the scene before both it and he faded into darkness.

Awaking sometime the following afternoon, it was sometime because his watch was gone. Also gone was the new wallet intended as a present for Geoff, no matter, it was empty and cost less than five dollars. The wristwatch cost even less money, purchased from

a wandering street vendor selling poor quality Chinese copies of famous European brands. With the benefit of sobriety and hindsight he was starting to believe those two villains weren't women at all, but a couple of ladyboys masquerading as real girls. One had perfect breasts while the other had none, their preference for petty theft over actual prostitution and how it was impossible to get their pants off left him wondering, convinced. Live and learn. Those thieving excuses for women, they got away with nothing more than a couple of worthless trinkets. If they'd just stuck with their original business agreement he'd have paid them handsomely for a couple of hours work. Fuck them. Next time pay a bar fine, street whores were always trouble.

A bottle of amyl nitrate and a ladyboy may not be everyone's cup of tea, but there certainly were plenty of takers. Looking at the incredibly well presented *katoey* hanging around the bar, doing their hair and nails, Kieren wondered. Could he ever go there? It seemed half the men drinking in Nana Plaza were comfortable enough with it. Big Dog's Bar was the perfect place for people watching, spying on everybody coming out from the Go-Go bars with their choice of partner selected from within. Lady or ladyboy wasn't always obvious. The bar girl seated in his lap discretely pointed out who was which. He was stunned. The ladyboys were the most feminine of them all, disturbingly gorgeous. Not just a bloke in a dress, these really were a third sex and Thailand seemingly embraced them without any prejudice. Doubtful they'd be given the same respect back home in Australia, well, Sydney maybe, certainly not in Richmond.

Maybe he could, but only if no one were to find out. Nobody finding out could never be guaranteed. There was always the concierge and hotel doorman to get past. Bar girls were required to sign in at holes, to register at reception, and he wouldn't be able to look the desk staff in the eyes. No, it might be the best thing since sliced bread, but he wasn't planning on finding out. Hats off to the men giving ladyboys a go though, he mulled. Perhaps they possessed a particularly worldly courage the he didn't have. The guilt would do his head in, he knew it. How awful the morning after? How awful, seeing them in your bed, in daylight, with nothing on, the makeup all rubbed off, the morning stubble, the small shrivelled cock hanging between their legs and you with a sore arse. It wouldn't seem so courageously worldly then.

No, he would rather go to the grave without trying that particular indulgence, especially after a lifetime of using the term homo as an insult. Still, there were dozens of straight-looking guys heading home with a ladyboy or two. Water off a duck's back it seemed. No one was forcing anyone, nobody was holding a gun to their head. Really dumbfounding was that this wasn't a prison, the genuine women on offer here were incredible. The mere thought made him shudder. He kissed his bar girl, pulling her firmly into his lap, proudly advertising his straightness.

People learnt a lot about themselves here in Bangkok he realised. They could learn a lot about other people too. Maybe it wasn't what you did here but what you chose not to do. This place provided unrestricted access to the majority of vices and self-indulgent pleasures known to man. With no one ever knowing what you did here, except yourself, it was a

true test of personal character. From where a person chose to draw the line here they could learn a tremendous amount about their inner selves.

Thailand was a different country today. The crowds, the noise, the traffic and air pollution no longer appeared exotic. The unavoidable cries of the bar girls, being called *sexy man* from every watering hole as he passed by was losing the flattering appeal of a few days ago, a lifetime ago.

Old white men, sixty years plus, walking the streets with their teenage temporary girlfriends disgusted him as they passed by. Why did the oldest men have the youngest girls with them, he wondered? It seemed the older a man was around here the younger their choice of bedfellow would be. Being old didn't nullify their requirement for some company. Company was a need shared by everyone and a big part of being there himself. But when enjoying the fruits of Asia, they ought to allow the fruit to ripen first. It just seemed wrong for men to seek out the youngest prostitutes they could find. Didn't they know that teenage girls were for teenage boys? That's the rules, even he knew that.

There were plenty of them around there like that, dirty old men with the cold eyes of sexual predators. He was no angel himself and certainly no prude. Paying for sex was fine, even soulless sex, but as a grown man he felt an obligation to enjoy his pleasures with women mature enough, professional enough and emotionally aware enough to understand the situation. It was a different matter that many foreign men chose a wife from amongst the bar girls and Go-Go dancers, there was at least some commitment. Not

that marriage was something on Kieren's mind. Personally, he figured Thai was eat in not takeaway.

Six games to zero. Jonas was unbeatable at Connect Four, the children's game, and they were playing for beers. Jonas was winning faster than he could drink which made Kieren happy, knowing what a limited budget the guy was living on. A group of four men, from the United States, sat next to them as they played. Overhearing their conversations, they seemed pleasant enough, engineers working on some project in Singapore. The group were having a holiday weekend in Bangkok for a little rest and recreation, Singapore, they said earlier, was a little tame. One of their group was describing his photographs to each man.

- *That's the Reclining Buddha. That one's the King's Palace. That there is the Chao Phraya river boats and the floating markets. I'll send them OK, he said in a charming southern drawl.*

It seemed none of these men's vacations included anything but bars and strip clubs. The photographs being distributed were providing an alibi for each of them on returning to work or going home.

Crack, a sound that only breaking bones can make and the yelping howls that followed were blood curdling. A taxi struck a dog on the street, not more than ten metres in front of them. There were dogs everywhere in Bangkok, placid enough during daylight hours but frightening to encounter at night when their courage grew as they formed packs, roaming the streets. The taxi just kept driving on

without stopping. In obvious pain the dog grovelled, with a back leg hanging awkwardly from the hip socket, dragging itself with front legs and taking refuge under a food cart, locked up unused, on the roadside. Now it was under the wheels of the cart, assuming a defensive position, snarling rabidly at the feet walking passed, with Kieren the only person seemingly aware of its plight. It pained him to think of the dog suffering, they were the one creature he loved and trusted most in this world. He'd be happy paying a veterinarian to treat it, but no way was he going near it. Likely the thing was diseased or dangerous or both. Just now it looked quite capable of taking a person's throat out.

From across the street came a Gollum of a fellow with a twisted body and wildly grinning demeanour that advertised disabilities both physical and mental. Slowly and carefully he approached this dog. Closer and closer he ventured, making soothing sounds and clucking noises, transfixing the injured animal. Slowly the demented looking fellow approached the cart, then squatting down slowly he edged closer and closer despite the dog's flaring teeth. The animal was in pain, that much was apparent, but it proved to be a knowing beast, eventually permitting itself be touched. Gently the twisted diminutive man began checking the awkwardly extended rear leg. For five minutes his hands felt every part the creature's body assessing it for any other injuries it might have received, all the time making soothing noises. Then in a single movement he manipulated the dog's dislocated rear hip back into place, the animal's only reaction being a puppyish yelp. Almost immediately the dog stood up

and trotted away, nursing the injured leg but obviously not too much the worse for the ordeal.

St Francis was at hand, with a crooked smile and crippled body and incredibly beautiful heart. Perhaps this world was alright after all, he thought. Tears flooded his eyes, hidden from the old soldier's view by fake aviator sunglasses.



A paper bag, some baht in exchange, two men disappearing on foot into the traffic without looking back once. It certainly a person curious as to what was in that bag. Thoughts of being stung at Central Station surfaced and he crossed fingers in hope. So, what exactly did he just blow more money on? Before checking, the first priority was losing this tuk-tuk driver ferrying them about. The driver knew what was going on and while holding contraband he was highly vulnerable to this stranger. No doubt the police would reward the driver for dobbing him in, reward him with some of the very same money Kieren would obligingly pay them to get himself off. So, at the next busy intersection, when they were boxed in by traffic, he handed the driver twice the fare displayed on the metre and legged it, quickly weaving left and right through small side streets, entering a dirty looking bar and taking a seat out back, hidden from the street.

Ordering a large bottle of Chang, while half expecting the drug squad to burst through the doors, his heart

raced. When ten minutes uneventfully passed he finally ventured into the wet floored, urine smelling bathroom to see exactly what the paper bag contained. Inside the bag was a plastic bag and inside that were twenty pills as promised. Good news, commercially pressed pills, brown with flecks of white, the image of a small dove indented into each one, a legacy symbol from the first European ecstasy pills of the nineteen nineties. These things were manufactured with recreational drug users in mind, rather than just some random pharmaceutical. He was expecting a bag full of aspirin, or tree bark. It was a good start, but exactly what they were composed of only time would tell. Opening the small zip lock bag released a familiar odour, the sickly-sweet smell of brown heroin. The bag just smelled like smack.

Taking only a half pill, washing it down with beer and leaving the foul-smelling bar, he flagged a motorcycle taxi for the trip back to Nana. Arriving at the hotel with a warm glow rising throughout his entire body and finally using a clean bathroom, it was pleasantly surprising to see a small shrivelled mushroom where a penis had been just minutes earlier, meaning there was some speed in these pills too. So, he'd ended up with a plastic bag full of pills that smelt like exactly what they were, heroin the drug of losers. He crushed one up, smoking half. It was smack alright, that awful taste confirming it.

- *Save me from myself, he said aloud, before collapsing backwards into bed.*



Eleven

Sydney. Holed up in bed for a week, wrapped in home spun blankets of post-holiday depression and self pity. Thailand took its toll. He was feeling more than slightly broken. The strip search at Sydney Airport was disturbing enough, the anxiety of it heightened considerably by the small packet of brown speckled pills wrapped inside two condoms and slipped up inside his arse. He thought about swallowing them but wasn't sure if latex could survive the journey through his digestive system, so they'd the suppository route, they were designed for that. Starting initially with a simple luggage search it escalated when the word unemployed was listed under occupation on the arrival card. Unemployed and travelling to South East Asia was suspicious and they'd wanted to know the reason for his journey. They'd also said he looked the type. It was saddening when the customs officers began looking for needle marks where major veins ran down arms and legs. It was sickening being mistaken for a junkie, but the airport hadn't been the place to get into arguments with border officials. Remaining helpful and polite he'd kept his cool. Happily consenting to the strip search and waiving the right to contacting a lawyer, saying there wasn't any need. He'd given them no reason to take any additional investigative steps, like an x-ray, that might reveal a small parcel secreted away in his bowel. Quite a rush pulling it off, though he doubted it was something worth doing again.

The real trouble with carrying those pills was that if apprehended they could prosecute for Class A heroin. It was foolish, he knew, but he simply couldn't leave them behind. Anyway, he'd gotten away with it. They were the only shopping he'd brought home, them and a two dollar pair of fake aviator sunglasses. It was a direct flight as well, Bangkok to Sydney. He wouldn't try carrying if going through Singapore or Malaysia, where they would hang and shoot you respectively.

Sitting now with his one true friend at The Green Park hotel, watching the Liverpool Street traffic pass by, it all looked so subdued in comparison to the frenzied streets of the Bangkok.

- *Spiked you reckon, sure you weren't just pissed?
Asked an open-mouthed Geoff.*
- *Spiked for sure.*
- *Not like you to complain about that though.*

What tremendous fun, regaling Geoff with travel stories and smuggling exploits, omitting the fact that it was mostly smack brought home, knowing that nobody likes a heroin smuggler. The look on Geoff's face changed from shocked to disbelieving as Kieren informed him about why he wasn't getting the gift of a wallet, having been robbed of it. Geoff looked more worried than amused by the tales being conveyed. There was a time when he would've been impressed, jealous even, but it seemed those days were behind him.

- *Come over for dinner this Sunday Copper. You look like you could do with a decent meal.*

- *In comparison to you that is, retorted Kieren defensively, immediately regretting the weight jibe.*
- *I'll invite one of her sisters over for you. Take your pick, Selma or Patty. At least they both smoke. It must be hard meeting girls being a smoker. Like kissing an ashtray, they say.*
- *Kiss my arse.*

Rock scissors paper decided whose round it was, sending Geoff to the bar. Looking at the smokers outside Kieren wondered, were cigarettes really that much of an issue with women these days? It certainly was becoming a hassle dashing outside every ten minutes for one. Hotels and bars without smoking areas were now no-go zones. Even some of Sydney's beaches were banning smoking outright, not that he spent much time at the beach, but still, some day out that would be, getting all stressed and shitty, no relaxation there. The flight from Bangkok was terrible and made sleepless by the constant cravings for nicotine. It did feel good though, coming home to the first smoke of his regular brand, Winfield, again. Bangkok was Marlboro or nothing and the quality there was atrocious. Like a lot of things for sale in Asia most cigarettes were cheap Chinese knock offs, fakes so he was told. Nuggets of black lung tar still clung inside his lungs because of them.

- *Hey, ah got a bit of news for you, said the big man, returning with two schooners.*
- *Do tell, enquired Kieren draining half his glass in one gulp.*

- *We have another baby on the way! A girl apparently. Geoff looked delighted. Kieren couldn't think of anything worse.*
- *Congratulations, said Kieren, furiously pumping his best mate's hand. Give me a minute and I'll go roll a fat sticky joint and we can pretend it's a cigar.*
- *Sorry mate, said Geoff apologetically. Got to take her highness in for a scan later, better not, eh. Come over on Sunday for dinner. I'll get the girls over for you.*
- *Yeah, righto.*

Geoff's dinner invitation was intimidating, largely because of the constant chaos of their kids, the hurricane was maddening. Then there was Karen, Geoff's wife. She wasn't always particularly hospitable either. Going over there meant her hassling him about settling down, getting a nice girl to take out instead of her husband. Thoughts of Selma and Patty made him uneasy too. What was Geoff thinking? Anyway, having slept with nine different women during two weeks in Bangkok there was no pressing need for the company of women, though he never officially counted the ones paid for in his personal tally.

- *Almost forgot. Starting that new job next week, at that hotel in Pyrmont. There's plenty of work there if you want.*
- *Thanks Geoff, I'm meeting up with a new agency this week. So, should be sorted. Cheers though.*
- *Oh well, the offer stands, OK.*
- *Righto, thanks and congrats on the baby, eh.*

With Geoff away to the prenatal clinic Kieren left as too. He knew it was selfish, but with the arrival of another baby Geoff would become a less frequent feature in his life. He wanted to carry on, to have a beer with someone else and wondered who to telephone, but not many of the old mates were keen now, most were ghosts. It was all bills and family. He hardly saw any of them and the married ones told fibs to their wives about where they'd been when catching up with him, Geoff the exception. He was feeling lonely today, even after the hour of company just spent with a friend. For a fleeting moment he wished for a job, someplace to go to, for the conversation, for the company, for the distraction from this miserable solitary introspection, from moments exactly like this. No longer was he *sexy man*. No one was clamouring for attention or striking up conversations. Girls weren't lining up down the street and no one was calling him *Sir*, not here, not in Sydney.

Loneliness was another hurt, another invisible pain. Nobody warned you about that when growing up. Might have been nicer to people if he'd known they would be needed one day. Now he understood why his mates started families, it was loneliness driving them to it. Loneliness was nature's cruel punishment for not breeding. He didn't really want a wife and the idea of children was appalling but spending an entire lifetime alone, on the outer, that wasn't particularly appealing either. Nature was a cunning bitch, you were damned either way.

An old man passed by, walking a small white dog on a retractable leash. Seeing these two together forced thoughts of his own neglected dog. Rez wasn't getting much love recently either. Luckily the girls were so

good at looking after him, taking him walking most days and sometimes to the park for their Tai Chi classes with the old Chinese guy from the vegetable store. They often spent more time with Rez than he did. The girls were doing a detoxification this week they'd said. So much for their die hard hedonism, he hoped for his own sake that they weren't going completely straight, there'd be nobody to misbehave with then.

Perhaps another fishing trip was in order? Some bonding time with the dog was overdue. From the rasping wheezing of his breath, the faint gurgling sound of tar in his lungs and the sweat rising on his forehead as he walked towards home, he could do probably do with spending some time outdoors. He blamed those awful Marlboros. There was a time when he was as fit and healthy as a tiger, when he could outrun most men, but he would be lucky fighting his way out of a wet paper bag today. Since stopping work he'd done very little physically, apart from bending the elbow and a few mattress press-ups in Bangkok. Sitting around the house or being on holiday made the cigarette consumption sky rocket too. Working prevented lighting up for extended periods, but now, being unoccupied, a cigarette seemed permanently burning in his hand. He awoke coughing furiously every morning now, he simply couldn't shake that cough. He was one of the few remaining smokers he knew and was beginning to feel each cigarette slowly but surely killing him. He once read somewhere that all smokers were secretly suicidal. Did he really want to die? That changed from day to day. It was getting expensive too. Waiting at the intersection he pondered about perhaps having a cleansing period, having a

detoxification himself wouldn't hurt. He couldn't remember a day without cigarettes since being a kid, since his mid-teens. It was strangely terrifying though, the idea of giving up the fags. He smoked, it was partly who he was. Bad enough to have lost his job, well, to have lost interest in it, but smoking was a significant portion of what little self identity remained. Quitting would mean saying goodbye to a close friend, one he'd had for fifteen years, a companion that'd stuck with him through thick and thin, accompanying him drinking when no one else would.

Arriving home to an empty house Kieren went immediately out back, letting the dog in, with Rez skittering about on the chequered linoleum floor of the kitchen, wagging its entire body in excited pleasure of seeing his master home. Nothing like the intensity of the welcome received when arriving back from holiday, but close. Someone was pleased to see him at least, or hungry.

- *Sorry mate.*

No dog food, the fridge was almost completely bare. Rez would have to make do with a handful of dried out, pre-grated cheese in a bowl from the sink, the cheese vanishing in a millisecond, hoovered up instantly. Upstairs in the bathroom he stared at himself in the mirror. A bit thinner in the face maybe, but was he really looking bad? Customs officials and Geoff obviously thought so. Generally, he was proud of his physical appearance. Small yes, but always fit looking. He liked the idea of being ropey and coiled like Steve McQueen in *The Getaway* or Clint Eastwood in those early western movies, as the man with no name. The possibility of appearing weak and feeble was

appalling. He fancied himself as a bit of a hard man, sullen and unpredictable, the strong outdoors type, resourceful. The sort it would take a bullet to stop and the type of man people wanted beside them in a pickle. Taking off the shirt he flexed his muscles, but it was no longer muscle, it was just plain skinny. Turning, trying the muscle pose again in profile, it made no difference. I was all collar bones and yellow stained teeth, not exactly an imposing figure, hardly intimidating. He looked more like an elderly geriatric than the hard-living pirate he fancied himself as being. How did that happen? An early night couldn't hurt. Back downstairs, after giving the dog the last of the milk, he grabbed a beer from the fridge for dinner.

The dog slept at his feet on the lounge rug while he drank, channel surfing the television and becoming bored, fidgety and restless. Needing a distraction of sorts that Deadman's letter, the suicide note stashed upstairs sprung to mind. Between hooking up with Sonia and getting away overseas it'd almost been forgotten, but not quite. Rather thrilling it was, having it hidden away. Would it feel the same once it was opened? Somehow it being there kept him going, a last resort of sorts. There was one thing in this world to look forward to as long as it remained unopened and unread. Would it be a disappointment if he did read it? Was just now, while feeling so shit, really the best time for reading the last words and testament of a desperately suicidal man? Would that cheer up this post-holiday come down?

Since finding that thing hanging in those trees a lot had happened. Quitting work, meeting a girl, losing a girl, going overseas, spending most his savings and shagging a good portion of South East Asia. Not much

opportunity to dwell on that corpse. No one at all, he hadn't mentioned that day to anyone, not a living soul. Somehow his mind preferred avoiding thinking of it, pretending it never happened. It felt easier that way, but now he saw it all again, those boots, the jacket, the willow tree, the nylon cord and flies, all of it in perfect detail. Most of all the face, that image would remain with him forever. Contorted and swollen, bulging weeping eyes looking at him. That picture would always remain. Was it really something to deal with just now? Tired, irritable and angry at nobody in particular, he decided on saving that treat for a better mood, when he could enjoy it. Now wasn't the time. He would keep that one up his sleeve, for a while at least.

Upstairs, entering his room, the musky smell of sweat and unwashed laundry struck his nostrils unpleasantly, forcing him to open the bedroom window, awkwardly lifting the heavy wooden frame, holding it up with a screwdriver inserted into a hole drilled into the wood. Laying on the bed was a pile of soggy, rain stained mail, the girls having brought it in from outside. Usual rubbish, a bank statement he was too frightened to open, payslip from the last agency work, a reminder letter about renewing the fishing licence. Not all rubbish, one an actual letter, with name and address written in ink, addressed to *Mr Kieren Walsh*. An actual letter, no one ever wrote to him ever, except maybe cards on birthdays and Christmas. On the reverse side, on the top right corner there was one word, *Sonia*.

Dear Kieren. Her handwriting was dreadful, like a small child's. How are you? First few weeks were awful. Addictions are demons, she wrote, but things are better

now. The physical addictions were gone now and the worst was over she'd been told. Her battle now would be psychological, in sticking to it. She wrote about a technique they taught her, whereby she viewed the cravings, her addictions, as a monster living inside her body. Her cravings were the hunger pains of the evil beast. Her sole job from now on was starving that creature to death, by not feeding it the narcotics it craved. No matter how hard the foul thing cries out she mustn't feed it, she wrote. They even encouraged her to draw pictures of it, this inner demon, to help visualise it as a real thing. She wrote how her anxieties seemed to be fading, some at least, while others were not. She was still having bad dreams, about being attacked, she wrote, but dealing with that was another matter. The final paragraph stunned him, telling about his appearances in her dreams, protecting her from the men stalking her in her sleep. Then her last words. *Looking forward to seeing you again soon, Sonia.*

That last part sounded keen. Did he really want her though? A girlfriend, could he face it? It was over three years since being close to anyone, since being committed to someone. Last time, when it ended as relationships do, brought him to his knees for months and months. Since then being sad had become something of a habit, becoming his default emotional state, but at least the pain was subsiding. He couldn't face going through all that again.

