

**GOING**  
**DOWN**  
**SWINGING**

**LONGBOX**

**ANDREW DENTON**

**PAT GRANT**

**BRIDGET LUTHERBORROW**

**LIBBIE  
CHELLEW**

**LUKE  
JOHNSON**

**KATHERINE KRUMINK**

Longbox  
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Trade &  
Investment  
Arts NSW

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## **NOW FOR SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT.**

Since 1979 we've published short stuff: stories and essays, one-page drawings and two-minute poems. But what about all the longer work, miles past the three thousand words or couple of illustrations that find homes elsewhere?

So we arrived at Longbox. Six extended works by eleven artists, assembled by one designer and a handful of editors, funded by hundreds of online supporters to make up *Going Down Swinging's* thirty-sixth anthology. Time to number off.

## **THIRTEEN STORY HORSE**

When Bridget Lutherborrow sent us two short stories set in a dream-like suburban apartment block, we wrote back and asked for more. Now the stories form a full collection. With painter Harley Manifold's knack for finding beauty in urban environments, he was the clear choice to provide a visual response.

## **LOOKING A LITTLE DRAWN**

It's intriguing when a person noted for particular skills tries something new. Some attempts end better than others. Andrew Denton was the first to claim he couldn't draw, but for a love of cartoons he was willing to chance vulnerability in the attempt. He even involved pro illustrators Megan Herbert and David Squires for contrast. Fortunately wit is a virus that survives many forms of transmission, and Andrew's efforts here compare favourably to Russell Crowe's discography.

## **RINGBARK**

In a few dozen pages, Luke Johnson demolishes the romantic Australian idea of the shearing shed. A former shearer himself, Luke describes a bleak, harsh world with glorious poetic certainty. Caroline Hunter's cover is a fitting complement.

## **PROTEIN / NEWS FROM A RADIANT FUTURE**

A genre mash of lit fiction and sci-fi schlock with a dark comic twist, these twin novellas bookend the apocalypse: Libbie Chellew marks its mundane beginnings while Katherine Kruijnk documents its aftermath. Technical illustrator Anthony Calvert plots the point in these worlds where language gives way to simpler forms of signalling.

## **TOORMINA VIDEO**

In rich colour on thick cream paper, Pat Grant's graphic novella starts in book form before folding out into a series of posters. From the depths of a 1990s video shop in a small coastal town, surrounded by stories in plastic boxes, Pat's own story crosses the intervening decades to its conclusion.

# Looking a Little Drawn

AD  
2015



I've always loved cartoons, particularly single-frame ones as exemplified in *Punch*, *National Lampoon* and *The New Yorker*. Sometimes I recite cartoons at people – example: the five-star general sitting at his huge desk and saying into the speakerphone, “There’s no time to use the scrambler so I’ll just talk nonsense.” Brilliant. I have also long admired Australia’s fierce and clear-eyed cartooning tradition – David Pope’s “He drew first” comment on the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre being a recent outstanding example. The cartoonist I most admire is Gary Larson, not just for his laugh-out-loud sense of the universe but because he has contrived to maintain complete anonymity. That makes him, for mine, the smartest man in the biz. So when Geoff Lemon challenged me to do “something different” for *Going Down Swinging*, and I hesitatingly responded with “I could, maybe, do a few cartoons?”, I was delighted when he texted back and said “Fuck yeah” because, well, the man’s a wordsmith.

So here they are. My first cartoons. Drawn with all the skill of a five-year-old who has drawing difficulties. If the cartoons themselves don’t make you laugh, then hopefully the thought of me hunched over my desk, tongue sticking out one side of my mouth, grasping my pencil in a child’s fist, will.

You will notice, however, that three of these cartoons are jarringly well-drawn. My thanks to guest artists Megan Herbert and David Squires, for lowering themselves to help me realise some ideas that neither the left nor right side of my brain knew how to draw.

– Andrew Denton, 2015

Looking a Little Drawn

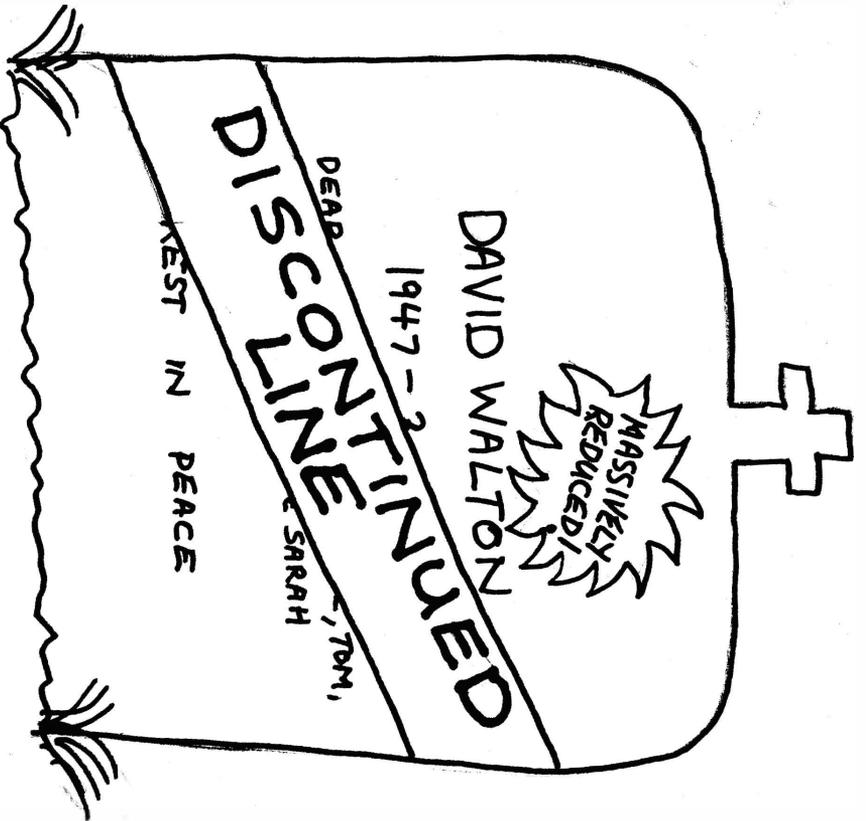
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as part of the Longbox series.

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ISBN: 978-0-9581941-9-8



DEATH OF A RETAILER

AD  
2015



Glad you asked John. I'm forming a group of fundamentalist moderates. We're going to travel the world & slaughter anyone who won't see both sides of the argument



AD  
2015



# THE BIRTH OF HOUDINI



AD  
2015

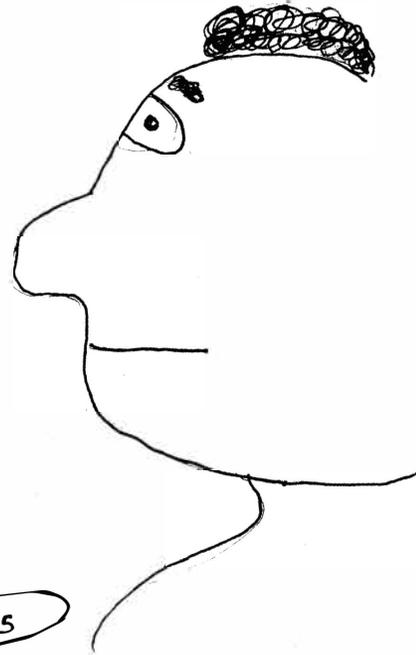
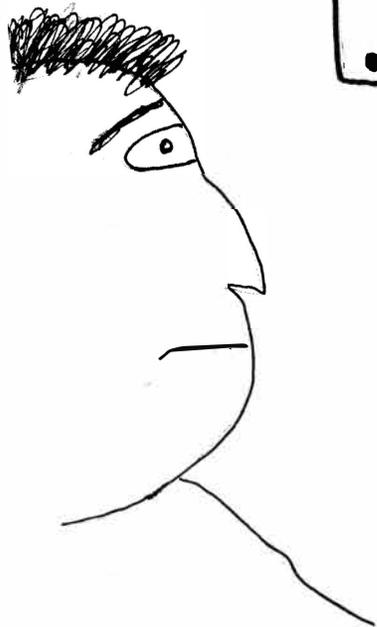


# HOW TELEVISION IS MADE 000

• FARMER WANTS A

~~tractor~~  
~~clown~~  
~~stomach~~  
Wife  
~~talent quest~~  
~~super tanker~~  
~~dwarf~~  
another farmer??  
murder - spin off?  
~~condo~~  
Junkie - maybe  
sacrifice cable?

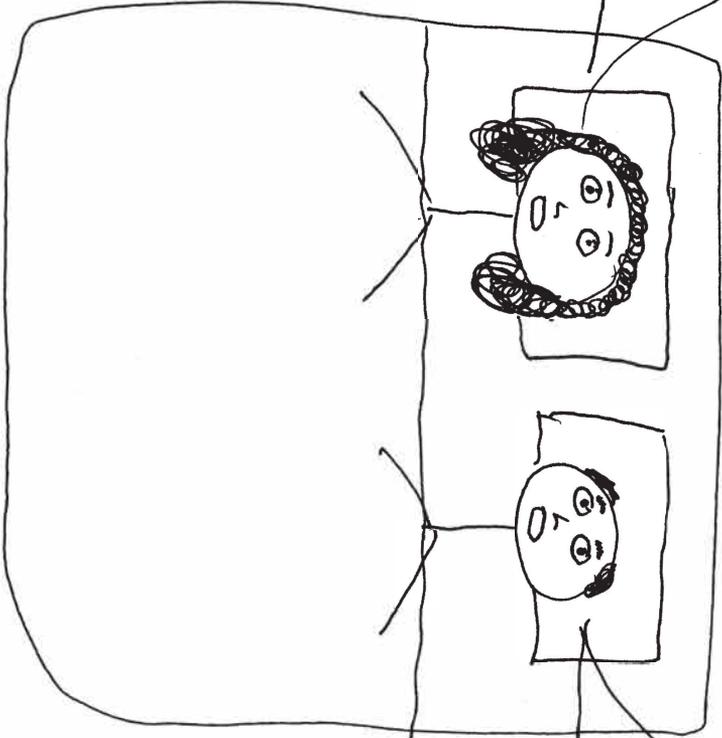
FARMER  
BRAINSTORM  
10 a.m.



AD  
2015



DO YOU  
EVER  
FANTASISE  
DURING  
SEX?

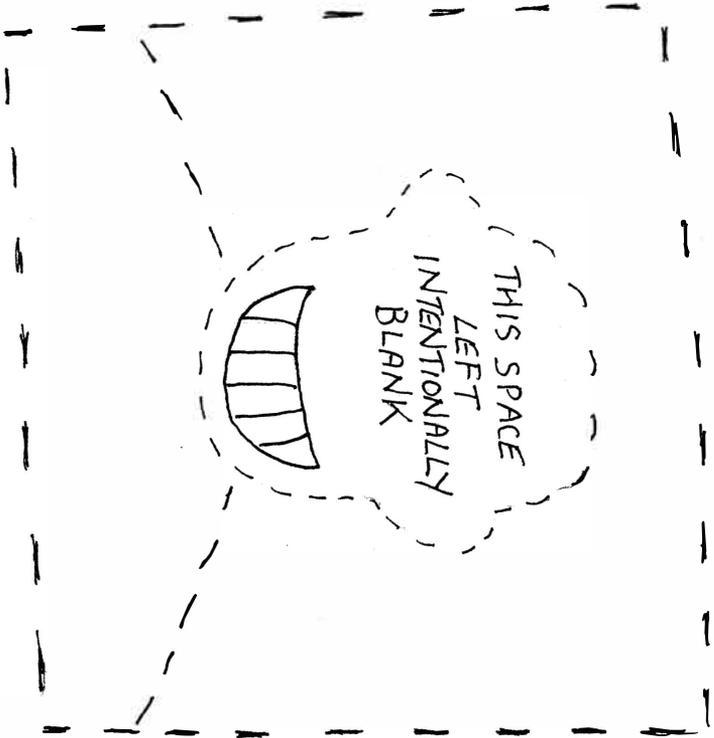


YES.  
MOSTLY THAT  
I'M  
SOMEONE  
ELSE.

AD  
2015



**BILL SHORTEN!  
AMBIT HUMAN BEING**



AD  
2015



If dogs became self-aware ...



AD  
2015



AUSTRALIAN  
COLLECTORS ITEM :



AD  
2015



# DESPERATE SEQUELS...

SOPHIE'S CHOICE II

SAME CHILDREN. HARDER CHOICE.

MERYL STREEP    JUDE LAW  
EMMA STONE    CHRIS ROCK

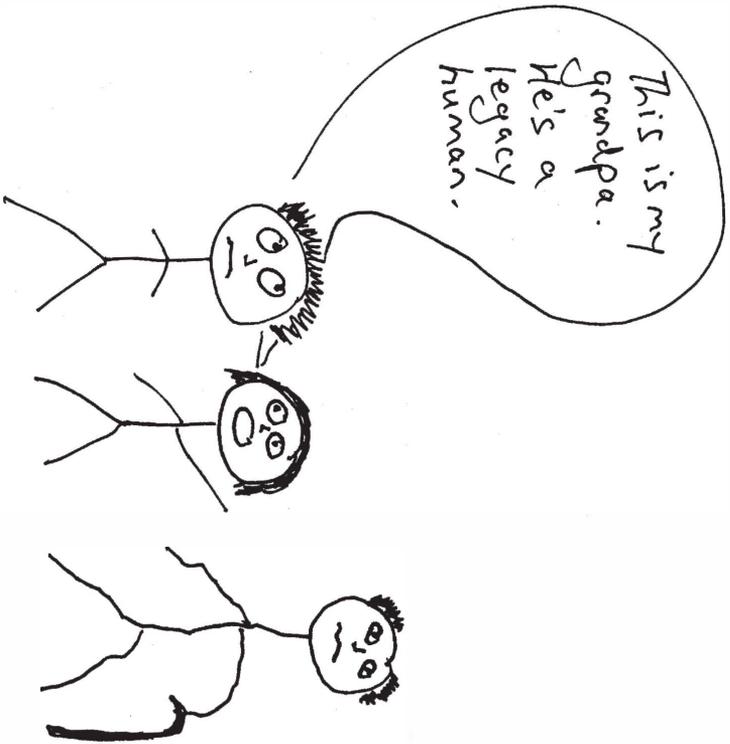
SCHINDLER'S LIST II

RETURN TO NAZI GERMANY

LIAM NEESON    JESSICA ALBA    P.DIDDY  
BILLY CONNOLLY AS 'CHURCHILL'

AD  
2015

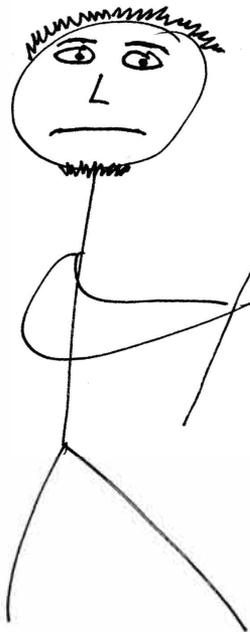




AD  
2015



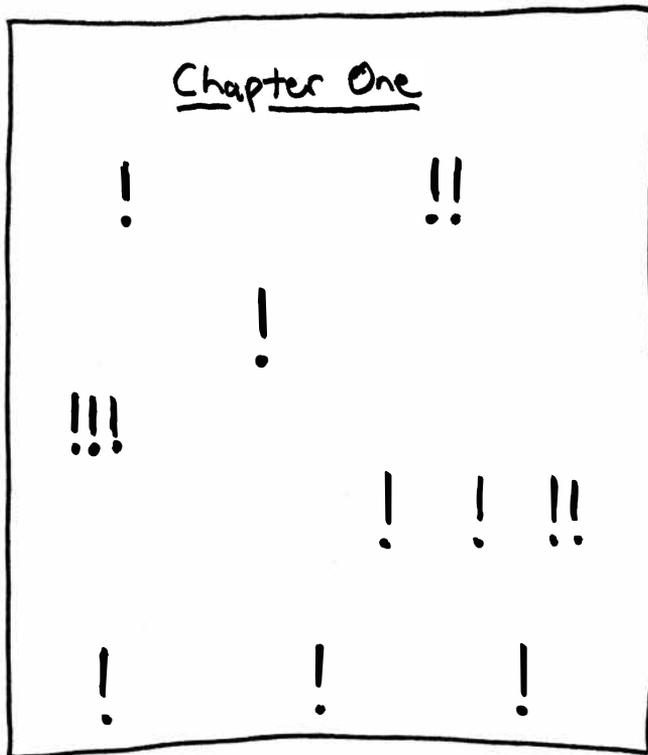
NARCISSISTS  
NEED TO  
TAKE  
A  
GOOD LONG  
LOOK  
AT  
THEMSELVES



AD  
2015

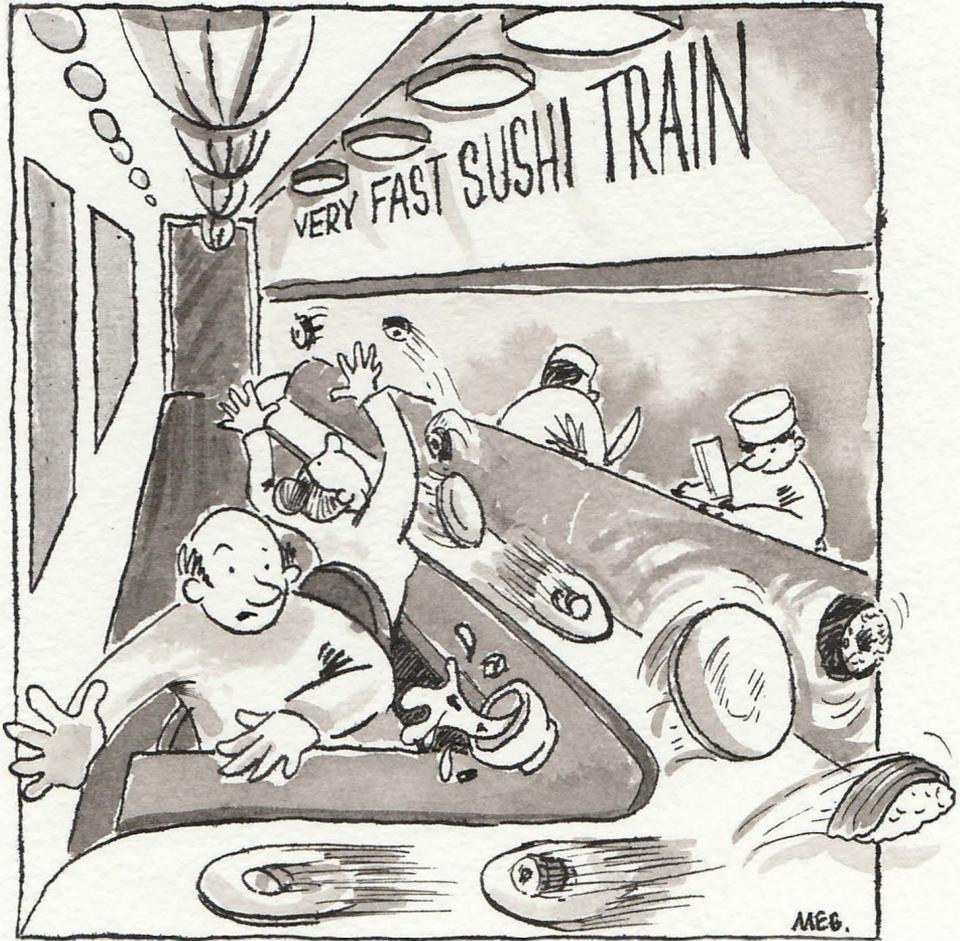


MATTHEW REILLY'S 1st DRAFT...



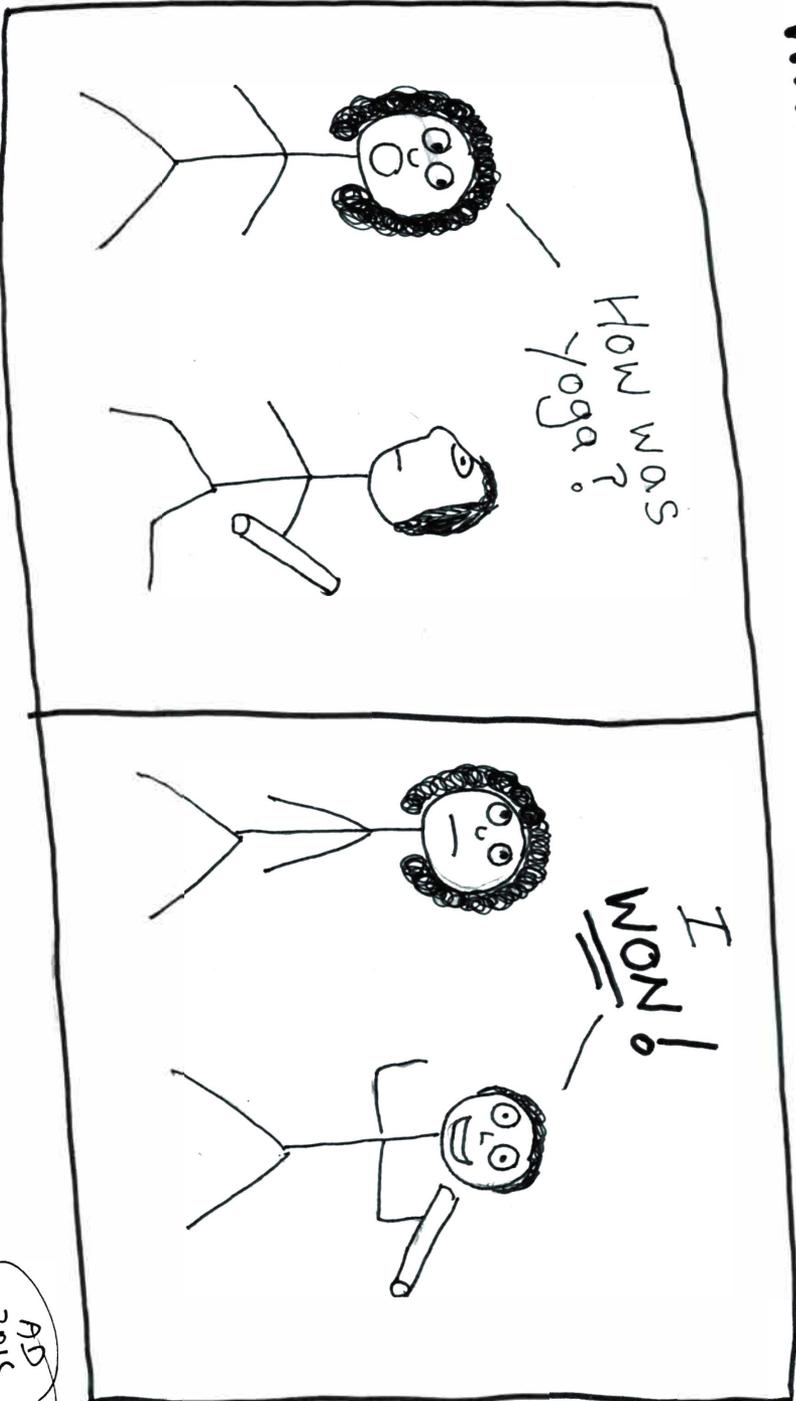
AD  
2015







TYPE-A GUY COMES HOME FROM  
VIPASSANA YOGA



AD  
2015





AD  
2015



COMING SOON...

WOODY ALLEN'S

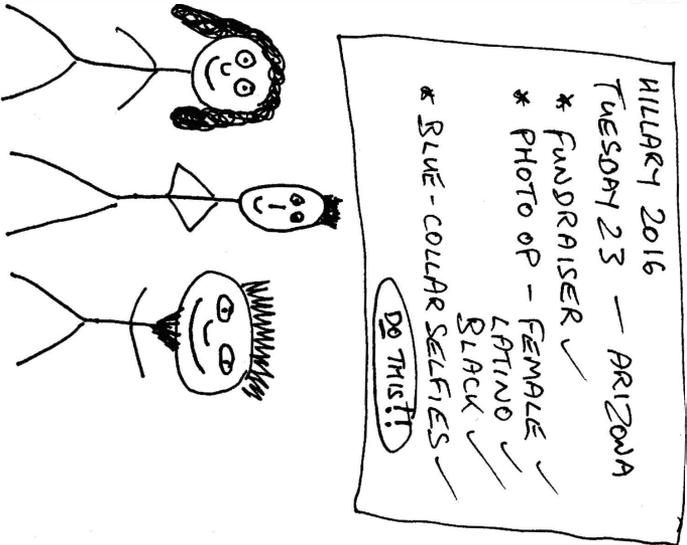
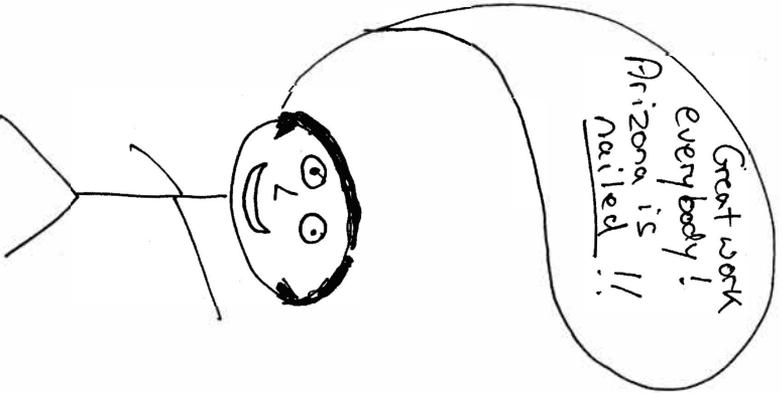
# SHOPPING LIST

IAN MCKELLEN BEYONCE KNOWLES PAUL RUDD  
JENNIFER LAWRENCE DANNY DEVITO  
RU PAUL AS 'MR GREENBERG'

AID  
2015



# HILLARY'S POINT PEOPLE: A BRIEF MOMENT OF CRISIS, QUICKLY AVERTED



AD  
2015



# OFFICIALLY - SPONSORED US JESUS SAYS HOWDY



AD  
2015





**NEW YORK POST**

NEVER  
MORE  
PROFITABLE

# CLINTON SHOCK!

## HILLARY FOUND IN BED WITH BILL!

- A 'PATTERN OF BEHAVIOUR'?
- LEWINSKY - "HE SAID I WAS THE ONLY ONE"
- KARL ROVE - "THIS IS THE SUM OF ALL FEARS"

ELECTION 2016 : DAY # 421

AD  
2015





HAPPY BIRTHDAY!

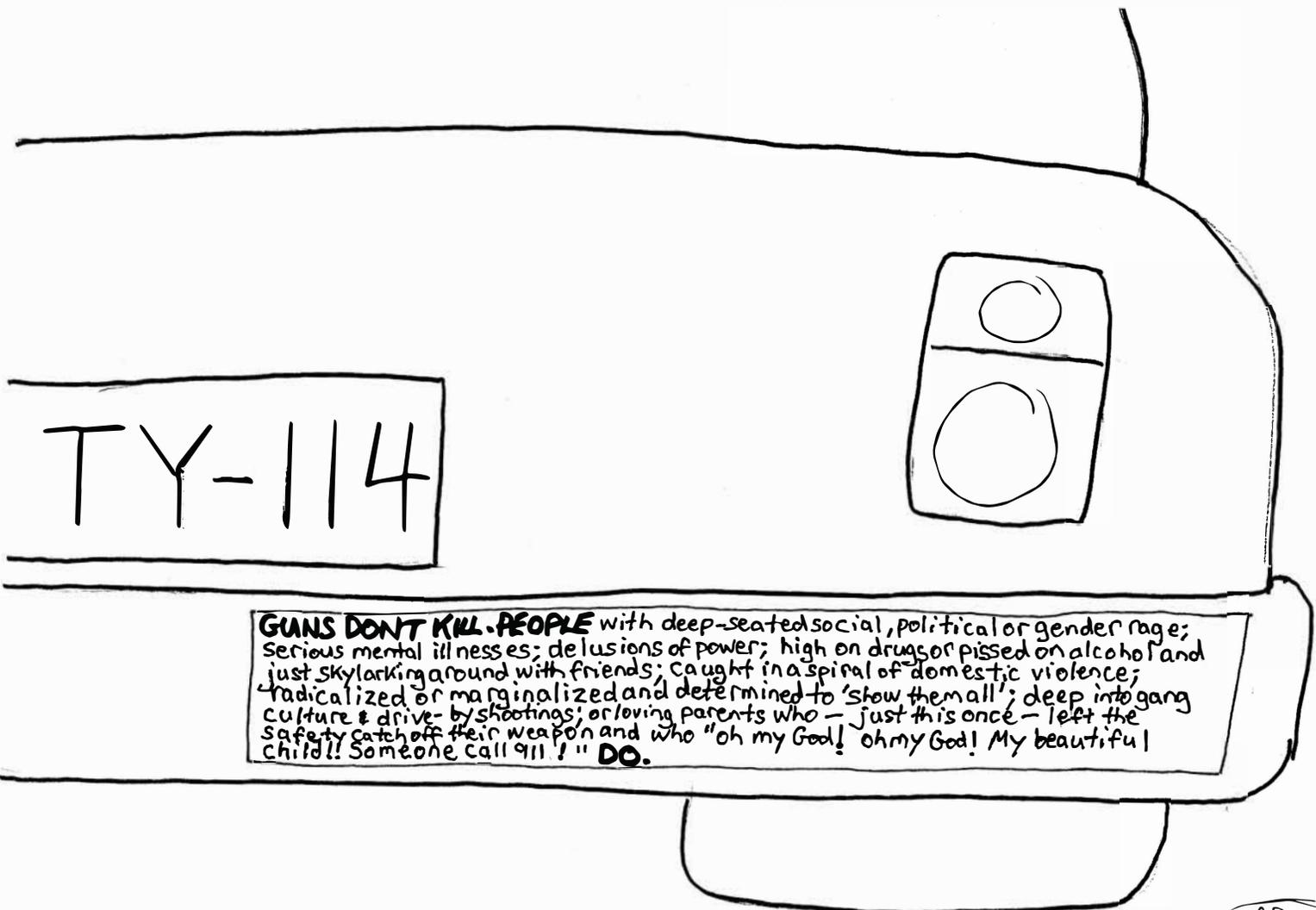
OK. WHO ORDERED THE ISIS-O-GRAM?

29

Oh my God! Troy!

AD 2015



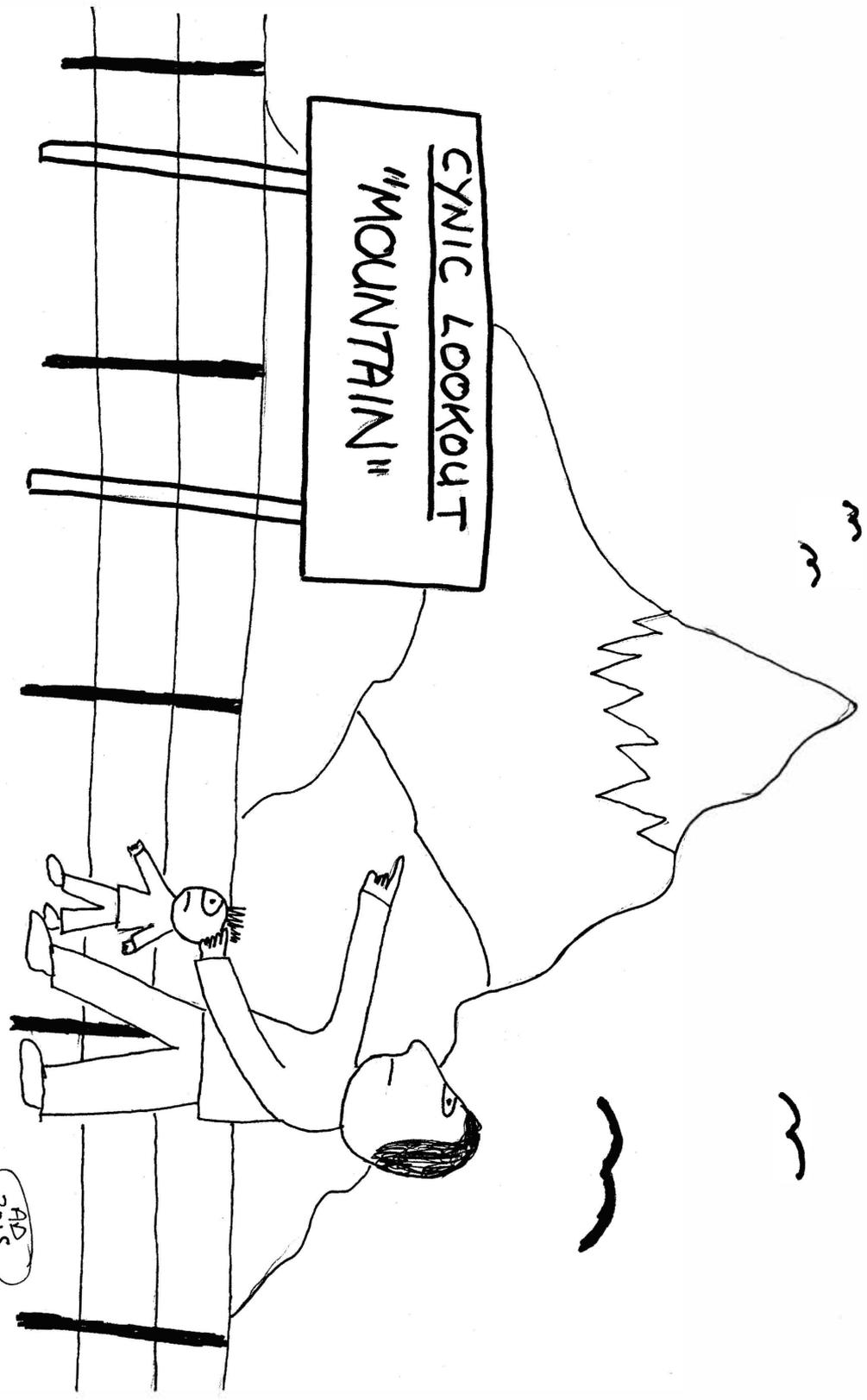


TY-114

**GUNS DONT KILL PEOPLE** with deep-seated social, political or gender rage; serious mental illnesses; delusions of power; high on drugs or pissed on alcohol and just skylarking around with friends; caught in a spiral of domestic violence; radicalized or marginalized and determined to 'show them all'; deep into gang culture & drive-by shootings; or loving parents who — just this once — left the safety catch off their weapon and who "oh my God! oh my God! My beautiful child!! Someone call 911!" **DO.**

AD  
2015





ADD  
2015





The great thing about playing poker with dogs

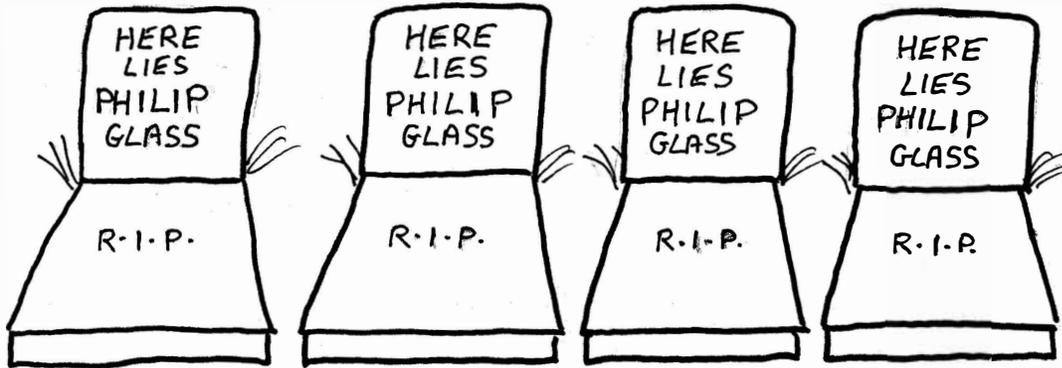




**FRIENDLY ALIEN VISITS JERUSALEM, 100 A.D.**

AD  
2015





AD  
2015



ING TO KILL YOU

YOU ARE CLEARLY RETARDED @HEADLESSFEMALEPIC I WILL RAPE  
YOU ARE THE ONE WHO IS GOING TO DIE AND I AM THE ONE WHO IS GOZ

I WILL RAPE YOU @RAPEBAIT

YOU SUCK A LOT OF COCKS

FAIL

WHAT'S MY ADDRESS BITCH

OT OF COCKS @CHOKEBITCH

ING TO KILL YOU

WHORE

I'LL FUCKING RAPE YOU HOW DOES THAT FEEL? @RAPEBAIT  
I HOPE SOMEONE SHOOTS YOU AND THEN RA

JINT

WHAT'S MY ADDRESS BITCH?  
RAPE - WORTHY

RAPE - WORTHY

FAIL

YOU ARE CLEARLY RETA  
BITCH

D THEN RAPES YOU  
DOES THAT FEEL?

I WILL CUT YOU

YOU AND THEN RAPES YOU

@HEADLESS FEMALE PIC

YOU SUCK A LOT OF COCKS

@CHOKEBITCH

I'LL FUCKING RAPE YOU HOW DOES THAT FEEL?

DYK

HEADLESS FEMALE PIC

YOU ARE THE ONE WHO IS GOING TO DIE AND I AM

CKING DYKE BITCH

I WILL RAPE YOU I WILL CUT  
I HOPE SOMEONE SHOOTS YOU AND THEN RAPES YOU  
WHAT'S MY ADDRESS BITCH?

CUNT

RAPE - WORTHY @RAPEBAIT

RAPE - WORTHY

YOU ARE CLEARLY RETARDED

WHORE

@CHOKEBITCH  
YOU SUCK A LOT OF

YOU SUCK A LOT OF COCKS

THEN RAPES YOU

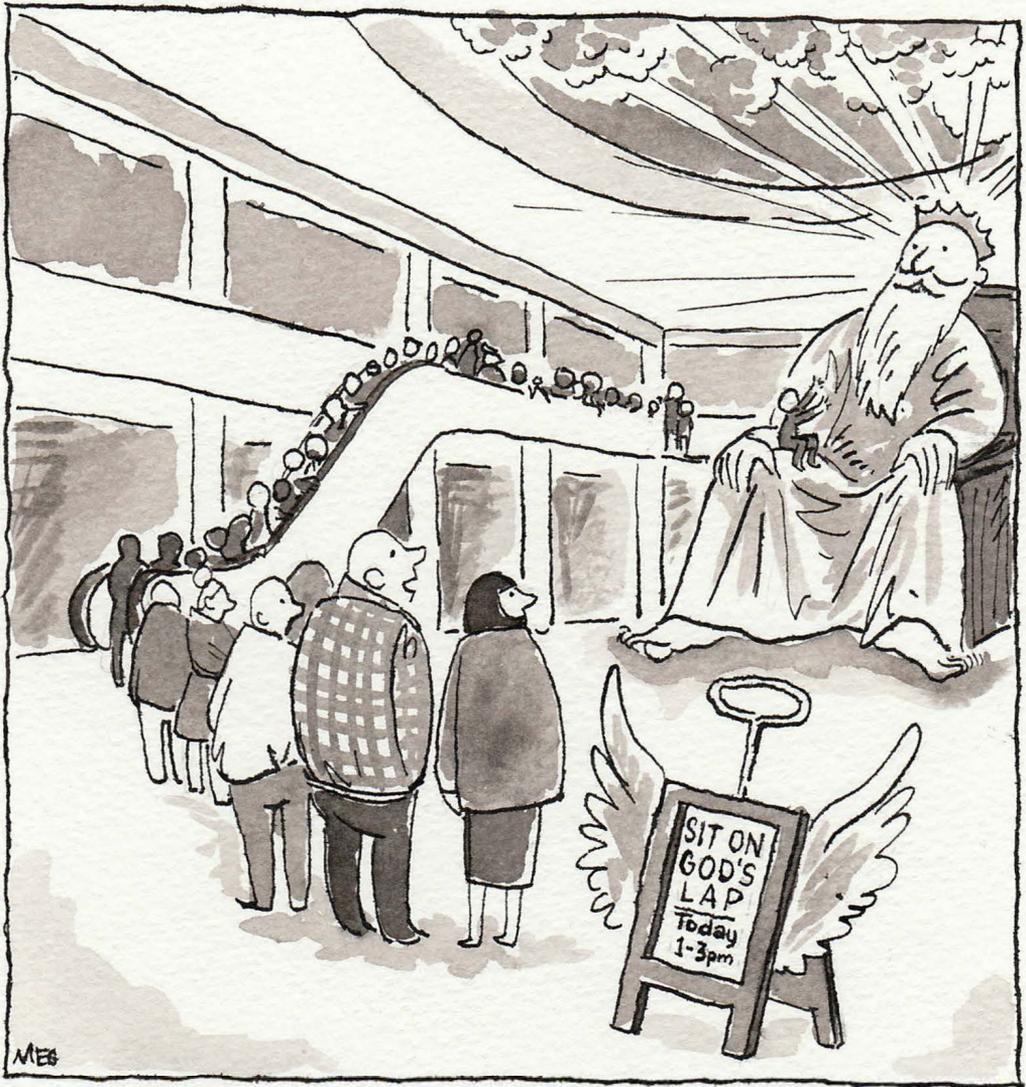
I HOPE SOMEONE SHOOTS YOU AND



THE GIRL WHO COULD SEE TWITTER

AD  
2015

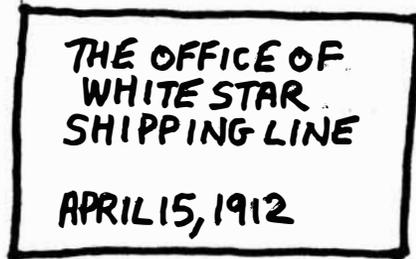




'See? He really is real.'



# TITANIC, THE ACCOUNTANTS CUT



AD  
2015



# DESPERATE SEQUELS 2...

BUTCH CASSIDY & THE SUNDANCE KID II

REVENGE OF THE ZOMBIE HOMBRES

SAM WORTHINGTON  
MADONNA

ROBERT DOWNEY JR  
RAY LIOTTA

THE EIGHTH SEAL (IN 3D)

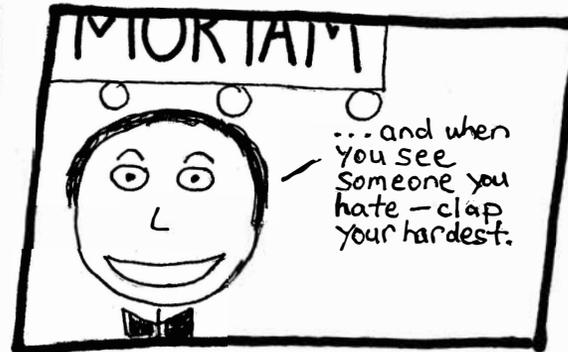
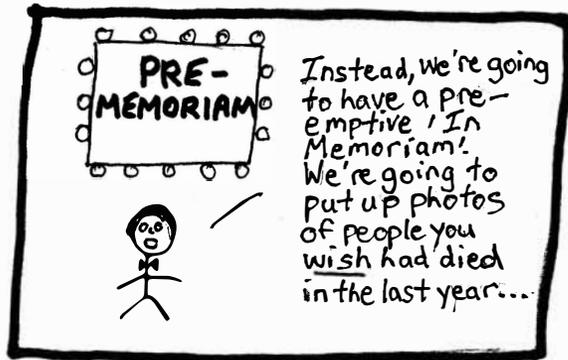
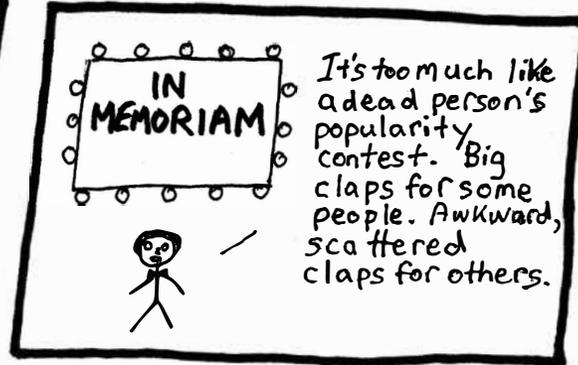
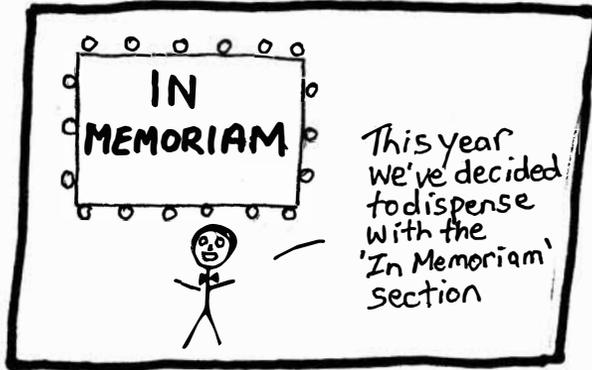
THERE ARE WORSE THINGS THAN DEATH

BENICIO DEL TORO  
SOFIE GRABOL OWEN WILSON AS 'DEATH'  
BJORK

AD  
2015



# AWARDS NIGHT DREAM #9





LOOKING A LITTLE DRAWN



WHEN I WAS LITTLE I USED TO PLAY FOOTY.



MY TEAM TRAINED AFTER SCHOOL ON TUESDAYS AND WEDNESDAYS AT THE FIELD BY BOAMBEE CREEK.

I CAN STILL REMEMBER THE SMELL OF TRODDEN GRASS



AND THE FEELING OF THE COLD AIR ON MY CHEEKS.

IT WAS DAD'S JOB TO PICK ME UP





BUT HE  
DIDN'T  
ALWAYS  
TAKE ME  
STRAIGHT  
HOME



I'M GONNA  
STOP INTO THE PUB  
FOR A BIT.

I'LL ONLY  
BE HALF AN  
HOUR.

I'LL GIVE YA  
TWO DOLLARS  
FOR A DRINK.

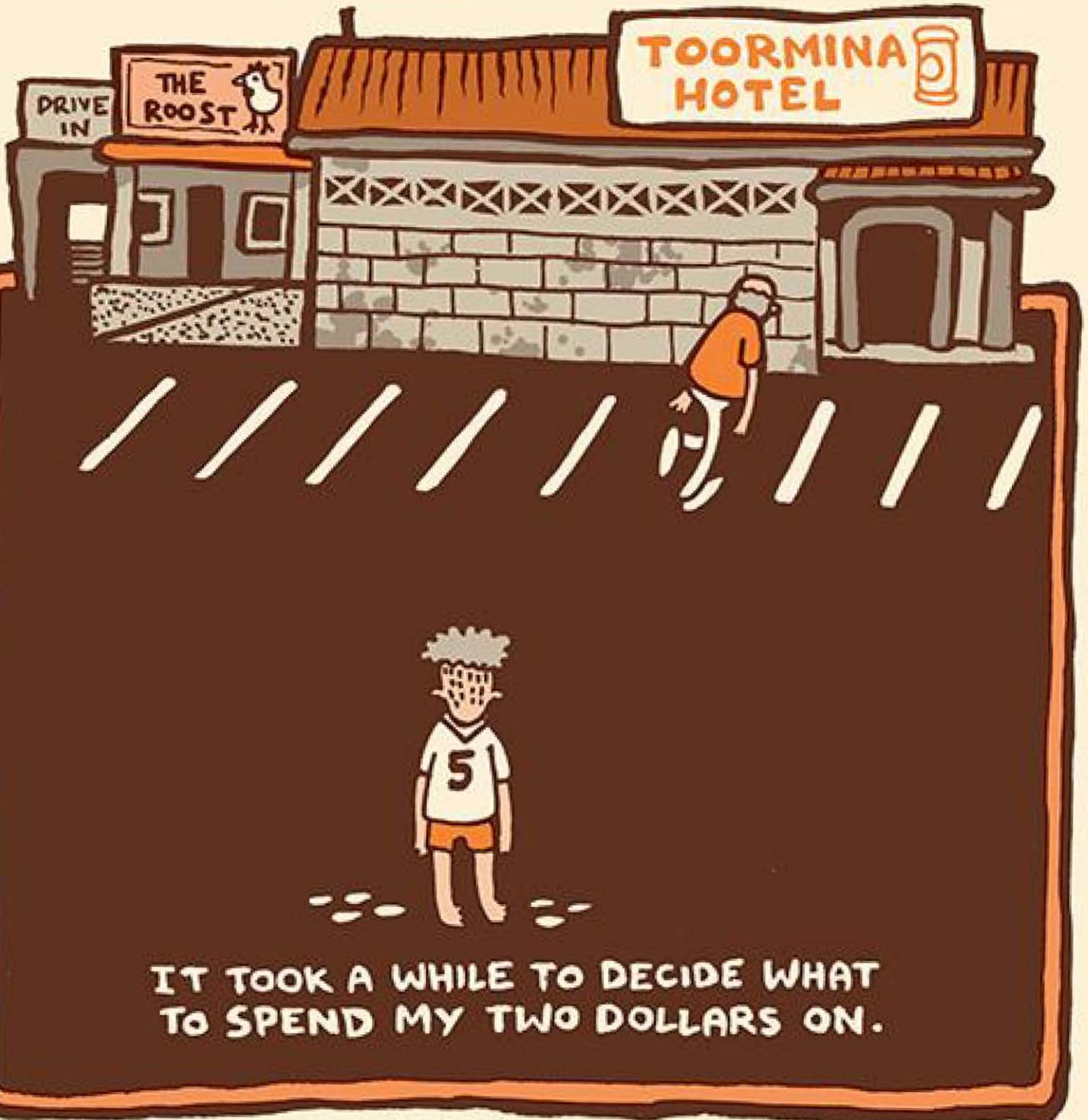


KAY



KIDS WEREN'T ALLOWED IN THE PUB SO I HAD TO WAIT OUTSIDE IN THE CAR PARK.

HERE YA GO.



IT TOOK A WHILE TO DECIDE WHAT TO SPEND MY TWO DOLLARS ON.

USUALLY I'D BUY A CAN  
OF LEMON FIZZY DRINK  
FROM THE CHICKEN SHOP  
NEXT TO THE PUB



THE STAFF AT THE  
CHICKEN SHOP SERVED  
A LOT OF SCABBY LITTLE  
PUB KIDS



THEY DIDN'T LOOK  
ME IN THE EYE

I REMEMBER ONE KID WHO'S  
MUM HAD GIVEN HIM MONEY  
FOR DINNER, AND HE'D  
SPENT THE LOT ON A HALF-  
KILO BLOCK OF CHOCOLATE.



MAN, I WAS JEALOUS  
OF THAT KID.

I DRANK THE CAN  
QUICKLY IN THE FRONT  
SEAT OF THE STATION  
WAGON.





AS THE SUN SET THE COLD STARTED TO CREEP INTO MY LEGS. I GOT BORED.

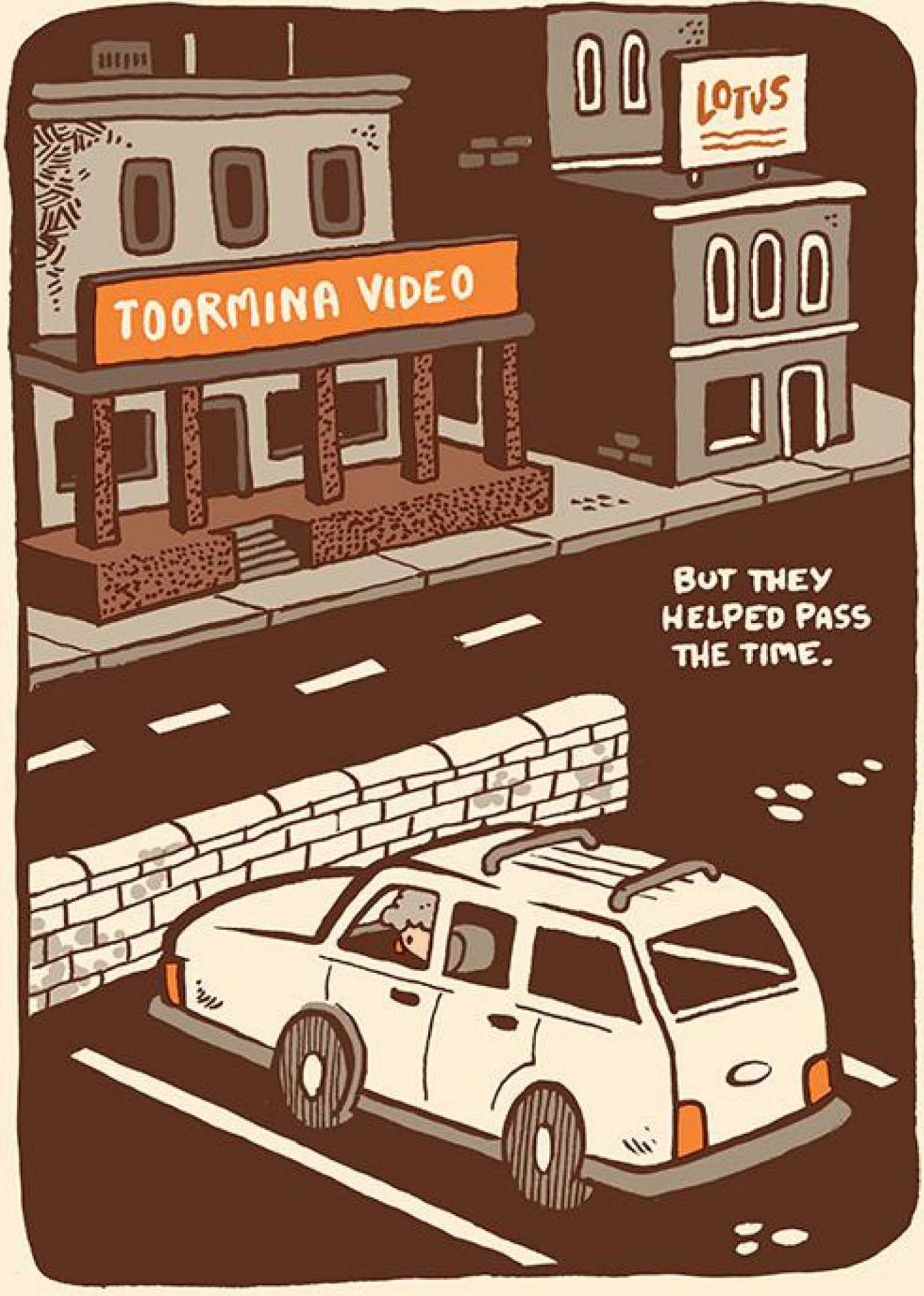


THERE WAS AN OLD STREET DIRECTORY AND A GRUBBY BLANKET IN THE BOOT.



THE BOOK SMELLED LIKE COLD SAUSAGES AND THE BLANKET SMELLED LIKE CAT WEE.





TOORMINA VIDEO

LOTUS

BUT THEY  
HELPED PASS  
THE TIME.

UNTIL I HEARD  
FOOTSTEPS ON THE  
BITUMEN



THE JANGLE  
OF KEYS



AND THE  
CLUNK OF  
THE CAR  
DOOR  
OPENING



ONE TIME DAD SAID SOMETHING DIFFERENT WHEN HE CAME OUT OF THE PUB.

GET A PIECE OF PAPER AND A PEN OUT OF MY BAG,

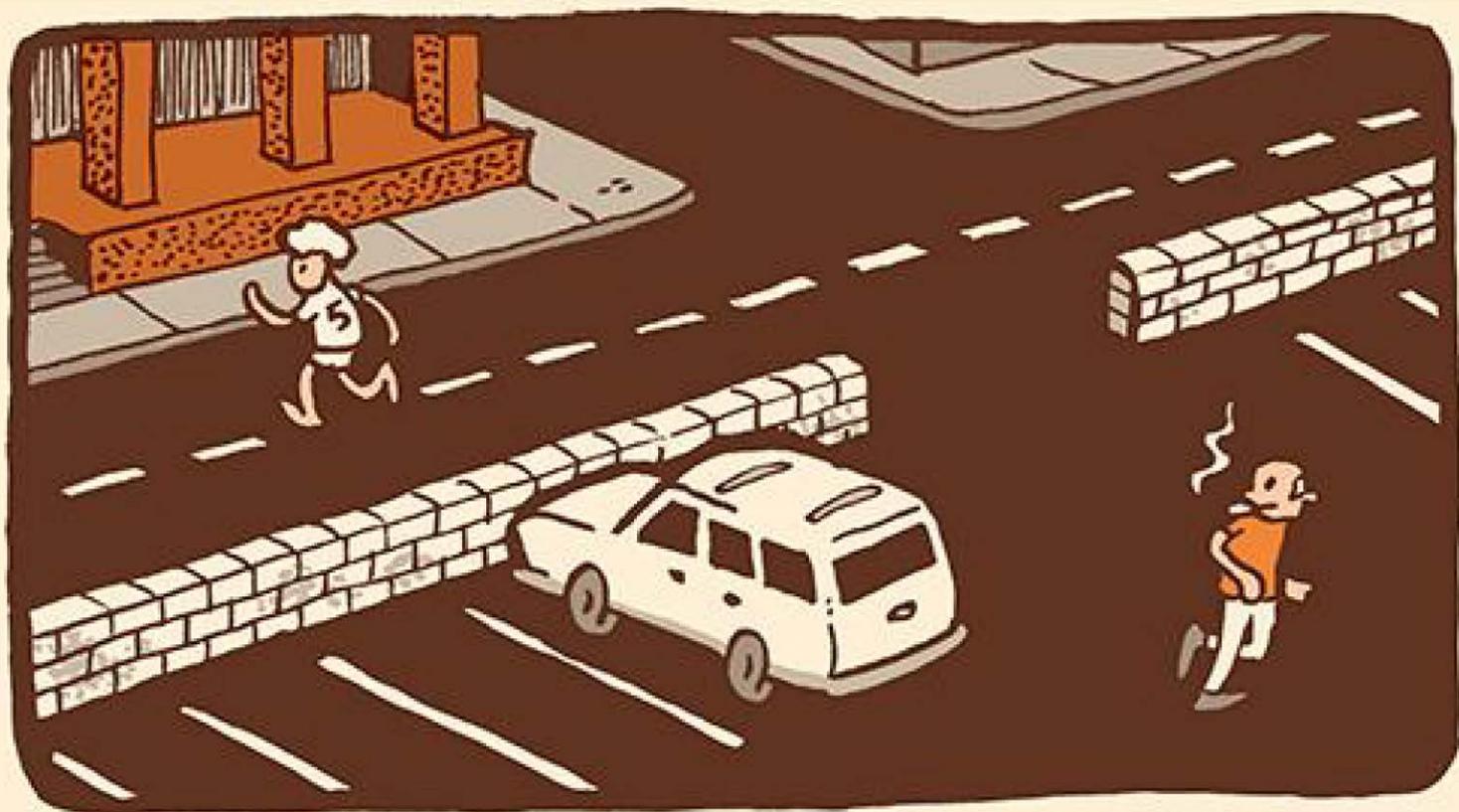
AND I WANT YOU TO GO INTO THE VIDEO SHOP AND MAKE A LIST...

I WANT A LIST OF FIFTY GOOD MOVIES THAT YOU HAVEN'T SEEN.

THIS WAY I'LL KNOW WHICH ONES TO RENT.

WE CAN WATCH EM TOGETHER.

I JUST LOVED DAD'S PLAN





I USED TO  
LOVE THE  
VIDEO SHOP



I'D HARDLY SEEN ANY MOVIES BUT I COULD  
SPEND HOURS LOOKING AT VIDEO COVERS.

COMING SOON

POINT  
BREAK



COMING SOON

HOT SHOTS



COMING SOON

BOYZ  
N THA  
HOOD



IN MY MIND ALL OF  
THEM WERE AS GOOD  
AS GHOSTBUSTERS

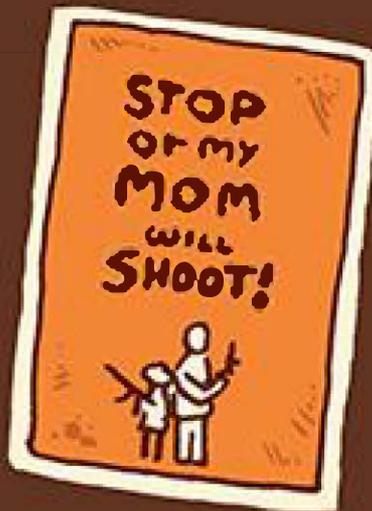


AT THE TOP WAS  
A JAMES  
CAMERON MOVIE.

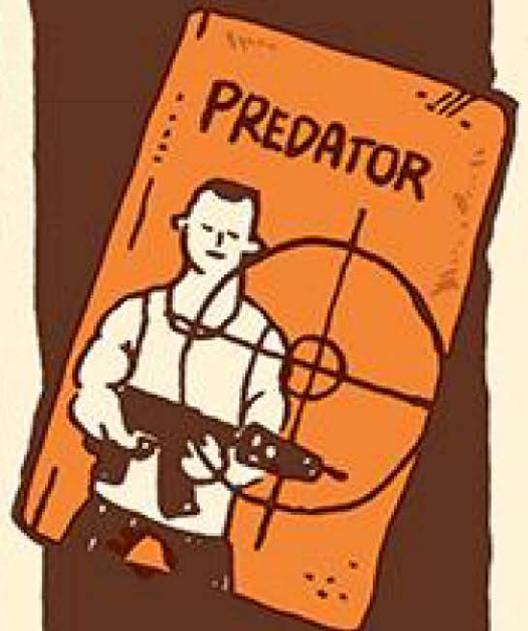


I'D SEEN THIS ONE  
BUT I HADNT  
SEEN MOST  
OF THE MOVIES  
ON THE LIST

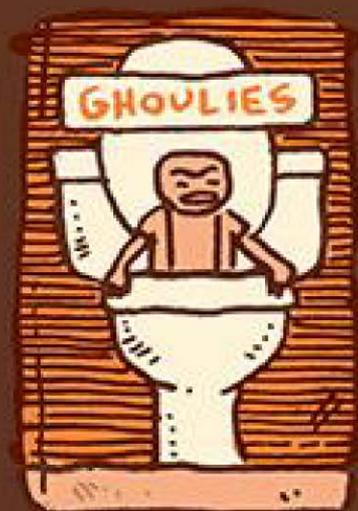
SOME OF THEM  
WERE  
FORGETTABLE



OTHERS WERE  
CLASSICS



I THREW IN A  
FEW THAT MUM  
MIGHT  
DISSAPROVE OF



AND SOME JUST  
BECAUSE THEY  
HAD STRANGELY  
SHAPED BOXES

I EVEN PICKED  
ONE OR TWO THAT  
I KNEW DAD  
WOULD LIKE.



I ANNOUNCED MY PROJECT TO BEN WOOTON WHO WORKED THE FRONT DESK AT TOORMINA VIDEO.



PLEASE REWIN



BEN WOOTON DIDN'T SEEM VERY IMPRESSED.

THE LIST TOOK AN HOUR AND A HALF TO WRITE.



I WAS CURATING  
SIX MONTHS  
OF SUNDAY  
AFTERNOONS  
WITH MY OLD  
MAN.



THE LIST  
REMAINS ONE  
OF THE COOLEST  
PROJECTS I'VE  
EVER BEEN  
GIVEN

I LIKED  
STORIES THAT  
CAME IN A  
PLASTIC BOX



MY DAD LIKED  
HIS CARRIED ON  
AN OLD  
BLOKE'S BREATH

I FINISHED THE LIST,



I REALISED  
THAT I'D BEEN  
AT TOORMINA  
VIDEO FOR  
WELL OVER  
AN HOUR

AND I LEFT  
WITHOUT HIRING  
A VIDEO.



AFTER THAT I  
DID SOMETHING  
THAT I HAD  
NEVER DONE  
BEFORE.





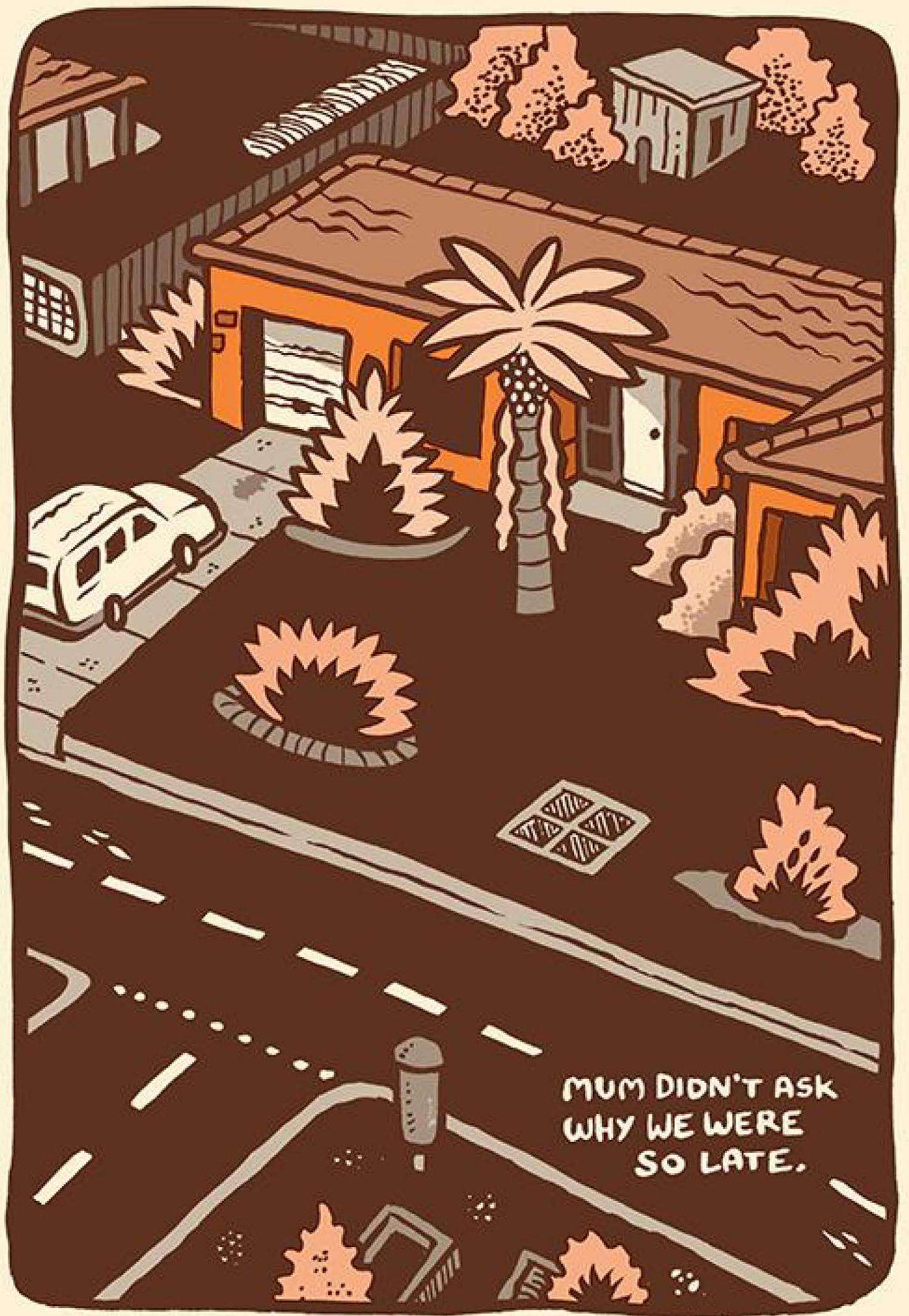
I READ DOWN THE LIST AS WE  
DROVE THROUGH TOORMINA TO  
OUR HOUSE



BUT I STOPPED BEFORE I  
GOT HALF-WAY.

DAD  
WASN'T  
REALLY  
LISTENING





MUM DIDN'T ASK  
WHY WE WERE  
SO LATE.

MONTHS LATER SHE FOUND THE LIST ON THE PILE OF PAPERS NEXT TO THE PHONE



WE HADN'T HIRED ANY OF THE VIDEOS ON THE LIST



WE HADN'T WATCHED EVEN ONE MOVIE TOGETHER



ONE MONTH AFTER THAT  
MY DAD FELL OFF A STOOL  
AT A FOOTY CLUB BBQ.



TWO MONTHS AFTER THAT  
HE TAUGHT ME HOW TO  
MAKE CURRIED SAUSAGES



YA GOTTA  
BOIL EM  
FIRST

38 MONTHS AFTER THAT  
HE FELL ASLEEP NEXT  
TO THE HEATER AND  
BURNED HIS LEG.



49 MONTHS AFTER THAT  
HE TRIED TO TOP HIMSELF



EIGHT MONTHS AFTER  
THAT HE DROVE THE RED  
CAR INTO A DITCH



12 MONTHS AFTER THAT  
HE WENT ON A BENDER SO  
BIG HE GOT BRAIN DAMAGE



5 MONTHS AFTER THAT HE WAS TRANSFERRED FROM HOSPITAL TO A NURSING HOME.



24 MONTHS AFTER THAT MY MUM FELL IN LOVE WITH SOMEONE ELSE.



NINE MONTHS AFTER THAT MY DAD GOT LOCKED IN THE CRAZY WARD BECAUSE HE KEPT SMUGGLING GOON BAGS INTO THE NURSING HOME.



39 MONTHS AFTER THAT HE SHAT HIMSELF AT A FATHER'S DAY BBQ.

JEEZUS!  
I CAN FEEL IT RUNNING DOWN MY LEG!



9 MONTHS AFTER THAT I HAD A STRANGE DREAM AND STARTED DRAWING THIS COMIC

4 DAYS AFTER THAT MY DAD DIED. HE WAS WAITING FOR A NURSE TO BRING HIM A GLASS OF WHITE WINE.





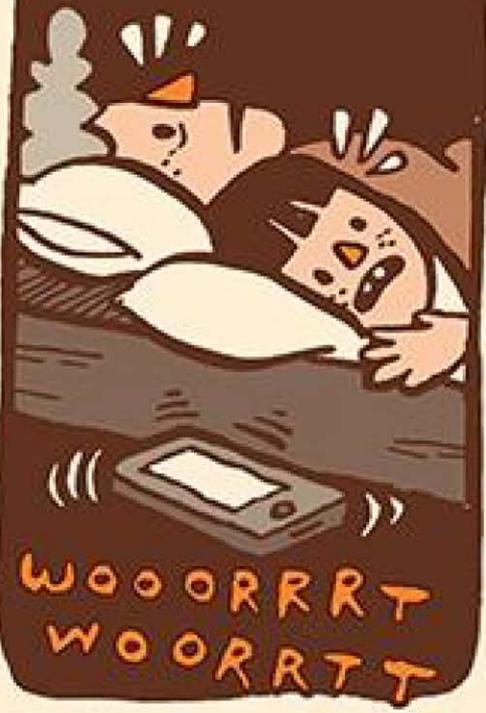
I HAD SIX  
PAGES OF  
THIS COMIC  
DRAWN BEFORE  
THAT NIGHT.



IT WAS A  
THROW AWAY  
THING;  
AN ODD STORY  
ABOUT A DREAM



BUT THEN



THEN IT BECAME  
SOMETHING ELSE.



MY OLD  
MAN IS  
GONE



BUT THE  
DREAM IS  
STILL  
WITH ME,

AND THE  
COMIC NEEDS  
FINISHING.



THE FIRST JOB WAS TO CLEAN OUT DAD'S ROOM AT THE NURSING HOME AND EAT ALL HIS MINTIES



I WENT STRAIGHT TO HIS BOOKSHELF.



I FOUND THE DVD THAT I HAD GIVEN HIM THE PREVIOUS CHRISTMAS



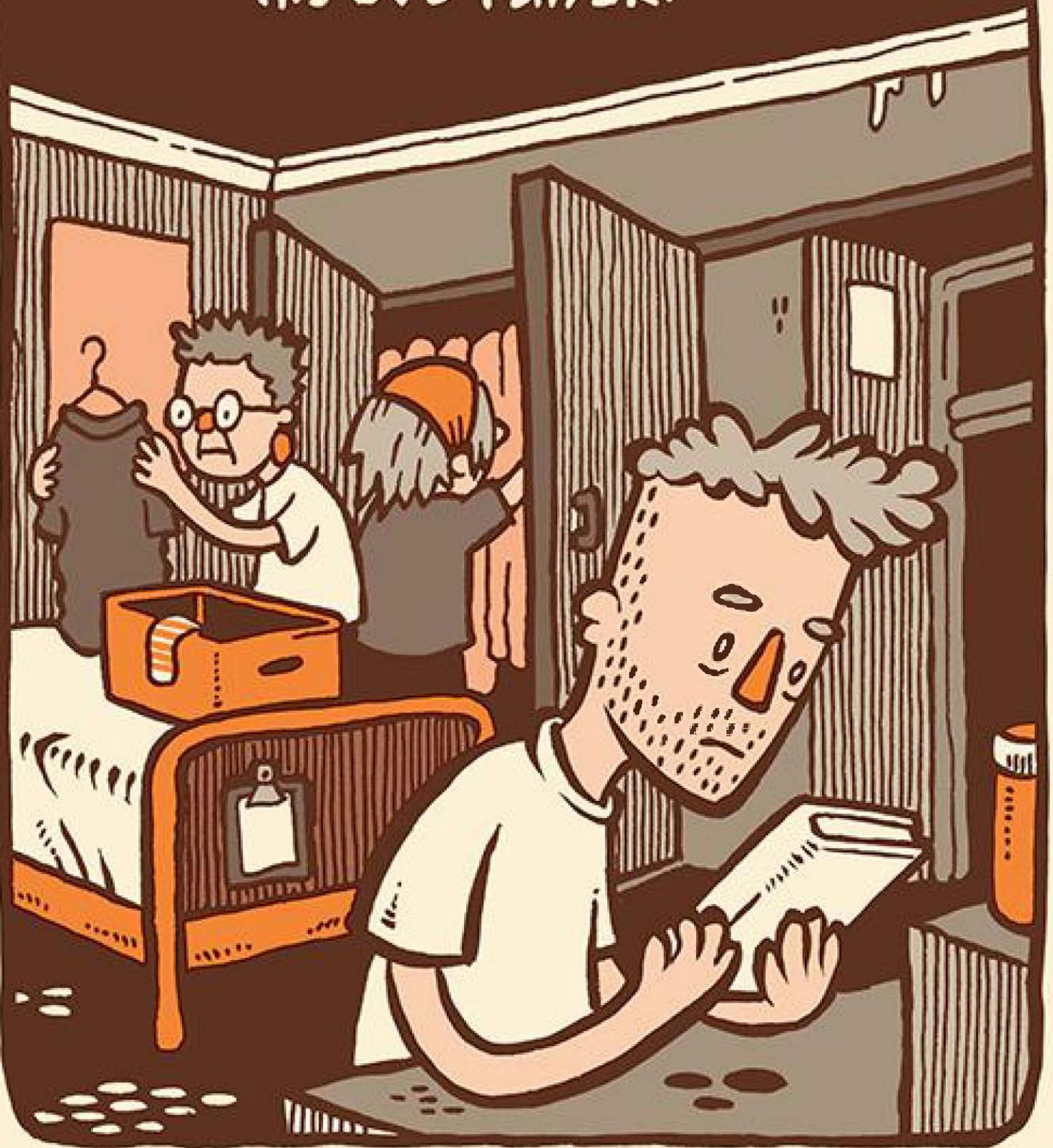
HE TOLD ME ON THREE SEPARATE OCCASIONS THAT HE HAD WATCHED IT. HE TOLD ME THAT HE THOUGHT IT WAS REALLY TERRIFIC.