Given a choice between having a heart broken again or taking a physical beating it would be no contest. Love hit hard for a little guy with wings and a person paid dearly for the pleasures of the arrowed one. When his heart broke properly it was as though the world ended, and it did for a while. It might be

intangible, physically impossible to measure, but heartache was real. A bit like loneliness and the wind, they couldn't be seen, a person only felt the effects.

Last time hurt. He hurt in the absence of her. He hurt for her smell. How he ached to be there waiting, with the lights on as she came home, so she wouldn't be scared in the dark driveway. Weeks of powering home from work, keeping it in like a beer chunder in a taxi, no soiling the cab, no tears on the sidewalk please. Hold it, head for home, hold it, home then hurting. He had cried and grieved and hurt so much it felt as though a bat had been smashed into the front of his face, as if the bones of his nose and sinus were crushed and fractured. The constant struggle not to lose the plot at work, not cry like a little girl, battling to make it through another day. Thinking his very teeth would crack from biting back the tears. Thinking what did he do to deserve this? And when he did get home it wasn't home, home had her in it, but safe now safe to curl up in a ball to convulse and choke, silently. He remembered that aching in the belly, like a stab wound from a rusty shank, not much damage outside but inside festering and the foul taste of bile rising in the back of his throat. He wanted her back. What happened? He loved her. But she didn't come around and she had not come back as he hoped.

Hours and hours wasted doing nothing. Staring blankly, thinking nothing, thinking of nothing but her. All the while his employer was losing a fortune as he did the barest minimum to get through the day and get home, alone. Then came the day he could no longer suck it in anymore. What to do? What could a man do, hardly acceptable to cry at work. No tears in the kitchen please, no crying in the Holden, so he walked

out and quit that job too. He'd been temping ever since, unable to face the commitment and responsibility that came with a fulltime job, with being on point, with being head chef. It was always the same. He never had a job that survived a decent break up. Then suddenly he'd found himself with no girl, no job and no reference. With no job the odds of replacing the girl got a little longer too. It wasn't just no money no honey, but without work his confidence, his self-esteem and social standing were ripped away. That last break up caused a downward spiral for Kieren. It hurt to think about it still.

What hurt most was that while wallowing in self-pity, and struggling to pay the rent, he heard from their friends that she was seeing an older guy, an accountant at the hospital where she'd worked. She bounced back bloody quickly, that happening was a second wound. Kieren figured women got over break ups faster than men. When the ship of romance sunk they often seemed not to even get their feet wet. While he was drowning in his own tears she'd been sailing off towards the horizon with a new man. Apparently that went tits up. She was nursing at a detention centre for illegal immigrants now, in Western Australia. Good money apparently, but she'd be earning every cent, out there in the middle of nowhere, dealing with some ignorant and pissed off people. Some were families, but a lot were potentially violent and received their medical treatment in hand cuffs. Even now, he wished to be there when she worked, standing beside her with a baton to break the hand of any boat patient that so much as looked like touching her.

Could he go there again? Once a girl got under your skin, once she had been let in, when that break up

came it hurt so bad. Then, words of advice streamed in from your mates. *Box on son, plenty of fish, I know a lovely girl for you*, but not many girls like a man whose occupation was crying and day time drinking, not the type your mother would be impressed meeting anyway. When in that relationship he'd become accustomed to being above all that, not trying to impress girls or play silly dating games. Things changed when a guy became single, the world looked at you differently. Partnered men were welcomed anywhere, pre-approved by the company they were with. There was a welcoming feeling when turning up somewhere with a pretty girl on your arm. When a guy was with a half decent woman it followed that he was probably half decent himself. A guy on his own could spell trouble and was treated accordingly. At his age being single meant a life on the fringes. It felt ugly.



Twelve

Campbelltown, an hour driving in traffic to get here and now too frightened to stop. What if he saw her? What if she saw him? Deep down that was exactly what he hoped would happen, to maybe see Sonia walking on the street and stop and lie, saying he'd just been driving past, what a coincidence, how are you doing, good to see you. Nearly an hour spent driving through the streets of Campbelltown. Three times now past the shopping mall, twice through the green gardens of the reserve, along endless random back streets, circling her residential rehabilitation complex, searching. Nothing. Same result as waiting outside the Cosgrave widow's house. Three trips to North Ryde this week, waiting, parked across the street from the family home in the hope of seeing her again, of meeting her. Where was someone for him? Giving up, he aimed the old for home, there was that job interview today, sadly.

Stationary, in the centre lane, hundreds of meters from the nearest traffic lights and without any other cars stopped in front of him. Confused and dazed, what exactly was happening? The first thing to register was Christian rock music, playing loudly on the radio of his 1978 HZ Kingswood utility, the only car he'd ever owned. This was the only station the archaic car radio could pick up, this and an opera channel, since someone snapped off the car's aerial recently. Limited radio was still better than nothing, there was no point in replacing the car stereo, not where he was living.

Jesus, Jesus, the lyrics chanted out. Self-consciously he turned down the volume, not wanting to be taken for a fanatical Christian and a bad driver.

This car originally belonged to his father, having been a company vehicle for the farming irrigation supplies firm where he worked. His Dad then bought it from the company. Much later he did a deal with his son for it, for painting the house, something which Kieren never did finish. That was just after leaving school, before taking his first job as a kitchen hand, the job that led him into a life of cooking and kitchens. His father loved that car and all Holden cars in general. He would wait and wait at a full taxi stand until one came along, refusing to ride in the queued Ford Falcons that were equally Australian in design and production. *I just like them son*, he would say, hoping the latest model Holden taxi might turn up, so that he and the cab driver could talk cars all the way home. Usually, before that happened, Kieren or his mother would tire of standing around and force him into whatever taxi was there ready and waiting, Ford or otherwise.

The Kingswood was hardly driven anymore, except occasionally out to Richmond visiting his mother or to get away fishing somewhere, which wasn't very often. Today down to Campbelltown was a nice drive. Usually it was such a hassle driving in the city. With a heavy clutch and three speed manual gear box it was tiresome driving in the constantly stopping starting traffic. He'd always planned to drop a five-speed gearbox in, the Toyota Celica one made a good fit, but he liked the idea of keeping it original, even though the original three-speed meant driving everywhere at four thousand RPM, a maximum speed of a hundred and twenty kilometres and chewing through gas. Such

a heavy old car, it was quite a workout just turning the thing. So, after a few years of owning it, he'd very proudly installed the power steering unit himself. Still, when compared to the earlier Kingswood models, this one was luxury with its radial tuned suspension. Everyone had these same cars growing up and the older models handled terribly. Like a wine bladder on wheels they drove, possessing tremendous fondness for under steering, drifting off roads when cornering, particularly when driven drunk, which was exactly how country folk drove much of the time back then.

This vehicle was the embodiment of himself and of how he presented himself to the world. Some people looked like their pets but Kieren figured he was like his car, old school Australian and proud of it. This was a car designed in Australia for Australia and it defined him. The issue Kieren faced was that the Australia it was designed for no longer existed. This car was intended for big rural roads and big rural people. Now, like most Australians, he lived in a densely populated city. Australians had become urbanised. Sure, some country folk still existed, but it was mostly a nation of townies.

The car's size didn't help either. Five metres long without the additional kangaroo bars. Not a lot of kangaroos to deflect in Darlinghurst but having a wall of steel on the front provided considerable respect from motorists in smaller compact cars, VW Polos and hybrid Toyotas, modern cars he felt were totally lame. Completely impractical, it couldn't even be taken into most car parking buildings for fear of getting it stuck. It spent most of the time parked in the lane around the corner from home, sometimes never moving for weeks.

Once upon a time he'd take sick days from work, staying home just to polish it up. Making excuses to bosses about being ill, he would go to the auto store, flushing brake fluid that didn't need flushing, changing brake pads long before the tell-tale chirp of wear. Often his head would go from under the blankets to under the bonnet without cleaning his teeth or putting the kettle on. That particularly memorable day, finally putting the mag wheels on, after months of saving up. Fifteen-inch, pressed steel chrome and he'd driven around endlessly for weeks afterwards, dragging mates out from their houses to look at his new set of wheels from every possible angle.

It was social conditioning making the car stop where it was just now. Red lights meant stop, except this red light wasn't a traffic light, this one was on the dashboard, this little red light meant add oil. In a foggy and befuddled mental state, he was reacting as everyone did on seeing a red, he stopped, and was obviously waiting for it to change colour, to turn green so as he could continue. It must have been ten seconds or more before someone behind finally honked their horn, dragging him back into the world in which he was supposed to be living. Breaking from the catatonia he drove on, confused as to what just occurred.

Meeting a new pimp, today's interview was with another temping agency for chefs and hospitality industry staff. Looking at himself in the rear-view mirror he regretted not shaving and not washing the oily looking hair. This wasn't exactly looking like the ideal food hygiene professional, and those eyes were blood red. No, no one should see him looking like this, not a potential employer anyway, what a guaranteed

waste of time that would be. Turning the car around he told himself there was plenty of other work out there and blew the interview off, searching instead for somewhere to top up that engine oil.



Thirteen

It was dark and wet and he was searching endlessly for a place to hide, having been pursued mercilessly throughout the night. Panic stricken he lay in the long grass that grew in a shallow drainage ditch running alongside the muddy track. He could see them approaching in the half light of the moon through the mist and the drizzle that rained lightly on him in his hiding place. Beyond cold, shivering so badly he was certain they would hear the chatter of teeth, his body involuntarily vibrating to bring itself warmth. It had been going on like this all night, running from one hiding spot to the next since being driven out of the small forest of leafless oak trees in which he'd sought refuge. But now he was so cold, and so tired he felt unable to move his legs or to lift his own weight to flee. They were coming again. From half a mile away, he was sighted in open ground. They were coming again.

Pointless really but using the last reserves of strength Kieren wrestled a tall upright post from the soft ground beside that track. Thick as his arm and taller than him, likely it once had a sign attached and now it would be his only weapon. In unison the three of them turned and rode towards him. Kieren's own nerve surprised him as he held his ground. There was little else he could do as the sound of horses' hooves gradually grew and grew to a thunder as they closed in, intent on using their mounts to run him into the earth. With immobile legs and a millisecond to spare, as the clouding steam from the nostrils of the first

horse blew directly into his face he hoisted the pole upward, tapered end forwards leaving the blunt end firmly planted in the wet earth behind him.

The lance pierced the charger at the base of the neck. The weight of the horse running at full gallop provided sufficient force to drive the stake three feet into the creature's torso before the timber shaft broke in his hands. The horse drove forward but without its legs, launching him aside and splattering his face with oxide tasting blood as it fell, distressed as it died wild, blood boiling from its flesh. The other two horses shied from the unanticipated defence for the slightest moment before their riders reigned them back tight, one either side, encircling him, trapping him with the foaming sweat of their flanks. In silence the fallen rider, dressed entirely in black, rose to his feet from where he had been thrown and painfully drew the sword from the scabbard on its hip. How it could see him, headless as it was, Kieren did not know, but he saw the purpose and knew it was intent on killing him.

Thirty-six hours since the last taste of brown heroin, twenty-four hours since his last drink and twelve since his last cigarette Kieren was experiencing the first taste of withdrawal. From that horrible dream he awoke to a sweat drenched bed and body. Hands trembling as they wiped away cold beads from his face and he swallowed back the blood in his mouth from biting into the side of his cheeks. Courtesy of staying up all the previous night by himself and drinking close to half a litre of bourbon, mostly straight, he overconfidently swore never to drink again. The decision to finish with smoking cigarettes came at the same time. That old chestnut, he could not count the number of times he'd uttered those exact same words

on the receiving end of a particularly severe hangover. They were usually said around eleven in the morning on a Saturday or Sunday and were an oath he never stuck with. Bizarre, sitting there upright in bed it wasn't a cigarette that was his first thought. Sure, he wanted a smoke, but it was the brown, that foul tasting opiate his diminutive muscles cried out for. That shocked him. He hadn't seen that coming. Just over a day now since those brown speckled pills that accompanied him home from Thailand ran out.

He felt achy and fidgety and nauseous, even his teeth were hurting. One thing at a time, he thought, maybe this was too much all at once. He headed downstairs, fossicking in the fire place of the lounge room, retrieving a couple of the longest cigarette butts, not caring that one had lipstick on it. Lighting the butt and inhaling, it was menthol, making him shudder involuntarily. He hated menthol cigarettes, but it brought some relief, tasting of ashtrays and perfume and mortar dust from the aging fire place. Who smoked menthol, he didn't really wonder, a visitor, a friend of his housemates Anna and Bella? Thankfully they were out somewhere and not home to witness him in this state. Of course, they were out, it was Saturday night. He'd forgotten the day.

A handful more butts rescued from the fireplace, torn open to retrieve the tobacco within and using cigarette papers made a passible looking cigarette. Passible to look at anyway, it tasted like dirt in his mouth as he lit it off the gas stove top. If there really was a god there would be a beer in the fridge. There were two. The first one lasted three seconds. He took the second can upstairs towards bed, being forced into the bathroom by sudden stomach cramps on the way.

Where did that come from? He very nearly soiled himself. Over the next hour the sweating and the aches continued growing in intensity, despite taking four paracetamol and visiting the fireplace and the bathroom twice each again. Maybe it was something he ate, or a stomach bug or something. Legs jiggled in bed and finger nails unknowingly scratched the skin on his forearms red, all the while running a tongue endlessly over those self-inflicted cuts, those bite marks on the insides of his cheeks.

What an unreal dream. He never dreamt, never remembered dreaming anyway. Did Sonia go through the same terror every night in her dreams, the ones where those two men hunted her, he asked himself? That poor girl, little wonder she avoided sleeping, avoided reliving that ordeal over and over. Laying there in bed, curled up in the foetal position, he hugged the pillow close into his body, imagining it was her, wishing it was her, wishing it was anybody, any her. Tears welled in blue eyes, but exactly who they cried for he couldn't honestly tell.

Sleep refused him. There was nothing for it. He dressed, intending to head out for cigarettes, the menthol butt's flavour having scarred the taste buds inside his mouth. Downstairs it seemed surreal watching himself from a distance, a reflection in the dark glass of the windows, a doppelganger staring back while talking on the phone.

- *Pretty good gear. Jumped on but not too badly, she said.*
- *Yep, yeah. Perfect thanks, I owe you one. No, no, I'm right. See you soon.*

She would meet him in The Cross in an hour, the pastry chef, she was going in there anyway she said. He suspected she was dealing for living but that was none of his business. It was tremendous of her to help, particularly this time of night. He would pay cash, this time for a full gram. He balked when she just offered giving him a syringe and a few clean needles, a rig she called it. Asking that question was almost offensive. What did she think he was? A Junkie? No, he just smoked it a little.

Walking into The Cross Kieren caught himself whistling to a Lou Reed song that wasn't playing, *I'm waiting for my man*. Knowing how the night would pan out he decided against drinking anymore alcohol, pacing up and down the street rather than waiting for the delivery in a bar, chain smoking all the while to make up from the half day without tobacco. The sickly sweet smell of sewer methane, rising from the storm water grates along the roadside, took his mind back to Bangkok where the same odour was everywhere. Neon lights, crowds of people, Saturday night and no temptation whatsoever to have drinks and leer at girls in the heaving bars of Kings Cross. Just wanting to get back to the house and collapse for the night, and finally there she was, his saviour in a Toyota Camry. The shopping took only seconds to complete.

The nearest bar was The Empire. Squeezing amongst the rowdy boozed up clientele, Kieren headed past the bar and directly to the men's room, entering the farthest cubicle and locking the door behind him. Slowly and carefully he unfolded the square paper packet, cut from a magazine and sealed up using an origami style series of folds which he was never able to replicate himself, no matter how many times he'd

tried. The pink brown powder immediately released its familiar odour. Keeping one finger firmly planted on the packet, lest his own breath blow this treasure from the cistern, using the tip of a single key, the house key, he scooped up a match head sized pile of the precious commodity. Then closing one nostril, he sniffed the hit through the other, key pressed tightly to his nose. The feeling of relief was almost instantaneous, most impressive for such a little taste, with the warmth of it flowing through his body, arms first then cheeks, chest and legs. The world was suddenly wonderful, immediately painless again. Happiness, it seemed, came in a thumbnail sized paper packet which carefully got refolded, then stashed away inside the coin pocket of Levi jeans. Heading out from the bathrooms and outside from the bar, it was time to get home, quickly, while he still had the legs to get there.

- *No.*

Arriving home, it appeared the house key was still on the toilet cistern, back in the bar. The girls were out too, partying somewhere probably, and with their house being break-in proofed there wasn't another option, he would have to go back. He might be lucky, it was in a cubicle and a single key wasn't much good to anyone. Between parked cars he dropped down onto one knee, using fingers to make himself be sick, before heading back to search for that house key, the smell of cat piss and concrete in his nostrils.

- *You've lost a bit of tissue, said a female voice.*

The voice was coming from just outside his visible range of focus. The voice began sewing his face

together with the pain of the sutures temporarily dragging him into full consciousness, then the tugging stitching stopped, and he gladly fell back into darkness. He came to again, lying on a trolley, in the small emergency department of a hospital somewhere, before drifting back into oblivion and nothingness. Waking later, this time consumed in a blinding white light, as a CT scan was performed on his head. In and out of awareness, a hospital bed, another light shone into his eyes and throbbing, throbbing, throbbing pain. Now a new voice, this one forcefully asking questions in his ear.

- *Have you taken anything tonight? Any medications, any drugs? Have you taken any drugs?*
- *Heroin and alcohol, said Kieren, pronouncing a W where an R was due to missing teeth, swollen severed lips and fractured stumps in his mouth.*
- *Quite a party, was it?*

What happened, he wondered through the pulsing pain? He remembered finding that house key and then the barman at The Empire refusing to serve him any alcohol. Vaguely he recalled a staggering, weaving walk home through the back streets, rounding that corner and seeing it all happening perfectly well, the danger in front of him. Just at that moment a dulled mind failed in sending the usual warning signals, the self-preservation signals, beware of danger. No alarm bells rang as he'd walked trance-like towards a group of big men all doing something he couldn't quite make out at the time, though so obvious in hindsight now. Them, those men, all shouting at each other with him

trying to get through them all, an arguing jostling group of rowdy agitated men.

What they were doing was fighting. Misinterpreting Kieren's weaving approach as an attack from behind, half that rage fuelled group of adrenaline pumped young men turned around and turned on him. No witty remarks, no starter for ten, no one asking him *what are you looking at?* There'd been a festival of huge arms swinging at his head, bone shattering and porcelain cracking with the violence. Hitting the asphalted ground, the raining of fists and feet continued for a time until the shouting sounds accompanying the punches and kicks subsided. Then silence, before a voice had come from the darkness. Never would he forget those words spoken in his ear, spoken in a strangely caring sounding tone, a thick nasal Australian accent. Nor would he forget the small crucifix swinging in front of his bleeding eyes, hanging from a sunburnt neck.

- *Hey, hey. Your tooth is in your pocket, OK mate.*

While lying there in that alleyway, crystalline fragments of vision had floated through his mind. Concrete, feeling cold, laughter coming from somewhere in the distance, a filthy ibis bird going through the rubbish in the alley beside him, as dirty as a naturally white creature could possibly get. Then him somehow rising, entering a bar with shirt in tatters, teeth broken stumps, blood everywhere and girls screaming, people backing away, falling, bright lights, an ambulance, darkness, then here at the hospital.

The sun arrived with an emergency dentist waking him again to apply temporary covers to the broken teeth.

- *This might hurt a little bit. We can't give you a local anaesthetic, OK. It could have a bad reaction with the heroin you took. OK, said the dentist.*
- *Fanku, said Kieren, not really knowing why.*

The sunlight hurt most. They will come and wash you shortly, a nurse said, her speech loud and slow. You may be in here for a day or two yet, she said, swelling of the brain, she said, you need to be monitored for a while, OK, they said. He was at Sydney Hospital Emergency Department, Macquarie Street, did he know that? They were looking to transfer him to St Vincent's Hospital Trauma Department, not far, we're just waiting to hear back, not sure they have a bed yet, OK. The CT scan revealed a haematoma and some fluid was causing pressure on the brain. He was lucky, she said. How was that exactly?

Drawing the thin blue curtains around the bed the nurse left. Painfully and carefully he rose up, lifting an unwilling carcass. Gladly he would fall asleep again in this bed. He might be a fool, but he wasn't stupid, he required further medical attention that much was obvious, but there would be a world of trouble with someone finding what was in his pocket, besides a tooth. Accordingly, the tooth went unmentioned to that emergency dentist. They could put teeth back in, he knew, but the risk was too great to chance it. There was a full gram of brown sugar tucked in his jeans and losing a tooth was nothing compared to losing liberty, as a gram of heroin could put someone in prison. From

the searing discomfort of every drawn breath he knew fully well the ribs on his right side were fractured. Pain however was only temporary, a conviction for possessing heroin would haunt a person for life. He was obliged to leave now, before falling unconscious again and someone emptying his pockets. It was also the natural response of the wounded, to take flight.

Shoes squeaking on the linoleum flooring of the hospital corridor, the smell of disinfectant and clean linen accompanying him, a broken bruised and shirtless body went randomly searching for an exit. Taking stairs down, gradually, one by one, hurt badly and stopping half way to regain his breath he touched a ballooned face lightly all over. His nose angled somewhat and the right cheekbone was sunken slightly and sparked pain to touch. Fortunately the jaw appeared unbroken. He knew what that felt like, from being king hit in his teens and was glad to avoid another round of plates and screws and wires. Things were bad, but they could be worse. A series of exit signs did their job and automatic doors parted, flooding him with a blinding sunshine. Then a statue, red brick paving and a pedestrian crossing with a large green expanse across a road. No plan other than getting away, avoiding people if possible. It looked like late morning, the sun was high eastward over the park. Wanting a taxi but there was none, only a sign that read *patient drop off only* and pounding hammer blows that were the rhythmic increases of brain pressure caused by his own heart beating. Cut, stitched and with a pumpkin for a head, Kieren aimed his body toward the sun and towards home, taking the pedestrian crossing over Hospital Road into the open green expanse of The Domain.

Half way across the freshly mowed grass of the park the abundance of teddy bears and children registered as being unusual. The balloons and smaller teddy bears seemed unconcerned at the car crash victim walking in their midst. The bigger bears, the ones as tall as himself, the women and the small children that were everywhere recoiled and screamed in horror at the Frankenstein striding wide eyed and groaning amongst them. Like the worst of LSD experiences, he moved through a sea of life sized cartoon creatures, clowns, jugglers, Marcel Marceau look-alikes and an old hippie on a unicycle. Seeds of dandelion flowers drifted past, floating in the air, while happy young families, boys blowing plastic trumpets that hurt like the pounding heartbeats, bear toting grandparents and an endless stream of startled screaming surrounding him. A teddy bears' picnic in the park, a stuffed toy brunch, a happy day for all and him, a devil, stumbling, bare chested and in denim jeans, the summer fashion of the homeless, weaving through a sea of picnic blankets, dolls and toys. Mothers snatched babies from his path. Concerned fathers took defensive positions between him and their children, as if he were an ogre out to eat the little ones. No one came close, they wouldn't. The shrill high-pitched screaming of the girl children hurt the most, so much for a discreet route home.

Wanting a road and a taxi he headed further through the park, amongst the trees towards the imposing Art Gallery of New South Wales. They were everywhere, hordes of young families parting like the Red Sea, aghast as he approached. He wondered if he might see Geoff and his children and be recognised, but no one would recognise him, not today, not looking like Christ

on Good Friday, beaten and torn. It was the longest quarter mile on record, desperately thirsty, craving water. He prayed silently for a taxi and the prayer was answered, a dozen queued cabs waited outside the gallery. Choosing a white Holden and opening the back door Kieren fell inside the car. The driver baulked for a moment realising it wasn't a costume, that Kieren looked like that for real. Three kilometres to his home, to his bed and sanctuary but he suddenly changed the plan. There was only one thing he needed. He craved what all men unwillingly admitted to wanting in times like this, in time of extreme need. He wanted what men cried out for when laying wounded and dying and dismembered on fields of battle. He wanted refuge, he wanted solace, he wanted his mother.

- *Been in the wars have you mate? The geriatric driver asked Kieren rhetorically.*
- *Richmond.*
- *That's a big drive. You got money on you fella?*
- *Yeah.*
- *We'll get you home son. Poor bugger. Drinking's a mug's game eh.*

The taxi driver said nothing on the drive and Kieren was thankful for it. Likely the physical state of this passenger, horrific as it was, was nothing unique to a cab driver in a big bad city like Sydney. He wanted to sleep but pain kept him awake and obliged holding his head upright with one hand, the neck muscles being too bruised and weak from those kicks and punches to support it. Applying pressure to keep the pulsating brain from bursting from its skull, his ribs screamed along their fractures with every short panting breath.

What really hurt, more than the bumps and vibrations, was the acrid smell of that pine air freshener, a scented cardboard tree hanging from the taxi's rear-view mirror, it was overpowering. Through one unclogged nostril the coniferous odour was bringing him close to being sick, burning, like sniffing paint thinners. Happily he'd have paid a hundred dollars to have it thrown out the window but without the ability to articulate this wish through a seized-up mouth, he just watched it swinging, stinking, hating it.

The houses flashing by began thinning in number, becoming intermittently replaced by open fields, then countryside. Then Richmond arrived. Pulling up outside the brick, two-bedroom, nineteen seventies house, it'd been less than an hour in the taxi, but it felt like forever.

- *He we go son. Home safe and sound, said the driver in a cheery voice, as if dropping off a grey-haired grandmother with her weekly grocery shopping.*

Paying the driver took time and effort. The wallet was wedged in the front pocket of tight fitting jeans, forcing him into rolling completely onto his left side, clutching ribs to suppress the hurt while straightening his right leg to access the wallet and money inside. The cabbie got out, opening the rear door, providing a steadying hand to hold as his wounded passenger carefully climbed from the car. With sparkling blue eyes, surrounded by radiating crow's feet and age spotted, melanoma dotted skin, the driver's face made him think of his father. It was good that Dad wasn't at home, witnessing him like this, his son, a bashed

junkie. Mothers were less judgemental of their boys and their sins, fathers were more easily disappointed.

- *Take care eh son. Maybe lay off the grog a bit eh, advised the driver, with a smile.*
- *Cheers, Kieren mumbled.*

Standing there in the growing heat it occurred that his mother might well not be at home. There wasn't any way of getting inside if she was out. Above and behind, magpies made the morning song that only early morning magpies make and Kieren realised it wasn't as late in the day as he thought. Reaching out and pressing the buzzer of the brown aluminium framed door, a fractured voice said aloud, *please*. Movement, the sound of movement at least. He could hear her coming down the hallway, she was home. He thanked God she was home. The door swung open and there she stood, stunned by what greeted her on the doorstep. With the taxi pulling away on the street behind, it occurred to him that this was the first visit home in several months.

- *My special boy.*
- *Sorry Mum.*

Light, another small torch being shone into his eyes by a man he didn't know, waking him, temporarily. Words were being spoken about him, not to him. Voices saying, he needs monitoring, plenty of fluids, discharged himself, just walked out. Then his mother's touch and her soft soothing voice, darkness again and all the while the constant hammer blows, one after the other, rhythmically pounding inside a fragile head.

Waking again, this time to his mother applying cold cream to the cuts and grazes and stitched up portions of his face. His body was stiffening, hurting everywhere as daylight seeped through the drawn curtains. Slowly, carefully his mother rolled his body over onto his left side, the side protected from the punching and stomping by the ground he'd fallen upon, holding a plastic bucket close to his body, him pissing into it, then darkness and pounding.

The day after the day after really hurt. Light hurt, opening eyes hurt, swallowing hurt. Broken ribs prevented moving, placing constant pressure on soft tissue that cried out for relief, if only the blackened body had the strength to relocate itself. The blessed oblivion of the first twenty-four hours now replaced itself with intense pain, preventing the mercy of sleep, forcing him to endure every uncomfortable moment. Heartbeats caused the most discomfort. Every beat another blow to endure, triggering involuntary whelping sounds, over and over and over, eighty times per minute. Uncontrollable stomach contractions began, violent diaphragm seizures, vomiting but lacking content, unlike anything he'd ever experienced, beyond torture. He truly believed he was about to die, that a blood clot would break free and lodge in his brain somewhere and finish him. He willed it to happen, wished for it. Let death be at hand, please, please, please he willed.

All this while a mother cooed lullabies while applying cream to the stitches and scabs, softening them to reduce the eventual scaring of her beautiful young man. Night and day, she came and went, hand feeding vegetable purees, lukewarm in temperature to avoid aggravating the stumps of teeth. Again and again

she rolled him, holding the plastic bucket, the same bucket he hurled nothingness into, time and again. Eventual trips to the bathroom were odysseys, a battle fought with each step against the lack of coordination and the dizziness that threatened to topple him. Once there, the sight of bloodied and dilated eyes frightened him. Little wonder they were so light sensitive, the pupils were diner plates and it saddened him seeing no blood in his urine that might indicate a terminal internal wound. No hopeful glimmer of death to finish the misery.

Outside the cyclical changes of day into night continued. Inside the pain was getting worse before it got better. After four days of being fed fluids and pissing in the bucket, Geoff appeared out of nowhere, no small feat for such a big man.

- *Mate, was all he could say.*

Geoff brought a small transistor radio with him, so his friend Copper could listen to music or the rugby league, to pass the time of recuperation. Switching the radio on, tuning it to a sports station, he placed it bedside. The noise, minimal as it was, proved too much to bear. Grunting through the broken porcelain of his mouth he pleaded for it to be turned off. Smiling, Geoff obliged then turned and left. The low and sombre tones of the big man's voice permeated the walls from the corridor outside, speaking to Kieren's mother in a voice fraught with concern.

- *If there is anything I can do Mrs Walsh, anything at all, you let me know.*

- *Thank you, Geoffrey. I'll give you a call in a couple of days.*

His mother returned, carrying pureed chicken soup. She began telling about how the hospital, when discovering he'd gone, telephoned Kieren's house and spoke to Anna. Anna, God bless her, his mother said, being a little protective of her cousin wasn't initially keen on getting her aunt involved. Kieren may well have wanted this kept quiet, Anna had thought, so she'd given Geoff a call instead, who then spoke with her. Everyone was highly relieved apparently to find out he was holing up in Richmond. Today was Geoff's second visit.

- *No one knew where you were, love. The hospital said the CAT scan showed signs of brain swelling. Geoffrey was worried sick, they all were.*

She said how the doctor would be visiting him again tomorrow and Bella and Anna were looking after Rez, so don't go worrying about that. She said the girls telephoned yesterday, asking could they come out to visit, but she'd told them no, not just yet. Finishing feeding her boy, she drew the curtains tight, leaving him be. Lying there in the semi-darkness, Kieren wished for his dog to be there beside him.

A week after arriving wounded in Richmond, in came his mother saying Geoffrey was here again, for another visit, if he felt up to it. Kieren said yes and quickly turning on the gifted transistor radio sitting on the bedside table. Geoff entered the small room, filling what little remained, this time with a bunch of papers in his hands. He was wearing his usual red and green South Sydney rugby league jumper that somehow reminded Kieren of Santa Claus, without a beard.

- *Giddy Copper. You're looking shit today, his big mate teased, sympathy implied.*
- *Paper work for you. Sign here, here and here.*
- *What? A will? You're after my Kingswood, aren't you? The W words were coming more easily than the others.*
- *I wouldn't be seen dead in your Holden mate.*

Curiously, these paper forms were applications for worker's compensation, a government financial assistance programme for injured workers. Generally, it was only available to those who sustained injuries while working, or travelling to and from work. Injuries like Kieren's, when incurred outside of the workplace and outside of employment, were not usually covered.

- *But I wasn't working, Kieren pointed out.*
- *Yes, you were. You just didn't know it. It was your second night with me and you were on your way home when it happened. Just sign them and I'll fill in the rest, alright.*
- *I love you, said Kieren meaning it.*
- *Faggot, said Geoff, not.*

Kieren signed the forms illegibly as his father advised him all those years ago. You don't want a signature anyone can read, he'd told his boy, just in case, you never know. Geoff took them away and that was that.

A few days later came a letter confirming it. Nine hundred dollars a week, until he came right physically, paid for doing nothing, and for up to twenty-six weeks. The big guy deserved a medal for pulling that one off.

True, it was taking something of a risk, but only if they were caught, and it was beyond true that an income was needed just now. The girls would string him up if he was unable to pay the rent. Darlington wasn't flash, but it wasn't cheap either and the girls didn't earn a lot, not enough to cover his share of the rent anyway. Thanks to Geoff they wouldn't be throwing his things out in the street to make way for a paying housemate, one which they would legitimately need. Because of his mate there would be no eviction, no joining the many homeless sleeping under the Cathedral Street rail bridge down the hill in Woolloomooloo. There but for the grace of God go I, he mused, thankful for not needing a swag to sleep in just yet. That one act, Geoff and the workman's compo scam, was the only thing keeping this tattered ship afloat.

The state of mind during that first week of recovery was comparable to the state of the body. While the self-pity and depression were understandable, warranted even, the self-loathing consuming all thoughts became indescribable. He never knew it was possible to hate yourself with such veracity. Part of him wished he could start life over again, make a fresh start, a new beginning. Another part wanted this life to be over, full stop. It was the shame of it all. How did he become such a fuck up? How did he manage to sink so low, to become so worthless? Whichever way he looked at it this was rock bottom. Could he muster the energy to climb back up, up and out from this sick dark hole that life had now become?

Where did it come from? When had he fallen? When did things go so pear shaped, he wondered? It was a riches to rags story of mental wellbeing. He was better off than plenty of people, he knew that. There was always food on the table and beer in the fridge. He grew up happy enough, with every opportunity, surrounded by a loving family and with all the support in the world. They hadn't been rich, but they hadn't been poor. There was always enough money for a few of life's luxuries, days at the races, picnics, getting away somewhere for holidays once or twice a year. Richmond had been a giant playground to grow up in, with hills and trees and rivers and girls. Compared to the dysfunctional freaks that Geoff was obliged to call parents, his was an absolutely princely childhood. Maybe that was why his mate stayed on the straight and narrow, having experienced first-hand the tortures of being raised in a home distorted by alcohol, abuse and poverty. Geoff was raised in a living hell yet was almost always happy.

What goes up must come down, perhaps that was it. This overwhelming blackness, was it payback for all the good times, the high times he'd enjoyed. He only felt good, or didn't feel bad, when drinking or getting stoned or both. When combined, did all those little highs add up to one big down? Nothing was ever for free, everything good in life seemed to come at a price. When that relationship ended a few years earlier grief had consumed him. Was that the price to pay for all the happy moments, the hugs, the joy, the elation, the Sunday mornings in bed? He was sure of it. Heartache and pain were the price of love.

Could he ever enter a relationship again and end the loneliness, knowing it would fall apart sometime in the

future? Could he face paying the eventual toll for the peace and pleasure that a woman's touch and companionship would bring? He craved and feared it simultaneously. Being with her, caring, sharing a house, sharing a bed, finishing it destroyed him. Was that the start of it all, did that trigger this blackness?

Looking back, maybe this darkness was already with him then, before they even met, before they ever broke up. Is that why she left? Was he really such a misery guts to be around? They never argued much. Sure, they'd wanted different things, that much he'd known. She wanted a house and babies and Sydney real estate was so frighteningly expensive. If you weren't already in the property market, then chances were you never would be. She'd wanted him to change his car, a big wedding, an engagement ring and a honeymoon in Greece. He'd have been lucky to afford just one of those things, but she'd wanted them all, she felt entitled to them all. He'd wanted to provide for her, to satisfy her white picket fence dream. That was why he went to sea, cooking on a commercial fishing boat, a long line vessel, to save enough for the deposit on a house. Fishing was the only way of making the money they needed with his half trade. But in that time spent apart they'd grown apart. When he was away, had she then realised how much better off she was without him? Had this unhappiness been with him all along, coexisting with them in an unholy threesome?

Perhaps he could have strived harder, achieved more. His tastes were simple, his old car and scruffy clothed were testament to that. Looking back, he could remember seeing it in her eyes, how he gradually lost appeal, how she eventually fell out of love. An entire lifetime spent working at sea would never bring in

enough money for her dream big city house. She'd grown up with a silver spoon in her mouth that Kieren himself had no interest in eating with. Likely a heavily financed silver spoon, as her father was declared bankrupt a few months after they'd broke up, great news as far as he was concerned. It was a hard thing satisfying the expectations girls who grew up rich, for who seven series BMW cars were the norm and anything less was a compromise not eagerly accepted. Diamonds were a girl's best friend which was something he would never provide with. Feeling such a square peg when visiting at her parents' house, coming away feeling less of a man than on arrival, her mother speaking in that quasi-English accent even though she'd been born and raised in Hobart. They were such wankers. They judged everyone by which school they attended. Social climbing upper class wannabes living in a bygone era, clinging to a long-outdated class system. Australia was built on who dares wins, not inbreeding. He imagined going there now, taking a taxi to their house and keying the paint jobs on those leased European cars of theirs. That would teach them. The thought of retribution made him smile a sinister smile. But he was going nowhere for a while, there was healing to do first.

The dentist was young, British and with dreadlocks for hair. Kieren wasn't particularly keen having this novice of a boy working in his mouth. He thought him a ponce, likely sent out to the colonies to learn from his mistakes before setting up practise, once practised, back home. Happily, he was proven wrong, they got on quite well. The young Brit even had two false teeth of

his own, from being kicked by a horse back in Britain, wired jaw and all.

Three new teeth in a row, two on posts and a crown fitted over the remaining stump of a tooth. The hardest part was two permanent screws being inserted into the jaw, forming the foundations for the artificial teeth. The remaining work was mild in comparison. Long and hard they debated, him and the dentist, about getting gold teeth. The cost was surprisingly similar to porcelain and was mostly covered by the workman's compensation. A mouth full of bullion, or one new tooth in gold at least, the idea was appealing. It was up to him to choose, porcelain or otherwise. The young dentist showed his true worth, solving the dilemma about going natural or taking the jewelled look. Bringing in a gold coloured marker pen, colouring the plastic temporary teeth Kieren wore, provided an opportunity of trying out the golden look before actually committing. Up close the gold looked great but from any distance the colour was lost, making him look toothless from two paces or more. Decision made and natural it was, but it had been tempting. How did a bloke like that end up working here in Richmond, Kieren wondered?

Finally completed, the three new teeth felt alien in his mouth. What a difference a clean and polish made to the rest of them, slippery smooth feeling, tobacco stains gone. He was a new man now that the missing teeth were fixed and the facial stitches removed. Altogether it took over eight hours in that dentist's chair. With the work finally completed Kieren handed the young dentist his phone number and a promise to take him fishing, should he want to see the real countryside. It would be good to show him around and

genuinely expected a call sometime, all men like going fishing.



Home alone in that little Richmond house with his mother off visiting his father before doing her dinner rounds for the Catholic Social Services mob she worked for. He thought it was voluntary but maybe they paid her something. How his mother survived financially he didn't really know. The house was freehold, from selling the bigger family place when his dad went into permanent care. He assumed she received a pension of some sort but didn't know exactly. He should ask her about that, maybe he could help. Maybe she didn't need help, but he made a mental note to find out regardless, he was the man of the Walsh family now after all. Lord only knew where Mr Walsh senior spent his days. His body was in a geriatric hospital in Penrith, but his mind was missing in action.

Earlier that morning his mother seemed a little less sympathetic towards him than on preceding days. Coming in early and drawing open the curtains and telling him to get up and move around, Go and do something outside, she'd said. It was Sunday she'd told him, she would be attending an early to mass if he would like to join her. It wouldn't hurt to show your face at mass she'd said. Apparently Kieren had a lot to be thankful for, but exactly what that was escaped him.

So, he lied and promised to go out for a walk about. He really couldn't face going to mass.

What to do? It really was becoming tiresome spending all day watching the clock and waiting to heal, tick, tick, tick, tick. Showering in her small bathroom Kieren looked at his reflection in the mirror. Again he failed to recognise the man looking back at him, though this time for different reasons. The face was structurally changed in the alley that night. The cheekbone on the right side was sunken, plain to see now that the swelling had reduced, though blue-yellow bruising still shaded much of the face. That kink in the nose would likely remain. The broken nose he didn't mind, quite liking it in a menacing sort of way. The slightly crooked nose gave a hint of pugilist, as did the scar above the eyebrow where the stitch holes were still evident. The greatest concern was the change to the shape of the mouth. After losing a piece of tissue from the upper lip, the stitches closing the wound pulled his mouth slightly over to one side, he felt disfigured. No beard stubble grew on the scar either, leaving a white split, a fight mark that was clearly visible. It would break down over time apparently, becoming less visible, but still it bothered him, that mouth wasn't his.

The silence in the house was deafening. No road noise in Richmond, no neighbours' voices, no sirens, none of that constant city hum from one million collective air conditioners. Entering the spare bedroom, he picked up the small transistor radio, taking it into the kitchen. Gently lowering himself into a chrome legged, vinyl covered chair at the small Formica table he twiddled the tuner back and forth trying a few stations, automatically recoiling at the

first when classical music began floating out, but the others were no better. Bellowing DJ voices, hard rock music stations, screaming advertisements and echoing horse races callers jarred his head. He tuned the radio back to that first station, with the peaceful classical music, somehow strangely soothing with gentle instrumentals and an absence of annoying vocals. Boiling rumbling, the kettle vibrating the stainless-steel bench began drowning out the music, so he flicked the switch off at the wall. Little matter, these days he could hardly finish a mug of tea. It was no longer the teeth, they were settling down nicely and able to withstand some heat, but his recuperating body was now rejecting the toxins it usually absorbed so readily, so greedily, including caffeine. At sea it was often the same. When the ocean became rough and his constitution became fragile, half a tea or even half a cigarette usually proved to be enough.

Sounds drifted outward from the palm-sized radio, made by instruments he couldn't name if he tried. His usual taste in music was unwaveringly sourced from the same instruments, two guitars, a bass, drum kit and occasionally a keyboard. Even the radio stations he listened to consistently pumped out the same musical format. Over and over it was four-piece rock acts, three guitarists and a drummer, all of them wearing black, growing long hair, plenty of tattoos and wearing studded belts. Individuality my arse, thought Kieren suddenly. Rock musicians the world over were the very definition of conformity, they were sheep. Every band regurgitated the same tired old format with nothing really changing in mainstream rock music since man first landed on the moon. Only the faces changed. A person could stick with their

nineteen seventies rock albums and be done with it. They were nothing but serial copycats the lot of them, but young people lapped up every new act coming along, disdaining older music for being out of date, for being old fashioned, for being lame. If only they knew. He felt kids today were arrogant little fuckers, pants down low and noses up high. Most needed a serious dose of reality, some hardening up before leaving mummy and daddy and getting kicked in the balls again and again and again by the real world. It might burst their precious little bubbles, but better to know what was coming their way, rather than getting blindsided by it. With foresight at least, they could brace themselves for the inevitable hit.

A solitary violin began slowly playing a melody, raising hair on arms, stopping him mid breath. A sad sounding song, growing gradually from nothing, gently swelling before soaring in intensity, strings mostly, an ocean of stringed instruments filling the room. Leaning forward with anticipation, listening hard, deliberately holding breath, not wanting to interrupt this beautiful thing as a one-inch speaker played a melody that consumed total attention. Soothing, healing, the music was mesmerizing and surprising himself Kieren knew he'd heard this very melody several times before, but where? The penny dropped. This music was used with incredibly chilling impact in *Gallipoli*, the war movie, in the final scene. This played when the young Australian diggers, the soldiers, knowingly and obligingly ran to their deaths, futilely advancing across open ground into the ready trained machine guns of the Turks, not a man surviving. Probably the best Australian movie ever made in his books and he'd seen most. That final scene

played again in his mind, the brutal finish. Just then he wished to die in war too, but then no. He was just bored, he was OK, this was just cabin fever now, that much he realised.