BUT IT WAS STILL WRAPPED IN PLASTIC

I REALLY LOVED THAT DVD.  
I WAS SURE HE WOULD LOVE  
IT AS MUCH AS I DID.

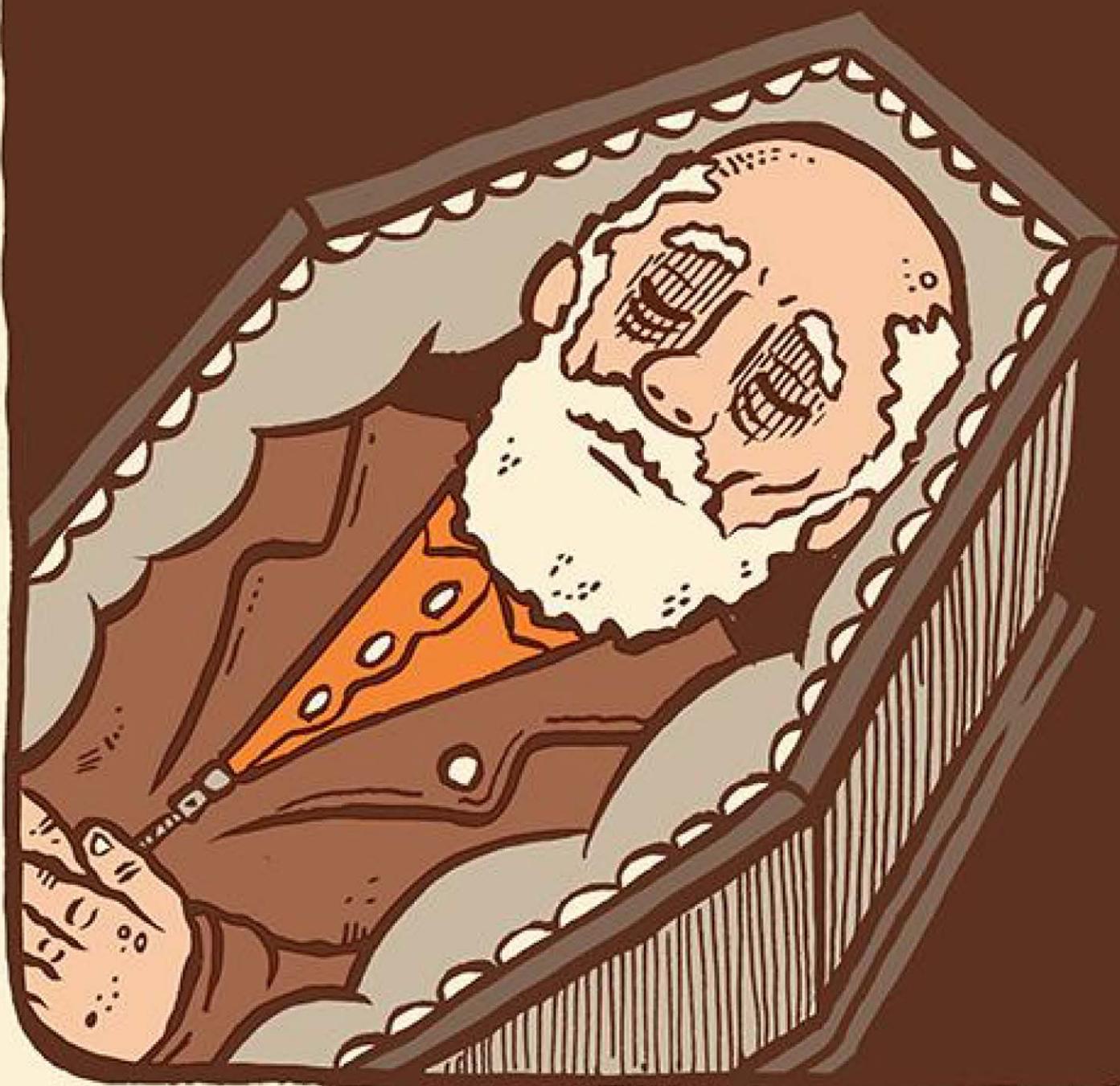
MUM SAID HE DIDN'T  
KNOW HOW TO WORK  
HIS DVD PLAYER.

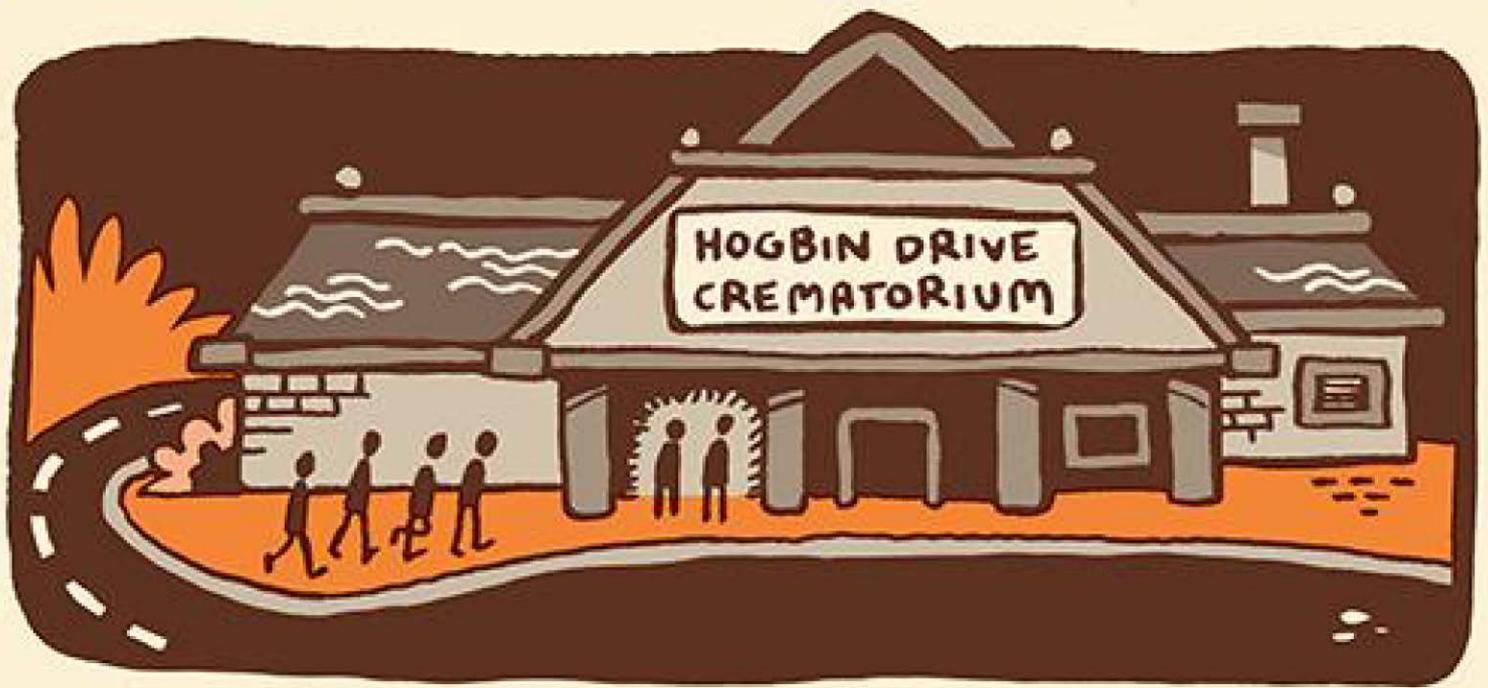


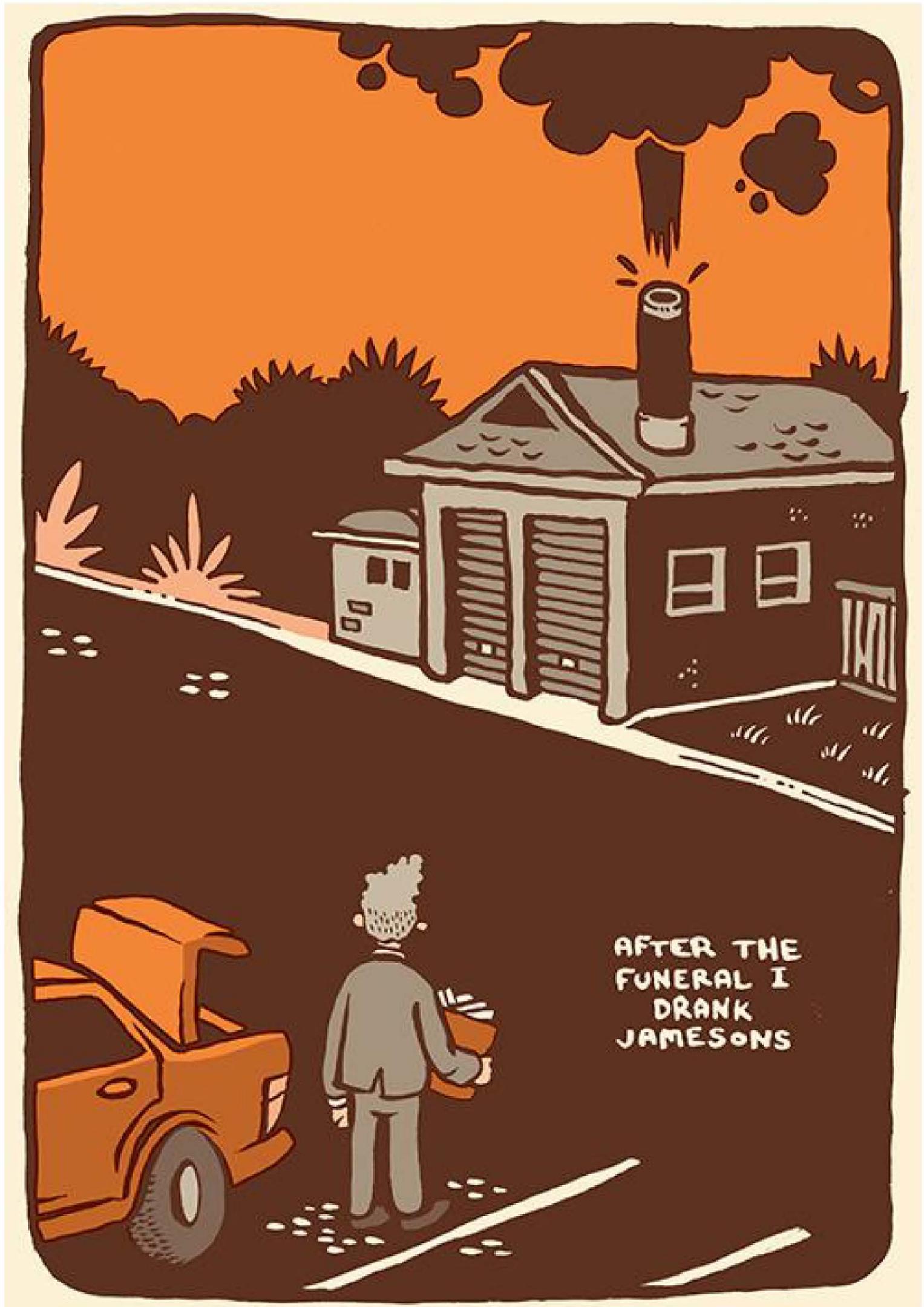


MY FIRST THOUGHT WHEN I SAW HIM IN THE COFFIN WAS THAT HE LOOKED LIKE A BAD WAXWORK VERSION OF SARUMAN FROM 'LORD OF THE RINGS'.

BUT WHEN I KISSED HIS FOREHEAD AND SQUEEZED HIS HANDS THEY FELT JUST LIKE I REMEMBERED, ONLY COLD.







AFTER THE  
FUNERAL I  
DRANK  
JAMESONS

AND I  
STILL HAVEN'T  
TOLD YOU  
ABOUT  
THE DREAM



IN THE DREAM THERE IS  
A LITTLE GIRL



AND SHE IS SITING IN  
THE FRONT SEAT OF A  
CHAMPAGNE COLOURED  
CAMRY DRINKING A CAN  
OF LEMON FIZZY DRINK



THE CAR IS IN A COLD  
CARPARK OUTSIDE  
A BIG BUILDING



THE GIRL IS COLD AND  
BORED



SHE IS WAITING FOR  
SOMEONE; FOR ME

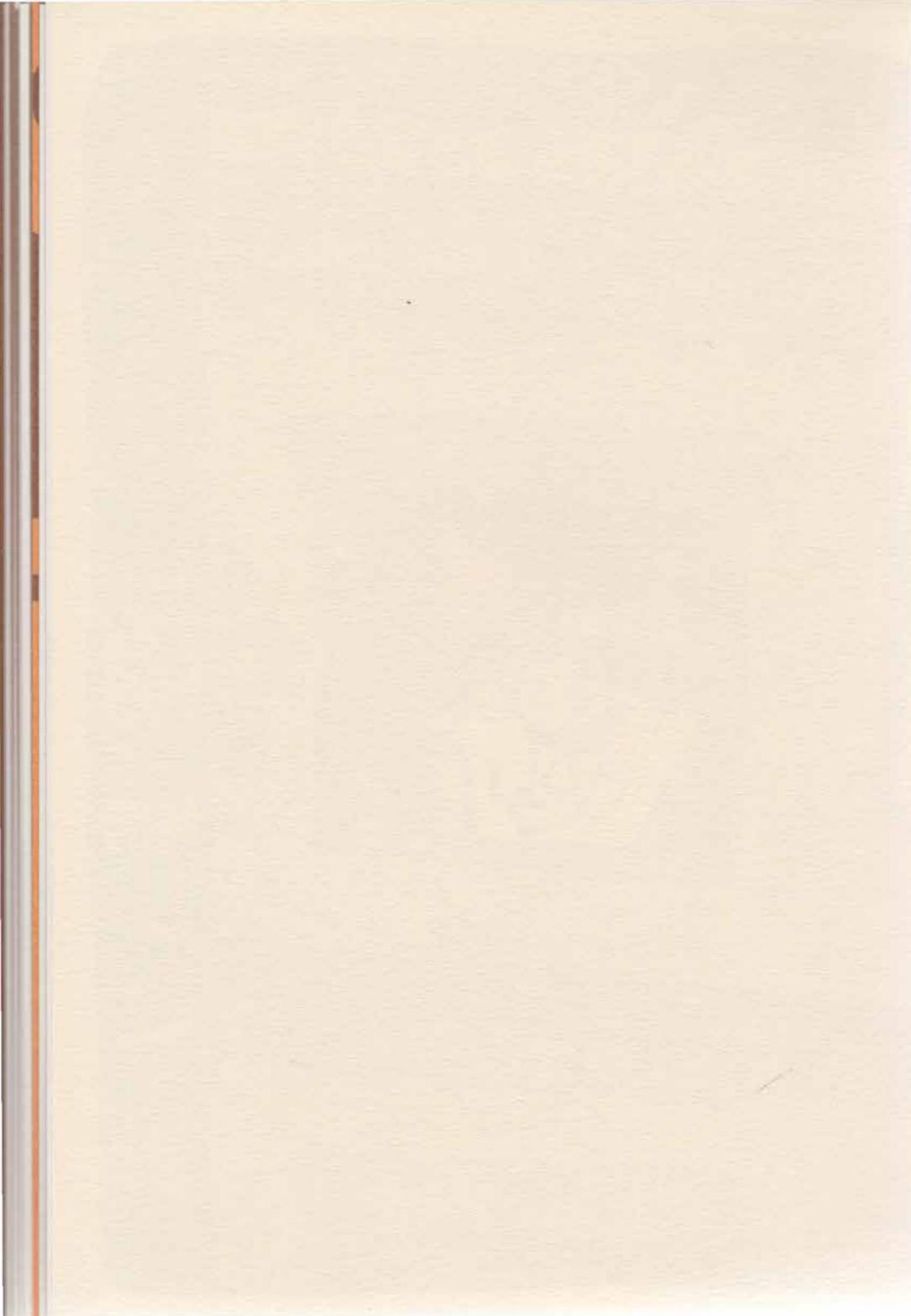
AND I AM INSIDE THE  
BIG BUILDING SITING  
AT A TILTED TABLE,

WARM UNDER  
THE LAMP LIGHT,

DRAWING  
COMICS







# Thirteen Story

Thirteen  
Horse

Story

# Horse

Bridget  
Lutherborrow

with illustrations  
Harley Manifold by

Thirteen      Story  
Horse

Bridget  
Lutherborrow

with illustrations      by  
Harley Manifold

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Thirteen      Story  
Horse

Apartment no.	
15.	Library      of Congress
4.	Mr Gumption
11.	Eggs
3.	Other      Fish to Fry
9.	Highway 31
1.	Scotty
5.	A      Good Firm Grip
13.	Eduard and the boy
8.	Beetles
12.	Hoofbeats
7.	Moon
10.	The      View from the Metro
15.	Jumpin'      Jack Flash



# 15







It was one of those too-hot-too-early spring days that begs to be stripped naked, to be dragged to bed and laid bare. But the heat took its time with the day. When the storm finally hit, Edward and I were already out on the balcony, dog-tired after too much nothing. From our seats we watched the square garden bed in the courtyard. Across the way were other balconies like ours: green corrals of painted metal, clothes racks and potted plants. Edward and I always end the day this way. Even when we get things done it's as though we haven't moved from our places. After two drinks, neither of us feels the need to keep wandering back to the kitchen. After two drinks, we're at ease enough to keep the bottle on the balcony. At ease enough to say, "Screw ice and modesty, screw the way they say it should be, who said whiskey was any good anyway and who cares how I take it?" Nothing is quite horse, but we are both pretty calm about things. Before the balcony and before the whiskey, Edward was inside the apartment and I was at my day job. I call it my day job even though some of

\*\*\*

We sat and listened to the rain fall. Me and Edward, nursing our whiskies: ice disappearing, drinks turning to oil spills. Edward's huge horse eyes blinked slow. On our seventh-storey balcony we could hear the storm wall its guts out, could hear the sky give in. Beyond the steel muzzle of the balcony rail, our little world of brick was dishevelled by an indecisive wind. Below us, scurrying neighbours leant into it, the tree in the courtyard thrashed with each gust. On our perch we were untouchable. Three solid walls and one open screen: just enough to see. Edward nosed his tumbler and dipped a long tongue in the whiskey, his graceless equine teeth poking out like broken piano keys. We'd been waiting all day for the storm.



Library  
of  
Congress

the time it's at night. Eduard stays at home or goes to see friends for long stretches of time. We don't have an elevator, so Eduard has to climb all the way up here, like everyone else. Once he figured it out he was pretty into stairs. He likes to talk too, though he talks slow and doesn't use many words. Not that he's stupid. He just doesn't need them and hates wasting anything. He builds furniture from egg cartons while I'm at work. I don't know how he does it, but it's really handy. I never ask him because he's pretty secretive about that stuff. He never leaves a mess when he's been making things and never makes things when I'm home. Egg cartons are sturdy and good for building, but they're not so good with spills. Luckily Henrietta from the first floor sells us a lot of eggs. Mr Gumption on the second floor gives us his cartons, too. Eduard makes a new coffee table every month or so. I'm pretty clumsy, apparently.

The other thing Eduard likes to do is scare the neighbour's children. There are five in the building: two boys with their dad on our floor, a boy on the third floor, and Henrietta and another little girl on ground level. Eduard sticks his head through the special window he installed in the front door of our apartment. I don't know how he put it in. He said it was inconvenient for him to open the door when a package comes or a pizza or someone to talk to. The children probably wouldn't be scared of him if they saw him in the garage or at the park, but the big floating horse head is weird. Maybe their parents let them watch *The Godfather*. Every now and then, when he's bored, Eduard will stand around with his head out the special window, waiting for someone to pass by so he can say, "Howdy, neighhhhhbour," in his quiet horse voice and chuckle to himself.

Sometimes I worry this place is driving Eduard mad. Recently I mentioned moving out, hoping it might prompt him to go off somewhere else, somewhere with patchwork fields and snails of rolled hay. Or at least somewhere with a backyard. But Eduard just breathed at me through his nose and shut himself in the bathroom for four hours. We didn't talk about it again.

At my day job I do a lot of keeping track. That's basically it: things that someone doesn't want to lose. Most of the things don't seem worth keeping track of. Besides, I don't know if we have space for all these words and numbers. I heard the Library of Congress is storing all our tweets. It just seems like too much to hold on to. But I know why they'd try: there are things I don't like to lose, either. Me and Eduard and the balcony, that's one way of keeping track. Some people think it's sad to do the same thing over and over. You have to let things disappear, so you can find new things. But then there are things you have to keep, otherwise the new things will never make sense.

There is an air conditioner at the office where I work. It helps us all hide from days like these, when the sky longs to de-robe for the whole long stretch from rising to sinking. It helps us forget the world outside is blind and rushing past like a cape. In the morning, before I came in, the sky was an uncompromising blue, looking down with the gaze of a lover. The kind of look that is a challenge and a secret at the same time. The kind of look that says, "We both know where this is going, but I'm not going to tell you how it will happen, or when." That's the kind of look the sky had, bearing down on the city.

\* \* \*

Before my day job, before the whisky and the balcony, there was the balcony and there was Eduard and me. The heat woke us earlier than usual, stirring sticky with mist behind our eyes. He had cold oats for breakfast, with milk, because he's civilised. I had eggs, because I know Eduard likes the cartons. We arranged our food on the outdoor furniture, a township of china and tea. To our left, a glimpse of cityscape: skyscraper tops sketching grey staircases through the smog. The tree in the courtyard stood paper-still. Eduard looked up at the sky with his whisky eyes and there was no challenge in them, and no secret. That's the way Eduard looks at everything - at oats, at whisky, at egg cartons and me. That's the way he looked up at the sky, as she looked back, waiting for release. That's how he looked at her all day, I think, until she finally put her hand to his snout. He is a very beautiful horse, after all, and has an unusual knack for building things and knowing when to let them go.



# 4



Mr

Gumption

He used to be a baker, the man whose arms look like big freeform loaves of sourdough. This is what the neighbours know. He is Polish, though he changed his name to Gumption, and lived a long time in Canada before coming here. Every now and then he will make and eat dumplings from his homeland that smell ever-so-faintly of sock. He used to own a tiny bakery a few streets over from the building where he lives now. Every morning he would wake as the drunks fell asleep on their benches in the leafy park beside the train station. Every morning he would shower and dress before sunrise, just to pour flour in a great steel machine and inhale the bodily scent of yeast. Now he is the groundskeeper of a red-brick horseshoe-shaped apartment building. Vacuuming the hallways of all seven floors on Tuesdays. Tending to the odd little courtyard in his rolled up shirtsleeves - even though his treasured square of pavers and plants is barely used by anyone else. Sometimes the kids upstairs will get drunk and do forward rolls in the garden bed, moving like colourful slaters amongst the succulents and kangaroo paws. All this is common information: the bakery, the dumplings, the forward rolls.

All this - but none of those for whom Mr Gumption fixes door hinges and clears leaf litter knows much about him. For instance, they do not know that one morning as old Gumption went about leavening breads, his son, transporting furniture for a family of five from Orange to Young, drove off the road and into a parked station wagon. They do not know that inside the car slept a brother and sister on a road trip together, or that they both, though scarred, survived. They do not know Mr Gumption's son died on impact. That the police said he must have fallen asleep, with his seatbelt off. That when the removalist company finally unloaded the cargo, everything was perfectly in place. The tray of the truck so well packed that the only damage was a single scratch on a hardwood dresser, which had the family known the circumstances they would have forgiven.

Everyone, however, is privy to the fact Mr Gumption himself used to drive ice trucks in Canada. They know it was so cold, even inside the truck's cabin, that his nose went numb. That the vast stretches of frozen ground made him lose track of time, so he could never tell when the end of the trip was just around the entirely metaphorical corner. That the ice was inscrutable, unreadable blue, which if the listener looked closely, they could see in his eyes. These things he tells anyone who walks by as he tends the tomatoes he grows in old cans on a ledge by the entrance to the building.

They also know - anyone who's been there more than a few months - that sometimes a woman will come to his apartment. She's younger than him, though older than many, and drives a Volkswagen Beetle with frangipani stickers in the back windscreen. No one knows for sure that he pays her, but he does. Most suspect, but can only guess the price or what they do or how she feels about it, which is actually quite good. Although she doesn't want his body and tries her best to ignore that part of him, it feels nice to sleep with him. He doesn't flinch when he gives her the money, doesn't hide it in her pockets or leave it on the bedside table. He hands it to her as though it were a gift, then follows her out to smoke in front of the letterboxes. The sky pinkens and swells with the burden of evening. He lights a cigarette. Instead of lighting her own, the woman takes his wrist, draws it to her mouth and smokes from his.

There are people to see this, as they follow their own paths home. But they do not see him as he goes to bed afterwards and they do not see him when he wakes at three in the morning without an alarm. They think there are no more entirely metaphorical corners left for him. That all the big things that can happen have happened to him now. They do not see him wish to the moon never to die in his sleep. Or bless each new day laid out in front of him like a blue stretch of ice.

# 11



Eggs

Eggs stopped coming the same week Lydia moved out. Things had been so regular till then. Henrietta would come by every Sunday with her basket of yellow cartons. Lyds would handle the exchange, giving the girl a pair of two-dollar coins. Sometimes she might call to me: "Paulie - a dozen or half this week?" Dropping the 'n' from my name. My parents are dickwads. Who calls a kid Pauline?

Lyds didn't just handle Henrietta, I let her answer the door all the time. Then she could be the one to fake interest in how big someone's kid was getting or shoo off religious pamphleteers. She'd stand there with a dark-blond piece of hair wound round her finger making chit-chat, I'd sit at the kitchen table drawing triangles on the local paper instead of reading. We worked good together - her doing the talking, me remembering to pay the bills. But I got tired of the weirdass vegetables she never remembered to clear out of the fridge. We'd joked she should be the one working in a lab - she could specialise in moulds - but the joke wasn't funny enough to make up for how annoyed I was. Lyds moved out, leaving no one to answer the door for me.

I was relieved when Henrietta didn't show on my first Sunday alone - that kid could talk. She didn't even need any input. You could just smile, hand over a coin and cradle a carton of eggs in your arm and she'd go right on about a friend of hers who had a funny last name or which bus station smelt most of wee. She delivered eggs to the entire apartment block every Sunday morning and she always had something left to say by the time she got to our place on the fifth floor. There were only fifteen flats all up, but that was still fourteen conversations. I barely had the stamina to get through one.

Then Henrietta up and disappeared for a month. I even started buying eggs elsewhere. But, just when it seemed the era of Henrietta was officially over, on the fifth Sunday, she was back on my doorstep.

“Hello, nice to see you,” was all I said, because asking questions isn’t how I like to talk and I didn’t want to open up a space for the girl to say a whole lot.

“It’s good to see you too how are you how’s Lydia it’s such a nice day,” said Henrietta.

“Yeah,” I said, walking back to the kitchen for my wallet. Returning, I handed her two dollars. As she was passing me the eggs one of the guys from down the hall - the one who always wears that ugly Panama hat - came out of his front door.

“Henrietta! We haven’t seen you in a while!” said Ugly Panama.

“Yes I’ve been away,” was Henrietta’s answer. The guy searched his pocket for a coin. I waited for eye contact, smiled in a neighbourly enough fashion at the dude’s ugly hat and closed the door.

Something bugged me so much about Henrietta’s four-word answer that the next Sunday I found myself kind of looking forward to seeing her. I was drawing rising wave crests over the classifieds when she knocked. I put my pen down without thinking, but hesitated halfway to the door, unsure if this vague curiosity outweighed my reluctance to make small talk.

I was greeted with the expected over-enthusiasm.

“Hi how are you it’s such a nice day,” Henrietta said, without giving me time to actually answer. Her strawberry-blonde locks were braided along the sides of her head like a climbing rosebush. Accepting a dozen eggs and handing over a five-dollar note, I ventured conversation.

“It’s nice to have you back, did you have a nice holiday?”

“Yes thank you I did.” Just that. Just yes and thank you and basically yes again.

“How was your weekend?”

“It was really good I went to Shannon’s birthday party and there was a piñata full of Chocolate Eclairs and Minties - Chocolate Eclairs like the lollies in the wrappers - and I didn’t break it all the way but I broke it some of the way and then Hudson hit it after me and all the lollies came out and that was good because if I broke it all the way I wouldn’t have seen all the lollies come out like what happened to Hudson.”

“Cool,” I said. “Have a nice day. Thanks for the eggs.”

Henrietta was hiding something about her ‘holiday’ for sure. Still, I hadn’t quite yet imagined it was anything worth finding out about.

Work was super busy that week and by Saturday arvo my fridge was looking sadder than it had when Lyds was around. I grabbed a couple of green bags from under the sink and headed down the street to the fruit market for something other than Thai leftovers. I wandered around the

place, looping and retracing my steps until the two bags were filled with knobbly different-coloured things: an Israeli artichoke, a sweet potato, purple carrots. I tipped the random haul of veggies onto the counter and helped the cashier put them back in the bag. On the way home I had a fleeting view of the train station down the hill and the awkward swarms of people crossing the road. There wasn't anyone around at the security door, so I had to put the bags down, open the door myself and hold it with my thigh. With my leg still in the door I got the groceries and wriggled into the building face first. After I'd panted for a moment I loaded up again, sneakers squeaking on the tiled floor. My footsteps were muffled as I reached the stairs - all mould-coloured carpet lit with shitty fluorescents. After two flights I stopped to rest, flexing my red palms. As I was reconfiguring my bags, the door to number 6 opened. It was that oval-faced guy I'd seen around. He always dressed in plain denim skinny jeans that were slightly too big paired with some nondescript t-shirt, probably in a size medium. Everything about this guy was medium. All his shirts had fake logos on them, designs created just for the shirt. Today's shirt said Cocos Cacao Consulate, in writing that mimicked peeling white paint, and there was a parrot. Someone had neglected to put an apostrophe in Coco's.

Medium guy stooped a little in the doorway, leading with his head, making it apparent he had no intention of actually coming outside.

"Oh, you're not her," he blinked.

"Good?" I said, starting off confident and falling into a question.

"The egg girl come yet? Did I sleep through it?" For a moment I didn't move, my brain slowly shifting into social gear.

"It's Saturday night." I waited for his face to show some sign of recognition. "She comes Sunday?"

"Oh." He looked disappointed for a moment. Then, "Do you know where the eggs come from?" He raised his eyebrows in a salacious manner. I was already leaning back down to pick up my bags.

"Uh, no." I looked up at him.

"Do you want to know?"

"Sure." I shrugged, dismissive. "I want to know a lot of things. Like where the hell she was for that whole month that's so secret?"

"Oh that," Medium guy frowned. "Kid had some pretty gnarly chicken pox for a couple of weeks there, saw her sneak out one night and just stare right out at all the lights outside, but then the parents called her in. So you want to know where the eggs come from?"

"I guess," I sighed, surreptitiously rolling my eyes. But something in me was turning like a key. Something about the exceptionally average man

standing in front of me in his elaborately-branded no-brand t-shirt made me curious. Perhaps it was a curiosity about him. His blandness paired with insistence. Where did he get his shirts? What was it about the rustling of shopping bags on this particular Sunday – which was actually a Saturday – that he thought worth coming to the door? I did want to know – where did Henrietta get the damn eggs?

“I’ll show you.” Medium guy set his right foot a little further into the hall.

“No no, that’s okay, I’ve got to get this stuff in the fridge.” I let the bags slide down my arms to rest in the crook of my elbows and held up my hands to ward him off. Medium chewed on nothing, looking over my shoulder.

“I’ll find you in the morning.”

“Okay. All right. Yeah, you’ll do that,” I said, thinking agreeing might be easier. He’d forget anyway. Medium gave one quick, high nod and darted back behind the door.

The next day, halfway through a slice of toast, I heard a knock, just one. Not thinking it sounded deliberate enough for a guest, I ignored it. But then, a mouthful of multigrain later: another knock. I pulled the door open. Medium strode straight in.

“Hey,” he nodded in greeting as he barrelled into my living area. “We don’t have much time. She’ll be on the move soon and we have to be in position.”

“Position?”

“Yeah, look, it’s imperative we find her first. Then and only then can we make our move.” Medium sidled over to the breakfast bar.

“Imperative? Can’t you just tell me?”

“Nah. Look, we don’t have the minutes. I’ll outline the plan.” He grabbed a pen from on top of the newspaper and started sketching a cross section of the building. His diagram eclipsed the entire second page. The more he drew the more I realised how structurally stupid our building was. Seven storeys tall with only two or three flats to a floor. About as wide as three houses, but taller than anything else on the block. Like a fucking space needle. Medium drew me in on the fifth floor - a grumpy looking stick figure with a ponytail. Then he drew Henrietta’s place - the first apartment in the building, right near the staircase. Inside he drew a small stick figure with a basket. In one of the third-floor flats he drew a nondescript oval-headed stick figure in a t-shirt. That was him. The whole thing looked pretty good - each apartment lining up with a paragraph of the paper.

Not that the plan really needed a drawing. Phase one was to confirm Henrietta’s commencement of egg-run. Phase two was to unearth the mystery of the eggs. Phase three was to get back to my own apartment before

she got that far, otherwise apparently, apparently the jig would be up. Part of me wished the jig was already up. But another part of me was rusted iron trying to find a hold. Part of me was turning very slowly, so as not to make a sound.

A component of step one was checking our mail - a cover for staking out Henrietta's front door. Even though it was a Sunday, Medium assured me there could still be something in there from Thursday or Friday.

"I don't leave the building much," he said, as way of explanation, packing up the map he'd drawn all over my reading material. "Plus I never get hard-copy mail." I eyeballed him as he concertinaed the schematics. "When you come to my door, only knock once. That way I'll know it's you. Nothing fancy. Fancy could be anybody. Nobody knocks once." He was right about that. I closed the door behind him.

My turn was first. The only thing in my mailbox: a take-away pizza menu. I knocked on Medium's door on the way back upstairs. This was the signal for him to prepare his own mail check. I flicked the pizza menu onto my bench. Then, following through with Medium's game of inefficiency, I tied the handles of a bag half-full of rubbish together and went back down the stairs. I spotted him outside near the mailbox. Right on time. Medium gave me a little nod. He knelt to retie his unruly shoelaces, stuck like a soiled pile of silly string to the top of his sneakers.

I made my way to the garbage bins and back to stop by Medium, who had lit a cigarette at the top of the brick steps. From where we stood we had a clear view of the first-floor hall. A clear view of Henrietta's front door: number 2.

Medium and I chatted in an exaggerated way. We chatted like neighbours, because the whole mission rested on us looking as though we'd run into each other on the way back inside and started a conversation. The best thing about this part of the plan was it could go on as long as we wanted and so long as nobody else was being a weirdo that morning, no one would know. Our conversation went like this:

"Hey, uh, how's it going?"

"Good. Yourself?"

"Yeah, good."

"Got anything interesting in the mail today?"

"It's Sunday. So, not really."

"Yeah. I got something from the Electoral Commission."

"Uh-huh." I shifted my weight from one foot to the other. "Listen, you could just tell me about the eggs.'