Surrounded by cheap white lace nylon curtains and the growing crescendo of violins Kieren felt good, which was the absence of feeling bad, for the first time in a long while. Taking a serrated steak knife from the cutlery draw he scratched the face plate of the radio, marking the spot of this classical radio station. Then the commentator's voice gave the piece of music a name, *Adagio in G Minor* played by New York Philharmonic Orchestra. This station he could get in the car, even without an aerial.

There must be something to do today, anything at all, but without a car he was trapped. Richmond wasn't exactly a social hotspot and having grown up here there was a reluctance to wander about the town for amusement. Visually it was quite apparent he'd recently taken a hiding, been beaten, not something to advertise. He wouldn't get five feet down the street without running into a person he'd known, a person who knew his mother, someone from her church. Another day of nothingness wasn't something that could be endured either though. Writing back to Sonia would be something to do, she was owed a letter and there was a pad and pen waiting beside the telephone. There'd be postage stamps and envelopes around somewhere too. Yes, he would, but it was ages since he used a pen to write anything. Where to begin? How to begin? *Dear Sonia*, seemed a logical beginning. *How are you* followed well enough but the thin writing paper and a bare table underneath produced a childlike, unreadable script. Scrunching up the paper

he started over. Then over again until a fourth attempt using a Woman's Weekly magazine to write on and reverting to all upper-case capitals finally produced legible handwriting.

What to write next? What should he write? What could he write? She was in a residential rehabilitation programme recovering from drug abuse and the emotional trauma of a group rape. Whatever he thought about conveying sounded pathetic considering what she was going through, and what she'd gone through. Kieren was no natural born liar. Brutal honesty was his style but a lot happening since last seeing Sonia wasn't particularly good news either, not for her ears anyway. Best keep this letter positive for her sake. The last thing Sonia needed right now, while fighting her inner demons, was to be brought down or upset. Refraining from mentioning a few things seemed best, things like being bashed unconscious and all the Bangkok whoring. He would have to say something about his trip, but girls possessed a natural suspicion about males travelling alone to South East Asia. He didn't want her thinking he'd been in opium dens or brothels. Yes, he would leave out some recent events. He began by using a phrase that she herself taught him, sabbatical. Just returned to Sydney from on a cooking sabbatical to Thailand, he wrote, learnt a lot about Asian cooking and ingredients and food, which wasn't entirely untrue. Did some shopping, which was also true if he included beer, girls and cigarettes. Road an elephant, again true but he decided against mentioning it was a baby elephant, ridden from one Go-Go bar to the next along Soi Cowboy, one of the most infamous red-light strips in Asia. No point mentioning the nights out

partying, not with her being stuck in confinement right now. Amphetamine fuelled benders, getting constant nose bleeds from using Viagra as a recreational drug for the warm hazy glow which two hundred milligrams provided, that she didn't need to know. Would she be jealous? Would she be offended? Either way, those stories were best kept as a special memory for him alone, and maybe Geoff. The only real fib was writing about taking a boat trip down the Chao Praya River that never occurred, having only seen the river only once while crossing a bridge in a tuk-tuk. The wisdom of the photographs being swapped around by the telecom engineers in Big Dog's Bar struck him now as brilliance. His only photographs of Thailand were paid for Polaroids, instant pictures taken in bars with girls or snakes or both draped over him.

Finishing off the letter he added the compulsory lines, *hope all is well* and *looking forward to seeing you again*. Then finally, after practising it a dozen times on a spare piece of paper, he signed the letter with a flamboyant new signature, legible and never used before, but on appreciation one that he would use again. He even added a couple of crosses and a circle to indicate kisses and hugs. Fossicking around in the kitchen drawers produced an envelope and stamps, addressing it then sealing his first ever love letter to a girl, Sonia.

Back from the post box, having thankfully seen no one familiar, it was now time to make a plan. It wasn't practical hiding in the dark spare room of his mother's house forever. Trouble was, deciding how to move forward required significant energy, something that was in short supply just now. In truth, he was perfectly

content staying exactly where he was. The worker's compensation money was more than covering the bills, but he was healing fast and the next doctor's appointment in a couple of weeks would declare him fit and healthy and draw the unforeseen financial windfall to a close. Geoff kept reiterating an offer of working with him. Come back part time, he suggested, making them both laugh considering Kieren never actually worked there in the first place.

She was hiding it well, but his mother's patience wasn't limitless either, that was becoming evident. She would never say it outright but from her manner this morning he figured she was tiring of hosting him. Having another patient sharing her small space, after nearly a decade of living by herself, must be an intrusion after all those years. She'd been nursing two fully grown men recently and it occurred to him he hadn't lifted a finger, hadn't even washed a dish since arriving. He made a promise to buy some flowers or something, maybe a card. Still, considering how family and fish usually turned bad after three days it was going alright for the two of them.

All this spare time was providing far too much opportunity to think and dwell and brood. It wasn't good to be doing nothing. Idle hands were dangerous when they were his. There was still that full gram a quality heroin stashed away inside his wallet. The smack nearly got lost to the washing machine, only saving it at the last minute by getting out of bed at immense discomfort. Mutterings about a girl's phone number being on a piece of paper somewhere disguised the reason for such urgent behaviour from his mother. Why not? A little taste would pass the day nicely, it really was the perfect cure for boredom, yes.

He felt like a juggler, in the garage with the cigarette lighter in one hand, aluminium foil in the other and clenching a rolled up twenty dollar note between his teeth. The minuscule pile of pink brown coloured powder kept playing hide and seek in the glaring reflection of the fluorescent light bouncing off the tinfoil. Pausing Kieren asked himself a question. Did he really want this? Maybe not, but it would make for a nice siesta. Maybe he could go down to The Royal Hotel instead, have a beer and a chicken schnitzel? Surely, they'd seen a few black eyes in there before. He hadn't been there since that St Patrick's Day with Geoff, when saying farewell to his living dad. Suddenly, blowing a kiss from the palm of his hand the powder vanished, scattering irretrievably amongst the concrete dust of the garage floor. Goodbye, he said aloud, making a silent oath never to touch that shit again.

Big Ben chimed from the doorbell, a thankful interruption whoever it might be, salesmen, market researchers or otherwise. Opening the door, there was his car and both Bella and Anna. Oddly both were wearing bunny girl ears with fluffy tails and holding a cane basket between them filled with what looked to be deli shop treats, baguettes and cans of beer.

- *We're the rescue bunnies and we've come to take you home, they both chimed in unison.*
- *Hello hello, said Kieren, incredibly pleased to see them.*
- *We tried calling first. Your phone is off, said Anna.*
- *Nice outfits, said Kieren. Why exactly?*

- *Thank you kind sir. Recycling really. It was our Christmas party for the salon last weekend. We went as Easter Bunnies, in keeping with the religious theme. You missed a good one Kieren, lots of pretty girls, Bella informed him.*

On the back of the Kingswood stood Rez, forcing Kieren to suppress a welling tear. He loved that dog more than anything but Rez suddenly struck him as looking considerably older, poor thing, too old now to climb down by itself. Stepping outside into the daylight he greeted the dog by giving it a rub down, massaging and softening its tight rear hip muscles, getting hugs and butterfly kisses from the girls in return. Bless them Lord, he said silently, lips moving with the unspoken words. The kisses tingled, and the hugs hurt those broken healing ribs, but he did nothing about it, apart from making a purring sound to show his happiness and pleasure.

- *Nice scars. You might score yourself a biker chick, looking all Bad Boy like that, pointed out Anna.*
- *That's your fantasy not mine Anna.*
- *So, do you think you'll survive, Bella asked, smiling broadly.*
- *That which does not kill us makes us stronger. Conan the Barbarian said that, quoted Kieren.*
- *I pretty sure that was Friedrich Nietzsche, corrected Bella.*
- *He must have seen the movie, laughed Kieren.*

Bella would know about stuff like that, about where the quote originally came from, thought Kieren. She

once went to university, studying psychology, before quitting and starting her trade instead.

- *Coming in for a cuppa then, offered Kieren.*
- *No time, we have plans for you. Picnic and a swim, come on, Anna told him.*
- *Yeah, maybe not, I've got dental appointments out here, lied Kieren.*
- *Not today you don't, today is Sunday. You need some sunshine, Sunshine. Get your stuff. Move it. You're coming home with us. Your mother already knows. We're stealing you home.*



Fourteen

A female conspiracy and it would be pointless to argue. He wasn't asked, he was told, a poolside picnic at the public swimming pool in Victoria Park at the bottom of Glebe, and he was coming. Having arrived in Richmond without even a shirt there wasn't a lot to pack. His mother picked up some essentials on the first day there, cheap underwear, board shorts which he was now living in since coming home wounded, a couple of grey tee shirts and a polo shirt, she always liked him in a polo shirt. Stripping a pillow case off the single bed and stuffing the meagre wardrobe inside Kieren headed outside and into the sunshine.

Surprisingly and slightly annoyingly, the girls managed to drive the big old car out, but as their intentions were so heart felt he said nothing of it. Anna drove it no problem at all she said. She'd driven big cars before, she said, having dated a surfer guy with a Valiant station wagon in her youth. That was before meeting Bella and before changing teams. Resisting the urge to slide the car seat forwards to where it usually was, choosing instead to drive with toe tips, the clutch only half way depressed as the column change crunched into first gear and they were away. It felt good having warm sunshine on the skin of his arm as it hung out the window, three in the front, the girls beside him and Rez on the back hanging precariously over the side, cataract filled eyes watering in the wind.

Coming down the motorway into the city and onto Parramatta Road the girls filled him in with all the

juicy pieces of gossip from their Christmas party the week before. Talking about who shagged who, who got drunk and about what he said, and she said, and what they'd said in return. These were people he'd never even heard of, feigning interest and disbelief anyway. Their constant babble made him realise just how much he'd missed these two girls during the near solitary confinement of recuperation in Richmond. Not a single question either, no asking about how he managed to get beaten up, or about his injuries which was immensely appreciated. Back in the city, a right turn into University Ave and the green expanse of Victoria Park spread out before them. Parking beneath a large tree to provide some shade for the dog, they unloaded, heading inside. Looking back Rez was already having pats and attention lavished on him by passing girls from the University of Sydney nearby. Oh, to be a dog, thought Kieren.

Victoria Park Pool, an urban oasis, an outdoor public swimming pool surrounded by grass lawns and a park and a perfect summer day. Not much space left on the grass, but they found some, settling themselves down against the perimeter fence. Besides bringing the hamper there were extra towels and a pair of swimming shorts for him, showing how much planning the girls put into today's excursion. Poolside there was the usual array of bronzed old men in Speedo swimwear, attractive young things from the university, muscle men and body builder women indecipherable from men were it not for their bikinis. A few younger lads in their mid-teens were rough housing in the water, wrestling each other, bombing the water and generally showing off. Compared to the buff gym types lounging poolside, Kieren felt opaque

and white and distinctly lacking muscle tone. However, he held one trumping card, he was in the company of two attractive young women, always a good look. The girls unpacked the basket before Bella, without asking, began rubbing sunscreen lotion into the skin of his back, massaging really, her public attentions washing away the last of the self-consciousness. There were presents too, a letter and a parcel.

- *There's a letter for you! Exclaimed Bella.*
- *That'll be from Sonia, said Kieren recognising the primitive hand writing.*
- *Kieren's got a girlfriend, Kieren's got a girlfriend, both girls sang childishly. Anna teasingly landed a solid right-hand punch into his upper arm.*
- *What he does not have is a beer, pass me one would you, thanks.*

The girls were always interested in his love life, though for the past few years it was just a casual sex life, intermittent at best, but they were always interested anyway. A second letter from Sonia. He only just posted a reply to her first one that morning. Before opening the letter, he discretely cracked open a can, unsure if drinking alcohol was permitted inside to pool area, the beer tasting good, the first one in quite a while.

With one woman massaging his back and shoulders, a very contented man began reading a letter from another girl. Sonia's mail, unlike his, was no love letter. In the very first sentence she acknowledged enjoying their time together then asked him stay away, well away. She wrote how she needed to focus on the task

at hand, nothing else. She was addressing some major issues in her life, which was exhausting and thinking about him wasn't something she had the additional energy for just now, sorry. She wrote about really wanting to make the best of this chance of getting herself in order, but it was something she needed to do on her own. She didn't know, she said, maybe they would catch up for a drink in the future, maybe not. He felt like such a dick, for the letter just sent, for writing about looking forward to seeing her, for sending kisses and hugs when she'd already given him the flick. That letter would arrive with her tomorrow or the next day, how embarrassing. He shouldn't have bothered, Sonia was gone and that was that.

- *She's doing really well, was all he said.*
- *Present time, said Bella, tossing over the second item of interest.*

Balling up the letter and throwing it basketball style into a nearby rubbish bin he picked up the parcel addressed *To Kieren, Love Bella and Anna*. Tearing the brown paper wrapping revealed a transparent case with plastic sports mouth guard inside, the type boxers and football players wore. Popping it in his mouth he raised both fists in the classic fighter pose, choosing not to mention it wasn't a fight that night. The only thing he'd hit was the ground.

- *For next time, eh slugger! Laughed Anna landing another blow.*
- *Oww. His cousin could certainly punch for girl.*

Lucky arriving when they did. Poolside filled up fast around them and their spot on the raised lawn at the north end was prime real estate, the perfect position.

Being sun worshippers, Bella and Anna stripped out of their bikini tops and he struggled not staring as they mutually applied Johnson's Baby Oil to one another. The oil's smell reminded him of nights in massage parlours, of other girls, stirring him, arousing him. Not everyone was as discrete with their eyes. Outside the fence a passer-by stopped passing by, blatantly enjoying an eye full of the two girls oiling themselves. Equally indiscreetly, Kieren raised a middle finger and the man hurried away, the eyes of a fiery redhead boring a hole in him as he went. He could be particularly menacing at times, though it helped being seated.

The domino effect or maybe just the time of day, either way, within ten minutes several other women lying tanning on the grass verge beside them shook loose their bikini tops, freeing their breasts to the sun. Surrounded by breasts and thankful for the sunglasses concealing the true direction of his gaze, he struggled in biting back the enormous grin threatening to break loose across his face, trying hard to be cool. The amorous affection displayed by Bella and Anna oiling one another made it plainly obvious to the increasingly tightly packed crowd that they, the girls, were indeed a couple. Accordingly, Kieren was unattached by default and also relatively hip by association. Girls like guys that girls like, and several nearby women soon shifted their body positions, ever so slightly and ever so deliberately, revealing to him alone a little more breast or buttock or both, just slightly more than common decency would usually allow. Being surrounded by the flesh of beautiful and scantily clad women was exactly the necessary tonic. His mother was quite right, there was a lot to be

thankful for, but this wasn't the time to be thinking of her.

From amongst the delicatessen treats of the picnic basket Anna produced a large spliff, rolled and ready. With the light wind from the south and open parkland behind them there was no problem smoking where they lay. Nearly two weeks now since Kieren last smoked anything, not since the beating, the longest period without smoking cigarettes since being fifteen years old. The biggest hurdles were over, getting past two weeks without nicotine was an opportunity he decided there and then to build on. So not wanting the tobacco within he declined, saying he would forgo this treat, but without telling them both why. There was no point making overly bold statements to people, not quite yet he figured.

- *All the more for me, Anna laughed, lighting up without a moment's hesitation.*
- *I'm impressed, said Bella, placing the back of her hand on Kieren's forehead, as if to test his temperature. You sure?*
- *Bloody tempted but no, thanks.*
- *Put a jumper on, hell's about to freeze over, quipped Anna.*

Making a decision was one thing, sticking to it was another altogether. Nostrils caught a hint of smoke, then being tempted became an understatement, tortured was the more accurate description. About to change his mind and indulge, the words of Sonia's first letter tipped the balance back towards abstinence, *starve the creature that is your addiction* she'd written.

He drained a beer, opening another, turning to focus on the other more tangible temptation at hand, flesh.

- *I'll go check on the dog. Make sure he's OK and still in the shade, said Anna leaping to her feet.*
- *Be my guest. Kieren tossed her the keys, immediately wincing at the flash of pain caused by over extending his ribs.*
- *Poor bubby, said Anna.*

Bending down Anna kissed him on the top of the head, wandering off, tying bikini strings as she went. There wasn't much to hide, or look at, but Kieren still rebuked himself for checking out his own cousin as she left. Just the two of them now and Bella leant forward, with her stoned bloodshot eyes looking straight into his, asking if he was alright, really alright. Yes of course, he told her. He would survive, a tough couple of weeks wouldn't kill him, then carried on talking, telling her about what a great mate Geoff was, about the worker's compensation so money wouldn't become an issue.

- *You know, umm Geoff wanted us, all of us, to pull some kind of intervention on you.*
- *Eh?*
- *He came around for a chat, with me and Anna, when you were in Thailand. He was worried. Reckoned you were maybe on smack or something. But I get a feeling those boys you were fighting with may have done it for us, the intervention thing, eh?*

So, Geoff had been around for a chat. How embarrassing to be a topic of discussion, an item of

concern, in need of assistance, of help. That floored him, visibly dropping his jaw and leaving him speechless, humbled, but mostly just embarrassed. Silence followed and staring at a mole on his forearm he wished the little black hole would swallow him up right there and then.

- *Say something Kieren.*
- *Let's just say I might not be my usual hard partying self for a while. Might just take things easy for a bit.*
- *Music to my ears my friend. We'll say no more about it. Unless of course you want to, or need to.*

He promised silently to make a visible effort, from now on, to show Geoff and the girls he was making amends on his own accord. It was disturbing, the thought of others thinking less of him, for them to have spotted a fault, a weakness within. From now on it would be chin up, regardless. No matter what was going on inside it would be a happy face displayed to the world, whether he meant it or not. Bella looked into his eyes, smiling and he smiled back, reassuring her of his intent. Shame you're a dyke he thought, for the hundredth time, almost saying it to her face, the face he adored but thinking better of it and keeping silent. That constant longing to touch her, for her to be his and not his cousin's, to marry her, for her to love him as he loved her, to ride her. Shush, he told his mind lest the words come out, shush.

Anna returned saying the dog was fine and how cool it was pretending to the passing students that Rez and the Holden belonged to her, butch as ever. Then a confession that they'd been letting the dog sleep

inside, on his bed, something he would never allow. He let it slide, knowing how much Rez would be comforted by being amongst his possessions while he'd been away, missing in action, but back again now.

On arrival home from the pool the girls opened the house, before heading off on foot to shop for the night's dinner. A welcome home dinner they called it, spaghetti bolognaise. Surely even they couldn't mess that up, he thought. They were both abysmal in the kitchen and it would take considerable self-restraint not to stick his nose in. Cooking always seemed a total adventure to them, an unknown world which they approached wide eyed, genuinely amazing themselves on completing anything vaguely edible. He suddenly regretted having stolen the battery from the smoke detector as theirs' was a set and forget approach to cooking that risked burning the house down, they were so easily distracted. His old girlfriend had been the same. She'd rarely cooked and whenever she did the mess afterwards was abominable, then she would expect him to clean up, of course, her having done the cooking. It was easier just to do it all himself. A generation of hungry husbands was looming, many modern women had forgotten how to cook, but at least it kept him employed.

Cigarettes butts in the coffee table ashtray called out his name, calling upon him to smoke their remnants. He fought them off, really feeling better for being off them, if only for a couple of weeks. His lungs were no longer gurgling when he'd exerted himself swimming and according to Bella his skin was looking good too, regaining its youthful elasticity she'd said. Anna even asked if he was using moisturiser and he'd told her yes,

regularly, only not on his face and she'd cringed. It also gave him something to do, something to fight. It was always enjoyable having an adversary to hate and starving that monster, his nicotine addiction, kept the mind occupied.

He'd nearly forgotten the dog. Outside on the street, lifting Rez down from the back of the ute, Kieren's hand clutched onto a hard and swollen lump near the right hind leg, with the dog immediately yelping sharply at the contact. This growth on the dog's belly was the size of a tennis ball. Further gentle exploration revealed another three, no four, smaller golf ball sized lumps, all appearing sensitive when touched. In the eight years that he and Rez were together, that dog never once went to a veterinarian, tomorrow morning would change that. He already knew what was up. He was about to lose a mate.



Fifteen

The spaghetti bolognese wasn't bad, though it was regretful advising Anna to let the sauce catch, to allow it to stick slightly to the bottom of the pot, to darken the colour and add some depth and background flavour. A fine line ran between catch and burn and accordingly the pan now lay soaking in the kitchen sink, the entire bottom blackened. The outcome was palatable enough and eating together as a household rounded off the day perfectly. He refrained from mentioning any concerns about the dog's lumps to the girls, wishing to maintain the good-humoured mood. Finishing drying the remaining dishes, Kieren headed upstairs for the first night in his own bed in quite some time, where the dog already lay snoring on a blanket in the corner.

Sleep came easily, and with sleep came dreaming. Together in the bush, walking through a light forest of gum trees with the strong smell of eucalyptus in the air, the ground at his feet dusty dry. Rez, running alongside looking much younger and moving faster and more freely than in many years, a younger dog tonight. Walking uphill through the scrub was a struggle, then coming into a clearing where the ground levelled out, where a bigger tree had fallen, trunk down and wizened roots up.

Using the *here now* whistle he called in Rez. Taking him by the collar and kissing him on the head he tied the dog there to the uprooted stump with a length of nylon cord. The whistling continued, a feigned happy

sounding song, while turning his back and swinging the short .22 calibre rifle from his shoulder, placing it to the skull of his beloved and pulling the trigger. The dog's head flew backward and blood sprayed, speckling Kieren's legs red. With a broken heart he walked away downhill from the clearing, distraught and sobbing violently. Grief eventually taking away his legs and collapsing to the ground he choked in wailing sorrow. Between those sobbing howls another similar sound reached his ears. Collecting himself up, running back uphill he entered the clearing once more, greeted by the terrified eyes of a wounded Rez gazing at him in loyal love filled disbelief. Writhing on the ground, the excruciating agony obvious, with the top part of its skull exposed the dog screamed out to him *Why? Why?* Then, realising the rifle was left somewhere back downhill Kieren collected up a sandstone rock in his hand and with it finished the life of the dog.

Morning came with sunburn from their pool day, but feeling better for the vitamin D or whatever it was that sunshine gave a body other than cancer and warmth. The dog was booked in at a veterinarian's clinic in Potts Point at ten. Apparently it would need to remain there for tests. Taking an instant coffee outside to the back garden, the old dog lay in the shade of the fence, struggling to get up and eventually giving up, just wagging its tail from where it rested. Canned dog food, a treat for Rez as biscuits were the staple fair, remained in the bowl confirming Kieren's worst fears, usually it vanished in seconds. A fresh stool flecked with blood lay in the dirt and it occurred to him that today could well be the dog's last. If indeed it was in pain, as he suspected, there would only be one option.

Lowering himself to the ground and laying prone beside his dog, Kieren hugged his mate, spooning like lovers and choking on the tears streaming down his face, making no attempt to hold them back, rocking his friend lightly in his arms in the saddest moment of his life.

While driving to the veterinarian they stopped off at a grocery store, buying two large chocolate bars, hand feeding them to his mate, still parked outside the shop. Whoever said dogs shouldn't eat chocolate was obviously not a dog. Rez ate them greedily, a look of astonished bewilderment on its face, having never experienced the taste of chocolate before in its life. Parking at the veterinarian's Rez got carried inside and left there on the surgery table. Driving home Kieren prayed an Our Father prayer over and over, before asking St Francis to look after his mate, in this life and the next.

The vet telephoned later in the day, breaking bad news and explaining the options available. It was malignant lymphoma, an untreatable cancer that developed rapidly and had already spread to the vital internal organs, quite advanced he said. The vet said it was surprising he hadn't done something about it earlier and Kieren mumbled about being overseas for a while, partially true. Likely Rez was already in considerable discomfort. There was no treatment. It was as he expected, euthanasia was recommended, highly recommend considering how advanced the cancer now was. They could dispose of the body, they said, unless of course he cared to make his own arrangements. Kieren asked for ten minutes to decide, calling them back in three. The dog never returning home and he never saw him again. In his heart he'd

already said farewell to his friend that day. There would be no burial, no funeral, the dog was gone and that was that. It was well into its teens, old for any dog, and had lived a good life.

It was time, now. Upstairs opening the bedside draw he removed the death note, hidden beneath men's magazines, the suicide note, the little treasure. Sitting there, on the edge of the bed, he wasn't completely certain of wanting to read this thing at all but needing something to cling in this hour of hurt and need, anything that could resurrect him, he decided to. Yes it was time. *To Whom It May Concern.* Would he open this if it were addressed to a particular person? Probably not, he decided. There was something plain wrong in opening another person's mail. Slowly tearing the brown envelope, tentatively extracting and unfolding the sheet of white paper inside, revealed the handwritten script, the words he'd waited so long to read. Kieren's immediate first thought was jealousy at how nice the writing was, hand printed in lead pencil. He began reading, the words shocking him to his core.



Sixteen

Two thirds the price of anything advertised elsewhere, so he figured it should sell quickly and that was exactly what was required, a quick sale. The marketing could have been better, just a handwritten *for sale* sign with a phone number and a dollar figure in the back window but there was plenty of foot traffic going by and the price was right. Those mag wheels alone cost nearly the asking price, but that was quite some time ago and the once gleaming chrome rims were now pitted with yellowing spots of rust. A good clean wouldn't hurt but the garden hose would no longer reach from being continually shortened for making bongos. So Kieren left it as it was, with the layer of road grime and dust helping by hiding a few minor dents and scratches. The biggest gesture was adding a bottle of oil thickener to reduce the haze of light blue smoke appearing when the revs got up. Piston ring wear, nothing mechanically fatal, not with the oil thickened. It wasn't as though he was intentionally stitching anybody up with a lemon. This was a three owner Aussie classic with a straight body and a decent set of wheels. Somebody would want it, hopefully, maybe to drop in a V8, some nostalgic old bugger like himself, living in the past. Personally he was over owning it and now, having made the decision to sell the car, it couldn't be gone fast enough. It was time to move on and he wanted it gone. What was once a love had now become a burden and he loathed driving it again after today, fearing damaging it or scratching up the paintwork, or doing anything that might prevent

its disposal. There would be one last trip visiting his father in Penrith, then park it outside the house until sold.

Geoff's arriving with supplies was expected. There he was now, standing in the doorway with a tray of hot savouries, a bag of ice, a bottle of Jameson's Irish Whiskey and a look of sympathy on his face. He'd even brought four drinking glasses with him, tumblers for the whiskey, being well accustomed to the lack of crockery and glassware in their Darlinghurst house. The four of them, Anna and Bella included, were having a get together tonight to toast the departing of Rez, to send him off properly. Kieren must have been in the good books with Geoff's wife, as she'd agreed on dropping Geoff off and collecting him later, so they could have a decent few drinks together.

- *Evening Copper, sorry about Rez mate.*
- *Thanks, come in. The girls are outside, no here they are.*
- *Ladies, said Geoff acknowledging Bella and Anna coming inside to greet him.*
- *How's my favourite married man, enquired Anna?*
- *Yeah, good. Whiskey?*
- *Yes please.*

By the third round there wasn't a dry eye as the household reminisced, ate sausage rolls and swapped doggy tales, everyone sharing a story or two of Rez doing this or that. Geoff reminded them all of when they'd forgotten the dog, on the way back from Bathurst, leaving him on the side of the road after stopping for a leak near Lithgow. They made it home

that night, driving all the way back to the city, before realising the dog was missing, no longer on the back of the ute. Kieren, drunk by then and unable to drive back out immediately, had worried all night long before sobering up and heading back early the next morning. When he'd gotten there, to the place the boys stopped, the dog came at very first whistle. Having used its brain, it'd stayed put in the last place it saw Kieren, Geoff and the car.

- *That makes us feel better for forgetting him when you were in Thailand, confessed Anna.*
- *We took him down to Thai Chi, in the park with Fon and came home afterwards without him. Poor thing made it home all by itself. We found him sitting on the front doorstep. Looked happy though, said Bella.*
- *I'm sure he had horse shit on him that day, said Anna. We hosed him off, but where would he find horse shit?*
- *To Rez, toasted Geoff, glass raised again.*
- *To Rez!*
- *Hey Copper. Do you fancy giving us a hand with the kids' footy team this season? Geoff enquired. I'm coaching again this year.*
- *Eh? What good would I be?*
- *You could be mascot. Nah, seriously. Come and be team manager. Extra pair of eyes is what I really need, like herding cats with those boys. Have a think. Plenty of time to decide.*
- *Crazy idea, but I'll give it some thought, eh.*

Kieren, much to his later embarrassment, grew up playing soccer, considered a girl's sport by many Australians at the time. It was Geoff and his kids that'd dragged him into their world of rugby league, and into supporting the South Sydney Rabbitohs, the Bunnies. Geoff was quite a talented forward in his day, a hard-running big man, nothing professional but pretty good. His own two boys were following in their father's footsteps too. He appreciated the offer but there was no intention of taking it up. Helping with the kid's team would be the only way of seeing Geoff regularly over the winter. It just wasn't practical with a cooking job involving working weekends. Well, that and hating all children. Their high-pitched noises and weekend hangovers were best kept well apart.

Eventually Geoff's phone rang, calling time, far too early for Kieren's liking. His wife was phoning from outside to collect him and with wobbling whiskey legs Kieren walked his best mate outside onto the street. Must be a blue moon tonight, as she-who-must-be-obeyed, who preferred being called Karen, got out of the car greeting Kieren with an arms wide open hug, very rare indeed. The news of the dog's death had softened her up, for tonight at least.

- *Sorry to hear about your poor dog love.*
- *Thanks Karen, thanks.*
- *Never thought I'd see the day, remarked Geoff on spying the for-sale sign in the back the Kingswood.*
- *All good things come to an end brother. Good night mate! Thanks Karen.*

Back inside a quiet house Kieren poured himself another drink, finishing off the last of the bottle. The

girls, being unaccustomed to drinking straight whiskey, already hit the hay an hour ago, having work in the morning too. Taking a last drink outside to their back garden, where the kennel remained and raising his glass, he toasted a silent toast to his dog and to his friends. What a good wake for Rez, we put him to rest well and maybe the grass would regrow out here now, he thought.

Upstairs in his room, he withdrew the letter from the bedside dresser draw, the one written by a dead man, reading those toxic words once more. How could anyone leave such words for someone to read? Wasn't it enough, leaving a flyblown carcass for another person to find, without scarring the discoverer with the contents of that letter.

Dead Michael appeared in his mind. The body hanging in the tree appeared again too, but this time it wasn't a dead thing. He saw the death throes, Michael kicking out his life in that protracted painful struggle. How wrong he'd been in the initial assessment that day. The hand trapped in the rope of the noose, those fingers wedged between the cord and neck. There'd been no intention nor will to survive, that grasp was only to ease the pain of dying, just as dying eased the pain of living. From choking a hare to death as a boy he knew how long it must have taken die in that poorly executed execution. Tears rolled down his face in the darkness. Were they shed for that poor man, a poor strangled hare, for himself or his dog? None, these were tears of pain. These pencilled words in his hands could be his own, he was in agony, he was Michael.

Convulsing with pain, sitting for the longest time, before finally rising and heading downstairs, tearing

the stolen letter in half, then again into four then eight, before placing the shredded pieces into the fireplace in the lounge room. Striking a match, he lit a cigarette, the first in a fortnight, before setting fire to the envelope in his hands, savouring the fire, allowing it to burn. Finally transferring the flame to the dismembered squares of paper in the hearth, smoke rose, and the death note vanished into ashes.



Seventeen

Not officially a rest home but a geriatric hospital. Dad was in the dementia ward, where the carpet stopped, linoleum started, where everything squeaked, through the security doors with the keycode access pads, in with all the freaks. On these infrequent visits it was always surprising just walking straight into the hospital. Feeling the need to justify himself to someone he stopped at the nurses' station, asking which room Mr Walsh was in, even though he already knew. Nurses smiled, number twenty-six they said, through the security doors down the hall, more smiles. Everyone was so nice here. He couldn't understand how people could act so happy, all day every day, it must be exhausting for them.

On this side of the electronic doors a group of cognitive elderly were keeping their motor skills engaged in the main lounge, passing around giant balloons to the encouragement of a nurse. Their activities were accompanied by a nun, blue veil and all, playing and singing religious hymns on an acoustic Spanish guitar. A tea trolley made the rounds, passing out cups, saucers and malt biscuits to those not engaged in the ball game. Kieren smiled and waved and said good morning, wishing he had shaved before coming out, so as not to look so scruffy. This hospital had doubled in size since he first visited, nearly ten years ago, slightly nervous then, like now. They were forever building new wards, demolishing another

neighbour and building another wing to cater for this aging and demented population of Australia.

Passing through the security doors the smell of elderly, cabbage and urine intensified. He thought about a country song, about dying in your sleep and how that would be good. Anything would be better than ending up in here, where your friends still came and saw you, but it wasn't you, visiting your crazy shell, no thank you. Many rocking uncontrollably, the guests in this lounge were not making any eye contact. Tea cups were replaced by plastic feeder mugs, the kind used by toddlers learning to feed themselves, though most couldn't manage to drink unaided.

Soothing music played on a radio, the sound broken intermittently by the squawks, howls and screams of the more disturbed patients. Kieren hated that lounge and crossed his fingers walking past it, only uncrossing them on entering his father's room. There were worse things than dying, ending up in that lounge being one of them. Entering room twenty six, a nurse aid, a Filipina by the look of her, was busy running a plastic comb through his father's damp hair, having just showered him by the look of it.

- *Won't be a minute love. Then you can have him all to yourself, she chimed happily, giving Kieren a big smile.*
- *No hurry, replied Kieren taking a seat on the side of his father's unoccupied bed.*

It was always the same and always heart breaking, that millisecond of recognition in his father's eyes, or was it? Secretly he hoped it wasn't. If it were, if for the slightest moment his father did realise his only son's

presence, then Kieren felt tortured for not coming more often. But that look was only ever for a millisecond. Then the eyes returned to the same vacant stare which they'd held for ten years or more, broken only by blinks and sleep. He could not walk, he could not talk, and could barely chew his own food. But he looked surprisingly fit and healthy, likely courtesy of a good diet, attentive staff and the absence of the stresses and strains of normal life. Looking at him there, so healthy, he guessed his father's body could live for another ten years, a shame really. There was a good side to it all though, his father wasn't confused and troubled like many of the other patients. No longer was he distressed and crying out for help and no longer trying daily to escape, to return to a home that no longer existed. Kieren was truly thankful for that stage being behind them. It was a terrible thing witnessing deranged dementia in a man once so proud, so independent.

In the corner of the single room a small television played a news channel with the volume up loud. The excessive volume was more to drown out the noises from the crazies in the lounge than because of any hearing difficulty his old man may have, he wouldn't know if the television was on or off anyway. His father was lucky to have a room of his own with a view of the garden. Most patients in the dementia wing shared rooms or were in small wards. Likely this private room was a courtesy, a favour to his mother who visited her husband and the other patients daily, bringing cheerful smiles and baking with her. She was forever baking. She deserved a medal for coming there so often, personally he absolutely loathed this place.

She really was a white light his mother, Cath, Catherine formally and formerly. Impossible not to like with her good natured, good humoured, good deed a day approach to living and accordingly his father got the best room in the house. He was the same, his Dad, once. Larger than life and with a smile to match, not an enemy in the world. His own father, Kieren's grandfather had come out to Australia from Ireland, on his own as a teenager, fleeing the worldwide depression of the nineteen thirties that hit Ireland harder than most countries. After arriving penniless and from an impoverished rural family, any day that didn't involve cold and hunger was a joy to him. That good-humoured approach to life rubbed off on his son, Kieren's Dad, the apple never falling far from the tree. Kieren's nature was very different, his apple must have rolled a distance when it fell.

If you can't say something nice about someone don't say anything at all, that was his father's personal motto. He would chide his son for running others down and for belittling the less fortunate. Not everyone is as blessed as we are Kieren, count yourself lucky boy, he would say. Some folk just weren't brought up right through no fault of their own, he would tell him. A gentle man who never laid a hand on his son in anger, unlike poor Geoff. Except once, after starting a fire in some long grass when playing with that weed sprayer filled with petrol, there'd been no corporal punishment at home. Fire was no laughing matter in rural Australia, taking lives and livelihoods away quick as a flash. Only good fortune and a garden hose prevented it spreading out of control. Even then he'd only received a few smacks on the bum. Looking back, there was plenty of freedom when growing up,

his father letting him make his own mistakes and learning from making them, there was no cotton wool. You don't know what hot is 'til you've been burned, that's how you learn, his father would say when Kieren's chin was down after stuffing up.

Nothing to do but sit on Dad's bed, there would be no conversation, so he began flicking through the old-fashioned picture books filling the single shelf above the bed. When his father first went into permanent care here, to begin this never ending wait for death, the nurses would place these books in front of him and he would turn the pages for himself. He'd stare at the black and white photographs, of timber workers carting logs from the bush, men driving teams of bullocks, huge Clydesdale horses dragging loads of beer and whiskey barrels. Pictures of fearless workmen hanging from the iron girders of a half-built Sydney Harbour Bridge, of farmers driving ancient tractors, old images of the city men with pants high around their waists, with his father believing they were family photographs in his mental confusion. Then his father stopped turning the pages. Kieren would do it for him when he came out visiting, before the old boy deteriorated and eventually stopped looking at the pictures, or anything. That was a while ago, before the pointlessness of visiting registered, before burying his father in his mind.

- *If it was you in there he would visit every day you know, his mother's voice echoed in his head.*

How long since the last visit? Eight months and about the same before that, when he brought a card out for his father's birthday, or was that the birthday before? It was easier thinking of his father as being

dead already and to remember the fun loving, Kieren loving, character that once was. This wasn't his father, not this half living unburied zombie, drooling saliva in the chair in front of him now, in that armchair that was his home for a decade.

For the longest time he hadn't known how to deal with it, choosing instead to avoid coming here and seeing this wonderful man reduced to a living nothingness. Again, it was Geoff and Jameson's Whiskey that finally allowed Kieren to deal with this death, to grieve without a grave to visit, to move on. That was nearly five years ago, on St Patrick's Day in March, when Geoff and he booked rooms in The Royal Hotel in Richmond, the same hotel that his father once drank in on Fridays after work with his mates. Driving out early they'd spent the day fishing nearby together, drinking whiskey all the while as they waded through streams before putting away the rods and propping up the downstairs bar of the hotel. Kieren was almost evicted for starting up an argument with some farm boy, until Geoff's massive frame intervened and quietened the situation. The barman had wanted him out, but the publican was an old friend of his father's and recognised him. Then Geoff and Kieren couldn't even pay for a drink, and then they'd all swapped stories about his Dad. *Smiley*, the publican called his father, a nickname for the old man that Kieren was unaware of until then. It was why he'd watched the films, the Aussie ones of the same names, about getting a gun and getting a bike.

He buried his father on that day, surrounded by plastic shamrocks and country girls wearing *Kiss me I'm Irish* tee-shirts and he tried, which is what started the troubles with that farm boy to begin with. It made

it easier, having toasted his father's life amongst men that knew him, who worked with him, that drank with him and that loved him too. Since that day visiting him in this hospital, with a heartbeat but no mind, was like seeing his corpse dug up, a waxen Madam Tussaud's figure of the strong proud man he once knew. Kieren wished him to be truly dead, for the heartbeat to stop, but for whose sake that was exactly he didn't really know. His dad would not have wanted to be a burden, the cause of grief and tears for all these years. The tea trolley passed by and he accepted the offer, eventually having two cups and a biscuit while browsing through the old picture books. Finishing the tea, kissing the head of a dead father, he left.

- *See you soon Dad.*

Later that morning, after driving over from visiting Dad in Penrith, the creaking car pulled into the open-air car park of the Richmond supermarket. He'd deliberately chosen to shop there today, avoiding at all cost the handbrake start, three-point turn nightmare of combining his car and the parking buildings of the bigger supermarkets and shopping malls in the city. He hated malls anyway, noisy things. Shopping today was to be a thank you for his mother. The plan being to fill her pantry to overflowing, to show some gratitude for her nursing him and putting up with the moaning and foul moods while recovering at her place.

Driving out earlier that morning, passing Victoria Park Pool, he'd really wanted to stop off for another swim. The day was particularly hot, there was no air conditioning in the car and he also needed the exercise swimming would provide. Without the company of the

girls though he'd felt too self-conscious, so he didn't bother, not wanting to be mistaken for some skinny white pervert hanging around the pools all day, copping an eyeful, no. Thoughts of what others might think often dictated his behaviour. Like buying toilet paper, it always made him feel uncomfortable to be walking around the supermarket with a big packet of toilet rolls. He couldn't explain it even to himself, everyone went, he just didn't want anyone thinking he needed to go then and there. He could be a strange old bird at times and knew it. Generally the household shopping was done by the girls anyway, who had no tissue issues.

Inside the supermarket were the usual array of daytime shoppers, young mothers with prams and demanding toddlers, merchandising staff filling shelves and a few individual males scattered around the store. From the time of day, the small baskets they carried and their budget brand selections, these were unemployed men. The visible mathematics many were performing confirmed it, moving lips and counting their fingers, tallying up before heading to the check out, so not to be caught short of money. Jobless, unkempt men. In his eyes nothing could be worse. Being assigned to their team, the unemployed lone bachelors, was social excommunication. Two middle aged versions stood beside the main doors, sliced white bread and cheap granulated coffee the only things visible through their thin plastic shopping bags. Slowly and carefully they each read through the handwritten advertisements pinned to the supermarket's community notice board. What were they hoping to find, Kieren scoffed? Free board and lodging, a paid house-sitting job maybe? Gardening

work, if only they had tools and a car? Shameless losers, they disgusted him.

Witnessing their disgrace was somehow cheering. Times like this made him glad to have a trade, to have a career of sorts. When the time came for earning a living he could support himself by finding work whenever he wanted. A working man's paradise Australia was once described as, jobs galore there'd been. The massive infrastructure projects going on all over the country would take anyone and everyone, shipping labour in from all over the world, work aplenty. Accordingly, being a jack of all trades and master of none was once perfectly acceptable. For decades a man with tools and a van could make a decent living, but things were changing, the days of cowboys were fast disappearing. Now it was all about trade registration bodies, public liability and indemnity insurance and workplace safety certification.

Australia still respected and rewarded men working physically hard, it was still a big tough country requiring a similar breed to perform the labour intensive jobs. Strong younger men, using an unskilled body, could earn good money doing the tough jobs and heavy manual work was rewarded well enough. Sooner or later though the body aged and slowed. Labouring physically would eventually become too much to cope with. When a person could no longer perform the tasks that housed, clothed and fed them they'd be in a bit of a pickle and without a fall-back plan they'd be stuffed. Every Sunday newspaper was filled with stories about ex-boxers or retired football players living rough on the streets, hero one minute, homeless the next. The same applied to old labourers

with busted knees and crook backs, only their stories weren't newsworthy. A trade qualification was a reasonable safety net. Life was long and expensive and required continuous funding. Despite growing to despise his source of income recently, seeing these old men and their meagre groceries made him suddenly immensely glad for having it. Aside from financial security an occupation provided classification of who you were. People were once even named after the trades they performed, Smith, Skinner, Cooper. Without a trade or a career who were you? What were you? Just a forgotten old sole, clutching at straws on a supermarket notice board.