“Shhh - keep talking.” Medium spoke through a fisted hand as though instead of shushing he were coughing.

“Okay. Um. Nice day?”

“Yeah. Nice and dry. Clouds look a little suss though.”

“Mmm.” I shuffled my feet. Medium was giving me the shits with his sub-par smalltalk. I could have been drawing wizard hats on the sports section.

“Look, I’ll tell you. But you have to promise you’ll stay and see anyway, okay?”

“Okay. I’ll stay and see.” At least we’d have something to talk about.

“So the eggs...” This was the great part. This was where the key inside me, the lock and the door all shattered to pieces in one giant fart sound. “The eggs come from a chicken.”

“Bravo,” I said. Some conspiracy.

“No, no, no.” Said Medium, his round bland head kind of wobbling as it went from one side to the other. His hands moved up and down in front of him, fingers curled loosely. He looked as though he were holding a birthday present, shaking it ever so slightly, hoping to discover what was inside. “No.” He said. “Look, they come from a chicken on the TV.”

“Bah!” I didn’t even try to hold back my one quick exclamation of laughter. “That’s not even very good. Really, there are better theories. Like: maybe their whole apartment is just filled with chickens. Has anyone ever seen inside? Or: maybe she’s laying the eggs herself. Ha! A little girl with a cloaca.”

“Woah,” said Medium, a sheen of admiration in his eyes. “That’s genius. But,” he said, “I saw what I saw, and what I saw was a single chicken on a television screen - one of those old four-legged televisions - and then an egg came out under the TV and the little girl put it in a carton.”

“Bullshit,” I said, only half directing this at Medium. I was looking through the security screen at Henrietta, who was opening her front door. She was opening her front door from the outside and going back into her home. Somehow we’d missed her. She must have gone out early and been invited in by one of the neighbours. I’d known Medium’s plan was far from infallible, but the chances of missing her had seemed so small.

Medium took a while to register what I was looking at.

“Cunt monkey,” he spat. Henrietta saw us and waved. I gestured at her, a little half wave and began walking towards the security door.

“What are you doing?” Medium hissed to my back. I was going off plan. Henrietta closed her apartment door and put down the egg basket. I actually smiled.

“Almost missed us,” I said, letting the security door close behind me. “Can I get two today?” I dug around for four dollars, and let Henrietta tell me all about her weekend, even adding some conversation of my own.

“She went to another party.” I told Medium when I got back out, cradling the eggs in one arm. I shook my head as he proffered his pack of cigarettes.

“Oh, yeah?” he said. “That Hudson kid there?”

“No doubt. Hudson’s such a busybody.” I shifted the eggs to the other arm, leaning against the brickwork of the garden bed. “No, Candice was at the centre of this week’s affairs.”

“No shit? She’s the new kid, right?” I imagined infiltrating a kid’s birthday party with Medium. Dressing as hedges, planting evidence - Candice’s Barbie brush in Hudson’s tiny camper van. “How about that horse upstairs?” Medium said.

“Hmm?” I knew he was talking about Eduard, but didn’t know what he meant by it.

“I reckon it’s really just two guys in a suit.”

“Fuck off,” I said. “It’s a robot.”



# 3



# Other Fish to Fry

Jill put her black kettle on. She boiled water for coffee, also black. Then pushed down bread for toast, parts of which burnt to match the coffee and kettle. Jill found the wing of a fly in her jar of marmalade. On the street across from her second-floor flat, a car alarm began its high-pitched serenade. Beyond breakfast, things for Jill didn't look much better. People said she'd put all her eggs in one basket and that her face had looked decidedly yolky since. They said it was all par for the course, that she'd pulled out all the stops, but when push came to shove she'd shot herself in the foot. Years of boiling burned a hole through the kettle. Jill missed her coffee.

There were other things Jill missed - the assurance that if she spoke, something might make a sound in response. Sometimes she could hear the clock marking careful footfall through the night. It went on regardless of what she said. Olivia had left a lot of things behind. When it came down to it, the details had been the most painful: who would keep the fading floral lounge they used to have sex on sometimes in the middle of *Grand Designs*, what would happen to the *Wicked* tickets they'd bought together. People told Jill it was all for the best. That it was a bit of a kick in the teeth, but there was life in the old dog yet and she should lick her wounds, bury the hatchet and make a clean breast of it. They told her there were no two ways about it, that she should pick herself up and dust herself off. Jill felt that if people would just stop saying their bit, she might be able to find time to get a new kettle to brew her own coffee and then everything would be alright.

A few days after the kettle incident, Jill's boss began to put the heat on her. Mr Margolis would sit in his grey suit at his wood desk in his office facing the bathroom doors. Whenever he saw Jill coming out of the toilet he would put down what he was doing and tap meaningfully at his wrist. Each time it happened, Jill wiped her hands on her skirt, rolled up her sleeves and got right back to work. Jill tried to stay her bladder, but however few toilet breaks she took it was always too many for Groucho Margolis.

She tried to work harder, but the wrist tapping went on. “More is more,” said Mr Margolis. “That’s the long and the short of it. The head and the tail.”

Everyone knew Margolis was only scared Jill would take his job, but that didn’t stop Jill from kicking up a fuss when she thought no one was watching. Her co-workers told their friends what a song and dance she’d made of it, almost Broadway big, they said.

“Shittingarseinvaders!” said Jill as she made herself a cup of tea in the kitchenette. “Sparklyfuckingbedsorescratchingsonofabitch.” No one had heard her curse like that before. She wandered about muttering, her head lit up like a sunset. In corridors adjacent to her office, people began to say Jill had a chip on her shoulder. That she was biting the hand that fed her. In all honesty, Jill thought the hand had been a bit of a jerk lately. She was more interested in testing her teeth against the dust or maybe the bullet.

In the end Jill figured the bullet might taste like coins and that coins didn’t taste too bad for something your mother told you not to swallow. Jill went to see Olivia in her new place. It was smaller than their apartment but the door was painted bright green. Olivia served coffee. Jill asked the polite questions. They even laughed a few times, although afterwards the room seemed too quiet. Olivia stirred a spoon through her drink though there was no sugar in it.

Afterwards, Jill didn’t feel any better. Things were the same between them and her luck hadn’t changed any. A nest of fleas sprang up in her carpet with the warm weather and her ankles swelled with pink bubble-wrap welts. Jill rolled up her socks and boiled water in a pan. She drank coffee on the balcony and watched a grey streak sweep across the sky. The cat on the next railing scratched itself and looked dissatisfied. It was all a lot more unpleasant than a slap in the face with a wet fish. Sure, Jill thought, in each life a little rain must fall, but she felt like her chips had been down an awful lot lately. It was time to be master of her fate, to take it like a man or miss the boat.

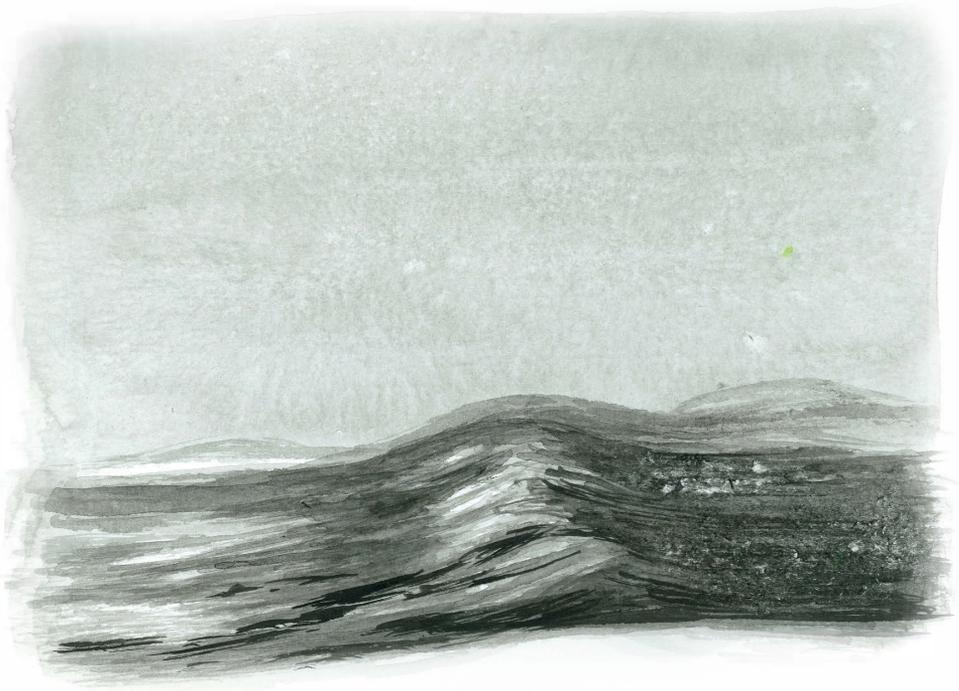
She bought a magnificent three-cornered hat, a gift for her 30th birthday. Tucked a bouquet of feathers in its trim. With her new tricorne she made friends easily. With cashiers at the supermarket. Groups of teenagers on the train. The friendliest was Eduard, the horse from the top floor. Eduard had eyes that looked like pieces of amber with shiny-backed beetles submerged in them. Jill took up drinking moonshine from a hip-flask and wore chain-mail everywhere. Each afternoon she would pace the streets on Eduard’s back, dressed like a fish and drinking to kill.

When Olivia finally saw Jill again, Jill was too busy fiddling with all the whistles and bells on Eduard’s new saddle to notice. Glancing up from her shopping for a moment, Olivia caught sight of Jill gallivanting down the

street, the spitting image of a young Tilda Swinton dressed in Napoleon's Sunday best. Now that it was over and done with, she almost wished she could turn back time. But she knew that would be reinventing the wheel, a recipe for disaster. Her friends had told her she could do better, but she wasn't sure that meant she ever would. It was a hot day and wisps of moisture rose from the ground, so that from where Olivia stood it looked as though plumes of smoke were rising around Jill. Even if Jill had turned in her direction, the mist of alcohol and actual water vapour would have made Olivia difficult to see. From up there she'd be just a smudge on a shower door. Olivia rearranged her bags and took one last glance before turning. With the heat blurring her surroundings, Jill didn't look one bit out of place. Britches had never suited her, but the boots looked as though they fit just right.



# 9



# Highway 31

Highway

31

You left behind only a scattering of things. The usual clutter of mismatched knick-knacks in the bottom drawer, in the top cupboard. A school of plastic soy fish, an old phone cable, her photograph. When we moved in I found these things. Her face, the name and place: dated.

Boxes line the living room. We have just the lounge to sit on. An empty pizza box and equally empty beer bottles strewn on recently shampooed carpet. Emily has left her bra on the floor while she pops to the corner shop for milk. It's our first night here: possessions piled high around us, limbs limp with use. Her things on one side of the living room, mine on the other. A day spent trailing up and down four flights of stairs to our new abode. Ants with crumbs. The inside of the living room matches the outside street: taped-up brown rectangles in leaning rows. There's no way to know how long ago you left. The place has that blank canvas feel. An unpeeled orange. An unbroken wave.

For the moment your little possibilities remain to line the drawers. They settle on the windowsill, sit pressed between phone book pages. I don't know who she was to you or what you might look like, but it's your script that stitches the back of her likeness. The loops and tails of your letters attempt to hold her stately presence static.

Soon we will spread our own memories over this space and all the little things you left behind will be lost or assimilated. In days to come, Emily will hang her dresses behind the sliding mirrored doors of the wardrobe. I will leave my jeans sprawled on the floor. We'll both do laundry in the tiny room between the kitchen and bathroom. Hang our things on the built-in balcony clothesline. From a certain angle it will look as though the terrace houses down the hill are pegged between our shirts.

The light in the photograph ying-yangs her features. Her hair is cut so its line folds her cheekbones. The ink on the back of the picture has begun to run. One humid day or one sweaty palm. Even paper ages.

In the bottom of the wardrobe I find a post-it note. A tiny piece of paper with one large line drawn across it, written in different handwriting to the photo. Several labelled branches flank this primary line. The names are barely legible. The big line has something written up it too: The Hume. She's left behind a roadmap, though the specifics are all missing. The only map you've left me is her face.

I spot an abandoned peg on the balcony and go out for it. The screen door nearly comes off its hinges. Across the way, on the neighbour's balcony, the leaves of a rubber plant gesture like upturned hands from a blue glazed pot. I bend over for the peg and fix its teeth on the pocket of my jeans. Then make my way to the railing, the pebble-embedded concrete turning dark with perspiration where my feet have touched. Downstairs in the courtyard an old man is watering the garden, thumb held over the hose end. His arms like homemade bread loaves tucked into rolled sleeves. Perhaps he knows your name. Perhaps hers. Or perhaps these are things even he hasn't heard. I go back inside, take the peg from my jeans. Clip her photo to the blinds.

The clink of a key in the door announces Emily, back with the milk. When I show her the photograph she smiles, genuine, but brief. The light in her expression mimics the soft sun on the cheeks of the other woman. Emily takes off her jeans and grabs another beer from the pack. She lies down on the carpet. Soon we will make quiet love on the floor. Hushed, like the summer heat that hangs low in the air. Careful, as if to not disturb someone sleeping in the next room.

# 1





Scotty

My name is Austen and I am what is called a Scottish terrier. *Pfft.* I live with a little girl called Sam and her mother Lauren. Lauren is taller. Long like her name and her wavy pale mane. Sam's hair is cropped short under her ears, dead straight and dark. She is small next to Lauren, though bigger than me. Our home has polished wooden floors, which I skit about on with my padded feet. Sometimes Sam chases me and her mother scolds her. Other times, when the girl is asleep and I am on my bed in the corner, the television shines its strange light on Lauren's face and I see her brow wrinkle for a moment.

My name is Austen, but sometimes Sam calls me Moustache. As though I am some clump of hair on the pizza guy's face. *Pfft.* She is always far more excited when she calls me Moustache than when she calls me Austen. Then she rubs her face into my back like she is trying to wear me on her lip. Usually a few days later, Lauren will take me to get my hair cut. On the walk home I feel light like a cracker with nothing on it.

We live at the bottom of a big toothy building. Toothy because it is built in the shape of a row of teeth. We have a tiny yard where I go when there is no one home. There are other people nearby all the time making noises and smells. Other animals live here too. There is a cat who jumps down from the apartment upstairs to balance along our fence looking too happy with himself and a horse somewhere further up with loud feet. There are other buildings all along the street, which runs across a hill giving glimpses of the city from between the lower buildings. The line of the city against the sky is like the line of a heart machine, which I have seen in the television shows Lauren watches when Sam is asleep. *Beep, beep, beep. Pfft.*

Sam has just started to go to preschool, which I know because Lauren told me on the first day several times.

"Sam will be a good girl and make nice friends to play with. Yes, she will!"

My hair was long on the first day of preschool, so I looked up at her

through my eyebrows. All the while Sam ate her crunchy cereal. I know it is crunchy because I have eaten it off the floor.

Usually after Sam comes home from preschool and after we all have our dinners, we will sit near the television. Me on my bed and the other two on the lounge. I like the way the light moves when the television is on. I do not like the sound. Mostly I like to watch Sam and Lauren and see the light flash across the wood floors. I love the wood floors, because when I sneeze - *pfft* - my legs go every which way and my claws rattle like the ticker on a clock. It is almost the same sound as when Lauren taps her fingers on the table. Except in two beats instead of four.

Tonight Lauren is watching one of her heart machine shows. She has not told Sam to go to bed yet, so Sam is still looking at a game on the iPad. As the show comes back from a loud break Sam looks up.

"That's you, Mum." She points at the main doctor lady. "You're her."

"Am I?" says Lauren, "Why's that?"

"Because you have the same hair and she's like the mum doctor." Sam swings her legs against the lounge. Through the single screen door, the windows of the opposite side of the building sparkle like the eyes of cats.

"And who are you?" Just as she says this, a sick little girl comes on the TV. Lauren looks straight at Sam, holding her daughter's attention away from the girl in hospital. The shot changes. A flurry of doctors walk past.

"I'm him," Sam points to a dark-haired man in a hospital bed. He is very healthy-looking and has a large smile.

"Oh really?" Lauren smiles and brushes some hair out of her daughter's eye. "Why are you him?"

Before Sam can answer, something goes thud on the window. Something warm and soft goes thud and slides down the glass. Lauren's back straightens, her breath comes in quick. She puts the heel of her hand to her forehead and stands up.

I run to the door and see a grey mess of feathers. The cat upstairs walks back and forth along our fence, its tail lapping like water. Lauren goes to look at the thing on the veranda. The bird is only little, its feathers still the sparse, soft grey of a hatchling. Sam follows her mother to the door and looks down. Her hands on the glass grow whispers of white at the edges.

"Go and take Austen for a drink," says Lauren.

"Moustache, Moustache!" says Sam, her hands reaching out for me.

"Go and take *Moustache* for a drink."

I want to grab the bird with my mouth quite badly. Lauren sees me, my head hanging over the threshold of the door.

"No!" she points at me. "Austen, no."

It takes everything I have to turn away from the bird and trot ahead of Sam to where my water bowl sits in the kitchen. Sam's swelly pink fingers gesture at the water. I put my face in it and drink. When I come out there is a lot of dripping from my face. *Pfft.* Sam laughs.

I hear the sliding door roll open fully and a sound like twigs snapping.

Sam follows me back down the hall. We get to the living room and Lauren stands up from a crouched position on the fence. She holds a plastic bag in her hand, letting it settle casually by her thigh as she rises. The bag hangs so flimsy and limp it looks as though it might drop at any moment, but Lauren's hands are pale at the joints. She steps inside and stoops to pat me with one hand, smiling at Sam. The plastic bag hangs in my face. It smells of gum nuts and red salt. I want to grab it with my mouth and thrash it about. I grab it with my mouth and thrash it about.

Lauren screams. I lock my jaw and try to pull the bag away, but she won't let go. Strong fingers grab either side of my mouth and pry it open. The bag has a small tear in it. I give one last thrash and the plastic slips out from between my teeth, breaking the bag open. The bird falls out with another, quieter thud onto the floor. I lean my face towards it, but Lauren swoops in, cradling it in her hand. She wraps it up in the bag and holds it like a package.

"NO," she says, looking down a pointed finger at me. "NO."

*Pfft.* Lauren sits Sam and I in front of the television again. She goes out the front door with the bag. Sam is smiling and sitting upright, hands pressed together, watching the heart machine show. It's a hot night and I lay beside her with my mouth open.

Lauren comes back in, closing the door carefully. There are wet rings under her eyes. The smell of the bag trails at her ankles. She sits down again, rubs my head so my back leg twitches. Her hair has fallen on her face and she pushes it up behind one ear.

"What happened to the bird?" Sam asks.

I scratch myself.

"What happened on my show?" Lauren's voice comes out crooked as the line of the buildings.

"The little girl got better!" she says. "Then Dr Montgomery ate a big sandwich."

"Oh wow!" says Lauren. She runs a hand over Sam's hair and turns to the TV. The handsome dark-haired man is on screen in his hospital bed. He is lying flat on his back while the doctors and nurses run around him and yell things. The heart machine goes: beeeeeeeeeeeep.

"I died," says Sam, her palms pressed together.

Her mother looks down at her with her head on an angle and her lips

drawn tight. The cat from upstairs starts stalking along the fence again. Against the glow of the lamps outside it makes a long twisted shape on the floor that makes Lauren and Sam flinch and go quiet. I get up off the lounge, shake myself and sneeze. *Pfft*. I do it again, three times in a row, louder and louder each time. *Pfft. Pfft. Pfft*. I am not afraid of anything.

# 5



# A Good Firm Grip

Good  
Firm      Grip

A

On Wednesday morning Kate woke at four o'clock with a syrupy mouth and man-hands sprouting from her wrists. Strong and hairy, where her own had been small with only the lightest fuzz along the knuckles. At a bar with friends the previous night she had drunk five, maybe six, glasses of expensive whisky, then wandered home to throw off her shoes and shirt, collapsing diagonally across the bed in her pencil skirt with the cat at her feet. So when she woke at four, thirsty and dull-headed, she had looked at the man-hands fuzzily for a few moments. But it was dark and she could feel the beginnings of her hangover rising ominous in the back of her brain, so she drifted back to sleep, head cupped in those large palms.

It was eight when the sun hatefully pried Kate's eyes open again and her hands were back to normal. The cat was curled within the circle of her arms asleep. Kate went to work and didn't think about the man-hands. At the end of the day she accepted another bar invitation. Someone bought her a whisky, dark and smoky. It sat like old embers in her belly. Kate couldn't remember when she'd started liking whisky, only that it made her feel like she was living in an old movie. She had another. Three more and the group were singing the *Wheel of Fortune* theme song over the cool blues of the pub speakers. The rest of the night swam by until all Kate could remember were the bright passing lights in the taxi home.

Waking thirsty in the early hours, she could see the hands were back. Knuckles like chicken drumsticks with the meat stripped off. She went to the bathroom, let the man-hands fill with water from the tap, and drank noisily from them. Back in bed, she lay awake considering what it would be like if her hands were stuck like this. She picked up her phone from the bedside table to test them. It felt lighter now that her fingers were muscled and hard. She got up and went into the lounge room, finding the remote, and mimed turning on the television. She held one large hand to her chin like she was deciding on a channel. The cat zig-zagged between her feet

and she leant down to let her fingers brush his back. His fur prickled with static as he registered the unfamiliar touch and he sprang away behind the blinds, which clattered against each other. Kate took herself back to bed. In the morning her hands were as if they'd never changed.

The next night, a Thursday, Kate went home quietly after work and ordered Thai. She didn't drink anything. The cat had gone off on his own somewhere. After a few hours watching TV she fell asleep on the lounge. When she woke with a start in the middle of the night her hands were the same, still holding the remote. She let it fall into a corner of the lounge and yawned, taking herself off to bed. The cat came back and curled up at her feet. They both slept through the night.

It was on Friday, after dumping her bag by the hatstand, that Kate pulled open the top cupboard and fished out a dusty bottle of Glenfiddich. Her freckled little hands popped open the seal and she poured herself a generous tumbler. She sipped, decided to add ice and went to sit on her bed. She ran her hands across the clean sheets. Her palms were smooth, nearly as white as the linen. Kate gulped the rest of the drink down, poured another, the ice still fresh. She let herself doze, and when she woke up there they were. She unbuttoned her top and ran the new hands across her stomach. Undid more buttons, took off the shirt, then her bra. Let the hands sit on top of her breasts. How soft those were under her new touch. How these new hands seemed to put up more resistance than the old. She rolled to her side to undo her skirt. She held herself, each hand touching the opposite arm. Let her fingers slide down until they hit her hips. Traced a path back across her body and let one large hand slip down between her legs.

Kate woke with the light, still thinking of the orgasm her new hands had given her. She worried she should feel this way when her regular hands had always been just fine. Did it say something about her that she preferred the new ones? If she invited someone into her bed, what would they think of these hands that were so thick and bear-knuckled?

It turned out most didn't mind or didn't notice once the lights were down. Though the hands kept changing - and they did change, really - Kate didn't call a witchdoctor or try to cut them off. In fact, she wished sometimes they would change for good, so she could shake hands with clients at work and look them directly in the eye, watching as they felt her new hands for the first time.

**13**



# Eduard and the Boy

Eduard  
and

The Boy

We'd never had that much contact with Eduard and The Boy. Most of us at number 13 had talked to either one of them a maximum of twice. We'd all seen Eduard on the stairs at one time or another. Kerfuffle is really the only word for it, Jim claims, what with the general carpet scuffing, the under-the-breath whinnying and jumble of human and equine legs. We all followed Eduard on Twitter though. Eduard's Twitter account was a laugh riot. Most people probably thought it was a joke account, as though some 20-something hipster barista spent his downtime making shit up about a horse living large in a city apartment block. We knew the truth of it. Eduard was a genuine space cadet - who just so happened to walk around in shoes made of steel.

We called his flatmate The Boy, but only out of habit. A few months ago we found out his name. We've always known Eduard's name. Everyone knows who Eduard is - word got around when a horse moved in upstairs. The Boy we just keep calling The Boy, even though he's probably older than most of us. He kind of looks like a chimney sweep, all spritely and messy. We never saw The Boy sit on Eduard's back. Mostly if we caught a glimpse of them together it was from our balcony: the pair of them coming or going, off on some mystery outing or negotiating the steps by the letterboxes. If the sun were setting just right, they looked like characters in a Western. The Boy's mouth matching the hard line of faded concrete he trod, Eduard's flanks matching the glint of parked cars lining the street. We whistled high, envisioning tumbleweeds creeping between the distant towers of the CBD. Eduard and The Boy made the city look as though no one else lived in it.

Orton was the one who found out The Boy's name. Orton's one of those people who always has a new band or movie he thinks you'd be right into, dude. We'd all been invited to a party down on Fauna St by a girl called Maya. Someone new was moving into Maya's warehouse and the

place needed re-warming. People wandered from place to place, filling plastic cups, eating salsa with chips. Closed conversations burst open with laughter and gathered back in. When Orton ran into The Boy in the doorway between the kitchen and the meagre backyard he was surprised but introduced himself. They went through the usual small talk - I've seen you round, I like your shoes, the weather's been pretty hectic. Orton told The Boy he should at least try, just try, to get into The Dawn Treaders and offered him a locally brewed cider. The Boy took the cider and was chatty for a bit. Maybe he would give them another chance. By the way, nice to meet you properly. Then he leaned out to look at someone behind Orton's head, said thanks again for the cider, and strode off into the party knocking back mouthfuls of Orton's fancy drink. None of the rest of us even noticed. When we asked Maya how she knew him she said she'd only ever talked to him at other parties or in the stairwell at our place. She'd invited him on Facebook, but she'd invited everyone. She was more friends with Eduard, she said. He helped her carry her groceries home on Friday afternoons when The Boy was at work.

Our apartment is one floor below Eduard and The Boy but not directly beneath. There are two or three flats per level and ours is at the left-hand-side near the street. So we don't get the sound of hoofs through the ceiling like the couple down the hall from us must. They make more noise than Eduard anyway. About once a week, at around 11:30 - like slightly shoddy clockwork. She sounds just like a movie of someone having sex. Sometimes she says his name: Ben. Sometimes, if the window is open, there's a slapping noise. We've decided she's over-thinking it. We've agreed his name isn't really worth shouting. Who is being slapped is still debated.

Two kids and their dad live above us. The younger boy has a haircut like a mushroom and wears overalls all the time. He carries around a bit of old blanket that he holds near his face. The other brother wears yellow dump-truck pyjamas around the building. He has a tiny pair of yellow Converse shoes which he wears with tiny skinny jeans when he goes outdoors. They don't make much noise except some nights when they get excited and run around in socks on the floorboards. Jim reckons he can tell the sound of running with socks on floorboards distinctly from running on carpet. Jim is an aficionado of the little things. He has the biggest room in our apartment and can identify any sound in the building.

About three weeks ago our Ultimate Frisbee night match was cancelled mid-game. We'd been playing in the rain for a few minutes and that was fine but then the wind picked up and the rain wailed down and big thunderclaps rumbled the corrugated walls of the shelter-sheds along the side of the park. It all got a little too ultimate, the flicker-film effect of the lightning showing

the frisbee's trajectory in frames. The trees ringing the field flailing their limbs in panic. We trundled home sodden. Warm fierce faces breaking smiles against the chill. Fissures of light split open the sky, healing instantly. Billiard balls of cloud rolled and boomed above. Jim kept chuckling at anything anyone said. It felt clean and right to be outside, warmed by our own efforts despite the elements.

By the time we got home the storm had died down. The slow black and white drizzle of the credits. Jim held the door open for everybody. As we rose up several flights of stairs Orton asked if anyone else had seen The Boy. No one had. Well, Beth had - Beth who sleeps in the smallest room of the apartment, in a loft bed with floral sheets - but she didn't know what Orton meant. The Boy had just been sitting there all by himself, said Orton. On the balcony, looking lost.

No one slept well that night. Those lying side by side complained of being kicked. Those who slept alone said they woke in a tangle of sheets, as though their legs had kept working through the night.

The next day Orton saw Maya post a big close-up picture of Eduard dressed as Hunter S. Thompson on Facebook. The caption underneath it said "Hunter S. Horseton <3". Nothing was suspicious about that. We'd all gone to the party where the photo had been taken late last year. The theme had been On the Run. Everyone was supposed to dress as their favourite exile, criminal or road-tripper. The fluro-lit share-warehouse had filled quickly with sticky-mouthed Bonnies and Marc Antonys. And there in the middle of it, a handsome stallion in a silly hat and aviators. We couldn't decide if Maya posting the photo meant she had the hots for Eduard or if she just liked having an interesting friend who took interesting pictures. The cigar did look great in Eduard's teeth. We supposed she was planning another themed party.

The night after the storm we played Cluedo in the living room, deciding to have an early one. Just as we were going to bed the woman next door started her over-the-top soundmaking. This was a particularly slap-happy occasion. As usual we felt the need to acknowledge the sound with sardonic eye contact. But, after a short giggle, we retreated to separate corners of the apartment, Beth trailing behind to turn off lights.

For the rest of the week the sounds next door went on. What had been an occasional amusement became a nightly ritual. We got bolder. Began parroting her sounds. Jim would jump on the couch, clutching the giant blue inflatable hippopotamus Orton bought at the \$2 shop. He'd moan and press it to him while in the kitchen Beth slapped a piece of processed meat against any available butt. Sometimes our ancient block-of-butter fridge would join in, rattling and whirring as though it were housing a swarm of

locusts. Surely if we could hear them they could hear us too, but although she'd stopped saying his name, our racket didn't affect their performance.

We started to wonder what had brought about such a sudden sexual reawakening. Jim used to joke that you could tell the day of the week from the sounds next door. Now it was difficult to tell one day from another. We started getting less sleep. They seemed to get louder. But maybe it was just that Jim had taught us what to listen for. The telltale squeak of the bedroom door. The equally telling but distinct squeak of the bedsprings. Sometimes the giveaway was the groan of the pipes as one of them took a late-night shower. If the pipes were particularly groany you could count on her being so too. That meant she was taking a bath.

About a week after they started, Orton said he'd seen Maya put another picture of Eduard up on Instagram. Only this time it was a nice paddock thing. The setting sun lit up treetops in the background. A bushfire-blackened stump cast a long shadow. Eduard was looking off into the distance as though he didn't know the picture was being taken. He had his sunglasses on. This time the caption read, "He will be sorely missed". There was no horse pun. He would not be saddle-sorely missed.

In our own ways we had begun to suspect something no one was willing to vocalise. That afternoon Beth went upstairs to Eduard and The Boy's apartment under the guise of seeing if they wanted to play Ultimate Frisbee. We decided one of our teammates could be sick. At the door of number 15, Beth was met with gentle refusal. The Boy didn't want to play frisbee, he couldn't play frisbee, he worked Thursday nights. Beth cut her losses and wandered downstairs to put on sneakers, recounting The Boy's excuses as she tied her laces. We went off to the game restless, wringing out dry towels over our shoulders. Beth had reported no sight or sound or scent of horse.

We still saw The Boy coming and going from the apartment. We didn't see Eduard, but that wasn't necessarily unusual. Jim started to theorise that the neighbours were making more noise at night because they were getting more sleep. Even when he was asleep himself Eduard probably kicked the floor through the night. Having never been anywhere more rural than Newcastle, Jim still knew more about the sleeping habits of horses than anyone else.

About a month after the big storm, as we packed up after frisbee one night, it began to rain. But the wind didn't pick up this time, the air didn't thicken further with water. Just a slow sad trickle that barely freckled the shoulders of our t-shirts as we walked home. Even two blocks away the top of our building was clearly visible, set between the terraces and houses

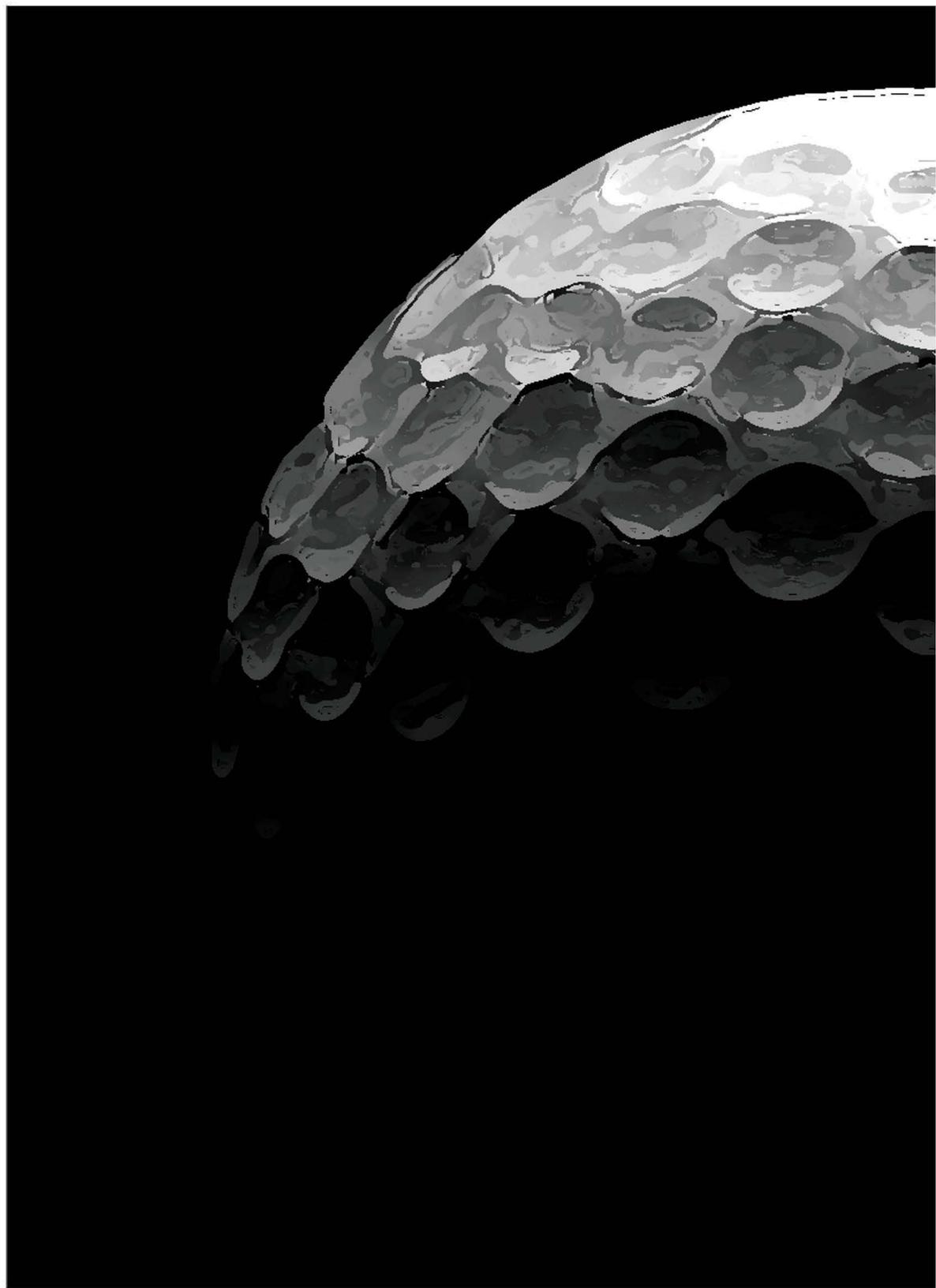
like an unexpected Tetris piece. As though someone had panicked and plonked this inordinately long bit of brickwork right smack in the middle of the perfectly jigsawed prisms. By the time we got to our street our clothes were beginning to dry. We reached the letterboxes and trailed up the steps, the orbled lights around the courtyard flickering on one by one. Windows and glass doors glowed like dim yellow computer screens. The Boy was sitting on his balcony, the light of his apartment behind him blinking slowly as the curtains moved in and out.