Standing proud and tall, forcing shoulders back and pushing the supermarket trolley purposefully, Kieren attempted to portray himself as some scruffy and unkempt millionaire, anything but being mistaken for one of them. Collecting things from shelves with a casual contempt, refusing to check the prices of anything, he was determined not to be mistakenly included in their number. Chocolates, tea, coffee, biscuits, walnut ice cream, crackers and cheeses, frozen prawns, deli meats, a bunch of flowers and even a potted orchid, his mother's favourite plant. Anything and everything went into that trolley, except toilet paper. Then finally a thank you card from the stationary isle to finish up.

She was a tiny woman, his mother, eating like a sparrow. Likely most of these treats would end up on the nurses' desk at the rest home. No matter, this wasn't about feeding her or supplementing her income, this was about expressing gratitude for the care and all the attention she'd lavished on him. He couldn't imagine having gone through that

recuperation on his own, without her. No way would the girls be holding a bucket while he pissed prone from his bed. Still, Bella and Anna deserved a little thank you something too, for looking after Rez, for being there when he needed them. That day at the pools together, collecting him back from Richmond, they would never know what that did.

Arriving, bundling in bags of groceries from the car, her house was empty, Mum was out. Unpacking everything filled the small pantry and fridge freezer to overflowing. The cut flowers were placed in a vase beside her bed and the potted orchid on the kitchen table. She would appreciate the thought, especially from someone generally so thoughtless. She would appreciate the garage space more, he figured. A second gift today would be cleaning out his junk from her garage. Hordes of his stuff filled the back wall, things kept for years thinking it was treasure worth saving and now, like the Kingswood, it was just rubbish to be rid of. She'd been forever asking to have it sorted out.

In the garage with the little radio in hand, tuning it to the classical music station that was now an unconfessed favourite, he took a long hard look at the mountain of cardboard boxes stacked against the rear wall. Where to begin? He knew in advance how this would work, or wouldn't work. The intention was clearing out everything unessential. He also knew that upon opening the first box he would likely start sifting through things, remembering this day and that day. Highly likely he'd soon find himself unable to part with anything, having been through this all before. He'd be there all day and depending on how much alcohol was

drunk would possibly be staying the night too. There was no hurry and these things needed tending to.

Upon investigation the decision of what to throw out was largely already established. Inside each box was mould, blue and black, covering almost everything, destroying much of what was stored away. Inside the first box two deflated footballs and a pair of soccer boots were ruined from the fungus, so into the wheeled rubbish bin they went. A set of books covering the battles of the First World War quickly followed, spotted black and swollen with moisture, gone too. A paper sack of old clothes smelling of dampness and mushrooms followed. Next to go, some old hand tools, wooden spoke planes and wood rasps, the handles riddled with the holes from borer or termites, blades pitted and rusted beyond repair. Why exactly had he kept them to begin with? The Playboy magazine collection received one last farewell review before tossing them too. They'd been contraband once, hard porn in their time but compared to pornography today they were about as hard core as the *Women's Weekly* magazines in the kitchen. The models in these Playboys were covered with so much pubic hair there was nothing to be seen anyway. A plastic bag of broken wrist watches and a few cheap pocket knives that wouldn't cut through butter, gone. There was a Haynes manual for the Holden, for an HQ not an HZ, but handy enough, this was taken outside and placed in the car.

Another carton contained his earliest attempts at tying fishing flies, handmade from the hair of hares he shot himself. Unusable now, the hooks rusted, but they made him feel proud, having caught more than a few fish with this handy work. Not many kids doing that today, most couldn't tie their own shoelaces without

their mother's help, he thought. A set of guitar strings, that phase didn't last long. His father's fishing hat was eaten away with mould too, saddening him momentarily. The stock whip coiled up inside the hat was rotting too. What was he thinking keeping an old stock whip? It nearly cost him an eye on many occasions. Ancient fishing reels, the lines fractured and cracked, gone. Another heavy box, camping gear this time, a Coleman's gas stove oxidised beyond safety, a blackened fry pan and a cheap nylon tarp. The canvas camping swag, the largest item in the pile, was also badly eaten and holed by the black death of mould which quietly pleased him. Sleeping outdoors in it gave him the shits, especially with massive huntsman spiders crawling over the mesh screen, inches from your face. The swag was too big for the rubbish bin, so he decided on dumping it somewhere on the drive back to town, those camping chairs could go in the ute too. A leather handled hammer which could stay, his mother might have need of a hammer, for putting up picture hooks or something but hardly likely, she hadn't changed a single thing in this house since moving in.

He was hoping she would come home shortly. A hug would go a long way right now and he wanted to be there when she saw the presents and his rubbish gone, but she could be anywhere. She could even be away for the night, doing her care work, sleeping over at some old person's place. She would be happiest about him visiting the hospital and seeing his father, that news always brought a big smile to her face.

The next box was heavy, very heavy. Records, vinyl records almost all of them his father's. Harry Belafonte, Frank Sinatra, Neil Diamond, Dean Martin,

Nana Mouskouri they could all go in the bin. There was one album to keep, Roger Whittaker. Dad was forever singing *Durham Town* while doing the washing up after dinner and *The Last Farewell* which sometimes made his mother cry. Kieren guessed that song reminded his mother of her own father, who died at sea. Yes, this one record could stay. He always thought of his father whenever hearing Roger Whittaker singing, it was the only album spared. Maybe his mother would enjoy seeing it sometime, a mutual album of paternal remembrance. She couldn't play it though as they didn't have a record player, not anymore, not since his father pulled the guts out of their gramophone years ago, turning it into a drinks cabinet.

The wheelie bin was getting full so pulling out the cardboard boxes and stomping them flat, he transferred them to the recycling, a first time for everything. He caught himself at it again, constantly running his tongue back and forth across the new teeth in his mouth, the tip of his tongue becoming raw in the process. They still felt alien, making him want to find pliers and crack them back out. He rubbed the scar where his upper lip was sewn back up, where the hard ball of scar tissue had now turned white. Stubble still wasn't growing along the wound's course leaving a faint hint of a hair lip.

Then a smaller box, wrapped up in plastic, unaffected by moisture and mould, containing toy soldiers, tobacco tins and playing cards. There was also the zip gun, an improvised .22 calibre pistol he made himself after reading the book *The Cross and the Switchblade* at school. A highly effective pistol, with a stolen car aerial for the barrel and a thick rubber band

driving the flathead nail firing pin, just as the book described. Being fond of having all his fingers, he never did have the courage to pull the trigger when loaded. What a stupid book to give schoolboys to read, he thought, it was all stabbings, violence and instructions on homemade weapons. Thrilling reading and one of the few books he ever did manage to finish.

- *Oh God.*

Tied together in a bundle were those old school report cards. It was amazing they'd been kept considering what was written in half of them. Flicking through them, one by one, in chronological order, was like reading about a slowly sinking ship, the report cards documenting a gradual academic and personal decline. Kieren was no rocket scientist, being about average academically at primary school, doing well enough in things he enjoyed and not so good in others. At secondary school things started out better than expected. The school had academic streaming, based on entrance exams, and somehow he was placed in the top class, out of three. His mother was so proud. The down side of the top class was him being the bottom, not a place anyone liked. The novelty of consistently coming last in all class work soon wore off.

Reading the earliest high school reports reflected a popular boy doing well enough in his studies. Reaching fifteen years old a distinct change in tone occurred. Phrases like, *no one doubts Kieren's ability*, and *needs to apply himself more* soon descended to reading *shows little or no effort towards class work* and *absenteeism becoming an issue*. By the time Kieren turned sixteen the school was likely appreciating his absences, the year eleven report read *continually*

disruptive in class, and the often aggressive attitude towards staff and fellow students is not appreciated. In short, around sixteen years old he became a prick and left school shortly afterwards. By then he'd long been hiding the notification letters for parent-teacher interview nights, largely because his mother usually came home from them in tears. His old man, the one adult he respected totally, would come home shaking his head and ask him kindly, but exasperatedly, what exactly was the problem at school? What was going on? By then Kieren couldn't care about school or study or kids' stuff, he was over it. His father left school at fifteen and he had done alright. It's a different world now son, you need qualifications, his father would advise. Girls don't like a boy without a good job, was his mother's approach, appealing to his already evident fondness for girls. So, against his parents' wishes he'd left school, despite his mother wanting him to stay on and finish year eleven mathematics to become an electrician. He would have liked that, being an electrician, always enjoying tinkering with things and working alongside men, real men.

Until recently, reading the documented demise chronicled in these school reports brought about a sense of maverick pride. Today they brought a feeling of waste. There was nobody to blame but himself. He hadn't grown up untamed and unchecked. He wasn't one of the little kids staying up late, being allowed to skip school and play up whenever they wanted. He wasn't underachieving from lacking attention. He got raised right with love and care and certainly couldn't blame his family environment.

Having bullied most of the weaker kids silly, he could not imagine what his old school mates would think

about him now. School reunions he would not be attending, there'd be plenty of people there wanting him shot. Suppressing fire, they call it. The best form of defence was offence and he would rain fire and brimstone on anyone even looking at him. There was merit in the strategy, nobody ever dared taking a crack at him as his vengeance was known to be merciless. During those last two years of high school he allied himself with some of the biggest, meanest mongrels around. The Ginger Assassin his fellow thugs called him, he'd loved that name. He was one of the bigger and tallest children himself, up until thirteen or fourteen years old, when suddenly and surprisingly he stopped growing any taller, quickly going from being the biggest to becoming one of the smallest. Still, he certainly did make life a misery for a few kids. Survival of the fittest, kill or be killed, boys' schools were all like that. He wondered if someplace out there was an angry guy with a rifle and a list with Kieren Walsh's name on it. No issue, he wouldn't be seeing any of them anytime soon.

Beneath the school reports lay a collection of photographs, family pictures mostly, the majority taken when he was very young. There were several of his mother and ever smiling father, with Kieren sharing the same enthusiastic grin in the many of the earlier pictures, becoming visibly sullener and self-conscious in the few photos taken during teenage years. Many of these photographs were recent additions, having been slipped into the shoebox by his mother he assumed. Baby pictures, his parents together when they were young, a couple of his grandparents and a few of the great uncles and aunts who were mostly dead or living in South Australia. Of

the older pictures, he only knew who was who from the names written on the back, in his mother's careful handwriting.

His favourite photograph, that first motorbike. Perhaps it was stretching things calling it a motorbike, it was only Solex, a bicycle with a small motor on the front wheel. The tiny motor could only be engaged after peddling legs first brought the bike up to speed. Fiddling with the carburettor he'd somehow messed it up, so for a long while it only went on full throttle. Whenever riding it the speed would gradually increase until approaching a corner he would need to back off. The trouble was that it risked blowing up the motor, disengaging it from driving the front wheel when running full tilt, it could rev out of control. So whenever young Kieren wanted to stop or slow down he was obliged to pull the spark plug lead off, taking sizeable electric shocks every time. He'd sold it to another kid who annoyingly fixed the carburettor problem in five minutes. After that he'd gotten bigger and faster motorcycles, two stroke dirt bikes that went like rockets, fast enough to break wrists and collar bones which they did. He was pretty good and would keep up with the best of them when riding dirt tracks. Off road riding required more balls than technique and balls he never lacked, always being the maddest of the group, the wildest child. Other kids once sort out his company because of it. He was continually pumping things up with a self-annihilating nature, charging everything in suicidal fashion, from dirt bike riding to good natured fist fights with his equivalent number in other groups of boys. Those fights generally ended with a handshake and a new friendship. Silently he

wished for a time machine to take him back there, to those happier times, to childhood, to a carefree life.

Next, a class picture from primary school, a bunch of gormless children and a fierce looking nun, Sister Mary Bernadette. Many of the primary school teachers there were nuns, probably because they worked for free and never took leave. The nuns not taking leave was a shame, especially remembering just how much fun you could have with those relief teachers. It gave youngsters quite a thrill making a grown woman cry, but nuns were a different kettle of fish, difficult nuts to crack and vicious when provoked. Even with the occasional ear lobe pinch, the priests were generally quite popular, but some of the nuns were just plain mean and this Sister Mary Bernadette was the meanest of all. The lay ones, the ordinary teachers, weren't always keen on using physical punishment, leather straps or jam spooning the backs of children's thighs. The nuns however loved it, serving generous portions of corporal punishment for the slightest infringements. The strap hurt, but never did any permanent harm, he'd got plenty and usually deserved it. Thinking back on what an arse he'd been, he felt sorry for teachers today, endeavouring to control thirty spoilt little brats without a belt or a cane.

When Sister Mary Bernadette was in a good mood she allowed errant students to choose their allotted form of punishment for themselves. Work or wallop, she would ask? Take a strapping or doing extra study work outside of class time, but only pussies took the detention. Kieren publicly embarrassed her once and after that got walloped every time, no choice in the matter. Confirmation caused the confrontation, that sacrament when young Catholic children were

admitted into the church as adults. The ceremony was held every second year, with preparation classes in the evenings taught by Sister Mary Bernadette herself and the gentle parish priest. Trouble arose when classes were scheduled for Wednesday evenings, the class coinciding with a television screening of *The Sullivan's*, a rerun of an Australian drama set during the Second World War. The show was particularly popular with the boys as the junior Sullivan men were seeing action in various theatres of the war. Training with Bren guns, bayoneting Japanese in Papua New Guinea or shooting Germans in Crete, it was gripping stuff. Foolishly Kieren, who was leading the boys as a group, requested that confirmation preparation classes be rescheduled. That was it, that old nun went crazy at the mere suggestion, telling them they were blasphemous heretics putting television before God. Had they forgotten the suffering of Jesus Christ their saviour on the cross, she's raged? Her tongue, he could still see that tongue bulging through her teeth in abstract fury. Surprising Sister Mary Bernadette, but more so themselves, the boys stuck to their guns and she'd then called in the parish priest for support. That's when it happened, instead of admonishing the boys, he thought rescheduling classes to Thursdays was a great idea, he was a *Sullivan's* viewer himself he said. Kieren's father had been sure that Wednesday evening horse race meetings at the Hawkesbury Race Track were the real reason for the priest agreeing to the rescheduling. Dad would know too, it was Kieren's father driving the parish priest to the race track each week for a few drinks and a punt on the horses. Defeated and embarrassed that old Irish nun made their lives hell. Cancelling softball and soccer, she instead sent them on gruelling cross country runs

from which the girl children were excused. So, when an unusually large twelve-year-old boy, with considerable emotional problems, reacted to her incessant goading by successfully swinging a chair at her head and felling her they were all quite pleased.

Regardless of all that he still considered himself Catholic. It got his back up hearing people bagging the church, like somebody ridiculing the sports team a person followed, it was offensive. His great uncle had been a Catholic brother, a sort of monk. Gone now, it was him that taught Kieren to fly fish, so he wouldn't hear a word against them.

- *Hello Love, his mother's voice, surprising him from the nostalgia.*
- *Mum! His face brightening at the sight. Just sorting of my junk. Most of it's got all wet.*
- *Sorry Kieren. The roof leaks a bit in that corner there, but only when it's windy. Be a dear and have a look for me, would you. I can't get up there anymore. Staying for tea?*
- *Yeah. Sure, please. Hey, thanks for the photographs, the ones you put in the shoe box, with the names on.*
- *Found them did you. Glad you like them. One day you will want to know about that stuff Kieren, about who you are where you came from. I won't be around to tell you about it then.*

A cup of tea for her and him having a beer, both laughing freely. The two of them, Kieren and his mother together at the little kitchen table, going

through Kieren's photographs and a few albums of her own. He pointed out his nemesis, Sister Mary Bernadette, in the old school photo.

- *There she is there. Mean old tart.*
- *Now, now Kieren. Be kind. She was a bit fierce, wasn't she? She was tough on you, I know.*
- *Nothing I didn't deserve, laughed Kieren.*
- *Here's one of Patrick Griffin and you. What ever happened to him Kieren? You two were practically joined at the hip, asked his mother.*
- *Dunno. Last I heard he was in London, but that was ten years ago. Never saw him after he got expelled.*

Kieren and his childhood best friend Patrick Griffin, the picture taken on their first day of secondary school, when Kieren had more freckles and both kids with shocking haircuts. Standing for the photograph with their bicycles and in school uniform, Pat's uniform decidedly worn, as Pat's father never was one for working. Wonderful time those early school days and Patrick Griffin needed to make the most of his. He was shortly after expelled for cannabis and poor timing while away on a school trip. Being best mates there'd been a considerable amount of suspicion cast over himself and he'd been interrogated intensely about the drugs. Fortunately for Kieren, he'd missed that school excursion due to a broken collar bone, motorbike related. He'd been lucky really.

His mother produced one of her own favourite pictures, of his grandmother giving Kieren a haircut in the kitchen of their old home, him pouting with a screwed-up face.

- *Look at your face. Never did like having your haircut did you.*
- *It wasn't haircuts. It was her haircuts I didn't like. Mum, they were awful.*
- *She loved you Kieren my boy. She was forever sticking up for her only grandchild. You were a saint in her eyes. Couldn't put a foot wrong.*

Of his grandparents Kieren only ever knew his grandmother, his mum's mum. She was gone now, dying when he was eleven or twelve years old. It was his first exposure to death and he vividly remembered that unsettling vigil, her body laid out all cold and waxen in the front room, the good room of their old house, ribs up and stomach down. Then the priest and nuns and lots of old women coming over, saying the Rosary, fifty Hail Marys over her dead body, murmuring incantations then tea and sherry for everyone. The shivers it gave him, waking the following morning, her body still laying in the front room, the coffin open and having to wheel her out of the way to retrieve school books from the shelf behind, her still smiling in death, dressed in her Sunday best.

Later that morning he'd been altar boy for her funeral. He remembered there being a reasonable turnout of people, with cakes and tea and beers for the men in the church hall afterwards. She'd been a popular woman. When sitting beside the priest facing the congregation during the service his greatest fear was breaking down and crying. The second fear was the charcoal. Funerals were always much more stressful than an ordinary mass for altar boys. Even with a normal mass there was a lot to remember, things to fetch and bells to ring at allotted times and

there'd be hell to pay when getting it wrong. One task was walking around balancing a copy of the Bible on the forehead, serving as a mobile lectern when the priests wandered down near the parishioners to give the reading. A twelve-year old's head was fairly good reading height for a standing adult to read from. Elder clergy with failing eyesight didn't appreciate wobbly boys and would pinch earlobes to remind them to concentrate more and fidget less. First class altar boys memorised the last lines of every page of the reading in advance, so they could turn the pages for the priests as they spoke. Every primary school boy was obliged to serve as altar boy. There wasn't much choice in the matter, unless you were simple or untrustworthy or were caught stealing altar wine. There was no avoiding it for Kieren, not with his own parents sitting front and centre at Sunday mass every week. Requiring two boys per mass and two masses a weekend, plus weddings, funerals and holy days of obligation it could eat into their spare time. It was a small school and there just weren't enough boys to go around. There was money in it though, sometimes, not for masses, but weddings paid. Sometimes they did alright, especially when the fathers of both the bride and groom slipped them five dollars each for a job well done.

The terrifying charcoal was for the incense burner, an elaborate brass container hanging on a long chain. About halfway through funeral services the priest waved it about the coffin at the front of the church, the theory being that at this exact moment the dead person's soul left their body. Rising heavenward there in the church, aloft with the rising smoke of the incense, their soul then travelled to heaven. Prior to

the commencement of his grandmother's funeral service he'd been tasked with lighting the lumps of charcoal. These burning embers would hopefully remain glowing sufficiently to smoke the incense granules scattered on them during the service, some twenty minutes or more later. No embers, no smoke, no ascension of the soul and his grandmother's soul would walk the earth for eternity. An overly talkative priest, a long eulogy or too many friends and family giving speeches and the embers easily could die themselves. That day his prayers were answered, the smoke rose and his grandmother made it to heaven.

If pushed to answer he believed in a heaven, in some form of afterlife at least. He never really gave it much thought. Being raised in a church school that was just how it was, there was a heaven and a hell and people decided for themselves where they eventually ended up.

- *There's my dad, your grandfather with his brothers. The one in Adelaide and that's Frank, your great uncle, that took you fishing.*
- *Poaching you mean.*
- *A shame you never met my father. He'd have loved you Kieren. Peas in a pod the two of you. Characters the both of you.*

While never meeting his grandfathers, a colourful collection of great aunts, uncles and cousins were regular visitors to their family home in Richmond. Coinciding their visits with the local horse races, they filled the house with laughter and cigarette smoke whenever they came. He knew his mother's dad was a merchant seaman, killed in a cargo loading accident on the Sydney wharfs, when she was only nine old. With

Grandma never remarrying they'd lived on Struggle Street from then on.

- *It must have been tough, Mum.*
- *Being poor was all we knew Kieren. Everyone we knew was poor. It was normal*
- *How did you survive, being a single parent family back then?*
- *Widows were commonplace then. Single women banded together, helping each other. They had to, there was no other way. We were happy though son, happy enough anyway.*
- *Who is this on the motorbike? Asked Kieren pointing to a picture in one of the albums, of a young girl sitting astride a small BSA Bantam.*
- *What? Don't you recognise your own mother? That's me on my first day at work. I rode that thing everywhere.*
- *You rode a motorbike?*
- *Of course, son, we couldn't afford a car.*

Roast chicken for dinner, cooked together, peeling the spuds and pumpkin with Cath doing the chicken and the gravy and more than a few drinks between them. Just how she could drink that awful sherry he would never know. Late into the evening they continued talking. Cath couldn't say enough good things about Geoffrey and Anna and Bella. Unknown to Kieren there'd been constant communications between them all as he'd lain prone and throbbing. She was very proud of her boy for having such quality people in his life, she said.