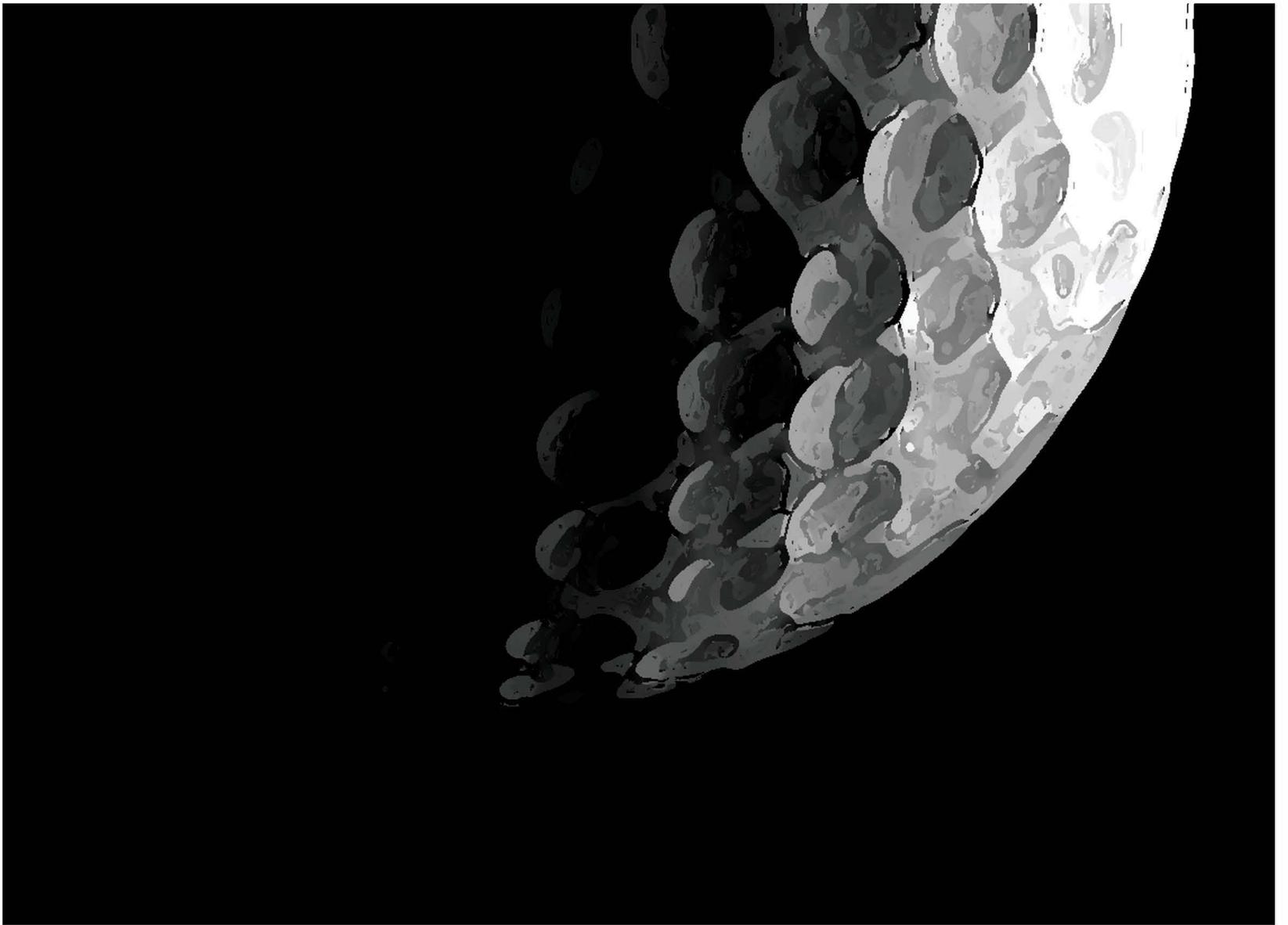
We decided to invite him to drink with us. We talked all the way up five flights of grey-green carpet, only quieting as we approached his door. Beth knocked but it seemed too soft. After some emphatic hand gestures and mouthing she knocked again. We heard the tiniest clink from somewhere in the building, like a cog slipping back into place. It could have been a bird landing on a rail. Wine glasses meeting. A tumbler set down on a piece of outdoor furniture. Beth knocked one more time. We heard the pipes groan, but Jim said it was someone much further down the building, washing up.

We slouched back downstairs. Sore, sweaty, ignoring each other's sighs. Orton took the garbage out. When he got back, he said he'd seen The Boy still there on the balcony. Orton flopped onto one of the mismatched armchairs, joining the silence that had overtaken the living room. Upstairs, one of the kids dropped something plastic on the floor. Next door we heard the squeak of a hinge or a spring. In the kitchen the fridge started its death rattle. For a few moments the fit of noise from its barrelled chest drowned out any other sound. Finally, as it died down, we heard a screen door open and close. We didn't need Jim to tell us where. The building went quiet. As though every orange-segment of its structure had frozen in place. Like Eduard's Twitter account, which stayed as it had been on November 1st - a scrolling page of identical little Hunter S. Horsetons. We would find recipes for oats, pictures of Eduard's contraptions, a plethora of record recommendations. But as far as we scrolled back, we couldn't make any more sense of the end.



# 8







# Beetles

Beetles

The day the beetles started appearing in my flat was a Tuesday. I was watching TV, getting up between episodes to make a snack or just staring at all the shoes on the living room floor. Thinking to myself, "Fucking hell Leo you need a hobby or something." Then as I came back from the kitchen with a mug of tea, I saw it. On a patch of lino just near the door the blue-green flash of moving water in the sun. A slick pile of beetle bodies, a surprise new doormat.

For a few moments we stood it off. I blew on the tea, scratched behind my knee. The waning sun edged in like an uneasy party guest on a conversation. Each beetle's back glistened like a tiny fleck of oil. I pried the broom from its place beside the fridge and with a little finesse managed to flick them all onto the balcony.

Much later in the night when I got up to take the empty mug to the kitchen, there was something dark in my peripheral vision. Over by the door were the beetles again. My first instinct was to second-guess. Had I moved them or imagined it? Their bodies patterned a square metre of floor, staring me down like the pupils of a firework-frightened puppy. I swept them clumsily into a biscuit box, took it out to the balcony and set them on the potted rubber plant. It was the only decoration on my pebbled patch of outdoors and had been there when I moved in. I hoped they wouldn't ruin it but I didn't do anything about it. I went to bed thinking about all the other things I'd treated the same way.

The next morning the beetles were inside again. At first I was only half awake, unable to properly take anything in before my coffee. Once I was awake, there was only time to dance into each leg of my pants as I rushed down the hall. I figured they'd get back in anyway, so I left them, picking a pathway between them to the door. It's not that I minded killing them, but dealing with squished beetles would be more effort. At work I Googled "bug infestation". Then I tried "beetles in my house what is attracting them?" I didn't find anything good, so I called Belinksy.

Right away I could tell Belinsky was grinning his annoying grin, satisfied he knew what to do. "Yeah, mate," he said. "No problem. We'll blast the buggers with some heavy-duty bug bombs, sweep the place out, you'll be right as rain." Belinsky is one of those endlessly useful people who takes pride in how endlessly useful they are, to the point that you'd mostly rather deal with things in your own ineffectual way. I'd thought I had a problem worth bringing him in. Now the answer seemed too easy. "Listen," Belinsky said. "Tomorrow, okay? I'll come round tomorrow, we'll sort the bastards out."

When I got home after work the place was worse than before. The beetles had swarmed towards the breakfast bar. Even the vertical side of the bench bore a beauty spot or two. They were perfectly still. This time there was no room to pick a path through the bodies. My feet fell with a satisfying crunch, like walking on unsealed gravel. I stepped on a few more clusters than necessary. "Belinsky'll sort you jerks out." I laughed, and did a little dance on their trampled bodies. "That's right. He's coming for you."

I imagined his wide satisfied face. What I really wanted was to show up tomorrow all chill like: "Oh that? Yeah I dealt with it, no Biggie Smalls." I went around the apartment looking for a hole in the window or an air vent I'd overlooked, crushing beetles as I went. Nothing. I searched the kitchen for something that might have attracted them. Broken pasta? Soy Sauce? Nope. Had I used some new weird cleaning product lately?

I gave up and cooked a sinewy steak, putting a couple of lettuce leaves on the side of the plate for nutrition. I ate at the kitchen counter, watching the beetles, my mouth half open. All this time and I'd never seen them move. I was convinced they'd be up to something as soon as I stopped looking. There was no way I wanted to wake up with a sheet of beetles pulled to my chin. No way I was going to let them tuck me in.

I grabbed a pizza box that stuck out of my recycling crate, swallowing the last mouthful of steak. Then I used the dustpan brush to sweep all the beetles into the box and went down to the courtyard, placing the box rather obviously in the red flowering gum. Around me the building towered bland and brown, as though I were the one packed in cardboard. Maybe the beetles would live here, or they'd scurry out of their little house and find some other person to bother. Hitch a ride and never look back.

I slipped through the security door to find the guy from the flat below mine standing under the stairs, chewing the end of a cigarette. He was wearing a shirt with a skateboarding T-Rex on it. The bubble letters across his chest read REXTREME SPORTZ.

"What's that you put in the tree?"

"Nothing." I kind of shook my head, as though shooing his words away

with my face. The guy sniffed, turning towards the entrance. As I climbed the stairs there was the sound of sneakers on tiles and the click of the security door opening. It was a relief to reach the fourth floor and shut everything behind me.

In the morning I was unperturbed to see more beetles. Actually, in those moments of still-waking consciousness it felt as though they were supposed to be there - some expensive modern rug thrown down to bear the feet of house guests. They'd become part of the room the way a tattoo just looks like skin after a while. They completely covered the side of the bench now. The front force had split and a second group led an advance left towards the lounge. There were even a few on the screen door to the balcony. Normaltown.

I surrendered to whatever Belinsky had planned.

When I got home after work he was already hanging around out front. "Hey, dude," he grinned. His large hand enclosed mine and pumped vigorously up and down. "Fucking epic altocumulus." He looked to the sky. "Might storm later."

"Yeah," I agreed, knowing nothing about clouds. Belinsky followed me into the building, his gait impeded by an indoor netball injury. A spray of beetles greeted us at the entrance to my flat, spilling into the hall. Belinsky eyed the black spots around the door with unraised brow and unturned lip, but as I pushed the door wide and he caught sight of my living room his features began to battle with each other.

Before us lay an ocean, oiled and cresting on whim. A monotone mosaic reaching halfway up the walls, leaving only the roof clear.

"Well, shit," Belinsky blinked. "You didn't tell me it was this bad. We can bomb the bastards, but it's gonna be a big clean up." He went to enter the apartment, but before his foot crossed the threshold the beetles rose into the air. Like an onyx cloud, like the aurora borealis - like something else I've never seen before.

We had to crouch to get into the room. Belinsky remained quiet, staring up at the cloud, mouth open just wide enough that one of the beetles could have flown in. His eyes were both softer and more focused than usual. For once he had no relevant information to relay.

Finally he composed himself, "Let's have at it." He swung his rucksack off his shoulder and fished out a couple of aerosol cans. "I've only got two, but if we block off the other rooms and make sure the stuff circulates, I reckon they'll do the job." He fussed around, setting down newspaper while I shut the doors. When I came back he'd set up the cans on top of my two stools like rocket ships.

“You got like a pedestal fan?” Belinsky sucked his teeth.

“Uh, yeah,” I went to the hallway cupboard and pulled out a dusty fan, causing everything else to collapse inwards.

“Perfect.” He laid the fan on its side so that it faced up towards the bombs. “Ready? You take this one,” He inclined his head towards the closer of the two bombs, then strode to the other and put his thumb on the mechanism. “We gotta set them off at the same time. Then run out the door.”

“Okay.”

“Go!” I pressed the mechanism and a stream of poison shot into the air. I coughed and turned towards the door, almost tripping on the newspaper. Belinsky turned the fan on and followed.

We waited it out in the coffee shop across the road. Belinsky didn't look out of place in its curated clutter. He wears flannel and shorts all year round, in winter adding an aged sweatshirt to the mix. He's been like that since we worked as telemarketers in our early twenties: me fresh out of uni, him fresh out of a stint as an extra. Not someone I'd normally befriend, but Belinsky befriends you.

He told me about which insects people keep as pets, and then talked about the kid he still seems surprised to have. He told me about a guy in his apartment block who uses the garage to build wooden replicas of castles, over a metre tall. This guy was a real character and would talk to anyone parking their car about the details of each new creation. All I could think of was putt-putt golf. That he might sell his novelty castles to miniature golf-course owners. I imagined someone striking a golf ball clean through one of Belinsky's neighbour's castles one day. A kid probably, mucking around on a school excursion. Perhaps a girl, the tallest in the class and the loudest. Not used to her sprouting limbs. She'd hit the ball too hard, smashing through a perfect replica of Manzanares el Real - bits of turret spraying across the course, the ball skipping away into a tiny hedge maze. She'd feel a little bad but no one would blame her. She wouldn't know how long the castle had taken to make. No one would really think where it came from. Meanwhile, Belinsky's neighbour would whittle turrets in the cold concrete cube of his carport weekend after weekend, none the wiser. Maybe this was why I didn't have a hobby.

I was still wondering about castles as I paid the bill, and as we crossed the street and climbed the stairs. As Belinsky opened the door I swallowed, preparing myself for carnage. Instead, the cloud of beetles was untouched. Hovering over us. The bug bombs were knocked over and the house smelled of chemicals. All smugness washed away from Belinsky's face. He scratched his head, put his hands in his pockets and kneaded his jaw. He paced around.

“Maybe if we –” he stood still. “No,” he shook his head and began pacing again.

I crouched over to the fridge and got myself a beer. “You want one?”

“Nah.” He was checking windows and doors looking for holes. He went through the cupboards and pulled out the pasta, the soy sauce. I popped the top off my beer and took a swig.

“If we could figure out what keeps bringing them back maybe we can put them somewhere else.”

“I tried that,” I said, running the bottle top between my fingers. He sighed and pulled out a beer for himself, limping over to stand at the breakfast bar. “Actually,” I said, “I don’t mind them that much.” I reached out to the black mass above me. It swayed, a few of the beetles climbing onto my hand. “Huh.” I brought it back down to my face.

Belinsky raised an eyebrow. I walked across to the screen door. A couple of beetles followed. I stepped outside. “Hey, idiots!” I yelled. “Out here.” I waved my arms. Belinsky gave a weak chuckle. A couple more beetles started to filter out. A white blur flew past my ear, hitting Belinsky clean in the forehead. He fell into the breakfast bar, the whole structure breaking under him. A golf ball ricocheted around the room. Beetles began to spill out of my apartment like water. I ran to Belinsky and put an arm under him. His head was already showing a ferocious lump. The beetles streamed out faster than seemed possible until there wasn’t one left.

“Well, that’s that,” said Belinsky. He didn’t seem pleased. As we stood there, imagining what it might look like from the ground – a black cloud flowing into the afternoon sky from a fourth-storey flat – there was a loud clang. The oven hood had crashed to the floor. One of the cupboards came down in a rain of spices. The fluorescent lights started flashing before carpeting the kitchen with glass.

Belinsky and I stood perfectly still in the middle of it all, leaning on each other. The contents of my apartment lay around us like a flattened swarm of bugs. A long quiet moment passed. I took a mouthful of beer and deflated my lungs.

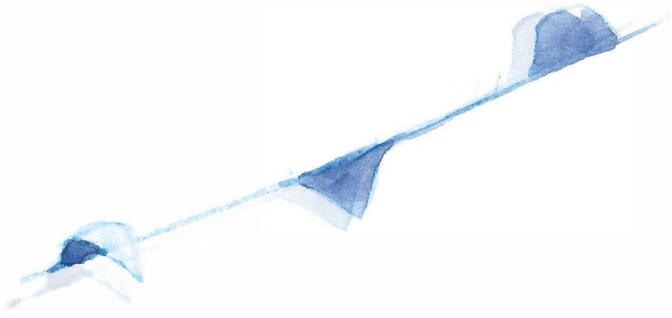
“No worries.” Belinsky turned his bulbed head to me, grinning. “This I can sort out in no time.”

The screen door came elegantly off its railing and landed just short of our feet. It was as if the beetles had eaten the innards out of everything. Or perhaps they’d been holding it all together.



# 12







# Hoofbeats

Hoofbeats

He breathes as though swimming: ripples of sheet, his body on mine. The dive is difficult, but the rest smooth. Our old analogue alarm clock by the bed a glowing red lap timer. His stroke practiced. Turning his head for air, each breath timed perfectly. Some nights he swims backstroke: a schoolboy spluttering through the last event of a carnival, hitting the side of the lane. The end arrives unexpectedly. Despite the markers overhead, despite the length of pool stretched out in plain sight. All these indicators and still it comes sudden.

There are hoofbeats in the ceiling at night. He says he doesn't hear them, so every time a hoof hits the roof I call out his name. Every time, when I ask, he explains: caught up in the moment, didn't hear a thing. The hoofbeats keep me awake each night. Even when they cease, they keep me from sleep. I think about them always. Sometimes it feels as though they are a very long drumroll for something, a countdown. Sometimes, even when I'm down in the deepest part of the building where the cars are parked in cages, I think I can hear hoofbeats.

My theory is Ben's trying to mess with me. There's no way I'm just hearing things and there's no way he can't hear it. He could definitely sleep through the fire alarm - I have seen him do it. But he can't be watching *Monty Python* through it. He can't be listening to Roy Orbison - who I hate - through it. He can't.

Ben and I have fought about the sounds upstairs. Not that they're his fault. But once, not long after we moved in, I was just so tired and he was just so insistent he couldn't hear anything that I flipped. I said things - things I meant, but had been holding back happily for his sake. Things that came creeping out when a third sleepless night shook me drearily into the world with black hammocks under my eyes. Things that blistered my throat and sent Ben lurching through the front door struggling to spark a cigarette with the dull flint of an old lighter. After that the depths of our bed

were still for a week. He came back. We made up. He said we were broken - there was no going back. Still, he stayed.

Recently the hoofbeats stopped. It was the most wonderful thing, sleeping without hoofbeats. Since then, Ben has swum above me every night. These days I don't call out his name. There is nothing for him to hear. I miss the soft canter in the ceiling in these moments. There is nothing to focus on but the breathing.

About a week after the hoofbeats stopped, something else happened. We had eaten at the coffee table: mushrooms simmered in red wine, served on a nest of pasta. Ben had spent an hour reducing the liquid, thickening it with flour. The food was good. There was shaved Parmesan and half a bottle of wine to finish. Afterwards, full and already sleepy, I ran a bath. Crashing water masking the sound of the television and the students next door trampling around. I got in before it finished running, the temperature far too hot, my toes chilled pink from the cold of the tiles. I eased the rest of me to the water. Let it rise around me. Ben interrupted, hanging on the doorframe. All he said was "Hello," eyes glinting like a starting pistol in the sun.

In bed afterwards we lay side by side on our backs. There were black insects stuck in the light fitting, still crawling around. I thought I heard someone crying.

"Do you hear it?" I asked. "You have to hear it now."

"Hear what?"

I felt as though I were sinking very slowly and gracefully - a coin dropped in a pool.

"There aren't any hoofbeats," said Ben.

"I know," I said, pulling a towel around myself as I got up from the bed. Not wanting him to see me if he wasn't willing to hear. Finally understanding that the end always comes sudden.

Bridget Lutherborrow



# 7



# Moon

Moon

It never occurred to me Timothy might hate the moon. We'd thought he was just in a funny mood, that he was after attention or something to do. Bored kids will do weird things just for the hell of it. That first night, the moon hung dinner-plate round in the sky. We'd seen it rise over the roof of the building beside ours, its pale scalp crowning on the terracotta roof tiles. Tim stared into his cup of milk. He took a gulp and watched the white film fall back down the glass. I was at the table with him, writing a list of things I had to do the next day. Tim's father was clearing the kitchen in the next room. "Shut up, moon," Tim said all of a sudden. "I hate you. Shut up, shut up, shut up."

"Whoa," said Tim's father, "Whoa, whoa, whoa, where'd you learn that word? You shouldn't tell anyone to shut up." Tim took another gulp of milk. He didn't even look mad, just like, whatever – how kids get sometimes. Tim's father closed the curtains and ushered us all out of the dining room. We didn't have any more trouble from the moon that night. Tim got up once for the bathroom but everything stayed quiet. His father and I forgot the dull shine just visible through the curtains and turned our attention to other things.

Two weeks later we caught him at it on the balcony. Imagine - a five-year-old in drawstring pyjamas bellowing his best cuss words at our planet's only satellite. The neighbours must have thought we were fighting. "Jesus," said Tim's father, "I thought it might just be a full moon thing, but the kid fully hates the moon."

"Looks like it," I said. I guess it was pretty disturbing that such an ordinary kid could up and start abusing something that had only ever given sporadic light and ornament to the sky during a part of the day when he was mostly asleep.

"Come inside," said Tim's father. But the kid was really letting loose and didn't hear. "Whoa, whoa, whoa, calm down, boy-o. Come inside, kidlet."

Leave the moon alone.” His father grabbed him around the waist and hung the boy over his shoulder. I could see from Tim’s face that he took this manhandling as an assault on his dignity. His eyes narrowed to half circles. Then, composing himself, Tim began to silently shake his fist in the air, only stopping when the moon was out of sight.

On the drive home from soccer the next day, Tim sat beside me in the car, peering out the window. Thankfully the sky remained shrouded in thin cloud as it turned from pink to orange to dark blue. I watched the road as I drove, but at the traffic lights I watched the sky and I watched Tim. Sometimes I’d catch the corner of a lunar grin through the clouds. Tim didn’t say or do anything, but he kept his eyes on the sky until we pulled into the carport.

As we made our way up the garage ramp on foot Tim held my hand. He walked slow, trailing behind, stretching out the time before he’d be inside. The groundskeeper was watering his tomato plants by the security door. I said hello and tugged Tim’s hand for him to do the same. But he paid no attention to me, only to the sky. I let it slide. It was just him and me that night and I didn’t know if I could handle an outburst alone. He stayed placid all night, but kept watching.

The following evening Tim fidgeted during dinner. He cast sideways looks out the window, chewed his food in big pieces and held his cutlery in fists. After dinner Tim’s father produced bowls of ice cream. The boy ate his idly, intent on the round white shape slowly shifting in front of him. His father ate with a sucking sound, framed by vanilla-painted lips.

“Shut up, moon!” Tim looked up from his bowl to the sky. The moon was there glaring blindly back, silent. Tim foamed ice cream at the mouth. He got up and banged his dirty spoon against the sheen of the window through which the moon gleamed like a new silver coin.

“Calm down, kiddo. Simmer down, fella.” Tim’s father pushed his chair back, stood up, opened his mouth to start another word.

“I hate you, I hate you!” Metal hit glass as Tim’s arm pumped up and down, banging an erratic Morse code that threatened to drown out his voice. The moon sat quiet – inevitable as a sink hole, still as a porthole against a storm. It looked as though a piece of sky had been hole-punched through. It looked as though Tim’s father was trying to figure out if he should do the thing he was thinking or let it go. Tim looked as though he wouldn’t stop no matter what his father did. Tim’s father didn’t turn around, but backed up and took the empty bowls to the kitchen.

Tim banged slower with his spoon. “Shut up!” he said. “MooOOOn.” I put my own spoon down then, noticing how my hand grasped it like a wand. I picked Tim up, though he was too heavy for me to carry far. His arm kept

moving, his spoon eventually scraping the windowsill, then only air. The slow grinding halt of a train. Tim settled quickly, the same as the first time. Cutlery clinked against porcelain in the next room. When I put Tim down he went to close the curtains, then sat on the beige leather lounge with crossed legs and folded arms. He sat like that for two hours before falling asleep. All the tension in his pose softened and he dribbled on his own shoulder. Eventually his father took him to brush his teeth, and before long they were laughing, probably covered in toothpaste foam. I struggled from the lounge and padded in slippers up the hall.

Tim's father was the last to bed. Switching off the light and feeling his way across the room, he peeled up the covers and climbed in.

"That kid of ours sure is weird," he said.

"Not much of a surprise." I looked at the pulse in his temple, drumming.

"Takes after the pair of us, I suppose," Tim's father chuckled. "Night."

"Night." I lay for a while with my eyes open. Listening to the sound of cars prowling the streets below, to the brash wind that spoke of rain on the way. Tim's father began to snore. I wondered if Tim would grow up to be a snorer. I wondered what to do about this moon thing. Perhaps if I let him take the golf clubs out while his father was still at work. We could lob a few balls at the dumb thing. It was a rotten state of affairs, hating the moon. That fucking polished asshole.

"Screw you," said a milky mouth. "What makes you so perfect?" The moon peeked between the curtains with that smart alec look it always wore.

"Shut. The. Fuck. Up." The words came out between my teeth.

"Me, shut up?" The moon scoffed back. "How 'bout you actually say something worthwhile for once? How about that, huh?"

I wanted to smear gravy on its face. To drag that one bright butt cheek down until it was actually staring up from the bottom of a creek. Instead I dragged the curtains closed, burrowed my head in my pillow, and swallowed all the terrible curses I wanted to let fly at the sky - the way I'd always done.



# 10



# The View From the Metro

from The View  
the Metro

I don't want to grow old in the city. Wear gold chains over knitwear over pants with straight creases. Stand stooped over a can of Coke outside Woolworths. Slurp brown fluid up a straw to folded lips. I want to be old like my grandmother and drink too much tea and never try anything new. Being old in the city would be like trying to outdrink the ocean. Like having a bird's eye view and only seeing detail. It would hurt the way a bruise hurts. Under the skin and after the fact. Like strong red wine. I don't want to watch things get big as I get small. To stand on the highest point of a rooftop car park looking out at a horizon of grey buildings on grey sky. To feel the weather where my body bends. Try to keep up. Be good at catching the bus to places other than the bowling club. I don't want to know how the roads used to be. To tell stories just to have people laugh or get bored.

I can't imagine being old in the city. I can only imagine being young in the city. Being young in the city is like facing facts. Like pushing your face up to a window to see your own oily expression in glass. Testing some strange plant's edibility by putting it in your mouth. Being young in the city is okay. You're probably too poor to live alone. You feel the weather mostly in your skin. When you find yourself on a rooftop car park your eyes are good enough to see the water.

But there are people who want to spend all of their lives in cities - my flatmate Eric, for one. Eric loves being part of something so large and loud: alive, those features of civilisation make him feel alive. He is ten years my senior, or close to, and owns the apartment we share. Every month Eric goes to body-corporate meetings in a weird room under the building and comes back telling me how he couldn't stop staring at the groundskeeper's hands, how their cracked clay surface runs with tributaries. Our bathroom cabinet is lined with oils and ointments that Eric plasters on his face. On his body too, I suppose. Sometimes he comes home drunk and sad, wearing that cheap straw Panama hat he got overseas. Saying, "I'm so old", and touching my shoulder. Leaning to look too long in the percolator left on the stovetop.

I say something reassuring like, "You're not that old." Meaning it, but wishing he'd stop. Thinking of the last time I saw my grandmother: a wisp of a woman waiting to be swept up by the same inevitable sou'wester as her husband.

When I'm old I want to move as far as I can from here. From the several storeys of doors and stairs that form the guard of honour to every carpet pocket-square apartment. From the spray-on concrete ceiling that I stare at every night and the peephole in the front door that makes faces hard to recognise. To a place where you can smell the water even when you can't see it. My grandmother lived somewhere like that. On a golf course beside a beach. The windows or roof tiles always needed fixing and golfers filed through the backyard like ducklings. My grandmother smelled of lipstick and only called me the wrong name by a slip of the tongue. The sound of the ocean was like static.

I can only imagine being old like this. In a place that has already put its feet up and said, "This'll do." A surrender, but not a defeat. It would be better to travel back to a time before I was born and grow old there. Somewhere with no rooftop car parks and fewer adjoining walls. Perhaps to the time of my great-grandmother, who had an Irish name but a Liverpoolian accent. Growing old in the past would be like sinking into a warm bath. Like diving under a wave. Waking up early because the sun has come to rest on your face. Being old in the past would be simple. No one would wonder that I was baffled by technology. People would forgive any strangeness of habit or speech. They would tell their children the world was different in my day. It would be just as unfathomable as being old in the city. There would be just as many things to be confused about. Just as many things to forget. But all my stories would be about the future.

Bridget Lutherborrow



# 15







# Jumpin' Jack

Jumpin'

Jack Flash

# Flash

It's been raining on and off for weeks. Spring storms that ravage the jasmine growing along the letterboxes. Heavy rains and hasty winds that give all the plants asymmetrical haircuts. Eduard and I can always tell one is coming from how hot the day is. The air feels brittle enough that you could crack it right down the middle like a Scotch Finger. Then, sometime in the afternoon, it begins: the tiniest seasoning of water, just a few glittering drops on the bare cement of the balcony or beading on Eduard's back. The heat always breaks like that. I could tell today's was going to be big.

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I come home after work to find Eduard pacing the apartment. It's hot and I let the backpack slide from my shoulder without thinking about where it falls. Eduard looks up, his nostrils billowing in and out in time with the curtains. He's wearing an earring and face paint in blue stripes under his eyes. When he blinks I can't shake the image of mussels opening and closing under a warm tide.

"I didn't know you had your ear pierced."

Eduard doesn't respond. He's standing in one spot, moving his legs, chewing on nothing. Instead he says, "Man, I just need to put some music on. Man, what song though? Man." He's picking up old vinyl with his teeth. Spinning record after record and not getting it right. "The Rolling Stones, The Rolling Stones, The Rolling Stones. Yeah. Yeah, that might be it." He nudges the needle down with his nose and stares at the disc as it begins to turn. As if he could read something there in that Sisyphian tar frisbee, doomed to always move at blurring speed and end up just exactly where it started.

It's *Ruby Tuesday*. A pile of paper record casings litter the floor around Eduard's front legs. The records sit stacked like loose change on one of his egg carton tables. I really need to pee.

“Hey buddy,” he says at last, pulling his top teeth behind the bottom ones.

“Hey, Eddard,” I say, calling him the name of Sean Bean’s character in *Game of Thrones*. I’ve been doing that on and off since we re-watched the show. Now I think it might uphold a tone of normalcy. As though I hadn’t just come home to find my best friend ruining the perfect order of his music collection. I use my calm voice and try to get close enough to put a hand on his neck. “How’s your day been?”

“Yeah, I can’t find the right song to put on,” is all Eduard says.

“Uh, what do you feel like?”

“I dunno, just something, something big. But not too big, you know. Like, something bigger on the inside.”

“Like the TARDIS,” I say, as if Doctor Who might ground him, but Eduard is already walking away. His reply hits the fly screen. Sliding into the afternoon air, which is in the process of taking a cool turn. Through the door I can see Mr Gumption sweeping the pavers downstairs. As soon as he gets all the leaves in a pile the wind gives him the slip, a single piece of foliage fleeing to a more secluded corner of brick.

“Eduard, let’s sit down.” I say. “Let’s sit and have a nice iced tea and chill out.” I’m tired from concentrating all day. Genuinely, it would be nice to just sit. I think Eduard notices.

“Yeah, uh, yeah sure,” he says, chewing on his shoulder.

I get the jug of iced tea out of the fridge, surprised Eduard has bothered to make a batch today. It’s some kind of strawberry concoction. I put a slice of lemon in mine. Eduard is still for a minute. I put the glasses down, let out a sigh and resist the urge to say “See, isn’t this nice?” For a moment I feel like a real champion of subtle unpatronising intervention. Until I find myself saying, “Is this gin?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s delicious,” I say, covering my tracks. Actually it is delicious, and normally it wouldn’t be a big deal that Eduard spiked the tea, but he’s really weirding me out. He’s calmer now though. He’s sitting on the beautiful red rug by the lounge, concentrating on manoeuvring his mouth around his glass.

“Basil, strawberry iced tea,” he says into his drink as way of explanation. “With gin.”

“Really tasty,” I say, swallowing. A spray of rain hits the balcony, a gentle sound. It’s getting darker outside.

Eduard lurches forward. I know he’s only getting up, he doesn’t like to sit much, but I can’t help but ask, “Whatcha doin’?”

“Going up on the roof.”

“The roof?” I say. “Eduard, a storm’s coming in.” For a second he looks longingly outside, through the screen door at the rapidly blackening sky crinkling like an eyebrow. I have no idea how he plans to get on the roof, but there’s no doubt he could do it.

“Yeah,” he says, “I’m going on the roof.”

“Let’s just finish these drinks first,” I say. “Then we can both go on the roof if we feel like it.”

“I’m going,” he says, angling his teeth at me. “Just as soon as I get my sunglasses.” Eduard leaves down the hallway, huffing. When he comes back he has his aviators on. I can see my face in them.

“Have another drink with me. I could use the company. The roof is probably slippery.” I watch for any sign of recognition, but I can’t see anything past the mirror of his glasses. Eduard chews for a moment. A piece of basil comes to the front of his mouth and he tries to nudge it out with his tongue.

“Oh,” he says. “Right.” And just like that sits back down to his drink. I go over to the record player and put on *Jumpin’ Jack Flash*. “Yeah,” says Eduard, “this is the one.” I pour myself another iced tea. “It’s a gas, gas, gas,” sings Eduard, shaking his mane. I sing too: it’s alright now.

I drink another tea and now I really have to go to the bathroom. Eduard’s singing grows faint behind me as I close the door. It’s alright now. He’s calm: we’re drinking, singing. We might be in for a bit of a night, but he’s manageable. While I pee I sing, “Yeah, yeah, yeah, woo!” Even though that’s a different song.

As soon as I get back into the hallway I can see Eduard has moved. His drink is finished and the screen door is open, the curtains sucked out into the bristling evening. I hear a sound out there. Other than rain hitting roof tiles. With an edge to it like a rusted trowel. The kind of edge that’s a surefire ticket to tetanus. I go out through the flitting flames of fabric. On the pavers downstairs Mr Gumption has stopped his sweeping. As I walk forward I catch sight of other faces. Eduard’s lesbian friend with the fancy feathered hat is down by the security door. The mother and daughter and little dog have all stopped running for cover and are sheltered under a single umbrella near the letterboxes, heads tilted to the sky. The man and his two sons next door are out on their balcony, the father in front of the boys, twisted around so he can sort of look up at Eduard but also sort of see where his kids are. There are others. Most are familiar, some are new. The group of students who live on the floor below aren’t there. Or the couple directly under us. Everyone who is there is staring up at me. Or actually, as I realise when it starts up again, they’re staring towards that terrible sound.

I turn to find Eduard towering above me, dimly lit from behind. Hair so wet it looks black. Though his head is moving from side to side, his nose stays in the air. Eduard is screaming. He is screaming and screaming and stamping his feet, while clouds boil around his ears. He screams again and doesn't even turn towards my voice as I yell up at him.

"Come down. I won't even watch how you do it, if you just promise to come down." The terrible screams go on. Nails on a chalk board. They fill the entire space between this side of the building and the other. Between the rooftop and the courtyard - which has never before been this full of people, all of them staring up at Eduard and me. Despite the noise he's making, Eduard doesn't seem altogether unhappy. His hair, heavy from rain, cuts black scars across his face. His eyes glow like metalwork.

"Come down!" I grip the balcony rail. My hands are cold, but my lungs are hot. "Please, Eduard, you'll hurt yourself."

It's raining so hard now Mr Gumption has put down his broom. It's raining so hard the little dog's feet are already submerged in a puddle. It's raining so hard water is rushing right off the gutters. Then thunder: the sound of a garage door sliding closed. Eduard's screams seem thin alongside it. He pauses and whinnies nervously. Then screams again - the loudest yet, the longest. A thunderclap booms. I duck and shield my face at the sound. One arm clutching the railing, the other curled around my head. The whole courtyard lights up bright as an X-ray. Then goes black. Just the sound of the rain pulsing on every surface like a heartbeat.

By the time I get downstairs most people have cleared out. The little dog and the girl taken in for a warm bath and a towelling down. The other children ushered away from the scene in the courtyard. Mr Gumption is by the security door. He's picked up his broom again but isn't sweeping. He's just leaning on it, looking up at the empty roof. When I ask how it happened he isn't sure. Shaking his grey head, blinking water away from his eyes. His prized patches of kangaroo paws have been crushed. The woman with the feathered hat is holding an umbrella over their bed. Her face is all angles and big eyes. The father of the boys upstairs slips out beside us, kneels and stretches out a hand, then shakes his head.

"What do we do?" The woman looks at me. Water is dripping off my nose. I wipe it with my sleeve and don't say anything.

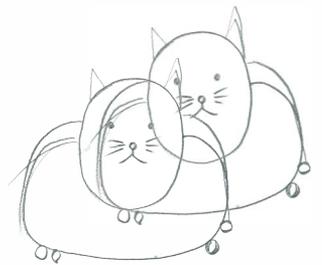
The man from upstairs puts a hand on my back. "I'll take care of it," he says, glancing up at his own balcony. He suddenly becomes a person who knows how to handle these things, and I give in to that. I let my hands cradle each other. In my mind I cut out a horse-shaped chalk outline that I refuse to look inside.

\* \* \*

Since then I don't sleep an awful lot, and when I do I dream I'm wearing Eduard's horse shoes and can walk on the ceiling. I dream of a machine downstairs that turns old junk mail into paper pulp eggs. I dream of all the seven plagues. I dream of whisky. Through the hours when even troubled sleep is beyond reach, the roof of the apartment building creaks as though someone is living up there. I tell myself it can't be. I tell myself it's just old joints settling in the growing cold. I tell myself nothing could have changed things, but even when I believe it, there are still things I wish I'd done. Sometimes in my dreams Eduard is here. He wears a smoking jacket and I have a pipe. We solve mysteries together.









Libbie Chellew

# PROTEIN

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Libbie Chellew

with illustrations by Anthony Calvert

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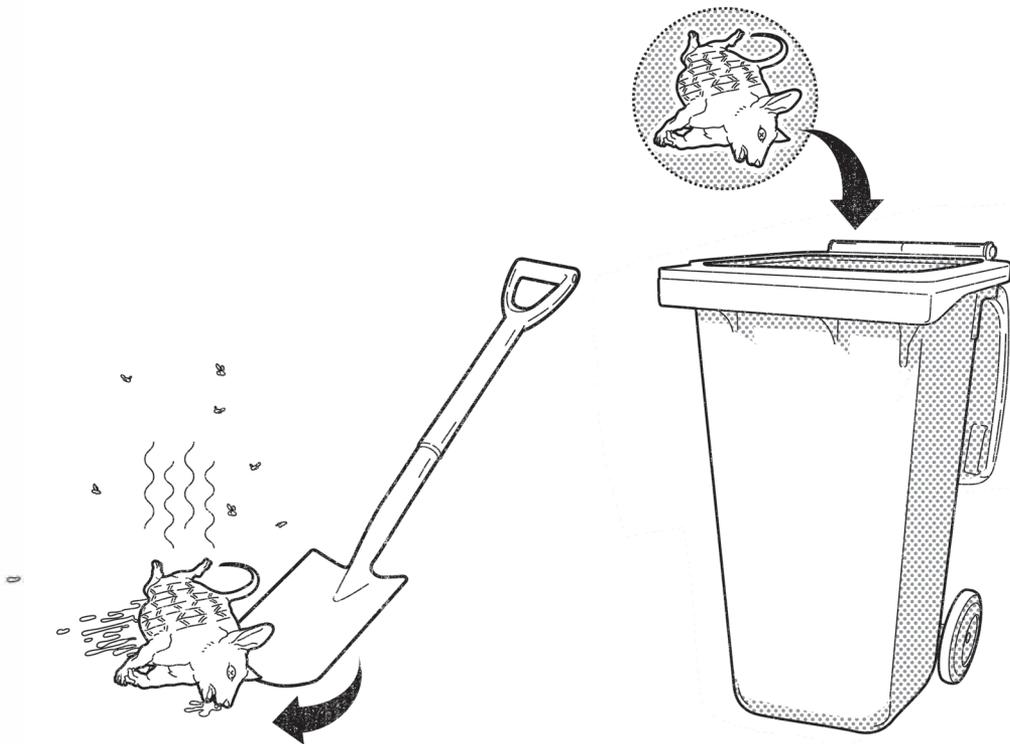
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Libbie thanks Glenn, Rob, Rhiannon,  
Brent, Adi and Ann. This is for you.

Fig. 1



Fig. 2



## EARLY SIGNS

Arthur brings the shovel down on its neck. The fact that Rory is behind him doesn't cross his mind. It isn't until the rusted bottom edge forces through flesh that Arthur hears a whimper.

He has no tolerance for wimps. Rory's natural reaction to witnessing death for the first time goes ignored. He would learn to be silent, or to wield the shovel himself. Sometimes violence is humane. No better place to learn that than with Grandpa.

"This is the best way," Arthur says. Rory's shoulders are up. "If it's going to die anyway you'd be weak to sit by and wait."

The last time Arthur had done this it was a joey. But you didn't see them in Greensborough anymore. That might mean the boy didn't need to see this. Arthur can imagine the argument coming from Rory's mother. But she'd be ignoring the overall problem. There's little meaningful death here because there's little meaningful life.

The boy is staring at the body, waiting for Arthur do something. Arthur has a splinter in his palm from the shovel handle. He rolls the skin of his left palm with his right thumb and forefinger. It's set in deep and he feels it as he rolls pressure on it from either side. Arthur considers the carcass. The sun rages behind him. The heat on his neck makes him think of cooked flesh.

"Find me a decent stick, will you?" Arthur says over his shoulder as he wiggles the shovel underneath the thing's limp head.

Rory appears next to him and hands the stick over without looking up. He is hopping from one foot to the other. The bitumen is hot on his soft young feet; Arthur can feel the heat through his slippers. Rory springs back over to the nature strip.

The stick is weak and too short but Arthur manages to push the thing onto the shovel. The flat half comes off the bitumen easier

than he expects. He uses the stick to curl the thing's tail back over itself. Arthur feels a pinch in his lower back as he straightens. The carcass balances on the end of the shovel. Arthur breathes through his nose in short whistles. Rory keeps his distance, running down the brick path to the front porch. Arthur opens the green wheelie bin and lets the carcass drop inside. There's blood on the shovel and blood on his left slipper.

"I'm just going to hose this off." Arthur raises the shovel at Rory. "Off you go."

At the side of the house, the tap shudders and sprays water in all directions. It's cool in the shade and he can feel the spray on his ankle. He watches the blood dilute and be absorbed by the soil. Turning the tap off seems to take more twists than it did to turn on. He leans the shovel against the side of the house.

Rory has put on one of the DVDs he brought with him. Arthur doesn't bother asking what it's called; it's animated. When he shuffles in front of the screen Rory ignores him. Arthur's moving a little slower, not used to being out in the heat. He's paying for it now. With each step his lower back twangs.

Arthur makes a thick lather with the soap at the kitchen sink, letting the water run while he does it. He cleans up the small mess he created making their Vegemite sandwiches for lunch. The sides of the margarine container give easily as he grasps it. He shouldn't have left it out. He takes the soft pink sponge and wipes down the bench in vigorous strokes.

He decides to wipe down the sink and the taps too. Then he wipes down the microwave and the stovetop. He takes his Thursday apple out and rinses the kiwi-fruit hair from the fruit bowl. He rinses the sponge again, watching as the dirt disappears and the sponge reinflates, looking new. He pushes the sponge into the groove between the bottom of the windowsill and the tiles, then runs the water again and is satisfied to see a grey mark resisting the rinse.

Arthur takes the cola Sunny Boy he bought for Rory out of the freezer. He had to negotiate the dollar out of his week's budget by buying one apple instead of two. He snips the top off and takes it into the family room. Rory is asleep, his brow concentrated and his arm hanging off the side of the couch. Arthur sighs and takes the Sunny Boy back to the freezer, leaning it upright on the interior shelf. Rory doesn't stir as Arthur turns the volume down on the television.

He sits on his armchair next to the couch and lets Rory sleep.

The television screen reflects the front yard. Arthur thinks about closing the vertical blinds but the cord is stubborn and would wake Rory. The movie is bright and soon the front yard is lost in a landscape made of lollies. Two characters, a muscled man who sighs with his whole body and a small black-haired girl with big eyes, sit on the branches of a candy-cane tree discussing something in earnest.

Arthur recalls his wife's love of hard-boiled sweets. At the lolly shop in Warrandyte, or Sassafra, buying jars of yellow pill-shaped sweets and red glass lollipops. The tin she used to keep in the car. He can hear the crunch. He watches the muscled man snap and break the delicate sweets as he walks through the lolly world. Arthur wonders what Rory learns from films like this. He thinks about his wife and her mad driving. He thinks about her.

When the credits start and the screen goes black, Rory is still asleep. His lip quivers. Then his whole body shudders in a way that makes Arthur lean on the arm of his chair and stand up. As he watches, Rory lets out a low moan. Arthur can hear Rory's tongue inside of his mouth, clicking rhythmically between moans. He doesn't think waking Rory up is the right thing to do, even as the moans become more urgent. Arthur stands and watches. Through the window he sees his daughter's SUV turn into the driveway. He feels he's going to be implicated in this, and goes to meet Nicole on the porch.

"How'd you go today?" she asks, smiling. She shakes her hair off her face, puts both hands on her hips. Arthur can see stubble under his daughter's arm and a half-moon sweat mark on her red linen top.

"He's asleep," Arthur says and nods toward the window.

"We're going to have to go straight away, though," she says and knocks on the glass. Arthur watches the boy. Nicole knocks again and then bangs. Rory jolts upright. He looks from his mother to Arthur, his expression blank. Nicole turns to Arthur.

"Are you well, Dad? How are you doing?"

"I'm just fine, Nicole," he says.

"I'm wrecked. We had some winners through the ER today. Had a guy in claiming not to have slept in three days. He reminded me of you."

Arthur breathes out his nose and nods.

"Three days, though. I nearly didn't believe it. No drugs. Just can't sleep. His wife was hysterical about it. They ended up screaming at each other. Dr Pratt had a similar case a couple of

days ago. Isn't that strange? Two in one week."

Arthur looks at the wheelie bin, in full sun now, and wonders about the stench. Rory comes out the wire door behind him.

"Thanks for having me, Grandad," Rory says and nudges Arthur's elbow with his shoulder. Nicole smiles at them through a yawn. Arthur nods at Rory and meets his eye for a moment.

"Come on," Nicole says. "Thanks again, Dad."

Rory follows his mother to the car. At the wheelie bin he turns his head and shoots Arthur a silly face – showing his bottom teeth and looking to the side – as if the carcass were a joke between them. As if he'd just said "Whoops."

## WAYS TO STAY CALM

This morning I left Jacqui a note on the bench about her boyfriend. I tried to communicate, in an unemotional manner, the inappropriateness of him staying six nights a week but contributing nothing. On Tuesday morning I decided not to take the bins in. I wondered: if I don't take them in, will Jacqui or James bring them in?

It's Friday.

The bins are still out there.

So is the note on the bench. The clean bench. I cleared and wiped it so they'd notice the note.

Jac is cooking a chicken-curry-flavoured pasta side dish in the microwave for dinner. James isn't here and I wonder if it's to do with the note. I'm leaning on the bench eating nachos I've just made. I've used creamed corn instead of sour cream. *I welcome opportunities to take positive action.* At IGA, I checked the Shop Ethical! app on my phone and bought the most ethical corn chips. *I am in the process of positive change.* Leaning on the bench I bend one of my legs and push the other leg back behind me and point my big toe. I stretch a little further and hold it. Jac and I have talked briefly about our day and our dinner. *The Project* creates some noise but not enough for comfort. I swap legs and stretch the other one back, crunch my food and watch TV. After a couple of minutes, she speaks.

"Andrea, what exactly do you expect?" she asks. Her lips are pinched. The kitchen is small and I'm close enough to see her freckles. I don't want to speak about it. That's why I left a note.

"I'm trying to watch," I say. I take my bowl and walk around the bench and over to the couch. The panel look concerned. Gorgi Coghlan's just reported on the sudden deaths of fifteen people in Melbourne. I do two squats, holding my dinner, and sit down on

the third. The panel are interviewing an academic, who criticises the delay in investigative action. Each complained about stress or insomnia before having a heart attack. Steve Price says he's disturbed. Families are saying their loved ones were agitated and paranoid. Gorgi explains there are further details on their website. The number for Beyond Blue appears on the screen.

"Let's just talk about it, okay? James can't start paying rent, especially now he's about to leave..."

"Jac," I cut her off. I've missed Peter Helliar's joke about stress. An ad begins. Jac brings over a fork and her pasta side dish in the container it was cooked in and sits next to me, sighing and putting her hair behind her ears.

"Maybe," I shrug, "he could mow the lawns for the inspection next week."

"Oh!" she says. She puts her hand on me. "Why didn't you just say that? Why make a thing of it?"

I can feel her hand on mine. I keep looking at the screen. *I release all anger because anger harms me.*

"You don't have to be like that. You should have just said you want the mowing done. I'll ask him right now if he can do it." She puts the Tupperware down and starts thumbing a message.

The back of my throat feels thick but I stay on the couch. On the coffee table is Jac's copy of Miranda Kerr's *Treasure Yourself*. I'd been reading it before she arrived home. Miranda has compiled her favourite affirmations from famous motivators and I remember them to stay calm and empower myself. I pick it up again and flick through the pages.

*I listen to my body.* I feel hot bile behind my belly button. *I am happy, calm and peaceful inside.* I put my hand on the page and breathe in through my nose. The acid keeps bubbling in the pit of my stomach. I try to imagine it's something calm. Warm milky tea. My jaw aches.

I wake up to a thump. I turn on my lamp and then turn it off again. I wait for my eyes to readjust. I am not afraid, I decide. I can handle it.

I pull on my hoodie, zip it up and push the sleeves away from my wrists. I open my bedroom door and look out into the hallway. Light shines through the window panel next to the front door. I'm really breathing now. Jac opens her bedroom door across from mine and laughs.

“Don’t worry,” she says. “It’s James. He’s staying over.”

She skips down to the bathroom. There’s another thump around the side of the house and laughter. James isn’t alone.

I walk down to the front door and open it a crack. There’s a ute in the driveway but I can’t see him. We don’t have a wire door. I can feel the night air on my eyes, sharp and cold. I hear the side gate. Jac appears behind me – her hair is brushed and there’s bronzer on her cheeks.

“Hey baby,” she says and pulls the door wide. He’s over on the driveway. “What are you guys doing?” She steps onto the prickly doormat, barefoot. Her pyjama pants are low enough to show the top of her turquoise lace knickers. No doubt she adjusted them carefully. She’s sticking her chest out too, trying to transform insecurity about not wearing a bra into confidence. I wait inside, rolling up onto the ball of each foot and back down again. *Whatever happens I know I can handle it.*

Another guy is standing just out of the light. He’s taller and keeps touching his penis through his tracksuit pants. Tall guy says something in low tones and then puts a cigarette in his mouth. James laughs.

“It’s fresh!” Jac says to no one. Tall guy gets into his ute and leaves without looking at us. Jac crosses her arms over her chest and then uncrosses them, sticking out her breasts again.

“Who was that?” Jac asks. James shrugs.

“He’s Squiz’s friend’s cousin.” He is drunk and bleary eyed, and holds his chin out arrogantly.

*I express my creativity.*

*I uplift everyone I meet.*

*I stop and smell the flowers today.*

I shouldn’t be standing there, at the door, in the middle of the night, as audience to his stupidity. I start back down the hallway.

“Us boys’ve figured out a solution to your grass problem, Andrea,” he says as he enters the house.

“What?” I feel as if acid is squirting into my skull from somewhere at the top of my spine.

“Come and have a look,” James says and continues past me. I follow them through the laundry onto the back step. Jac has snuggled into the crook of his arm and her eyes are closed. She’s faking some kind of intimacy, probably to make me jealous, but her thick

arms are bare and dotted and her hands are in fists from the cold.

“Well?” I ask. I straighten my arms behind my back as if I’m stretching but I hold them there and pump my palms upwards for five counts.

I hear a *baa*.

“There she is,” James says.

“Oh my god,” Jac says. I look at the back of the two of them and then beyond them into the yard. The back sensor light is in my eyes so I can’t really see.

“It can eat all the grass for you two.”

“A sheep!” Jac gives a nervous laugh.

Finally, I see it. A vague yellow light across its woolly back, and even though its face is in darkness, I know it’s looking at me. Its ears look like horns until their silhouettes twitch. It’s a joke. A prank. I laugh too, but it doesn’t come out right. Then the sheep goes *baa* again and I know it’s real.

“That’ll keep you sorted. Consider it my parting gift. This is so permanent I won’t feel like I need to come back,” he says in a tone.

“Don’t joke about that.” Jac turns away from him. She is pouting.

“Very funny,” I say to the back of his head but my voice is small. *It is safe for me to speak up for myself.* “James. You have to get rid of it tomorrow, before you go to Vietnam. You are not leaving it here.”

But he just laughs and pushes past me to go inside.

“At least we don’t need to buy a mower,” Jac says.

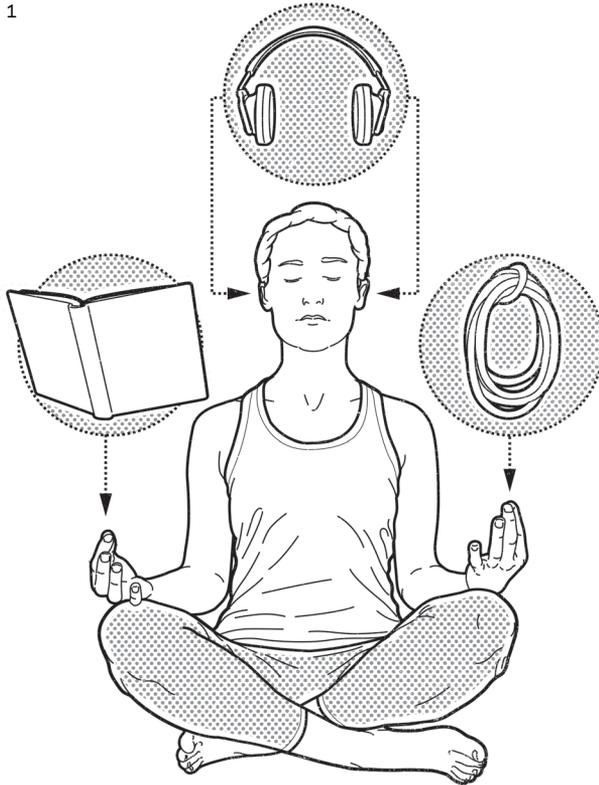
I keep looking into the darkness at the sheep. It’s quiet and still so I don’t move. I just stare at the blank space of its face. Then it steps toward me and I see its black eyes and stifle the urge to run. Instead I step back and pull the door shut, then close my thumbs inside my fists. I wonder if James closed the hatch that leads under the house. I imagine the sheep crawling under there, ramming at the house’s stumps with its head.

In my room I take deep breaths to calm myself but my skin is crawling. *I listen to my body.* Maybe I’m cold. I jam my desk chair under the door handle and do ten star jumps to warm myself up. My heart is already racing so I choke on my breath. I get under the covers. *When I decide to be happy, I attract great things in my life.* I move side to side until the doona is tucked tight around me.

It takes so long to fall asleep I start to hear my wristwatch ticking over on my desk. I dream more than once that a sheep is walking

towards me and I'm stuck in mud up to the top of my thighs. I piss myself in one dream. I wake around dawn. There's grey light pushing in through the blinds. I hear Jac through my wall, sobbing out accusations at James, who is silent. I imagine him kneeling over her, cock in hand, trying to bring himself to come while she cries about his open-ended trip to Vietnam. I get out of bed and lie on my back on the floor. I do one sit up and then two. *I make it to two hundred and forty. I am my own best friend.*

Fig. 1



Protein

# DEAD THINGS

*I know that if I arise above the drama, answers will arrive and the way forward will be clear.*

I hate being alone in the house. Days are bad, especially when I hear a *baa* while doing homework in my room, but at night it's worse. Jac has gone home because her mother is sick. She didn't offer to help deal with the sheep, or clean the house for the inspection, she just sent a text saying, "I'm heading home tonight. Dad says mum is having a nervous breakdown. Sad face." That's not the kind of text you can respond to by saying, "I hope you vacuumed first."

I have left the gate open the last couple of nights in the hope that the sheep would just wander out. But it's still there in the mornings when I get out of bed. It's still there and not eating the grass. At two o'clock last night when I Googled "ways to fall asleep" I felt like I'd lose my mind if I read "count sheep". When I did sleep, I swear I dreamt about not being able to.

I have to do housework before the three o'clock inspection and I have to deal with the sheep. This makes me hot with anger before I'm even out of bed. I get up to have a cold shower. It's so cold that I breathe short quick breaths. I scrub myself with my exfoliating glove and peach shower gel. Then I have an idea.

After I get dressed I turn on the radio to pump myself up. I choose an old brown leather waist belt because it seems strong, and put it on my bed. I shake my head and sing as I search through Jac's desk. I look under the sink in the toolbox that her dad gave her when she moved in; this is her first time living out of home. Duct tape.

Gwen Stefani sings that that life is short and I'm capable. I take scissors from the cutlery drawer out to the bush by the letterbox and push some leaves aside. I cut the blue rope and pull it out,

then take it inside to put on my bed with everything else. Yes, this will work. If I can get the belt around its neck and tie it up behind the shed, I'll tape its mouth up and then I will have solved the problem.

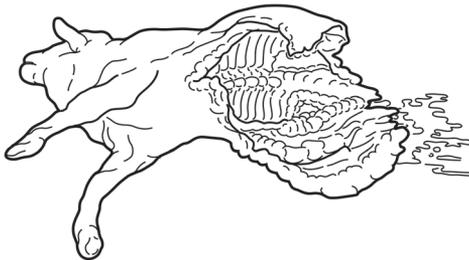
The song asks what I'm waiting for. I just have to work myself up to go out there and catch it. My own nervous blinking has started to annoy me so I close my eyes and breathe through my nose. I slip on my coral ballet flats. I'm nervous but excited that I have a plan. The song says to take a chance you stupid ho. Then the song is over. I look out the window into the backyard. I can't see the sheep. I take the rope and duct tape and put them in the front pockets of my knitted vest. They hardly fit. I keep the belt in my hand.

I push open the door and dart a look around it, to the side of the steps. The last thing I want is for the thing to sneak up on me. The radio announces a 1800 number for anyone experiencing sleeplessness, aggression or anxiety. It's too long to memorise. I can see the shed and fence to the left, but I can't see back behind the bushes.

I walk across the grass and sing in my head. Tick tock tick tock tick tock tick tock. Then I see it. Underneath one of the bushes. It isn't a sheep anymore. It's just meat and wool, bulging eyeballs and pointy bone ends. There's a trail of guts across the lawn. It's a Wednesday morning. It's warm. I can hear pigeons. It was probably a fox, I tell myself. I am leaning over and gagging. Jac has left me with this.

There's a rustle next door and the clang of glass bottles falling and smashing into one another. That's the only choice. I'll have to bin the thing. I go through the side gate and wheel the green bin onto the back lawn. I take a deep breath in and hold it, then grab the sheep by its two front legs. It's heavier than I expected so I

Fig. 2



have to drag it in violent yanks. It hardly moves. I tense my core and try again. There's a rip inside one of the sockets. I drop the legs.

There's grease on my hands and there's dirt stuck to it. There's blood in the crease between my palm and my little finger. I splay my fingers and hold my hands away from my body.

I feel sick, so sick. I look at the carcass and think about getting into trouble from the council, I think about getting into trouble from the garbage man, getting yelled at and held by the shoulders, getting shoved to the ground. I think about explaining the blood on the grass to the real estate agent. I think about explaining the mowing. I wonder how I can get rid of the mess in front of me and still have time to clean up the house and myself. I have to vacuum. I haven't vacuumed since I moved in, even when Jac moved in and bought a Kmart vacuum cleaner, neither of us bothered. I have to clean the black mould off the bathroom walls. I have to wipe up all the hair on the bench in the bathroom and get the toothpaste marks off the sink, as well as the yellow splatter of Betadine throat gargle. There's a smell coming from the kitchen sink. The stovetop is wrecked; something sticky has cooked itself onto the metal. I'll have to clean Jac's room as well, all the stuff she's left over the floor. Dirty damp towels, old clothes and cheeseburger wrappers left over from nights out that get kicked under the bed, the pickles crunched up in the waxed paper giving off a salty stench like used condoms that I'm sure I'll find there as well, her mouse cage that needs to be carried under the house because we aren't allowed any pets, the glass panels of the tank giving way and the tiny stones and pieces of shit falling over me and between my toes, and the mice, the mice scurrying up my legs and up my neck until I collapse into myself onto the floor turning to muck like the bad witch in *the Wizard of Oz* because there's no place like home

Fig. 3



Protein

## BIOLOGICAL WASTE

I hold the medical container firmly between my ankles. Brett makes a u-turn at Eastfield Road. Lily has woken. The weak wail is at once captivating and grating. I twist my arm back around my seat and try to rub her belly with the back of my hand. I can feel her little nails on me.

“Anna,” Brett says, two hands on the wheel, driving cautiously. I look across.

“Nearly home,” I finish. Anna turns back to the window. I wanted to say something important about this moment, coming home as a family for the first time, about being parents, no longer a couple but three. I can’t seem to keep my thoughts together.

I see out of the corner of my eye that Anna has reached around to reassure Lily. She puts her other hand on the door handle. I take a wide turn into our driveway, click the button and watch the garage open up for me. It will take me in, will close behind me, close off the world.

“God. It’s such a relief to be home,” I say.

I murmur in agreement, watching the garage door impatiently. “Can you bring Lily in? I want to go to the toilet before I feed her.” Brett smiles and nods at me from the driver’s seat. There are shadows under his eyes. I knock the medical container with my foot and turn to take it out carefully.

It’s my placenta. I’m not going to make fajitas with it. Before the birth Brett made jokes about placenta fajitas. In the privacy of my own kitchen though, alone, I plan to make a smoothie. It’s natural. It’s meant to help with milk production, postnatal depression. After what’s happening to the world these days, I need all the help I can get.

I consider offering Brett some smoothie without telling him; the berries are meant to mask the taste. I hear him accelerate into the garage. I place the container behind the front door and make my way upstairs to the bathroom. I take the yellow cup I use for rinsing and fill it hastily, half cold, half hot. I test the temperature. I'm busting, and the sensation of water on my finger makes it worse. I can hear Boss howling. He knows we're home.

I pull Lily's capsule out of the car and carry her through to the kitchen from the garage. Boss is at the sliding door, his tail waving madly, his sad face lost as to why we'd left him for so long. I put the capsule down on the floor so he can look at Lily through the glass. His sad eyes are steady on her, and his front left paw rises limply. He's pointing at her. He cries. He isn't used to being locked outside.

I pull down my tracksuit pants and sit, concentrating on my pelvic floor muscles. I imagine I'm sucking up a piece of spaghetti, like my osteo taught me. I take the warm water, open my legs and pour it over myself in a newly mastered stream. The cup of water is gone before I finish. I close my eyes and lean forward, bracing. I feel relief, an unpleasant flutter in my chest, when I don't experience the sting. I take some toilet paper and pat myself dry. Tender. The nurses said that the tears should have already begun to heal. But not long after the birth, I absent-mindedly let my urine – undiluted – make contact with the tears and screamed from the private toilet attached to our hospital room. Brett had burst through the door. The nurse had followed and looked at me with a familiar absent sympathy.

I wonder if Anna is going alright. I don't know why she wasn't warned the first time. The nurse had taken Lily to the nursery after that and let Anna sleep for six hours. That's meant to be unthinkable when you have a newborn. I should have taken the chance too but I couldn't sleep.

I walk upstairs with Lily as Anna comes out of the bathroom. "I'll unpack the car," I say and hand her the capsule. She sits down gently on the corduroy armchair my sister has given us.

"Brett," I call. He pauses on the stairs, his head and shoulders visible through the balustrade. "Let the dog in, he's not used to being outside."

From the darkness Brett asks if I want the gate barrier thing at the top of the stairs or the bottom. I'm not sure but I say the top. I stroke Lily's cheek. She turns her head toward my hand. She makes a pained face and I unhook my bra. It takes a few tries but she settles.

I hold her with one arm and manoeuvre my hand into my pocket for my phone. Facebook feed. Instagram feed. Twitter feed. I skim an article on *The Age* website about a mail hoarder from Doncaster. I look at photos of Prince Harry at a bar with a mystery woman. Brett appears at the top of the stairs. He screws the barrier in place against the wall and highest baluster. I smile at him but the hall is in shadow. I'm unsure if he's looking at me.

I scroll through tweets from *The Age*. There's a quote from a Greens senator and a quote from the Prime Minister. There's a problem with the hotline. There's no confirmation, though, of what it is or how people are coming down with it. I sit Lily up and burp her. Her chin is soft as I hold her there; she's relaxed, milk-drunk and droopy eyed. I move my head from side to side to feel if I'm tense.

Boss jumps into the kitchen when I slide open the door. He spins in a circle. I give him a good pat, kneading his neck and scratching behind his ears. He jumps up and balances his paws on my hips. I talk to him in the same soft voice I now associate with Lily. He's a good boy, I say. A good dog.

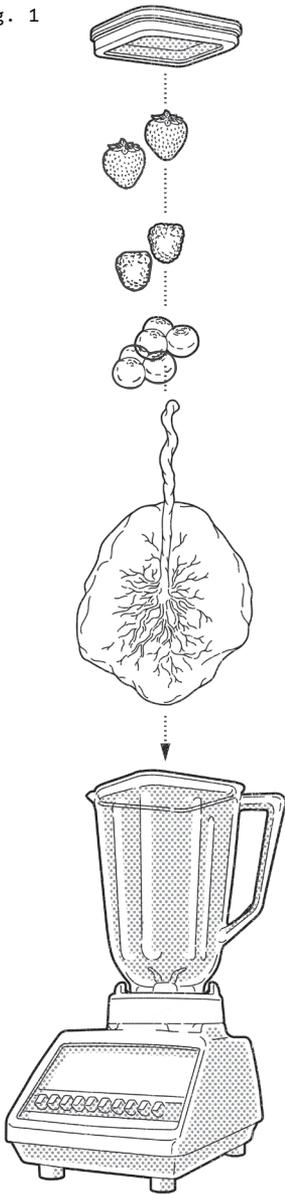
I hear Boss thunder up the stairs to the barrier. I can see his white tail wagging but his brown head is lost in shadow. I'd read online that a good way to introduce a pet dog to a new baby in the house was to strip the baby naked and let the dog smell it all over. I can hear Brett down in the kitchen pulling out drawers and closing cupboards. I walk to the hallway with Lily and kneel down next to the gate, then slide my hand through the bars to pat Boss.

"This is Lily," I say.

His eyes are steady on her. He whines at me and bounds down the stairs. It's time for Lily's nappy change. After, I put her in the bassinet. I shush her until her eyes close.

I sink down into the couch with my coffee and feel an overwhelming appreciation for the soft leather. I flick through channels on mute until I hit NEWS24.

Fig. 1



Brett has turned on NEWS24. I hear someone, the Prime Minister I think, say there is no point speculating about containment measures, and to leave the experts to their work. He says something about fear-mongering media. I decide not to listen. I take the bags from the hospital and make a pile to wash.

I can hear Boss' nails as he trots along the floorboards downstairs. A ball bounces and he skids around. It's good to be home. My mother has been over to feed him and she's cleaned as well. I take another deep breath through my nose. The feather doona crumples beneath me as I lie on the bed. The evening light is soft through the beige curtains. I run my hand across the cushions noting the different textures. Silk, cotton, burlap, wool.

I take my iPad from the coffee table and check Twitter. Boss is leaving me alone. I glance at the TV if something new is said, otherwise I scroll through my newsfeed. There's an article on Slate about Melbourne. It's called 'The Beginning of the End'. On the TV a newsreader in front of Bunnings says panic has caused a huge spike in sales. The Essendon store is struggling to keep up with demand for generators.

My phone starts vibrating against my thigh as I lie enjoying the Cold Power smell of the doona cover. "Anna," says my mother. "How are you? Is it good to be home?"

"Yes, so good, Mum. I couldn't wait to get out of there."

"There was a line out of Emergency when I left this morning," she says quietly.

"I saw it too. The nurses told me..." I start, before deciding not to go into it.

“I got a call from your uncle.”

“Pete?”

“He said he thinks he has it,” she said, her tone positive but her voice tight.

“Why? What symptoms?” Silk, cotton, burlap, wool.

“He said he’s been sweating and his pupils are pinpricks. He feels anxious.”

I don’t say anything.

“Everyone feels anxious,” my mother says, trying to sound sceptical. “I asked him if he was looking into bright light – those ugly fluorescent lights he has in that bathroom. He told me he was going to close the curtains and look in the mirror in his hallway. You know, your Nanna’s antique sideboard that sits wasted in that house?”

“And?”

“I told him if they were still pinpricks to call the number.”

“Right, what else are you meant to do for him? Drive to Gisborne?” I don’t mention the problem with the number.

“I wouldn’t believe it for a minute,” she decides.

“He wouldn’t even think that he might be putting you in danger,” I add.

“And I,” she declares, “am a new grandmother for goodness’ sake.” She sounds normal again.

“Yes,” I agree emphatically.

“I’ll be over in the morning?”

“Yes, thank you Mum.”

“Do yourself a favour, Anna, and don’t sit in front of the TV tonight.”

I wait for her to say something else. She sighs.

“Just tell Pete to call the number, Mum. They’ve put out a number. What else can you do, really?” I say, and end the call.

I think about going to see what Anna is doing, but I flick channels instead. I read a few emails and call my brother Drew.

“I was thinking we should go and pick up supplies,” I say vaguely.

“Brett, buddy, wait till the looting starts. Then we don’t have to pay,” he bellows. A wave of nausea comes over me. “We already got twenty litres of water,” he says. “It was on special.”

“You’re actually stockpiling?” I ask, somehow astounded, even though that’s why I’d called.

“They’re saying only every second person isn’t turning up for work. What’s that mean in a week or two?”

Lily sleeps on. I unlatch the gate to make my way downstairs. As the staircase turns toward the foyer I see a spread of red across the floor. There’s Boss with part of my placenta in his mouth, swinging it from side to side. His nose glistens with blood. His paws slide around on the filmy floor. He tries to run toward me.

“No!” I say loudly and firmly. He stops before reaching the carpeted stairs. He puts the placenta down in front of him and looks at me with his head cocked.

“Brett,” I yell towards the living room.

“I’m going out for supplies,” I call back to Anna, who is yelling at the dog about something. I pull the door shut behind me before she can tell me not to and hurry into the car. I wish I’d remembered to turn off the TV.

I hear the door slam, and look back at Boss.

“Stay.” I hear the grind of the garage door rising. I’m furious.

I walk back upstairs to loosen the barrier and bring it down to the bottom step. Boss sees me and takes a step. “Stay,” I say aggressively. He sighs loudly and lies down, making his legs and chest bloody. I step from the carpet onto the wet cool floor to put the barrier in place. The blood comes through my sock. I feel it on two toes. I look back at Boss. He’s stretching his neck out to sniff at another piece of placenta. I watch his tongue as he slowly licks the meat. The yellow plastic hazardous material bag is near my right foot; the cooler box on its side nearby. I squat and screw the gate tightly in place.

# PROTEIN

The toilet paper is gone. I don't see any as I wheel the trolley around, wasting time trying to prioritise what I need. People seem to be working in pairs. I shouldn't have come on my own. There are trolleys jammed into aisles like Christmas. The more packed mine gets with water and cheap KMart camping supplies, the less I feel safe leaving it at the end of the aisle while I make my way down to get something.

My phone keeps making its swishing noise to notify me of new emails. A group conversation had started that afternoon between eight of my mates. I check my inbox at the traffic lights on the way. Work is asking me to return from paternity leave because they're under-staffed.

I pack the boot of the car and get into the driver's seat. I sit and watch people in the car park. There are people standing guard at their cars – that's the only sense I can make of it. Swish. Corky's Dad, Richard, is in trouble. He's missing. He left after he punched a hole through the wall this morning. I start to reply but can't think of what to say. I can't offer help.

I decide I can't leave the car packed with supplies and go into Coles. I have to move. I turn the ignition and reverse out. Swish. The car park is as bad as the aisles. I edge across to the other side. I wait for a couple to finish packing slabs into the backseat of their car. Swish. From Rob. It's a huge email so I skim it. He's making crazy claims. Biological warfare. Swish. Aaron telling Rob to stop drinking so early in the day.

I walk across to Coles, wanting to look back at the car. My phone shrieks in my hand. It's Anna. "Are you at the shops?" she asks. "I need sponges."

"Sponges," I repeat.

"You left fast. What are you there for? You know Mum made us a

lasagne? There's milk here."

"Supplies. In case some our suburb gets quarantined or something. In case we need to stay indoors for a while."

"Okay," she says slowly. "That's probably a good idea."

She's been watching the television. She's read something. I wonder what she's read. I am disconcerted by how calm she is.

"Are you okay?" she asks.

"Are you?"

She lets out a noise like a laugh but then I hear her sniff.

I wait.

"Are you okay, though?" she repeats.

"I'm as okay as I can be. Did you know once there's no power, water will only last a day? You know it takes electricity to pump-fill the reservoir that we get our water from?"

There's a long pause.

"I think you should come home."

"I'm just walking into Coles now. It's busy."

"But Brett..."

I tell her I'll be as quick as I can. She keeps talking at me until I end the call.

There's no toilet paper at Coles either. I buy a lot of fresh food. I look at a banana or a grape and wonder. I think about just heading home to Anna. I should have started at the canned food aisle, there's little left. I fill the cart with salsa and wraps, tinned mushrooms and couscous. I pick up a few boxes of protein bars, surprised by the amount left. I buy corn to pop. Soup mix. I pick up muesli and two one-litre cartons of long-life soymilk. The regular milk is gone.

My stomach hits the floor. I sprint out of the cereal aisle to the baby section. I side-swipe another man's trolley. I'm not used to manoeuvring such a weight. There are five tins of formula left. I feel sick. Swish. I stand there longer than I should, wondering if I should leave some. For other new parents. I don't even know if we need formula. A woman shouts "Excuse me!" I turn and see her elbow the woman next to her and try to take another packet of nappies off the shelf, but her hands are full. I look at my trolley and put the tin that says 'Toddler' back on the shelf. I wait for nappies at the plastic doors to the back of the store that slap open and closed.

At the checkout the woman in front of me is reading her phone. She waves her credit card without looking up.

“No need for manners,” the guy behind the counter says and raises his eyebrows behind his silver-framed glasses.

“I’m sorry,” she says and glances up at the guy and over at me. The counter guy and I share a look and he shakes his head.