- *You know they're dykes don't you Mum? Lesbians. He always enjoyed shocking his mother a little.*
- *Of course, dear. Don't you think there were gay people when I was young? It's not some recent invention you know. That's why Anna came up here to finish school, her mother was a bit funny about it all. They're all good now though I think.*
- *Yeah. Anna went down to stay a few months back. Things sounded alright between them, from what she said anyway.*
- *Value those girls Kieren, Geoffrey too. New friends are silver, old friends are gold, remember that, she advised.*
- *I will Mum.*

During his recovery period neither of them smiled very much and they'd never really discussed the matter and the assault. It was hard on her too no doubt, seeing her baby boy beaten to a pulp. The brain swelling was serious and potentially fatal and if he wasn't aware of the gravity of the situation she certainly had been. She'd prayed up a storm and admitted to having the nuns at the parish say a novena to hasten his recovery.

- *I really thought we might lose you, his mother said.*
- *Don't be silly Mum, nothing can kill me.*
- *Don't be so sure my boy, even superman has his kryptonite.*

The look of anxiety permanently residing on her face while nursing an injured son was now replaced with a

happy glowing radiance. There was something incredible about a mother's love for their sons. Husbands they just met at parties and were stuck with but their boys they created and made themselves. She was overjoyed now, seeing him on the mend, on the up again, so Kieren chose to avoid mentioning the death of Rez. Hearing of the dog dying would only make her concerned for him all over again and he figured she deserved a break from worrying about his wellbeing.

They finished their night with bananas and walnut ice cream and him being tucked into bed with a kiss on the forehead and a change of perception. She was no longer Mum, one half of his parents, she just became a person in her own right. Tonight she became Cath, his friend who once road motorbikes. It felt so good being home. Where was that time machine?

In the morning when leaving the house, a magpie's song filled the air, coming from the big pine trees on the other side of Francis Street. The bird's warbling sound reminded him of arriving at that same door tattered and torn, not so long ago, and a poem about magpies they once learnt in school. Approaching the car, a wiper blade stuck straight up, while the other had a note tucked beneath. Thankfully it wasn't a parking ticket, but an enquiry about the car being for sale, *very keen* the note said, and the bloke wrote he would try calling later that day. Two blocks away his lucky morning continued, spotting a rubbish skip outside an empty section on Bourke Street, dumping the rotting swag, excess boxes, rubbish and chairs before driving off towards the city.

Remaining on the passenger's seat were his father's set of golf clubs. The clubs themselves were old, the putter even having a wooden handle, but the bag was modern and presentable enough. His father never did play much golf and golf wasn't really Kieren's game either, playing only on a few occasions and usually losing interest quicker than golf balls. The only hole he really enjoyed was the nineteenth. Last time golfing very nearly put him off for life, an awful experience playing with the now ex-girlfriend. Wanting to do something different, something a little more upmarket with her for a change, they'd rented clubs and given it a go, but that day turned sour and they'd fought and argued all day long. She'd played before, she'd said that day, and she certainly hadn't been in any mood to be taking any golfing advice. So he'd kept his mouth shut, enjoying watching her play all her green shots with a pitching wedge, every putt firing high in the air. She was certain, in her thinking, the letter *P* etched onto the club stood for putter. That day was just before she left.

The route home from Richmond passed the air force base, then the Hawkesbury Race Track where so many childhoods days were spent with Patrick Griffin. They'd often rode out on their bicycles, late on race days, collecting up the discarded betting slips littering the ground, swirling about in the wind. One by one they would check them against the list of race winners, searching for an accidentally discarded winner or place bet or a late scratching they could then claim the money on. They almost always got something for their time. There was often an additional win of bottles of lemonade, given to them free by the race course stewards for their cleaning up the tickets. Then they'd

cash in, spending their winning there at the racetrack on battered sausages and candy floss before cycling home. Sometimes they'd get a lift back with his Dad, with their bicycles in the back of the exact same car he drove today. Pat found a twenty dollar note one day, a lot of money then, giving Kieren half. Driving home now he wondered about that day and whether he'd have done the same in return? It would depend if Pat saw him finding the money or not he guessed.

Arriving back in Darlinghurst felt strange. Between holidaying in Bangkok and recuperating at Cath's he hadn't spent much time there recently. Today the house made him feel uneasy, so much bad fortune, so much unhappiness there. Somehow he felt this house was to blame, before changing his mind and deciding no, this was only a house. He was not about to go projecting the blame and responsibility for his fuck ups onto mortar and brick. Coming inside the phone began ringing, and he let it go unanswered. Ten minutes later it rang again, this time picking it up, it was about the car.

- *Three owners, yeah. Goes fine, I drive it most days, Kieren informed.*
- *I had a decent look around it last night, but can I come back around now, take it for a drive?*

Kieren explained he was now in the city, not Richmond, it was a 202 motor, three on the tree, matching numbers, aftermarket power steering and used a bit of oil, rings likely. Better condition than most and worse than some.

- *Would it make it out to the Blue Mountains? I live at Hazelbrook.*
- *Mate, it would make it to Perth, with a bit of oil, ensured Kieren.*
- *Look, said the fella. I'm planning on repowering it anyway, engine, box, drive train the lot. Would you hold it for me until tomorrow?*
- *Yep, unless someone wants to buy it.*
- *Consider it sold then, the fella said.*

Excellent, he would take it for asking price and come pay cash later today if that was alright. The guy was getting his wife to bring him in now, with the money and registration forms, they'd be arranging insurance on the way, so consider it sold.

Thirty minutes later the doorbell rang. Opening the door and introducing himself Kieren greeted the conservative looking couple, asking if they wanted to test drive it first, which they declined before producing a bible and asking if he read the Gospel. Was he aware of the work of Jehovah Witnesses, they asked? Not the car buyers but door to door god sellers, the door slammed furiously shut. How dare they come here uninvited and interrupt him? What if he'd been smoking pot or watching porn? He hated their kind, those clean living Christian types, righteous in their abstinence of all that was fun. They were smug annoying fucks with no concept of his world, the real world. His world was pain and hate and shit waiting to pounce around every corner. It wasn't just them being annoying dickheads wandering about ringing the door bells of sinners, it was the message they peddled that really pissed him off. Exactly where in their precious

book did it say to give up drinking and gambling and whoring, to gain entry into their incredibly boring version of heaven? His Jesus had balls, got angry, flipped tables in temples and turned water into wine when parties ran out of alcohol. Most of the apostles, Peter included, were commercial fishermen and likely hard bastards accordingly, with Mary Magdalene being a working girl if you were to believe the press. That was his kind of religion. Where these new age, born again types got the idea they couldn't drink, screw, smoke or swear he had no idea. They were missing out. If they really wanted to save souls and make a few converts, they'd have much better luck pushing his version of religion door to door, particularly around this neighbourhood.

Nearly two hours later the doorbell finally rang again and the car guy arrived. Outside on the street the two men enjoyed themselves, talking cars and engines and gearboxes together. It wouldn't be used as a daily drive car, just wanting a project to work on in the garage, the man said. Less enthusiastic, the man's wife remained scowling unpleasantly from inside the other car. Kieren immediately understood this man's need for a workshop project to hide himself away with. She's not convinced of the merit of it, the buyer said to Kieren, before driving away in his new distraction.

No sense of loss, no seller's remorse. It felt right that the car would be repowered, repainted and reborn and was now heading back into the countryside to where it spent much of its life.



Eighteen

Clothes make the man, apparently. Oxford Street, not the cheapest place to shop in Sydney, but within walking distance from the house in Darlinghurst. A hot day for trying suits on but fortunately, in the heat of mid-summer, men's suits were currently on sale. An hour old haircut and fresh from a full wet shave, hot towel treatment included, the first time ever at the barber's shop down Liverpool Street, the peppermint treatment was still burning cool on the skin of his face. Gone was the half-hearted attempt at a beard. Gone too was the semi-mullet hairstyle, replaced now by a short close cut, number three on top fading to nothing on the sides and neck. It felt so prickly, he could hardly stop rubbing his own head.

The shop assistants encountered along Oxford street were largely gay men or late thirty something women, the type that relied on good looks in their earlier lives, finding themselves skilled for nothing but retail work after their inevitable divorces. They weren't in retail, *working in fashion* he'd overheard one assistant saying, talking unnecessarily loudly into her cheap cell phone, nails painted bright red to match her lipstick, mutton dressed as lamb. Still, he was enjoying being flirted with, it felt nice being on the receiving end of all this attention. Sales commissions were what they were really chasing, not actually him, but he let them suck up all they wanted. Truth was he'd been happy enough with the first suit he tried, but relishing receiving the attention and enjoying having

his arse kissed, he continued drifting from store to store. The heat and sticky humidity of a Sydney summer's day was driving the choice towards as light weighted a material as possible. Trying on a mid-brown coloured jacket, a simple classic cut with small lapels and flat fronted trousers, he immediately knew he'd found exactly what he was after. It was Bond, very Bond.

Dressed in this smart suit and while talking with the camp male retail assistant, his language and pronunciation improved tremendously. Consciously he forced himself to articulate properly, using *th* sounds where he may have been lazy and slipped in an *f* sound in the past, no swearing either. Dressing like this improved his game considerably. An inverted female shopper maintained eye contact in the reflection in the mirror, reminding him of an old *ZZ Top* song where every girl was crazy about a sharp dressed man. This was it, this was the suit.

While shopping empty handed the attention received was good, but carrying an Italian branded suit bag, while searching for shoes, belt and a plain white shirt, sent the retail girls into arse kissing overdrive. No tie though, ties were lame, ties said *my boss makes me wear this*. No tie meant not having a boss, not wearing a tie said you were your own man. Pretty soon the outfit was complete with new socks included, paying for everything with a credit card despite the thick wad of car sale cash in his wallet. There were other plans for that money. What a wonderful feeling, walking past the stores he'd visited earlier without spending, waving inside and swinging the shopping bags. Stopping for a beer in a wine bar, while waiting for a tailor to raise the hems of the new

suit trousers, admiring an endless stream of attractive people cruising down Oxford Street, Kieren realised just how many beautiful women and gay men Sydney had, which worked out just fine by him.

The lounge was covered in bits of fabric and feather boas and seemingly every article of clothing the girls owned between them, and the sewing machine was out. Another fancy-dress party he guessed. They were always making something artful, clothes, curtains, bean bags, big abstract oil paintings on brightly coloured canvases brightening the darkness of the house in the process. Some of their art was quite good, particularly Bella's. Kieren himself couldn't even draw a stickman, or a happy face. Art was not exactly an acceptable subject for a boy to take where he went to school.

- *Hello sexy man, they both cried out, Kieren having told them about the standard bar girl greeting in Bangkok.*
- *Doing a spot of tidying up I see, he teased.*
- *Sorry, wrong house. Can we help you? Have we met? Who is this attractive man in our house?*

Bella rubbed the newly shorn head, making purring sounds as she did and Kieren stirred at her touch. Anna just went to put the kettle on, returning with three beers instead, no clean cups in the kitchen she said.

- *We're getting smashed tonight. It's a lezzie do I'm afraid or we'd invite you along. But tomorrow we're going to Vic Park, the pool again. Want to come along for sunshine and tits, Bella enquired?*

- *See how we go, I might be playing golf.*
- *Golf? You are cleaning up your act, remarked Anna. Joint?*
- *Righto, yeah.*

A nineteen twenties party and the girls were making themselves flapper dresses that Kieren kept referring to as slapper dresses, teasing them good naturedly. Even Anna was preparing a dress to wear. Knowing the occasion, he assumed she would go as a gangster in a pin stripe suit, but no, she would be revealing her feminine side tonight along with her slight cleavage. The girls were in good spirits as they sewed, always enjoying preparing for their parties as much as the night out. He showed off his own new clothes and played DJ on the stereo by changing radio stations a few times, avoiding commercials and hip hop and sport while the seamstresses pined and stitched themselves back in time.

Tiring of his taste in hard rock music the girls kicked him off the stereo, so he did what he did best, heading into the kitchen, tackling three days dishes without the aid of a dishwasher. They did have one, he was it. He didn't mind as kitchen work was second nature to him and completely alien to them. To be fair, he couldn't recall having ever cleaned the bathroom or the lounge so it all worked out evenly in the end. Outside in the back of the house the momentum continued. Beer in hand, he pulled a few weeds, filled the holes the dog dug, collecting five coffee cups, four wine glasses and a few sand covered plates in the process, little wonder there was no crockery. He washed this new round of dishes before heading out again, buying beer to keep himself occupied for the evening. Returning home, the

girls were just heading out the door into a waiting taxi, stealing a bottle each from the slab of beer as they passed.

- *Thanks. Have fun, Bella waved in parting. Anna punched her farewell instead.*
- *Ladies.*

He was glad to be staying in this evening. Going to a party required a whole level of energy he doubted could be mustered up tonight. His body was still coming right. Besides, having been to the occasional lezzie function before, being the only straight male at the party was not necessarily the dream deal it sounded. For starters, usually all the girls there were all queer. The other men in attendance would be homosexuals who steered well clear of him and any straight girls attending pretended they weren't, but not for his benefit. People only seemed to engage him in conversation out of pity, like it was their good deed for the day. Apart from that insult, the complete absence of any possible hook-up took away any fun, zero sexual tension was boring. Then once people there got a few drinks in them, sooner or later, out of nowhere, some bull dyke would accuse him personally of causing the last century of male repression. From sheer boredom he wouldn't be able to resist winding it up in return. His favourite retort was asking them, *if you don't like men then why do you dress up like one?* Sparks would fly and feeling outnumbered he'd leave the party, taking a taxi to a pub for the company of real men. He'd been there before, more than once, not again, no thank you. From his personal experiences most gay women weren't nearly as likeable as Anna and Bella, most were downright rude.

Usually this time on Saturday it'd be time to go drinking in a nearby pub, but tonight he wasn't so keen. That beating broke more than a nose, teeth, ribs and cheek bone, it also broke his confidence. Gun shy, wary now, he was cautious of putting himself amongst drinking men, where there was always that potential for arguments and the opportunity for violence, especially around this neighbourhood on Saturday nights. Kieren always fancied himself being a particularly streetwise character but the events of that night left him shaken. Putting feet up on the coffee table, tonight's movie was *Gallipoli*.



Nineteen

- *Golfing today Sir? Asked the hotel concierge smiling warmly, handing over the key to the room.*
- *Yeah, tomorrow maybe, depends on the weather.*
- *307, top floor, corner room. Enjoy your stay Sir.*

Entering the room Kieren propped the golf bag against the wall before ignoring the *No Smoking* sign and inspecting the hotel room booked for the following two nights. An historic building, well presented, nothing flash but exactly what he'd hoped for. Stripping the bed of all its linen, the sheets and blankets, he laid them flat on the floor and collecting the towels, face cloths and mats from the bathroom added them to the pile. Saving a single towel and wedging it into the gap beneath the door should hopefully prevent the cigarette smoking being noticed and attracting any attention. Taking off shirt and shoes, he emptied the contents of his pockets onto the bedside dresser, before drawing closed the curtains and shrouding the sunlit room in semi darkness. Fumbling through the golf bag, he felt tremendously tired and was looking forward to some rest.

Seconds later came something he wasn't expecting. High pitched, a single screaming frequency, resonating and with harmonics, like a crystal glass brushed by a wet finger. There was only the sound, this tiniest of sirens loitering in the air, bouncing faintly from the polished wooden floor, off the walls and to his ears, around and around and seemingly never fading. What

a marvellous sound. He took some time appreciating it. Unexpected as it was, the sound brought no response. Did twenty seconds just pass? Maybe it was an hour, impossible to tell. No more than a minute really, with him just standing facing the floor quietly listening to this sound.

Slowly the sense of sight returned, the wooden floor at his feet entering into awareness. Darkened timber, visibly aged and worn with obvious scratches and scrapes here and there. The tiny circles in the flooring capturing his attention, causing the first movement in eighty seconds, an eyeball's flick. Stiletto heels from the shoes of women long gone, or at least long past their best, had left visible impressions in the floor underfoot. Permanent wounds in the timber, small circular pox marks that survived the labour, the sanding, the shellacs and varnishes attempting to remove all traces of them. Their little scars surviving, stubbornly refusing obliteration, testament to that special occasion, nights out well dressed, high heels on, a bit of a do. Character features the hotel manager would likely say but a shame really on such nice timber. Darkened now, it was light and golden once, still evident in protected places like the bottom of the wardrobe, under the bed and in the corners where no one had walked or painted or danced in high heeled shoes. Harder woods may have resisted the women's scarring heels but not this one.

He allowed himself one further moment to reflect, soaking up this unanticipated event, mildly surprised at not feeling surprised by the sound at all. Quite the contrary, he felt nothing. Beyond emotion now and beyond any doubts as to the required course of action. Times like this required resolve not emotion. When

emotion became involved things got messed up and mistakes were made. In the third floor room of the old brick building, more like a converted manor house than a purpose built hotel, Kieren lowered the rifle from his head and drew back the bolt. The ineffective cartridge ejected automatically, skittering across the polished wooden floor, bouncing off the skirting board, spinning into the corner where it eventually came to rest. Even in the half-light seeping through the thick curtains, closed tight despite the heat of the day, the useless pin mark in the rim of the bullet was clearly visibly.

This hotel building was selected for several reasons, most importantly the girls, Bella and Anna. It would be thoughtless and highly cruel traumatising them both by performing this task back at their house. From personal experience he knew they would never forget such the sight, it would scar them for life. They wouldn't want to continue living there afterwards either, finding decent rental properties in Sydney wasn't easy and this way saved them the hassle. Most importantly though was this hotel room's thick brick construction. Bricks ought to stop any wayward projectile from carrying on through his head and into someone else's. It wasn't far from the house either.

Using his feet, he rearranged the sheets, blankets and towels intended to soak up the river of blood that just failed to arrive. He'd witnessed livestock shot and it was messy, the linen would make cleaning up easier. And there was two hundred dollars on the bedside dresser, with a note instructing it be used for a bar tab for the cleaners, or whoever the task of cleaning up this mess fell to.

Closing the bolt loaded a second cartridge into the breach the .22 calibre rifle. Deliberately he'd loaded the magazine with additional rounds, better to be safe than sorry. Should the first shot only wound, rather than kill, having another ready to finish the job was essential. The last thing he wanted was living on brain damaged, but that misfire was unanticipated. Placing the barrel of the reloaded rifle to his temple again he adjusted the angle slightly. Pointing towards the back of his head meant the exit wound should occur amongst the hair. He knew Cath, his mother, would bury him as a Catholic and he hoped to allow her an open coffin at his vigil, that was how it was done with her. This way the any exit wound should be invisible as he lay. Entry wounds were always much smaller, undertakers could just cover it with putty and makeup.

Ensuring the trajectory included the solid wall behind he slowly squeezed the trigger again, cautiously applying pressure, not wishing to lobotomise himself with a jerking pull. The clack of the spring-loaded firing pin travelling the length of the barrel entered his skull, followed once more by that resonating ring, the natural frequency of steel. His whole head rang. Fillings of his teeth felt as if they might explode, vaporise in his mouth from this intense vibration. Then came another noise, the screeching sound of lungs drawing breath.

Ejecting the second round into his left hand and placing the rifle at his feet he inspected the bullet. The rectangular indentation from the firing pin was clear enough, the brass cartridge however was an unusual green colour and the projectile was coated in a powder of white lead oxide. The rifle was fine, this ammunition

was corrupt. Loading the rifle's magazine, a minute and a lifetime ago, he took these rounds from an already open packet without bothering to look. Reaching now back into the golf bag, Kieren extracted the brick of bullets, a box made up of smaller cardboard packets, each one containing fifty rounds. Now it was plain to see, the half-opened packet which he'd used was clearly water damaged, the brass shells inside all tarnished green from wetness. On further inspection, the other small packets were a different manufacturer's brand altogether, these ones all in perfect condition, completely unblemished. Water had only damaged the box on top. After drawing the curtains he'd been semi blinded, with eyes still adjusting to the darkness when loading the magazine, the ammunition's poor state went unnoticed.

Rinsing cold tap water over his face in the bathroom those same eyes startled him. Contorted unrecognisably in the bathroom mirror, they were vertical slits, like the eyes of a cat. Adrenaline surged through veins with unprecedented force, forearms visibly swelling from it, hairs raised standing on end. This was fantastic. There was no question about it, there would be no third attempt. No way was he wasting this feeling. Nothing, not a drug in the world could be compared with this, heart beating furiously, an electric tingling sensation flowing through him, feeling like a giant.

Deeper inside the ringing sound remained, in incredible detail. He began playing with this newly adrenaline heightened sense of hearing, tuning in and out, focussing on the individual sounds from outside, squabbling sea gulls, traffic, voices and laughter flowing in from the street, then back to that resonating

chime. The sudden absence was striking, like a thorn removed, it was gone. Perhaps because of the anaesthetic of adrenaline and possibly only temporary as a result, but an enormous weight felt lifted and that continually playing record no longer played, it was gone. He needed air and out of this room, immediately.

Without wasting another second, picking up the rifle he removed the bolt, pocketing it, before stashing the now disabled firearm back inside the golf bag leaning against the wall. Pulling back on a shirt, grabbing his wallet and the drinking money the cleaners would now never earn, he walked down the hotel stairs and outside into blinding sunshine, the newest member of a highly exclusive club. Ten foot tall and bullet proof wasn't it, the overwhelming feeling was something closer to invisibility, of being a walking spirit.

He wanted out, he wanted a swim and pointing feet north down Victoria Street aimed towards the nearest ocean. Invisible perhaps, but still highly audible, uncontrollable maniacal laughter, mad wild cackles burst out intermittently as he walked, the unstartling sound stopping other pedestrians in their tracks from half a block away. Powering purposefully along Victoria Street he dropped down into Woolloomooloo, weaving through back streets, past Bells Hotel, crossing over the road and taking the long flight of concrete steps up into the Botanical Gardens. Entering the gardens adrenaline fuelled senses became heightened even further by the rush of additional oxygen, delivered by the surrounding dense foliage. Inhaling deeply, he felt his body absorbing it, energising, uplifting with every breath.