“I’m sorry,” she repeats, looking at her phone. “I’m just reading about – I’ve just read – sedation isn’t working. Nothing is working. They’ve actually announced that nothing works.”

She picks up her shopping bags. I feel a drip of sweat run down behind my ear and into the collar of my shirt. Swish. I want to take out my phone, but I don’t. The man scanning my formula has his lips pursed. A man behind me speaks. He swears about the wait.

I leave the checkouts and wheel the trolley towards Liquorland, past two teenage boys leaning on the guide-dog-shaped donation collector. I think one of them says, “What about this guy?” As I enter I see a refecton in a fridge door. The two boys are right behind me. I turn to them abruptly.

“I’m not in the fucking mood, okay?” I keep eye contact and the boy closest to me takes a step back. I feel good. They don’t say anything and walk down the white wine aisle instead. I take two slabs of White Rabbit Dark Ale and a bottle of gin to the counter, hastily making room in the trolley and squashing some of the watermelon quarter.

“How are you today?” The sales girl stretches out the cord of the scanner and scans the top slab twice. I don’t answer. I hold the gin bottle out, barcode toward her. As we wait for the transaction to approve she takes her ponytail over her shoulder and splits it into three sections to start a plait. “Do you want a receipt?” she asks.

Someone smiles at me as I wheel my trolley outside. Swish. I touch my phone in my pocket and remember I’ve forgotten the sponges. It’s overcast and the sun is going down. I wheel the trolley past the florist and the two-dollar shop.

I’ve filled up the boot and the back. I bought even more water at Coles. I should fill the car with petrol too but I don’t want to leave it unattended while I pay. The drive home is frantic. There are stupid drivers all over the road. Idiots with their heads down at the lights – reading their phones – not seeing the light change to green.

I drive into the garage and watch in the rear-vision mirror as the door closes. I rustle around for the Valerian sleeping tablets I took from the back of the shelf at Coles, and swallow four. I can feel my heart pounding. I want to hide some food and water from Anna. I

don't want to alarm her. I pull out the slabs of water bottles and stack them in the corner. I can't think of what to do or whether to leave some supplies in the car, so I take out some bags of fresh food. The door handle that leads into the kitchen is stiff. It's locked.

I put the bags down and try again. We never lock the door from the garage to the house.

"Anna," I call out. My chest pounds with adrenalin. In the back courtyard I try the sliding door. It's locked too. I see Boss through the glass. He's attached to his lead, which is looped around a leg of the dining table. He stands up when he sees me. His torso and mouth are bloody. I put down the other shopping bag and pound on the door. The thick glass shudders beneath my fists.

Anna appears like a ghost at the doorway across the room. The reflection of the yard disturbs her image.

"Anna," I say. I can't catch my breath. I put my palm on my chest and lean over into myself. She's nearly given me a heart attack. She paces toward the sliding doors and stops.

I put my hand on the door handle and wait for her to unlock it. When I look up she just looks at me through the glass. She shakes her head.

"Let me in," I say, although I'm not sure she can hear me through the glass. I'm exhausted.

She shakes her head.

"What is going on?" I say. I'm grunting as I shake the door handle.

"Brett!" Anna yells out. I can see she's afraid. I stare at her and wait for an explanation. Boss barks once, his tail between his legs. Then I know.

"Anna," I say and take my hands off the door handle.

"No," she says, running her hand over her face. "Brett, please. You're scaring me."

"I don't have it," I assure her. "There's a lot going on right now. But I'm feeling fine. I feel normal."

Anna's face contorts.

"Where am I meant to go?" I ask.

She shrugs at me. She's covering her face with her sleeve, wiping her eyes and nose. "I called your brother but he won't even come over," she says and I hardly hear her.

I'll have to unpack the car before I leave her. Unless I just leave with the supplies.

She looks at me and I look steadily back. This is over the top. She's paranoid. I look at Boss and the blood. I have to find out what's gone on in there. I'm not going to leave without Lily.

I say Anna's name firmly and look at her through the glass. She takes a few steps back.

"Anna," I yell. "Let me in."

She slips from the room. I turn and look around the courtyard. The birdbath, the patio chair and the BBQ gas bottle.

Protein

# FENCES

Rory woke to his mother entering the room. He could see the light disappear behind her silhouette as she closed the door behind her. The door handle made a quiet tick as it closed.

“I’m awake,” he said. “I just woke up, I mean.”

“Good,” his mum said. She took quiet steps towards the bed. Rory stayed in a dim dream state and waited for her hand to brush his forehead.

“I’m going back into work for a few hours.”

She put the home phone on his bedside table.

“Just speed dial if you need me.”

Rory closed his eyes again.

“Shhhh,” she said. “I’ll be back before you wake up. Remember, don’t watch the telly.”

Rory stood at the kitchen bench trying to lever two slices of bread into the toaster. The lever wouldn’t click down. He held it and peered in to see if the coils turned red. They didn’t. He gave up, left the slices in the toaster and made a bowl of Vita Brits. When he took the milk out of the fridge, the carton was cool but the light didn’t come on.

He shovelled cereal into his mouth and listened to his mum’s voicemail again. As it beeped he took the phone away from his ear and pressed ‘end call’.

It was his second day off school. They were calling it a mid-term intermission. No one had to go to school anymore. Rory found this out from the TV. He could imagine what his class would have done if his teacher had announced it: hooting and high-fives. There were rumours and he talked about them excitedly with his friends at lunchtime, but when he actually found out he was alone in front of

the TV on Friday night. His mother had made a few calls to confirm it. There was a list of schools in the Sunday paper as well. Rory had ripped the page out and stuck it on the fridge.

“You’re a lucky boy, I guess!” his mum had said. But neither of them smiled.

Rory took his bowl to the sink. He took a snack-sized Nanna’s Apple Pie out of the freezer, folded the edge of the foil down and took a bite of the crust. He poked his head into the lounge room and looked at the empty driveway. He took the pie and sat on the couch. The pastry was cool and buttery. He would usually bite some of the apple and let it thaw on his tongue but it wasn’t icy. He was disappointed and bored.

Rory put the home phone in the pocket of his yellow tracksuit pants and slipped out the front door. He walked around to the tree outside his mum’s window. It took three easy steps to get into the tree. Then he made his way up, the bark gritty on his palms. The tree itself was cool. He placed his feet carefully on the branches, more carefully the higher he got. As he reached the height of the chimney he made his way across a horizontal branch and onto the roof.

He stepped onto the tiles and crouched on all fours. He crawled up to the peak and came out from behind the curtain of wide green leaves and out into the open.

He wondered how far away his grandad’s house was. From where he was sitting, he could see countless grey roofs of people he didn’t know, and then the square salmon top of the hospital. If he faced the other direction, it was back towards the hills and he couldn’t see far, only Burnie’s place opposite. Burnie had a motor-bike and had given Rory a ride down the court and back up again in the summer.

Burnie was one of the sick ones, though. His house was empty now.

Rory watched the roofs of the houses waiting for something to happen. Then the phone in his pocket beeped. He took it out and saw the black outline of a battery flashing.

The house phone rang as Rory earned a record 1600 points on the Dumb Ways to Die app. He paused the game and balanced the iPad on the arm of the couch.

“Hello?”

“Rory, I’m so sorry,” his mother said.

“Where are you?”

“I’m at work. I’ve been held up at work. We’ve got so many people here. Everyone who can work is working. I need to stay longer. I just wanted to check that you’re okay.”

“Yeah I’m fine.” Rory felt hot tears form but his voice held strong. “I ate all the Nanna’s pies. They’re defrosting.”

“Tell me you are joking.”

“The power is out. The home phone might run out of battery. I’m so bored. Just come home.”

“I can’t just yet, Ror. I really need to help these people.”

Rory pouted and banged his feet on the carpet.

“Is that the best way?” Rory said.

“Sorry?”

“Is that the best way, though?” he said louder.

“What do you mean?”

“They’re going to die anyway, right?”

“Rory!”

His mum was silent for a while and Rory could hear beeps and voices in the background.

“I don’t have time for this,” she said and then gave an instruction to a nurse named Sally.

“Why can’t I go to Grandad’s?”

“It’s not going to happen, Ror. Maybe tomorrow.”

“There’s nothing to do here,” Rory whined.

“Write a letter to one of your friends. Go play out the back with the basketball ring. There’s chalk in the second drawer, you know. You could chalk something on the concrete outside.”

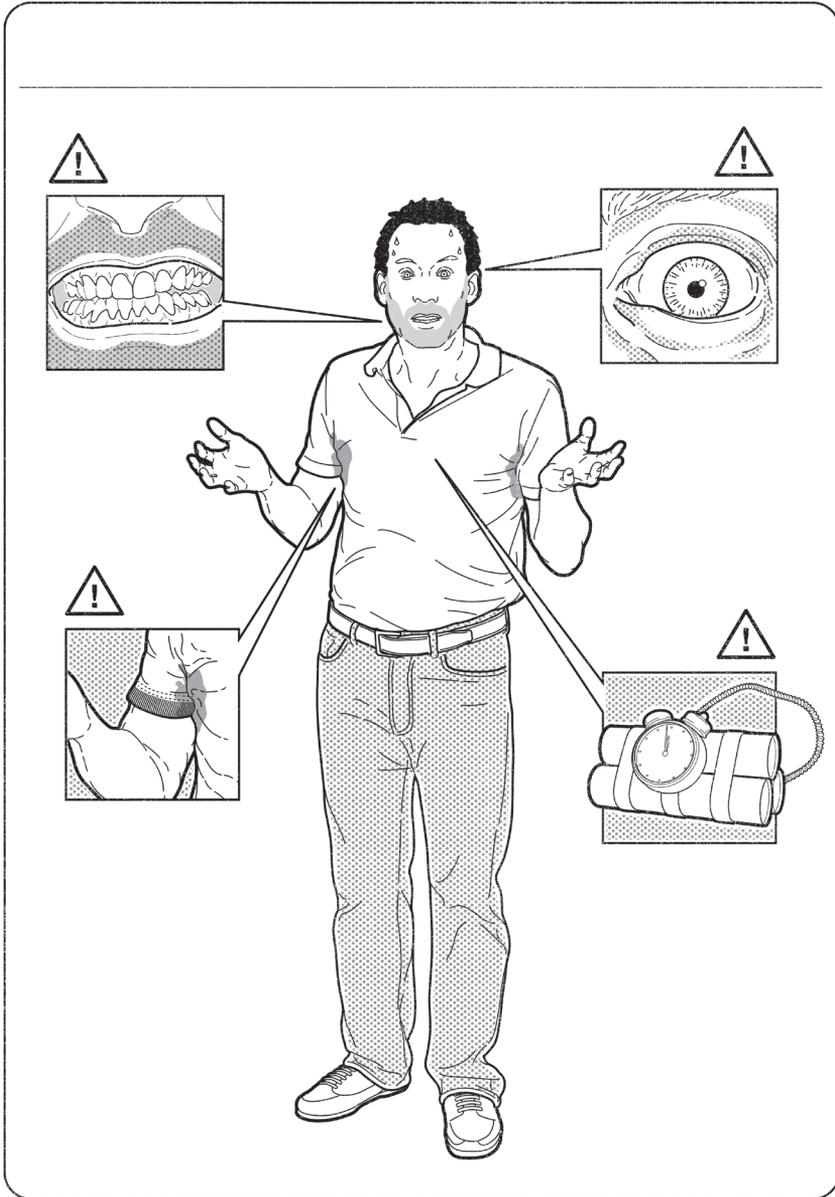
Rory listened to her talk.

“You could vacuum. Oh no, you can’t. You can dust. You could read a book. Hang out the load of washing that’s in the machine.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he said and pretended to laugh. But the phone had cut out.

Rory heard a knock at the door. The iPad had thirty-five per cent battery. It was three-thirty. His heart was thumping. He saw a woman in a nurse uniform through the flywire.

Fig. 1



“Rory?” He didn’t recognise her. “It’s okay darling, you don’t have to let me in. I’m one of the nurses who works with your mum. My name’s Joanne. She sent me by to tell you that there’s tuna bake leftovers for dinner and she’ll come home before ten. Here’s some jellies as a treat. She said you like pineapple?”

Joanne leant down and stacked the three jellies next to the purple pot with the dead rosemary in it.

“How come you got to leave?” Rory asked. He was embarrassed as soon as he said it because he sounded like a kid.

Joanne looked uncomfortable.

“Are you going back? Can you tell her to come home?”

“No, I’m not going back,” she said. Joanne turned to leave and then looked back.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

Rory said yes because he knew that’s what was required of him.

Rory left the house with a drink bottle, the iPad, two muesli bars and the three pineapple jellies. He had the supplies in his backpack. He wore his green All Stars.

He had made his way up the hill and now he was walking alongside the main road with no footpath. He stomped on the long grass as he went. There weren’t many cars around but he didn’t like being on the main road. He thought he’d get caught.

Finally, he saw the T-intersection in the distance. The first turn-off for Grandpa’s house. It was a long street with nice brick houses. He could see all the roundabouts dotted along the road as it wound down towards a strip of shops that was out of sight. Rory knew that once he got to the shops it wasn’t far. That’s where they drove to pick up fish and chips when they were at Grandpa’s on Sunday nights.

Rory looked into people’s gardens. He watched bees crawling on yellow roses. He startled a honeyeater in a tree on the nature strip and watched it dart through a gap in two branches and fly away. He wondered how much trouble he’d be in. Grandpa would call his mum and tell her. Rory just had to get there before dark.

He took out a pineapple jelly and a spoon from the front pocket of his backpack and wiped the spoon on his pants. It had picked up lint from the bag. He ate the jelly and walked a little faster. He pulled a couple of dried pods off a silver birch and then let them

disintegrate between his fingers, the tiny brown leaves scattered on the concrete.

He wondered who was sick. He looked through a shiny green bush at one of the house's windows but the blinds were drawn. No cars had driven past. He passed a magpie but it just kept poking its head into the grass. Rory stopped. It turned its sharp beak towards him. Rory stared as it hopped from one foot to the other, then over the grass and onto the road.

Rory kept walking. The road was bending around the row of houses and it seemed to just keep going and going. Rory picked up a stick that had fallen from a gum and dragged it along the ground until it broke. He let the remainder of the stick clang along one fence, and then ding along another. It scraped along rendered cream bricks and then ticked along a blue picket fence. Tick tick tick tick.

LUKE JOHNSON



RINGBARK

THE JOINTS  
THE JOINTS  
RINGBARD  
RINGBARD  
RINGBARD  
RINGBARD

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**For Angela**

Cover image by Caroline Hunter

*Ringbark* is an extended excerpt from the unpublished novel,  
*On Dead Highways*.



“Get out of that.”

The dog licked its nose and looked up at him.

“Dirty black bastard,” he said, and he flicked at her with the thing in his hand. A thin line leapt from it and through the air and landed on her back. Droplets beaded off her coat and rolled about unbroken in the bulldust. “Piss right on you, if you like the smell so damn much,” he said, and he flicked it at her again.

She trotted away and found a spot alongside the fence where no nettles were growing and she sat down.

She was a good dog and the boy knew it. He was not proud about it but he knew he had himself a good one. He fed her and kicked her often enough that she ought to have known it too. He would not have kicked or fed a useless dog, much as he would not have done any of the things that can ruin a good dog. Good dog can be a funny thing, his father had told him, and he was not wrong about that. The boy had seen more than one that had gone funny and needed shooting.

“Best thing for a shiny coat. Didn’t you know?” He cocked his hips forward and squeezed the lazy last dribbles from the end with his fingers. The early sunlight made each drip look like a drip of sap until it hit either the ground or his boot and left a corrugated ring-mark the way piss does and sap does not.

When there was nothing left he tucked his shirt into the front of his trousers and told her to get over and she did. She flexed in the shoulders and was over the fence like that, barely the powdery slap of her landing on the other side before the cold dry smell of dust. He watched her stalk down the yard with her head hung like a fox, those two shoulder blades twitching back and forth against each other as she went.

“Wayback. Wayback,” he shouted after her, and she lengthened her stride.

6

When she had found the far end of the yard he yelled something else at her and she understood what he meant and began working the sheep toward the shearing shed. One tried to stand its ground and she bit at its hocks. The taste of lanolin did not excite her, as it can with a young pup, but sat soberly in her mouth, and the boy knew by the way she held it there and went limp-jawed that it was the same as the taste she got from licking the back of his hand. It was the taste of his skin in the afternoons when he had patted her on the chest and told her she had done all right.

Afternoon is the best time of the day, the boy often thought. Morning is the best time of day for dogs, but afternoon is the best time of day for everything else. In the afternoon you know the day is beat and it feels good to think about all the work you got done. Only a dog likes to think about all the work that is yet to be done. Dogs can be stupid. He knew that. So can sheep, though. Sheep can be a hell of a lot stupider than dogs. Dogs do what you tell them to do, at least. But then, a dog will go funny unless you treat it just so.

He picked up a length of poly-pipe that was lying in the bulldust. It was a good length for mustering sheep, about a metre and a half long, and the roughened edges and bowed middle were testament to its use over the years by all the other rouseabouts who had worked the shed and shouted their dogs around the yards outside.

“Come on, move them up,” the boy said, leaning over the fence panel and swinging the piece of pipe at the sheep. The dew on the top rail made a straight dirty line across the belly of his flannelette shirt. “Come on, come on. Push up, you bastard.” He brought the pipe down against the hindquarters of an animal too slow to get out of its way.

They were a craggy old mob in the yards that day. Slow and stubborn with age, heavy with fleece and udder. They had the same dim grey reflection in the eyeball that sheep being loaded onto a truck for the abattoir will have and the same perceptive unwillingness to cooperate. Amongst them there was more than one that was all slack and hollowed-out with cancer, and when they moved past him the boy could smell it sweet and thick and it smelt something like the way rum does.

“Chrissakes,” he said, spitting it back out against the corrugated shed wall.

Cancers were worth double to the shearers. So were fly-blowns and ones with prolapsed ring-holes. None of them went much in the way of shearing, but a double over the board was a double over the bar and the boy's father did not need anyone teaching him that lesson.

If the old man drank like an abo it was because he thought he was one. That was what they all reckoned. They told the boy that he was black in the guts and black in the nuts, and the boy knew enough about alcohol and enough about himself to understand this was meant as an insult to him.

The old man and the boy lived alone now and it had been that way for a while. The last one had packed her stuff into a garbage bag four years earlier. And because the old man was not one of these types who finds it impossible to forget about a thing once they no longer have it, she was not missed now that she was gone. That was just how it was with women. With him too.

Some nights when the boy had been lying in bed for a long time but had not yet fallen asleep, he would hear the old man talking to himself in the kitchen. If he had had a skinful he would be mumbling about what a bitch that so-and-so was and then he would be getting his boxes of bullets out of the pantry and counting them onto the kitchen table. Fifteen of them in the big box and another eight in the small faded box, which he kept in the bottom of an empty coffee tin. The sound one of those little bronze-coloured bullets made when it rolled off the table in the middle of the night and hit the floorboards was a sudden crack of laughter, the sound of an unexpected cackle that startled the boy and made his nose tingle on the inside no matter how awake he was. When his ears and nose had stopped fizzing, he would hear the old man on his knees clumsily fisting the floor right in front of his face – because when he was drunk it was easier for him to remember with his hands than see with his eyes. The boy fell asleep many nights listening to the old man laughing at his own drunkenness on that kitchen floor.

The old man was a rum man. A devout practitioner all year round. He knew how much was needed for getting himself religious and how much more after that for riding the mattress right through into a half-decent sleep. The boy had tried doing the same once and had been spun out of his bed and made sick all over the carpet. He promised himself it was only because he had drunk it too quickly and had gone to bed too soon. The old man told him that he was a damn idiot for drinking in the first place if he could not handle the taste. The boy agreed with the old man in principle and decided that he would practise enjoying the taste in secret until it was real enough that he did not have to practise at it.

When the dog had wheeled the mob through the gateway and past the boy, he told her to get right up. He got his fingers under her collar, his four knuckles ribbed across the back of her neck, and hoisted her over into the middle somewhere.

“Come on, get them moving,” he said. “You haven’t got bludging rights yet. Get at them, you black bastard.” She worked at the mob from the inside, turning the sheep over on themselves and up along the edges of the ramp. It was the newest thing about the shed, that ramp. It was all metal and concrete and had been put there as a replacement for the old wooden one, which the white ants had got into. Beneath the galvanised grating an eaten-away piece of the old railing reminded the boy of a hip bone or a pelvis bone or whatever that one with the hole in it is. The white ants had chewed it smooth the way cork is smooth and left it there misshapen and useless.

“Look what happened to the last rousey,” the boy said. He turned to the dog. “No sign of his dog, though.”

At the top of the ramp the dog stopped and barked the last of the sheep into the shed. When they were right through and out of the boy’s sight, she swung her head across the tan of her chest to show him that she had been victorious and that none of the sheep had been a match for her and that all angles had been covered. The boy spat against the side of the shed and climbed up to close the gate behind them.

“All but,” he said to her, feeding the chain between the rails on the gate. “You’d be a specialty dog if you knew this one. I tell you what.”

She put her nose against the leg of his pants and sat.

Apart from the occasional dam bank, the country around Bribbaree was flat and you could see a long way from the top of the ramp. The paddocks were full of dirt and burrs, the burrs as peeled-up and sharp as paint coming off the outside of a house and the dirt as eroded as the weatherboards underneath. Along the fence line, trees crowded and arm-wrestled each other for root space and who had rights to the drain and spillway. On the entire property there was only one that did not look hard done by and disgusted with the general state and lack of water, and that was the peppercorn growing against the side of the shearing shed. She was feeding her way through by sucking at some vein the others did not know about: a cracked pipe between the shed and outhouse, or rust-hole in the bottom of the rainwater tank perhaps. Some secret spring that was giving her a warped, unnatural-looking health.

During the summer the peppercorn was a good tree to have growing there as it kept the sun off the shed until mid-morning and made the inside cooler than it would otherwise have been. In the winter, though, when the main shear was on, the whole place stayed cold and dark until lunchtime. It had been cut back many times,

the peppercorn, and leaked sap like blood from everywhere the chainsaw had touched it. But the damn thing always grew back faster and thicker than previously. Somebody should have ringbarked it. Done it in the proper way.

The boy stood for a moment and watched as if he expected the peppercorn to do something. For all its ugliness and contemptuousness it was just a tree and did not do anything no matter how he looked at it. His dog watched it too and she barked at it for measure and he told her to sit. The tree was full of spite. He could see it. Spite for each and every bastard who had tried to cut her down. Spite for the gums in the paddock with their roots that knotted the ground around them. Spite for the broken water pipe that was keeping her alive one drip at a time. A tree can be ugly and contemptuous and spiteful, the boy decided.

“It’s not going to shut itself.”

The boy turned and looked down the ramp to the far corner of the shed.

“And make sure you shut it properly or there’ll be sheep everywhere, for chrissakes.” When he had finished speaking the old man rolled his lips over the cigarette in his mouth so that it bobbed up and down like a piece of straw being chewed on. He had lips that were yellow and callused like his knuckles that were yellow and callused from shearing and his voice was a closed dry suck: the colour and fragrance of a fireplace that has just been swept.

The boy pretended not to hear him. He put the chain over the bolt as he would have done anyway and leaned back on the gate to check the certainty of the latch. It did not come open. He checked it again and when it did not come open again he eased his weight off and let go.

“That proper enough?” he said quietly to his dog. She had no answer. “I’ll teach you how one day. Then you’ll be a specialty dog.” She looked at him. “Over,” he said, rubbing his hands against the front of his trousers. And she got over.

Inside the shed the smells were more physical than fragrant. Broken skylights in the roof tugged at them and mixed them with fumes lifting off the animals and floor as thick and languid as a warm milk skin. It was a rinse that stung the eyes and made them squint, caused the tendons in the forearm to ache and seized all the finger and carpal joints. If you bent over you felt it threatening to snap in the tops of your legs, otherwise it pushed like a knee in the middle of your back. The shearers did not notice it as much because they

had ignored it for so long. The boy, though, was young and still able to see it and touch it and inhale it, and he enjoyed the stiffness it put in him. It was a recognisable stiffness.

At twenty-five past seven the first catching pen was full and the boy had started pushing sheep into the next. Along the board the shearers were greasing the down-tubes and checking the cutter-throw on their handpieces.

“Listen to that, would you?” Nick Cant said.

“Listen to what?” Ray said. Ray was the classer and overseer. He wrote the payslips and signed the wool book and organised the men.

“To this.” Nick Cant played the cutter back and forth, making a serrated key of it against the comb teeth. “Singing like an absolute bastard.”

“That don’t mean anything,” Ray said.

“Bullshit. Fifty a run without breaking a sweat. That’s how sharp I’ve got the bastard.”

“Who? You or the sheep?”

“Hey?”

“Breaking a sweat.”

“I said, without breaking a sweat, you dumb bastard.”

“Yeah, you or the sheep?”

“Well, if it’s not breaking a sweat, what do you mean, me or the sheep? Neither of us. Without breaking a sweat means without breaking a sweat.”

Nick Cant was a shearer from out west somewhere. He was short in stature and had been bred for the sheds and sheared naturally with the sort of ease they try their hardest to teach in learning schools. He never told anyone where exactly he had come from, but it must have been some place where they still knew how to breed shearers the proper way. Shearing will do that. It will propagate its way right into a family’s bloodline so that after two or three generations, young flat-chested mothers start dropping knock-kneed, pigeon-toed sons, and daughters with sharp elbows and sharper tongues.

Nick Cant had not brought a family east with him, only a 1979 Kingswood which he reckoned was not too different from a wife anyhow: if it has tits or a motor, it will wind up costing you money.

Nick Cant was tough too. He could shear quicker than most blokes, drink more and could take a punch as well, and that was what made you tough when you were working in the sheds. Fearlessness was the only other measure and Nick Cant did not fear

much of anything. He had stories about picking fights with abos and ones about outrunning the coppers in his car and one about jumping into the wheat dump from the top of the Milvale silos. The boy had heard them all.

In his fourteen years, the boy had never tried picking a fight with any abos and no copper had ever bothered chasing him down the laneway in the old man's Land Cruiser either. The only claim he had was getting head-butted between the eyes by a crossbred ram on his first day of work and not being knocked out. As they told him, though, that was not any sign of toughness, that was just the colour coming out. The boy knew enough about colour and about himself to understand what they meant. Nick Cant had told him that abos had heads like garden shovels and had shown him his hands to prove it.

At twenty-nine minutes past seven a tin door opened at the front of the shed and the old man came inside. He was wearing a pair of leather-felt moccasins with the shoelaces chewed out of them and a singlet that hung baggily over his shoulders. As he walked he scuffed the floorboards with his feet and the toes of his moccasins were polished smooth and black. He was a lean man all over, tall, with the type of tired, drawn face a priest might have and two thin grey arms that softened in colour as they neared the tabernacle of each pit.

"Where'd you grow up?" Nick Cant said to him.

"Wherever you say, Nick," the old man said back.

"Then shut the door, you old bastard."

"Not that cold, Nick."

"Bullshit it's not. Me piece is shrivelled up inside me like a second arsehole."

Ray laughed. It was easy to make Ray laugh. Ray was supposed to be in charge of everything that went on in the shed, but getting him to laugh was never difficult.

"Put your jumper back on if you're so damn cold," the old man said.

"Jumper ain't a busted condom, mate. Once it's off, it's off."

Ray kept with the laughing.

"If that's what you say," the old man said.

"You should know," Nick Cant said back.

The old man did not say anything then. He only tightened his eyes a little and shook his head to one side and locked his handpiece onto the end of the down-tube. Nick Cant circled around in front of him like a cocky young boxer who had just slipped one through. He kept his eye square on the old man but tilted his head so that it was

his corner rather than his opponent that he was really playing up to.

"Don't worry about it," he went on. "I'm sure none of them old gins was worth wasting two new ones on anyways."

By now the boy was working hard to fill the last catching pen. He could feel the hollow curve of his back livening with sweat and the tickle behind his knees where the denim was beginning to cling.

"Isn't a woman alive worth two," was all the old man said and he did not look up to say it.

Nick Cant grinned some more. He had a whiskery grin.

"My oath," he agreed. "I don't doubt that. But then again, I've never stuck me piece in any gins to find out, neither, I gotta say."

"I'm sure you haven't," the old man said.

"I've had it in plenty of other places, don't worry about that. I can't figure out what's so special about one of them outback ginnies anyway?"

"Go ask your hand."

"Me hand hasn't been up no outback ginnie. It isn't going to know the answer."

"I'm sure it hasn't."

The way the old man spoke when he was sober amused Nick Cant, and his amusement was all air and spit, like he was trying to sip something off his top lip.

"Well, tell us, then," he slurped, "what desires a decent bloke such as yourself to want to go and stick his wire in the dirtiest rotten blackest holes he can find?"

"I'm sure I don't know, Nick."

"You don't? It sounds like some sort of competition to me."

"Well, then."

"So it is, is it?"

"Must be."

"Christ, you're a hard old bastard," Nick Cant said to the old man.

"Aren't I?" the old man said.

"He's a hard old bastard, isn't he, Ray?" Nick Cant said.

"He's hard, all right," Ray agreed. "But he ain't that old."

"Bullshit he ain't," Nick Cant said. "He's a hard bastard and an old bastard. Aren't you?"

"And you," the old man said, pulling the drive into gear to calibrate the handpiece's tension.

"Nah, I'm not a hard bastard," Nick Cant raised his voice over the sound of the machine. "Too small to be a hard bastard like you."

Just how hard are you anyway?”

“Just as hard as you say, Nick.”

“He’s a hard old bastard, all right, isn’t he?” Nick Cant said. “You going to teach the boy how to be a hard old bastard?”

Behind the chutes the boy was using his knees now to force a last sheep down the race and into the pen. Above him the broken skylights were sucking the fumes and voices out into the paddock and he could feel the updraft against all the places he was wet. It made the skin around his Adam’s apple dry and tight.

“Don’t need teaching,” the old man said.

“In the blood then, is it?” Nick Cant asked him.

“Just don’t need teaching, that’s all.”

“What else don’t need teaching?”

“Why don’t you ask your hand?”

“Why don’t I ask your hand? Why don’t I ask both your hands, old man?”

“Why don’t you ask both your own hands?” the old man said.

“Why don’t we ask both the boy’s hands, old man? He’s got nice-little, soft-little, black-little hands, doesn’t he?”

The boy grabbed the last sheep by the snout. He twisted its head back over its body and drove it forward bluntly and blindly and neck-first.

“Which one’s softer, old man? Boy’s nice-little black-little hands, or the nice-little, black-little hole he came out of?”

The old man sniffed and looked up. He spat into the bottom of the chute and sniffed again. He was smiling in spite of himself and Nick Cant was smiling also, and Ray was smiling and looking back and forth between the two smiling and smiling shearers.

“If you like, old man, I can shear the arsehole out of one of these poor old sheep?” Nick Cant suggested. “See if that’s softer than a dirty old gin hole. Less trouble. Surely.”

“I’ll do it,” Ray said. “I’ll shear the arsehole out for you. You’ll like the way I do it. I do it the Kiwi way.” He stepped toward the old man and tried to grab hold of his handpiece. The old man pushed Ray’s arm away and the live handpiece jumped up. The whole down-tube came with it and recoiled just as awkwardly when the extension ran out at Ray’s forehead. Ray did not baulk or jerk back – it was too slow to baulk or jerk at. He put his hand on his brow and opened his mouth. There was a small amount of blood, nine or ten prick holes, each with its own thin red tail.

“What does that remind you of?” Niek Cant said.

In the pens, the boy stopped pushing and swallowed hard and looked at his father. The old man did not look back, he just took an oil pot off the shelf and re-oiled his handpiece. It was a tin pot and when he pressed on the base of it with his callused yellow thumb it hiccupped oil over the nine or ten blooded comb points.

The boy and the old man arrived at the pub at the end of each day still in their dungarees, which were bloodied and sweated in and smelt like oil. The old man sat at the bar and drank rum and the boy sat behind him in one of the low chairs by the window not drinking anything. The boy liked that he was able to be in there and he always behaved a certain way and nobody minded too much at having him around. Gritter would not have allowed him to drink, but he was sometimes given the tobacco and papers his father had paid for and he would roll them into cigarettes for the old man to smoke. He rolled them thin and tight for the old man, putting his thumb into his mouth before twisting each end to seal it, and the flavour on his thumb would make his mouth ache and then dry up disobediently. The boy had come to appreciate the taste, though, the mature earthiness which stayed at the top of his gums for the entire night after, and he knew that it outweighed such discomforts as a dry mouth.

Gritter was the publican. He was a small man with muscular forearms and a brown moustache that made his face look both droll and serious at the same time. Gritter was a decent enough nickname for him and everybody agreed on that. The ones who drank beer enjoyed saying it aloud and rhyming it with schooner of bitter.

“Where did we leave off?” the old man said when he and the boy arrived ahead of the other shearers that evening.

“In the dark,” the publican answered.

“Give us one of those, then,” the old man said.

Gritter took the unfinished bottle from the night before and screwed the cap off. Without measuring exactly he tipped some of its insides into a glass and placed the glass in front of the old man.

“That dark enough for you?”

The old man picked up the glass and looked at it.

“It seems lighter.”

“Things always seem lighter in the light. Don’t let it fool you.”

“If I can stop it from fooling me, then we might be in with a chance tonight,” the old man said. He had seated himself on the wooden stool which had the flat, deep-brown leather cushion. All the other stools in the bar were black and metal, with well-padded cushions and low, unpadded backrests.

“Don’t be so sure,” Gritter told him.

“Why’s that?”

“Because.”

“She on her time or something, is she?”

“Has been since I married her.” Gritter took the rolled note the old man had laid down and he straightened it out and put it into the till.

“Why don’t you bring her down here and slip a few of these into her, Grits? She’d be all right then. You could drive a tractor round the bar and she wouldn’t complain.”

“She’d find something.”

“Not enough ice,” the old man said.

“Wrong colour tractor.”

“No straw.”

“Too much horsepower.”

“Too much horsepower.”

“You know what they call a bloke whose wife isn’t complaining?”

“Lucky.”

“Widower.”

The old man raised his glass.

“To the lucky widowers and their beautiful dead wives. And to too much horsepower.”

When the old man had finished the first drink, Gritter poured him another and he drank it as well. He drank with ease and did not seem at all put off by the taste or strength. Watching him relax into a more comfortable slouch the boy tried to understand the trick. Partly it was the way you did it. A glassful in three proper sips. You tipped your head back and held each mouthful for a second, then you threw it back a gulp further and it was in your stomach. It was as heavy as a meal, and as warm. He could tell by the way the old man nursed himself. The other thing was what you did between mouthfuls, made a routine of it, kept your head down and your fingers tight at the base of the glass, as if that was where your centre of balance was.

You only let go when you wanted to bring the smoke between your knuckles up for a suck, and then it was a sincere suck just like the mouthfuls of rum. Sincere and worthwhile, the boy told himself.

For four glasses the old man drank this way: seriously and meaningfully and decidedly. On the fifth he began taking the drink at muscle reflex. His Adam's apple bobbed and his knuckles whitened. The glass came away from the bar and toward his mouth. Rum dammed around his lips and his eyes focused along the length of his nose as if they were in charge of telling the hand when. It was an undisciplined, reactive way of drinking and the boy could not understand it. He could only watch it and tell himself that it was the most impressive and advanced kind of display.

Nick Cant and Ray arrived when the old man was on his sixth. They came through the side door and Nick Cant had both arms behind his back and was already grinning. Ray was beside him and was grinning also and nodding along and showing everyone inside how this grinning business belonged to him first, or at least second.

"Pick a hand," Nick Cant said.

"Pick one," Ray repeated.

Gritter looked at Nick Cant and the boy looked at him too. The old man looked at his glass and did not look at anyone. Apart from Gritter, the old man and the boy were the only two in the pub and it had been at least a half an hour since they had sat down and made their individual declarations by putting money and not putting money on the bar. For four glasses the old man had been declaring absolute clear-headedness and now, two glasses on, he was declaring absolute instinct, which was something more divine and more enviable, and the boy was trying to declare empathy and admiration for that fact and Gritter was making no declarations, just feeding other people's.

"I'll have the one that isn't shoved up your arse."

"They're both shoved up me arse," Nick Cant told the publican. "Guess again."

"The one that's up there the furthest, then," Gritter said, taking two schooner glasses from a tray beneath the bar and sitting them on a tray beneath the beer taps.

Nick Cant adjusted himself painfully and obligingly, screwing his face to one side and switching his weight from the left leg to the right and back to the left. It was all part of the trick. Moments of relief came into his expression when whichever hand it was that could not find the opening acted at finding the prostate gland, and by the end

of the pantomime Ray was really laughing. The performance finished between Nick Cant's legs. One dead kitten.

"How's that, Gritter? How do you like my pussy?" He poked the kitten's head around like it was the one asking the questions. Ray wheeled about, pointing at the thing and wiggling his finger.

"No pussies allowed on weeknights," Gritter said non-declaratively. "More trouble than they're worth."