Sleeping fruit bats, hundreds of them, hung motionless, inverted like pendulums from the trees. Stopping, inspecting them in their slumber, cloaked up in black leathery wings, the branches bent and sagged, hanging low with the sheer weight of the bats' numbers. Carrying on through the jungle he stopped again, on a small bridge spanning a pond surrounded with exotic plant life. Enormous leaves of giant water lilies floated in the still clear water, stirred only by the wings of brightly coloured dragon flies darting low across the surface. So tempting, so inviting, it took enormous restraint not to dive in, to just swim here. Looking down into the water, small fish schooled in the shade of the bridge at his feet while bird song from surrounding trees filled the air. Something else appeared in the water, something unseen in a long while, the smiling face of broadly grinning young man shining upwards and another reflection above and behind the face. Standing completely motionless with head bowed, not wanting to frighten it away, watching the white underbelly and broadly sweeping wings reflecting in the water, a willie wagtail hovered directly above him, so close that he could feel the breath of its wings. The small bird circled around twice, before vanishing amongst the trees in determined pursuit of a passing green dragonfly.

Macquarie Street brought an end to nature. Crossing the road and taking a stone steps provided a starkly contrasting environment to the expanse and greenery of the Botanical Gardens. The limestone stairway took Kieren down into Circular Quay, directly into the midst of a densely packed mass of people. Like most sunny days, Circular Quay was awash with milling tourists, everyone heading in all directions but nowhere in

particular. Kieren weaved through the menagerie, past Japanese tour groups, Chinese women wearing wide brimmed hats, colourful Indian saris, Sikh men in turbans and American school children excitedly pointing and talking. At the water's edge, lining the rails, sunburnt young men waited for ferries with foreign girls and beach towels slung across their shoulders. Rural country lads like himself, drinking early with cans in their hands, watched the pretty girls parading about. Biker men in leather vests, people eating ice cream, couples holding hands, everyone looking so totally content.

Every few metres along the waterfront buskers of one type or another were performing and entertaining the crowd. There were jugglers, magicians, acrobats and motionless human statues. Capturing the largest audience were Australian aborigines, in traditional garb, playing didgeridoos accompanied by hardcore modern techno music. Every nationality under the Sunday sun was waiting for a ferry boat to somewhere with the smell of seawater and kelp in the air. Stopping to buy bottled water from a Vietnamese guy running a Lebanese kebab stand it occurred to Kieren that if anyone was an ethnic minority around there today it was him. A face full of freckles and bright orange hair wasn't all that common. The grin on his face threatened to split his head in half.

Boarding the ferry there was the usual scramble of people hurrying for the best outside seats, but everyone was a winner on such a windless day. Kieren took a seat at the back of the boat, relinquishing it minutes later to an older couple, standing instead, holding the rail as the boat shuddered away from Circular Quay. Sydney's harbour bridge, the opera

house, the golden coastline replicated in the mirror calm water, he ignored them all. People monopolised his vision. These happy good-humoured people, he simply could not take his eyes off them. Removing the rifle bolt from his pocket he discreetly dropped it into the hurryingly passing ocean. He wouldn't need that again, that rifle belonged to his father. There were still two other firearms stashed away in the roof space at his mother's house anyway, a Lee Enfield and his boyhood combination rifle. Deciding which weapon to use caused something of a conundrum, but there wasn't any .303 ammo and the shotgun on the other one just seemed so brutal, there'd be no head left. The stock and barrel left behind in the hotel room he would dump later, if he could bring himself to touching it again. Thinking of the rifle suddenly brought on an intense nausea, stomach contracted violently, forcing his head over the side, vomiting bile into the calm blue Sydney Harbour. Standing upright, wiping his mouth he was glad for the bottled water and felt a little bit ashamed, but nobody witnessed the purging, everyone was focussing of the Sydney scenery passing by and he was now focussing on them.

Nearing the heads at the entrance to harbour the water darkened in its deepness. He wished for the boat to keep going, out from the harbour and into the swells of the open ocean. He wanted to sail far away forever but the ferry stayed within the harbour, soon docking at its destination, Manly. Disembarking, the excited beach goers charged ahead but Kieren took his time, enjoying the view from the rear of the ship, the last passenger to step ashore. Tourist shops lined the pedestrian mall of the ferry terminal building and entering one, Kieren purchased the cheapest beach

towel and smallest bottle of suntan lotion on offer. The temptations of the Hotel Steyne were easily resisted today, instead walking the congested pathway alongside the water's edge to his ultimate destination, Shelly Beach. Stepping onto the golden white sand the day's heat rose by the second. Crossing the beach to the farthest side provided plenty of space away from others. Against the large rocks he wasted no time in spreading the towel, wriggling out of hot denim jeans and burying his wallet deep in the sand as inconspicuously as possible. He would swim in his underwear, no one would notice.

Wading waist deep, then diving under, swimming as far as possible underwater on a single breath, not really wanting to surface at all. But surface he did, swimming on towards the white water breaking on the rock point. Freestyle was quickly tiring but he wasn't stopping until well clear of all other swimmers, then when finally alone in the ocean, rolling over and floating, with the big toes of both feet above the surface. Eyes closed, floating there motionless, breath calmed and the ringing sound finally faded from within. Eventually, opening eyes revealed a bright turquoise sky, clear blue above and clear blue below, floating at that moment suspended between heaven and earth. Then came another sound and he listened intently, silence, a silent world and a silent mind.

Finally, at peace. He continued swimming around the rock point and further out into the open Tasman Sea. On a different day he would be frightened of strong currents or bull sharks taking him, but nothing scared him. Drowning today, he figured, would be so ironic. In the open ocean he mingled with two surfboard riders, him bobbing like a cork and them not

responding to the waved greeting, ignoring the swimmer in their midst.

An exhausted body eventually extracted itself from the ocean, walking over hot sand to where the towel lay, drying down with water wrinkled hands. Since entering the water the crowd on the beach had grown quickly and a large proportion of the population were attractive, young, female and topless. His first thought on leaving that hotel was escape, finding some solitude was the original objective, but being here was ten times better. Yes, there'd been quite enough solitary introspection recently he decided. Just now he wouldn't swap Shelly Beach for all the tea in China or India or wherever tea came from. The place was now one big heaving party. He wondered if the girls were doing the same at Victoria Park, having a swim, tanning in the sun and looking at beautiful women. There were worse ways to spend a day. Yes, this was a day worth living.

Part of him wanted to tell someone, to tell anyone about this morning. It was incredible. How exactly did twenty bullets end up spoiled with all the other packets remaining perfectly fine? Was the leaking roof in the garage to blame for ruining the stashed ammunition? He figured it must be, but no. Those golf clubs were never stored in the garage, ever. They'd always lived inside, in the wardrobe of the spare room, covered over with a blanket, not moving in years. The garage's roller door was too easily opened, lacking sufficient security to be leaving illegal unregistered firearms inside. No, suddenly he remembered. That half packet getting damp all those years ago, dropped into the river on the day he vaporised that willie

wagtail. Did the actions of a small bird really save his life? It seemed so.

He wondered about discussing this with someone. Who would that be though? No one would believe him and if someone did they'd probably want him kept on suicide watch, committed to a loony bin. No, he wasn't keen on ending up in psychiatric care. Not now, not when finally feeling more mentally stable and more balanced than any time in years. Swearing a silent oath, Kieren promised never to tell a soul about what happened today. That cleansing violence was for his knowledge alone.

Over the next few hours Kieren swam more, relaxed more and came up with a plan. The plan wasn't going to change the world, but it was a start. First of all, he needed to get back to work, that much he realised. He needed a job more than just for money, he needed the socialisation. He missed the good humoured banter, missed having drinks after work when beer tasted like nectar after ten hours in front of hot stoves. He missed looking forward to days off work when it wasn't every day. Stuck at home alone was solitary confinement, a self-inflicted punishment that provided too much space for dwelling. He would be better off doing something, to be occupied rather than preoccupied. Yes, he would call Geoff tonight and see what was going at the hotel. Maybe some functions work, catering for weddings and the like or production cooking, making bulk food all day. Even larder chef would do, anything but a la carte. Maybe not full-time hours either, three or four shifts a week would be ideal. That would allow time for working on another plan, a plan to get out of kitchens all together. It would probably be gradual, but he would make it happen.

Second, slowing down on the party supplies seemed like a good idea just now, hard drugs were doing his head in. Beers and a joint occasionally were enough for most people. Yes, he decided, he would stick with that, nothing else. Constantly taking all that other rubbish was slowly destroying him, he knew it, mind, body and soul. Most drugs brought more panic than pleasure for him anyway. Maybe not total abstinence but a degree of moderation was in order, it couldn't hurt.

Unsurprisingly, topless girls sunbathing on the beach got him to thinking about women. He wanted one. The time spent with Sonia, before her going away, really was special. It was selfish he knew, but satisfying someone's need for a sense of security, something that his presence could provide, made him feel secure too. There was purpose in knowing that Kieren Walsh wasn't just a lump of meat taking up space in the world. It was reassuring knowing that his presence and existence was benefiting someone other than himself. It wasn't much but it was something, better than feeling nothing. Perhaps having a girl in his life would help keeping him on the straight and narrow too. Likely it wouldn't be Sonia, from the tone of her last letter it was over, but still, he promised to call her in a while, when she'd finished up sorting herself out. She may not want to see him, then again, she just might, either way there was nothing to lose. There was one major problem though, that scaring on her arm. She couldn't wear cardigans all day every day, not on days like this. What would she do here at the beach? What would she do at the pools in Victoria Park? There was no mistaking what those marks were, anyone could tell exactly where they'd come from and he didn't want people thinking she was a nutcase for

everyone's sake. Yes, he would call her. And he needed new wheels.

Five o'clock and the bathers on Shelly Beach began shaking towels and dusting themselves off in preparation for departing homeward. He really wasn't looking forward to returning to the city, least of all returning to that hotel room, but that golf bag needed collecting immediately, that couldn't be forgotten. Leaving it there with a rifle and ammunition tucked away inside was inviting trouble. If the hotel found it they would call the police. The police would likely arrive in Darlinghurst to a house smelling of cannabis or worse. Next thing he'd be up on drugs and firearms charges, a combination which never read well in court. The girls might even be dragged in for possession too, they always had treats stashed. He would go back there right now. It was just a room after all.

The return ferry to Circular Quay was more crowded than the trip over, with the passengers all wearing tired faces. Calm water made for a pleasant ride down Sydney Harbour but nearing the city a feeling of dread rose in his stomach, like when approaching an enemy on the street. Delaying tactics rose in his mind. Another ferry ride someplace else? He could go up to Parramatta maybe, just keep riding about on ferry boats. No, there was a job to do, and he was tiring fast. That wild surging adrenalin supporting the first part of the day was long gone now, evaporated, leaving fatigue in its wake. An empty stomach wasn't helping matters either. On Alfred Street, near Circular Quay, he flagged a taxi.

- *Leaving already Sir? Not staying the night at all?*

It was a different concierge from checking in, this one speaking in a feigned pompous tone of voice that Kieren figured was a vain attempt to bring some status to a poorly paying job. The few seconds just spent upstairs in the room, collecting the golf bag and that first cartridge from the floor, left his head reeling and spinning in circles. Feeling too dizzy to say anything he paid the hotel bill silently and left, taking the waiting taxi the few remaining blocks. Entering home two sunburnt and content looking housemates were reading quietly in the lounge, a nature documentary playing unwatched on the television.

- *How was golf? Bella asked without looking up from her book.*
- *Went to the beach instead, Manly. Did you get down to Vic Park?*
- *Nice. Yeah, crowded though and bloody hot. You here for dinner?*
- *Eating out tonight, thanks anyway.*

Upstairs the bedroom was spotless, the cleanest since first moving in. It was nice coming home to a tidied place, all clean and with the bed made up and smelling so fresh. With everything packed up this room suddenly seemed so big. Yes, he decided, with some decent new bedding he could bring a girl there, it wasn't so foul after all.

Neatly laid out on the bed were the new clothes from Oxford Street, the suit, shirt and shoes, all purchased with the express intent of being buried in. That outfit

would still get worn, maybe only to the horse races, but they weren't a completely wasted purchase. It was about time he owned a suit, he was thirty-two years old after all. He felt very thankful now for not choosing a tuxedo styled burial outfit, that really would have been wasted money.

Conspicuous in the breast pocket of the suit jacket protruded an envelope containing five thousand dollars cash, funeral money, from the car and more taken from credit cards. The envelope was addressed to Catherine Walsh, contained cash and nothing else. There was no note, no instructions and no fond farewell. He thought long and hard about leaving a farewell letter but there just weren't the words. How would he explain to his mother why she'd prematurely lost another man in her life? After her father and husband, Kieren would have been the third. No words could soften that blow.

Removing two small bullets from his pocket he stared long and hard at the rectangular indentations in their rims, shaking his head in disbelief and gratitude. These he would keep as souvenirs and placing them in the bedside cabinet he closed the drawer. He was glad the plan failed but he was also very proud of himself. He'd pulled the trigger today, twice. There was a strange pride to be taken from that. The second pull was particularly gutsy. He wouldn't be forgetting that sensation in a hurry.

Showering quickly and dressing in the new attire, checking his look in the mirror he finally liked what he saw reflected. The man looking back looked like a man he wanted to be. Filling wallet with cash he headed outside, wearing his Sunday best, in search of a good

restaurant. Tonight he would treat himself to a few things. He already knew what to have first and practised saying it as he walked.

- *Fish of the day please.*



Twenty

Sonia's phone call came out of the blue. She called him, asking to come collect her when she left the residential program in a few days' time. She said she would prefer to leave that place as a woman, picked up by a handsome man. Being collected by her parents, she said, would make her feel like a naughty child. Kieren declined, it was too much pressure and he didn't want to begin what was possibly a new relationship at the gates of a drug and alcohol treatment centre and he told her as much. There was test cricket on TV that day as well. Instead, he asked if she would prefer a day or two settling in, then have a date with him on the Saturday afternoon, they could go for a country drive. Then on Sunday night they could have a proper date, dinner with maybe a sleepover in a nice hotel somewhere. Sonia said yes, liking the logic tremendously. He didn't mention the cricket. So, Sonia took the train to her cousin's house in Balmain where she would be staying until finding a new place of her own. She would not be going back to Newtown. Balmain was nicer, an upmarket suburb full of childless city workers with little dogs and small old terrace houses. It wasn't far, he would pick her up there on Saturday.

Date day arrived sunny and windless. A fine day for driving into the countryside to talk and walk and escape the city for a time. Pulling up in a small white rental car, Sonia was outside waiting ready. It struck him immediately that she was looking rather fat, much

heavier than he remembered her being. He couldn't blame her for eating though, there weren't many vices she was allowed now.

- *Hi.*

- *Hi.*

Fidgeting slightly, they each looked at the other, unsure of what to do or what to say next. Walking around the car and opening the passenger's door, he made a hand gesture to get in. Suddenly it was weird, he should have hugged her or kissed her or squeezed her hand or something.

- *Have you had a haircut, remarked Sonia still outside the car, with a quizzical look on her face.*

- *Yeah.*

- *Something else. You've had your teeth cleaned, haven't you?*

- *Yeah when I stopped smoking, said Kieren not mentioning the beating that also contributed to his slight change in appearance.*

- *Come here.*

Sonia planted a firm kiss on his mouth, breaking the ice. Then getting into the car, allowing Kieren to close door for her, they headed away on their country adventure. It was good driving with Sonia sitting on his left, still conscious of the damage to the right side of his face, even if she hadn't noticed. It wasn't quite one hundred percent healed yet and he was still forever running his tongue back and forth across the three new teeth. The scars above his lip and eye were still visibly whiter than the surrounding tissue, but

they were fading. He could hardly get a word in edgeways for the duration of the drive out of town, Sonia chirping away happily and him content to drive and listen, not knowing what to say anyway. Relaxing in Sonia's company as they drove Kieren gradually freed up, the awkwardness evaporating and soon their conversation flowed freely.

Their first destination was a wildlife and nature reserve, not far from Richmond, where they fed the wallabies and goats and miniature pigs wandering freely around the park. The birds however were confined to cages. Half wanting to liberate them, he secretly felt a pang of sorrow for the birds, hoping for their sakes they were born into captivity, rather than being captured and placed there. It would be a horrible thing to lose your liberty having once been free, he thought. From there they drove up into the hill country around Kurrajong, where they ate a late lunch, Kieren struggling to stop at the single beer he allowed himself as driver, but managing. There were other days for Sonia to take the wheel. Today he would call upon every ounce of gentlemanliness he could muster, digging deep to find the few. After lunch they left the hill country, stopping and walking along the banks of the Hawksbury River, so very close to where he'd found a hanging man, many years ago, but only three months in reality, another event left unmentioned. As they walked and explored Kieren showed off by climbing a tree and Sonia beat him in a handstand competition, with him taking out the stone skipping contest across the big river. He regretted not bringing a rod to do a little fishing, but today was not for that, with company came compromise.

- *Hey, pretty girl, Kieren hailed, having found a vintage tractor amongst the overgrown trees of the riverbank.*
- *Flattery will get you everything, said the girl with a smile.*
- *Come and check this out.*

An ancient tractor with cracked rubber tyres and a pitted chrome badge declaring it to be a Fordson Major and the remnants of a rotting wooden palette, covered in grey lichen, laying in the dry grass nearby. They climbed aboard, sharing the space of the steel driver's seat between them, two up, ploughing an imaginary field, taking imaginary crops to market and kissing real kisses, passionate and long but going no further. That was for tomorrow night, today was fine just as it was.



Twenty One

Alternating between kitchen stores manager, when the regular guy had his days off, and two days covering for a production chef worked out well for everybody. When cooking, Kieren knew exactly what supplies were in stock to use and when ordering in supplies he knew exactly what the kitchen would need brought in. Best of all, no restaurant service, no one shouting food orders at him, or any orders for that matter. Here he answered to Geoff and Geoff alone.

The arrangement was fine, but having been approached by one of their major foodstuff and kitchen equipment suppliers, about joining them as a fulltime sales rep, things looked likely to change soon. He'd been honest with them, pointing out his own absence of any sales experience but apparently that was something they were prepared to teach him. His industry contacts and food service experience would be invaluable they said. There would be a formal interview, but apparently that was only for due process, the job offer was there, he could consider it his to take should he want it. It was a nationwide company with opportunities to relocate anywhere once he earned his stripes. It was an opportunity to get away from the stoves and that was good enough for him. Best of all it came with a car, a sedan, not a van, so it wasn't just a glorified delivery job. That part appealed particularly, he was yet to replace his own car. Instead, he and Sonia just rented small runabouts for their weekends away or when going out to

Richmond visiting his mother and to fish a few small ponds together. The only trouble he could see with the new foodstuffs job was their lease arrangement with Ford. He was a Holden man. He'd informed Geoff of this when telling him about the opportunity on offer. Geoff responded by telling him to get over himself, quickly, shave for the interview, have another haircut and say, *yes sir, I would like the job please*. You just want rid of me, Kieren had teased Geoff jokingly. Correct, Geoff had replied, meaning it.

From Geoff and the girls Sonia heard of the beating, but perhaps not the full severity of it, and she'd scolded him lightly for fighting a fight that never occurred. Personally, he doubted if he would ever have told her about it, but now she knew. Oddly, getting bashed wasn't something he regretted or lamented over, quite the opposite in fact. Since then he'd pulled his head in and grown up a bit. No more staggering around The Cross on a cocktail of whatever and no more breaking house rules. He wasn't going teetotal and Sonia still drank, though weekends only for her. He owed those lads that roughed him up a drink. Being kicked senseless had been a blessing in disguise, well, there'd been a silver lining at least.

Today he was cooking at home, a meal for three very important women, Sonia, Bella and Anna. The four of them now shared the house in Darlinghurst. All the girls were there in the lounge now, chatting away, happily working on their art project together, as he wandered in and out from the kitchen seeing how it was coming along. Bella really was amazing, for a millisecond Kieren wished he could swap girls, Sonia for her, before chastising his own thoughts silently. He forced himself to look down and away from her, away

from Bella's body and to what she was doing instead. Even her hands were beautiful to watch as they worked attaching thin tracing paper to Sonia's left upper arm. Onto the tracing paper Bella was now carefully copying the patterns underneath, the ones carved by Sonia's own right hand. Historical wounds, the act of someone no longer present and something she was certain would never recur. Like Kieren, she'd found her old self and happiness again, though through a very different path.

Today was a second fitting, as Bella called it, fine tuning the design she was preparing for Sonia. They'd been working on this for weeks. To begin, Bella wrapped Sonia's scarred arm in damp tracing paper before allowing the paper to dry and pencilling in the location and pattern of her white scarred skin underneath. Using the traced lines as a stencil, Bella then created a drawing of the finest pattern of winding ivy, vine and leaves, running over the path of the scar tissue, concealing them with the unfurling twisting pattern. From mapping out the pattern on the light tracing paper, it progressed to a sketching on the plastic arm of mannequin, and now a final dry run before the big day.

Just to make sure, today they were painting the design onto her skin. This way Sonia could see if she liked it before committing to having the design tattooed, by an old girlfriend of Anna's no less. They'd hardly begun and the results were obvious. Sonia was delighted and Kieren loved what he saw. It was an incredibly personal experience between them all and the girls bonded deeply in the process. There'd been tears all round in the information exchange phase, of

how the scarring had begun, behind them now but necessary.

After the first fitting Sonia felt an addition was required to bring colour and femininity to what would ultimately be a large full arm tattoo. They messed around with drawing flowers and birds, eventually deciding on incorporating a butterfly into the design, resting on the vines of Sonia's upper forearm, it completed things perfectly. It was looking good and it was going to hurt like hell.