"Like cars," Nick Cant said. "If it's got a pussy or a motor it'll end up costing you money."

"Or if it's got tits," Ray said.

"Same thing, Ray. Tits and pussies are the same thing. What do you say, old bastard? You should know."

Eyes down, the old man was not knowing anything more than the plain instinct that governed the glass in his hand. Instinct was a complex thing and could be easily confused with both centrifuge and gravity, and as the old man made the glass turn round and round inside his hand and the boy waited for him to answer, the three forces seemed identical all at once and no single one of them seemed any stronger or weaker than the other two.

"Free to good home," Nick Cant said.

The old man's throat clicked and his fingers synchronised themselves and the spinning stopped. The boy studied the sequence that followed and he did not comprehend it any more clearly than the last time but he knew it was an important thing and a valuable thing, and he was able to appreciate that it was much more than just a run of actions, that it was something more like an alignment. Nick Cant put his thumb at the base of the kitten's right ear and made it twitch like a dog's. Dogs exaggerate all their actions when they are being watched. And when the alignment was over, the old man wiped below his lip with the knuckle of his thumb and turned to face Nick Cant properly. There were perhaps six or seven metres between the old man and Nick Cant, and the distance between the boy and Nick Cant was almost the same, though the line of sight was not interrupted by beer taps nor the bar itself, and the line of sight between the boy and old man via Nick Cant as vertex had grown to almost sixty degrees. It was becoming an L-shaped bar. The boy stopped looking at his father and looked at Nick Cant, and there was a second kitten now. Both were broken skulled and Nick Cant's boot was bloodied at the heel and Ray was still wiggling his dirty middle finger and the whole thing was a real puppet show, which you had to find amusing on account of its preparation and committed cast.

“I’d stop putting milk bottles up my arse, Nick,” the old man said.

“Though, you might try a shotgun,” Gritter added.

Nick Cant held the first kitten up and looked it in the eyes. It had milk-drunk eyes. Pulled from the teat and kicked in with a steel-cap toe. The way a fish hauled onto a boat is spiked at the back of its head before it has the chance to sense the pressure collapse or the hook’s release or the ice. The other one, still dangling between his legs, had damaged and explicit eyes. Dogs’ eyes. Where iris had become pupil and pupil had been pushed back into the skull to become clot.

“That what your wife calls it, Gritter?” Nick Cant made the second one say.

There was a picture of Gritter’s wife on the mirror behind the bar. In the picture she was wearing a dress and was smiling and sitting at a park bench with a birthday cake in front of her.

“Twelve-gauge,” Gritter answered it.

“Twelve-gauge,” Ray repeated. Ray was getting it, all right. He laughed and said the words again, loudly and impressively and familiarly and hyphenatedly. The grinning thing was his and now twelve-gauge was his also.

“Don’t take too much credit, Ray,” Nick Cant said. “You’ve already taken more than your share of credit today.”

Ray was silent then. Handpiece-in-the-forehead silent. The words had turned on him. The hyphen had turned on him. A familiar construction like twelve-gauge is your friend one minute and then it does this to you. And because you have relied on it so many times, you do not know its weaknesses, only its strengths, and there is no angle you can call upon for counterattack. Only silence.

The boy thought Ray did have some proper credit on his hands, particularly in the web of each finger and thumb where he would grip the wool in staples and stretch it apart to judge its strength and its tenderness and make some guess at its micron rating. But the credit on his forehead was a pantomime credit and it was like the picture of Gritter’s wife which had been stuck to the mirror with Blu-Tack and looked grandiose and ironic amongst the topless-lady postcards from places without beaches, and faded comic strips which showed sheep receiving salon haircuts, and farmers with hats pulled down over their eyes saying, Is it raining or am I crying?

“How much credit is that, Ray?” Gritter asked.

“Stuff you,” Ray said.

The boy doubted whether Ray at all understood the difference between these types of credit. Comic-strip credit and real-life credit. Is-it-raining credit, or am-I-crying credit.

“Cranky, isn’t she?” Gritter said.

“It’s PMT,” Nick Cant advised him. “Cunt got his period today.”

“Cunts will do that.”

“Show him, Ray. Show Gritter where you got your period.”

Ray tilted his head back. The bleeding had stopped and the damage was a lovely bruise – a purple lacquer with dark individual spots where nine or ten comb teeth had gone in and bunted against his skull.

“What do you reckon about that, Gritter? And that’s the old bastard that did it to him. Sitting right over there.”

Ray made his forehead go tight. One of the scab-holes started trickling blood that ran down toward his nose. At the last second it streaked left into his eyebrow and thickened out.

“Would you like a tampon?” Gritter asked. “Nick’s wife might have one upstairs you could borrow.”

Ray let go and his face slipped back into place.

“You’re a prick,” Ray said.

“I’m not the one that did it to you. Don’t go calling me nasty names.”

“He’s a prick too.”

“I’m not a prick,” the old man said.

Gritter and the boy both looked at the old man and Nick Cant held one of the kittens just above his head to see whether it was male or female and Ray used his sleeve to pad the blood on his forehead which had already started to clot again.

“I’m a hard old bastard,” the old man declared. “How’s that, Grits? Am I hard enough and old enough for the Bribbaree pub? Nick wanted to know, you see? Him and Ray were arguing about it today. That’s what started the whole thing. Tell him.”

“I don’t know,” Gritter said. “You shoved any dead cats up your arse lately?”

Nick Cant stopped looking at the cat’s genitals and looked at Gritter.

“Not today,” the old man answered.

“What about Ray’s twelve-gauge?”

“No. Tried shoving my own up there once.”

“Doesn’t sound very hard or old to me.”

“Hear that, Nick? Gritter says you’re full of shit.”

“Christ, you’re a hard old black bastard,” Nick Cant said to the old man.

“Aren’t I? Bloody black bloody bastard. Have a look at me, would you? You ever seen a blacker looking face than this? What do you think, Grits? Am I a black bloody bastard or what? Nick knows black bastards when he sees them. Doesn’t know hard bastards real well, but he knows black bastards.”

The old man was a little gone. Gritter was grinning and the boy could tell it too. The boy enjoyed it when the old man got to this stage each night and started indulging himself in such a way. It was with a kind of spite he did not like in most people, a self-spite which usually seemed pointless and unconvincing; coming from his father, though, it was believable and encouraging and was not at all unconvincing or comic strip-like.

“You mightn’t look real black,” Nick Cant said, “but you carry on like one.”

“How’s that, Nick?”

“Like a useless bastard who knows he ain’t worth shit all.”

“You don’t have to be black to know that. Just old. Hard old bastards know it the best. You’ll know it one day.”

“Age hasn’t got anything to do with it.”

“What’s it about, then, Nick?”

“I told you.”

“What’s so useless about us black bastards, then, Nick?”

The boy knew.

“Nothing,” Nick Cant said. “You’re good at sniffing petrol and being dole-bludgers.”

“That’s two things we’re good at,” the old man said.

“Can’t shear for shit,” Nick Cant said.

“Can’t shear,” the old man repeated. “That’s true.”

“Can’t rouseabout neither,” he butted in – the boy. He heard himself say it before he heard himself think it. Cannot rouseabout. Not for shit.

The old man loosened his grip on the glass. The spinning stopped. The three forces quit each other. The boy pushed back in his chair like a planet dropped out of orbit.

“Watch yourself, boy,” the old man said. He sounded neither drunk nor self-indulgent. He sounded sure and sober and square.

The boy leaned forward and his chair came back down onto four respectful legs.

“See, smartarses too,” Nick Cant said.

The boy looked at the ground. A stain in the carpet turned crude and out of focus. He looked away from it. The quickshear poster on the wall looked like an illustrated inferno. The clock above the fireplace seemed backward. Reflexive spite is not something you can teach yourself, and you are a damn idiot for thinking you could use it or parade it so easily, the boy told himself.

“Don’t have to be black to be a smartarse, neither,” the old man eventually said. “That’s an age thing as well.”

“You better fix it out of him before it becomes a sitting-down thing.”

“You can do it, Nick,” the old man said.

It had been done before. The boy had been sat down. Only once, but he knew what it was like when it came. It was a fist that landed just below your left eye. Not for being smart, but for being stupid. Not hard enough to break any bones, either. Only hard enough to take your feet out from under you. And when you were on the ground and did not want to get up, it was a fist that grabbed hold of your shirt and told you that you were getting up anyway. It hit you again and you knew this time that you were supposed to stay on your feet. This was a fist that would keep putting you on your arse until you stayed up. You learned quickly enough what that was about.

“Not my job to do it,” Nick Cant said. “You’re his old man.”

“Yeah, but you know what us black bastards are like, Nick. Whose job does that make it?”

“Don’t talk like that, old man. Boy doesn’t need to hear about his ginnie mother getting done up the arse by a whole bunch of you.”

Ray padded his forehead with his rolled-up sleeve some more. The blood looked brown and soily where it was soaked into the flannelette above the elbow. On his eyebrows it was brown also, and gristly, because it had dried there during the day and the hairs were sticking through at pointed, singed-looking angles.

“Up the arse. Is that where babies come from?” the old man said.

“That’s where gin babies come from. Where do you think they get their colouring?”

“I thought they pulled them out of dingo holes.”

“Dingoes don’t dig holes,” Nick Cant said.

“You sure about that? What do you think, Grits?”

“Nick’s the expert on holes.”

The boy looked at the clock again. Almost twenty to seven. Big hand and little hand jerking away from each other in second-split intervals.

“Maybe I ought to have told him you were his dad, Nick. Boy needs a good role model for a father.” The old man had returned to being declarative, and now the declarations were in the very bottom of the glass and he held it at his mouth until he had found them and drunk them cleanly. Gritter took the glass away when he was finished.

“Like hell.”

“He does. Don’t you, boy? Black old bastard like me is no good for a boy’s morality.”

“Too dark to be one of mine,” Nick Cant said.

“He isn’t that dark,” the old man said. “That’s just an age thing. He’ll lighten as he gets to be more like his new dad.”

“Like hell.”

“Don’t be like that, Nick. Boy needs a role model with a good sense of morality and colouring.”

“The only thing Nick could give him is a taste for dead pussy,” Gritter said and he put the seventh half-full glass in front of the old man. The bottle it came from went back beside the other bottles and its lid went on, though left unscrewed.

“Boy needs to learn about dead pussies too, Grits. Teach him about responsibility and moralities and all the rest.”

“Too black to learn about either of those,” Nick Cant told the old man.

“He isn’t that black, is he? How black are you boy?” The old man swung around. “You black as your old man, boy?”

“One sure way to tell,” Nick Cant said, jerking his hand back and forth to demonstrate the sort of thing he was talking about. The kitten made a lovely substitute as he jerked and he was holding it by the skin at the back of its neck and its male-genitalia sibling was hanging by its skin also, and the boy wondered what had happened to the rest of the litter. Four left stomped and bloodied in the haystack behind Nick Cant’s house? Or something more creative for them? A gumboot full of water? Full toss onto a cricket bat? Ray and Nick Cant salivating all day long over the various and creative ways for disposing of a litter of feral kittens.

Ray brought his own hands up in front of him like he was measuring a fish.

“Nick,” he said.

Nick Cant scoffed.

“Boy ain’t got that much blood in his body, Ray. Poor little bastard would go diabetic just thinking about it.”

The boy put his eyes right on Nick Cant: the smear around the mouth, the hairs that were pasted flat to the forearm with spit and lather.

“Wouldn’t you, boy? Keel right over if you had one that size.”

“If that’s what you say,” without so much as a blink.

“There he goes again, old man.”

“He’s your boy now,” the old man said. “Disciplining is up to you, Nick.”

“Come here and get your flogging, son,” Nick Cant laughed.

“Being a smartarse will get you nowhere.”

The boy swallowed. Very deliberately. You swallow, he said to himself.

Nick Cant laughed some more.

“Must be true,” the old man said. And in one mouthful he took the entire glass of rum Gritter had served him and spat it up into the air. “Make a wish, Nick’s new son,” he said when it had come back down and landed all over the bar top.

“Christ, you’re a black bastard,” Nick Cant said, throwing the female-genitalia kitten at the old man. “Send him home, Gritter. Look at the mess he’s making.”

“Go home, old man,” Gritter said.

“Don’t have a home, Grits. Hard old bastard like me sleeps under the stars with all the other hard old bastards and their black bastard sons.” He sat the kitten on the stool beside him. It looked no bigger than a rat. When he let go of its body it fell off the stool and hit the floor. He laughed at it.

“Doesn’t have a home, Nick,” Gritter repeated, leaning over the bar.

Nick Cant cocked his neck back and drank the head off the beer he had been given, his Adam’s apple jabbing from the underside as he swallowed in sharp little sips. The boy swallowed with him. Though much more slowly and thoughtfully and slowly.

At ten o’clock, only the old man and the boy were still sitting in the pub. The bottle of rum that had been started the night before was empty and the old man was happy to be full of its effect. Convincing Gritter to keep unscrewing the lid once Nick Cant and Ray had gone home had taken all the persistence the old man had, persistence that had become more and more passive the more successful it was,

and now it was worn down and asleep inside him and he was ready to call it in. Gritter eyed what was his final dollar or so, some coins scattered on the bar, and said that he was closing for the night. The old man drank the bottom out of the glass, pressed his smoke into the ashtray and stood up.

“Who’s driving?” Gritter asked him.

“I’ll get us there. Mightn’t be able to drink much, but I can still drive a bit,” the old man said.

“You’re all right,” Gritter told him. “Don’t worry about that. You’re a messy bastard, but you can drink, all right.”

“Bullshit I can. I can drive a bit, though.”

“All right.”

“Never said I could drink.”

“Good. Piss off.”

“I never said it.”

“Don’t forget to take him with you.”

The boy went along

Outside, the ute was parked nose-first into the gutter, just how everyone parked when they pulled up at Bribbaree Pub. Windows were down and handbrake was off and that was the way they left them. On a hot day all the utes there together looked like a mob of cattle nosed in for a slurp of water. The other side of the road, in front of the church, was for trucks and road trains – bulls with thick dusted hides that rolled into town and bellowed when their compression brakes slowed them to a stop. Usually they were on their way through from Young or Quandialla with a load of super, or across to Forbes or down to Wagga for the market sales. The truckie would slip over for a longneck to take away with him and leave the mover idling and snorting, its warm diesel breath reflecting in the pub windows. Nick Cant had left one of the kittens taped to the bull-bar of the old man’s ute. The other one was at the base of the front wheel and the old man did not remove either before opening the door and climbing up into the cab.

Friday and Saturday nights blokes brought their kids and wives along to the pub. The wives sat together in the beer garden while the kids played chasies on the bitumen out front and waited for the streetlights to come on so they could throw rocks at them. They were kids who knew how to rub spit on a grazed knee or a broken toenail to stop it from bleeding and their dads were blokes who knew all the back ways home at the end of the night. It was not a good place to be then, when you were still waiting out front and the others had been

kicked up the arse and taken home already. The boy hopped into the cab with him.

“At least she didn’t cut the lights,” the boy said.

The old man banged the steering column with his closed hand.

“Don’t see how it’d affect you anyway.”

“No, I’m just saying. Like what you and Grits were saying earlier.”

“Gritter can say what he wants. It’s his missus.”

The boy thought about it for a moment.

“I know that,” he said. “I was just saying.”

“Keep your mouth shut, then.” The old man turned the ignition and the ute jumped forward into the gutter and stalled. The bull-bar kitten’s head dropped forward and its tail curled under. “Goddamned clutch,” the old man said. He found reverse then and they pulled off the gutter and drove away.

From the pub home was six kilometres. Closer to four if you were walking because you could follow the railway tracks up past the silos and cut through the line paddock. That brought you out at the front cattle ramp and from there it was only another five hundred metres by car or by foot. Last time the boy had walked it was when the old man fell asleep at the bar and Nick Cant threw his keys on the roof. He walked it both ways that night and his dog walked it with him and when they got back with the spare set, the old man had already woken and climbed onto the roof and found the ones Nick Cant had thrown up there and had driven himself home. All the boy did was turn around and walk back from the direction he had come, his dog padding on ahead to show how she knew the way.

At the crossing the old man slowed only enough to see there were no immediate trains. He jugged the ute over in third and the boy looked along the line in both directions. There had been an accident there once – too long ago for anybody to obey the stop sign, but not long enough that you failed to drop a gear at least. Somebody still put flowers at the spot where the car had ended up, and a little further along a tree was missing a piece from its trunk. As they passed it the old man lifted his hand and adjusted the rear-vision mirror.

“Make sure you feed that damn thing tonight,” he said.

The boy turned. His dog was watching carefully through the back window, ensuring the exact sequence of gear changes and mirror adjustments the way she ensured sheep from the perimeters.

“I know.”

“Well, you didn’t know last night.”

“I fed her last night.”

“Bullshit. Way the damn thing carried on.”

“There was probably a fox or something. But I did.”

“Not its fault, neither. Course it’s going to carry on like that if it hasn’t been fed. Dog can’t feed itself. Your responsibility. You’re supposed to be the one looking after it. Working dog. Not a goddamned pet. You want a pet, go to a pet shop and get a goddamned guinea pig. Probably forget to feed it too.”

“I did feed her. I gave her a leg.”

“Carries on like that again tonight I’ll shoot the bloody thing.”

The boy kept his mouth shut after that.

It was a slow trip home and an uncomfortable trip. Each time the Land Cruiser sharpened into a bend or around a pothole the boy’s head would drop to the side, shoulders and neck falling away with it. He fought sporadically and uselessly against the potholes and against the long heavy day, telling himself he needed to look annoyed and alert and ready to prove. See, a dog is an ugly thing, he would start to explain: needs to be fed every night. Then the ute would sharp again and he would quickly remember that he meant funny thing, which was truer and more awake-sounding. And anyway, he would go on after that, dogs are not like sheep, sheep can eat all day, more they eat the better. But sheep will leave their own young for dead if you get too close. Never seen a dog do that. Dog will bite your hand off if it does not trust you. Cannot get a sheep to trust you. Not unless you feed it. But that is not trust.

At the top of the laneway the Land Cruiser began wandering rightward into a bend that was not there. The sound of the tyres cutting through rougher, unbroken bits of gravel made the old man jerk at the steering wheel, and the boy’s head banged hard against the side window. He sat up properly this time and tightened himself in the chest and shoulders and pressed his chin down into his left collarbone. He held his breath like that for a few seconds and did not allow himself to yawn. A thought came into his head that his dog was no longer on the back, that she had fallen off. But he did not allow himself to turn around either. He did not know why such a stupid thought was in his head. Maybe it was something he had been thinking about. The bull-bar kitten had lost some of its stick and was dangling in front of the radiator grill.

“Another thing that needs doing,” the old man said.

The boy did not know whether he meant the road or the ute or the dog.

“I’ll feed her,” he said, deciding it was the dog.

“Don’t have to tell me about it,” the old man said. “Just do it. And don’t go giving her any more of that meat either. She can make do with kibble.”

“I know.”

“Damn thing eats better than we do half the time.”

“I know she does,” the boy said. “I’ll give her the kibble.”

Instead of turning out and reversing into the shed, the old man swung wide. He pulled the ute in front-first and let it idle. It was an old ute and he always let it idle before killing the motor. That was something he had taught the boy. For a moment the boy sat there with the old man, listening to the motor whistle and slow, thinking there was something he should say, something about the way he still remembered all the important things he had been taught. The second kitten had avoided being backed over because the old man had started the ute with the clutch only half pressed in. That was something he had warned the boy about too. And about keeping both hands on the wheel. The boy did not say anything about any of those things though, and when nothing else came he pushed his door open and dropped his legs out.

The shed was just long enough and wide enough to fit the ute and some shelves at the end. To get back past the ute meant hugging the wall, which is why the old man would reverse in. The shelves were against the wall at the back and were full of dirt and shit. Bird shit, rat shit, mouse shit. The boy had found a nest of newborn mice in one of them once, hairless pink buds that he popped between his fingers, then wiped on his pants. At such an age their eyes are embryonic and they may as well be genital-less. Above the shelves, stretched inside-out over a wire frame, were three dusty rabbit skins. They had been hanging from the post for a very long time and the boy had been told how they would have been worth something once, how you would have bothered to make sure your cuts were even and to the points. But that was before everything changed. Even wool was not worth anything now. The old man stalled the motor and everything went dark and quiet and more narrow.

“Come on,” the boy said to his dog and he felt his way along, careful to step over the twenty-litre drum of Roundup he knew by experience and bruising on the shins.

The dog’s kennel was behind the shed. It was a large hollow tree trunk that had been cut and dragged and left on its side beneath a pine. The pine had been dead for a number of years too. The inside

of the kennel was smooth and splinterless and cool and smelt like rain. The boy remembered being able to crawl right up into the end. As a kid he had probably spent as much time in there as he had in his own bed. And as much as he understood the way things change, he could not convince himself now that it was he who had grown too big for the log and not the log too small for him.

Next to the dead pine tree was a dead chest freezer. It had been the meat freezer in its previous life. For years it had sat on the veranda outside the boy's bedroom window, faking silence, humming him to sleep. Now it was broken and full of dog biscuits. Its seals were beginning to rot and its cord was severed. Stuffed, not broken: you can fix something that is broken. The boy opened its lid and used the dented saucepan inside to scoop out a bowlful of kibble. When his hand was clear he let the lid fall back down with a slap so that the old man would hear him definitely feeding her. The only response was the back door of the house slamming shut, appropriately answering that no, he was not hearing him definitely doing anything.

"All right, you black bastard," the boy said. The dog came and sat in front of him. "Haven't you learned how to do it yourself?" he said to her. "Here, I'll show you. Then you'll be a specialty dog." He put the saucepan down on top of the freezer and bent over. With his left hand he found her collar, and with the other the chain that was lying in the dirt. She licked the hand holding the chain. "Get out of that, you dirty bastard." She tried to lick him on the hand again. He cupped her head, hard at first, with her ear in the web of his thumb and forefinger. "Come on," he said, easing his grip and giving her a scratch behind the ear at the same time. He clipped the chain on and patted her chest. She offered her chin. "Okay," he said. He scratched it with two fingers and gave her a last strong pat on the brisket with the palm of his hand. Then he left her and went to the house.

The kitchen pantry was open and a bottle of rum was on the table. He put his Esky down and walked through and looked into the old man's bedroom. There were no lights on but his eyes had adjusted and he could see clearly enough. He came back into the kitchen and picked up the bottle and took a sip. It made his throat swell and his stomach tighten. He sat it on the table again and went into his own bedroom.

Screen door ricocheting open, hitting again and catching was the first thing the boy heard. It made him open his mouth and his eyes. He listened for the boot-steps across the kitchen floor. After three they dampened into the lounge room carpet and he swung himself one foot out of bed. Before he could right himself with the other foot, the door was flung open and the light switch thumped on. Kibble and ants were chucked over him like a bucket of water.

“What do you damn well call this?”

The boy stayed half in and half out and looked neither up nor down.

“What did I tell you last night?” the old man said, stepping forward some more to impose his narrow shape into the boy’s periphery. He was holding the throttled saucepan at chest height and his boots were muddy from the dew which had settled on the bulldust outside. The boy stared at the torn denim knees of the old man’s trousers and told himself to keep away from the eyes.

“What did I say?” the old man pressed again, grey-eyed, grey-tongued and grey-kneed. “For chrissakes, boy. You answer me.” The boy let the old man’s knees go hazy for a second and in that second he could see the dog all wrong-footed and appreciative and stupid, desperate to be let off her chain. Have you learned how to do it yourself yet, you black bastard? his imagined self said to her imagined self. You would be a specialty dog if you could master that one. He was close enough to kick her. Then he sighted the saucepan. On top of the freezer. Left just out of reach. You are effing kidding me, he said aloud, and he heard himself say it aloud, and it was as if he were someone else saying it. Fucking kidding me – not effing kidding me, he corrected himself. Aloud. The air lapping at his knees like a dog’s tongue. You dirty bastard. He kicked at the cold damp bitch.

“I meant to,” he answered, focusing again and looking up into the old man’s greys.

“Meant to what?”

“I thought I fed her kibble like you said. I meant, you said, no meat. I must have left it on top.”

“Fed it kibble? What’s this, then?” The old man threw the saucepan forward again and the boy flinched. Nothing more came out and he felt stupid. “This how you feed the thing? Is it? Better off shooting it. You want to shoot the damn thing? Is that what you want to do? Quicker than starving it. I can tell you that.”

The boy brushed an ant from his shoulder and it fell onto his stomach and bit him. His stomach muscles twitched and the ant bit him again. The biscuits had left small salt crumbs on his skin and each one of them felt like an ant biting him now.

“You want to damn well learn,” the old man said, and he tossed the saucepan against the bed and left the room.

The boy squashed the ant and swept the salt off his chest with the back of his hand. He leaned back onto his elbow. The other ants, the black, actual ants, still attached to the biscuits they had ridden in on, began righting themselves and shipping off in a consensual direction. It does not take long for an ant to find its bearings and get back to work. Even the squashed one on his stomach seemed pointed toward the doorway, its legs flat and coordinated and industrious.

For a while the boy did not move. He stayed half propped on his right side and listened carefully. The sound of the screen door slamming closed for a second time. The sound of the chickens being let out at the other end of the yard. Motorbike being kick-started and ridden away in the dark with his dog barking after it as far as the cattle-yards and then stopping and remembering the hunger that had her defeated in the tail and ears, and the voice. When he could no longer hear the motorbike himself, the boy flicked the dead industrious ant off his belly and got up.

First he put some socks on, then the two flannelette shirts and singlet he had worn to work the day before. They pulled on in one go because that is how he had taken them off before getting into bed. Like a skin. When the singlet was straightened out underneath he kicked at a pile of clean clothes on the floor and unearthed a pair of dungarees he could wear. The legs were stiff and twisted, but they were not ripped or worn through like the old man’s. Rouseabouts did not need to use their legs the way shearers did, holding sheep down with their knees and calves, and polishing combs against their thighs until they flashed a high sheen. The boy’s untorn dungarees were twisted out of shape because they had been left in the washing

machine for several days and had eventually dried in there instead of over a line or the back of a chair. The drying had shrunk them as well and the boy struggled to get them over his arse cheeks. He did not do the fly, only tucked himself across the tight open front and everything stayed there uncomfortable and awkward and rigid, and like that he shuffled out through the door which the old man had left open. He said something as he went, and he did not know himself whether he meant it mockingly or respectfully or cautiously.

Standing at the toilet bowl the boy sniffed his armpits and thought they did not smell too bad. He sniffed his left hand and thought that it smelt musky and like cancer, and he thought the cancer smell was not as offensive as it had been straight off the sheep. Or not as fresh, maybe. He was unable to decide whether something should smell worse when it is strong and fresh or when it has been left to stagnate. Probably when it has been left, he considered, thinking of the way a hangover worked. He ran his tongue around the inside of his mouth then and spat a white-coloured mucus into the toilet. His teeth tasted like rum. A taste that infected his muscles and made him shudder involuntarily and piss on the lip of the toilet.

“You want to fucking learn,” he tried again, redirecting and pissing the mucus off the ceramic side and into the cloudy water.

When he was finished the boy zipped the fly on his dungarees and did the button. He wiped his hands with a towel and sprayed deodorant down his front and under his arms. The deodorant left a white powder on the inside of his shirt and along the edge of his pits.

For breakfast the boy made toast and coffee. The toast he ate quickly and resentfully and the coffee he drank without sugar or milk. The bitterness of the coffee caused him to wince each time he took a sip and he did not recognise it for bitterness or for wincing. He made certain to have a piece of toast in his mouth each time he sipped. Coffee like this, black with no sugar, was the only thing the old man ever ingested before lunchtime. It had taken the old man more than fifty years to work his stomach into such a tight and stubborn ball as this, and the boy knew he still had a damn time ahead of him to do the same.

When the coffee was half gone and there were only crusts left, the boy stood up and went to the back door. Outside the sun was not yet risen, but it was half light anyway, and he could see the chickens that had already scavenged in as close as the scrap pile below the veranda. Three or four of them were pecking the ground and the boy knew there was nothing they had not turned over already, either the

day before or the day before that. He thought the chickens probably knew as well, even as stupid as they were. And they were plenty stupid. Stupider than sheep. He pulled his boots on and opened the door.

“Chook-chook-chook. Here, chook-chook-chook.”

They clucked and circled the soggy mound, spreading their wings and straightening their bony necks.

“Chook-chook-chook.” He tossed the crusts and watched them flap and squabble over the bigger bits. A smart animal would go for the little, broken bits, he thought, leave the stupider ones to fight for the king crusts.

Before the boy had reached the end of the veranda the dog was acting all ridiculous and grateful again, jumping over her kennel and running around its base, yelping at him to let her off so that she could bolt across to the hayshed and take a shit and then quickly back to wherever he was next headed. No, quickly back to her empty food dish, he scolded himself. Then, no, quickly back to wherever he was next headed, he recorrected himself. Habit not hunger. Her chain became caught on one of the kennel's sawn-off limbs and she strained desperately and gaspingly for a moment. Then she was free once more and the boy was walking toward her with straight arms and a straight, firm look in his eyes. The boy had dark brown eyes and they were straight and firm like his father's which were grey and straight and firm.

“Ah, you stupid idiot,” the boy said when he was right up close to her. He leaned forward without bending his knees and tried to unclip the chain and she clambered onto his arm, spluttering and coughing. “Sit,” he said, stamping his boot down onto the chain to make her head jerk back under. “Stand on your goddamn neck in a minute.”

She stayed submerged and against the ground then and her tail was low and flattened and against the ground also. She waited until the boy had the clip undone and then her head buoyed a little and her tail swished once through the bulldust and her back legs cocked themselves ready.

“Wait,” the boy told her. The starting-pistol tone of his voice made her balk forward. He grabbed her head and pressed it hard into the dirt. “I said wait, you false-starting black bastard.” And when he had kept her snout locked obediently against the earth for long enough to make sure, he let go of it and the chain at the same time, and the recognizable sound of the links dropping slack fired her into the usual mad gallop. She disappeared through the fence and into the tall, dead grass like an eel beneath a footbridge.

Once she had reached the clearing of the hayshed, the dog stopped dead and curled her spine over. She sucked her ribs and held her tail stiffly behind her, and her bottom jaw hollowed into almost nothing. Both of her ears flattened and fell back too. It was a culpable expression. Behind her, beneath the roof of the hayshed, there was a fire truck that had not been started in a long time and next to the fire truck a rake with a broken hydraulic line. Beside the permanent rake was an impermanent boom spray and after that a cement mixer. The cement mixer was of the PTO variety and was yellow with a red gear casing and red drive shaft. It was sitting on a blue palette. There was no hay in the hayshed, except for the floor covering which was loose and scattered. After she had held herself in the customary position for ten or so seconds without shitting anything at all, the dog limbered out and returned upstream toward the boy.

Though the afternoon was considered the best time of day for all things except stupid sheep and stupid dogs, there was something about mornings the boy also liked very much. It was the feeling of ownership. If you were awake early enough to recognise the feeling, then you could be quite proud of it and you could tell yourself that it was yours to keep and that no one could do anything to take it away, even though you knew this last part was a lie. All somebody else had to do was be there. A second person could often add to the feeling and make it stronger by turning it into something amplified and reflective and competitive, but after two you were just another sucker standing around waiting for the reliable afternoon and the feeling was lost. That was the tragedy of morning and the tragedy of its feeling.

The dog caught up to the boy when he was halfway across to the shed. She tried nosing him on the hand as they walked along together and he swung his hand up and out of the way.

“Go get the shovel,” he said to her, and she started forward, then stopped and looked back at him. “What kind of dog are you? A bloody useless one, no doubt. When are you going to learn, hey?” She tried nosing him again and he slapped her away.

The boy’s dog was named Sal, though she no longer answered to Sal, or to any name. She had been called Sal after the old man’s dog. That Sal had been a good paddock dog and a good yard dog. She had been black and tan like this Sal and narrow across the shoulders and had liked working sheep from the perimeter. That was something all Sals and kelpies liked and were good at. What never seemed strange was that both dogs had been called Sal. Even while they were alive

together they were both called Sal. Bitch dogs were always called Sal, and nothing seemed so natural to the boy or to the dogs.

The boy's Sal had not always ignored her name. There was a time when she was still a pup that she answered and understood which Sal the boy was talking to and it always amused the boy to call the name with a particular dog in mind and have the correct dog respond while the other waited for her own time to come. That was a number of years ago, though, and a pup can be a funny thing and might not always go on behaving like it should or like its predecessor did. Sometimes a pup, which has been clever enough to learn the nuance of its name alongside an identical counterpart, will stop doing something and no matter how hard you work at it or flog it you will not be able to make it start back. A pup that has been rushed or trodden on in the pens might refuse to go near rams again. A pup that has fallen off the back of a ute might need heaving up by the collar and chaining on forever after. A pup that has been kicked and called Sal enough times in the one afternoon might spite itself and pay no attention to the sound of its own name.

The afternoon she stopped responding to her own name was the afternoon the old man's Sal got shot because the boy forgot to chain her up. He had left the old man's Sal off overnight and she had killed half a dozen lambs and two breeding ewes. Not any of their sheep, but the neighbour's. It was not the neighbour who shot her though, it was the old man. He made the boy go with him. Made him hold onto her. Say, okay. A bullet going into muscle or fat or skull does not ring out or whip-crack like a bullet that misses everything and continues on with a clear path. A bullet that finds the thing it is looking for hits dully and contentedly, like an axe against the thigh meat of a tree, or an apple breaking apart on concrete. After the old man shot his own Sal for killing half a dozen lambs and two breeding ewes, he went home and kicked the boy's almost to death. She was still only a pup then and did not take much kicking before she had had enough. And the boy was still only a boy and did not take much watching on before he started feeling ashamed at the beating she was taking. Ashamed with himself, yes, but ashamed also with her and the way she kept trying to skulk back into her kennel, the old man having to drag her out and stand on the chain so she would not go anywhere.

At the entrance to the shed, the boy stepped over the drum of Roundup and manoeuvred himself along the wall toward the shelves at the far end. It was quite dark inside the shed and the boy found it difficult to make out the kitten still attached to the bull-bar until he was very close to it and then he could see the way its fur had

become damp and sweated-looking from the dewy air and he could also see the eyeballs which looked glazed and preserved and weepy. The dog noticed the kitten too, and she stood up on her back legs with her front legs balanced against the bull-bar and sniffed its body and tried to lick the area where the blood had congealed into the fur, making tough, twisted sinews of ginger and maroon and white. The boy pushed the dog away from the kitten and told her to get out and she danced around in the narrow space between the ute and the shelves looking for a way past him. He struck at her again and she skulked off beneath the ute, glancing back once to make certain the corpse had not been newly decriminalised.

The boy squatted down in the space in front of the ute and felt around for the shovel which he thought was probably beneath the shelves with the fencing equipment. He moved his hand carefully over the tools and had a clear picture of everything he touched and when he could not find the shovel but recognised the posthole digger and felt barbed wire tangled through its blades he was able to feed the wire back onto the spool and pull the digger free without scratching or pricking himself. He stood up then and looked at the digger and leaned it against the side wall of the shed and opened one of the wooden drawers just in front of him. There was a boning knife inside the drawer and the knife had a white plastic handle and partly rusted blade. The blade's edge was sharp, despite the rust, and the old man kept it that way and used it often for cutting an old sheep's throat and removing its legs for dog meat. The old man did not shear the belly fleece on such animals because there was no benefit in shearing the belly fleece from an animal about to be killed. Nor was there any benefit in shearing the hocks, and the dog would have to make her own way through the tough woolly skin in order to get to the meat and shin bone. Usually the dog kept it half buried until the ground had done the job of opening up the leg for her. A dog is clever about things like rot.

Using the knife, the boy cut the kitten away from the bull-bar. He peeled the remaining silver-coloured tape off the kitten's body and held it by the tail. The head was flat and impressed and the ribcage and spine were crushed. When he tipped it upside down, the tail kinked back over the broken spine and revealed a small milky arsehole. All the underside was milky-coloured and the tops of its paws were milky-coloured also. The boy put the knife back in the drawer and left the shed, carrying the kitten pale side up in his left hand and the posthole digger in his right, with its heavy base slung over his shoulder. He looked impressive with it slung like that.

Probably the way a rich man on safari would look impressive after snuffing out a lion or elephant or gazelle with one shot. No big deal. His modesty would be heroic and the rifle over his shoulder would be archangelic.

The boy took the kitten and heroic rifle to a spot in the house paddock where some pine trees were growing in front of a ruined pigsty. Wind had destroyed the pigsty years earlier and its roof was lying now amidst the base of the pines, wedged between two of the bigger trunks, and was covered in pine needles and dirt. The boy could not remember how the pigsty had looked before that windy night, but he could remember the way it looked the morning after and the way the pigs looked, two of them stuck in the ring-lock fence where they had tried to push through, still squealing and kicking, and thinking he had come to cut their throats when he had only wanted to cut them free.

After setting the kitten down on one of the collapsed posts, he put the digger-rifle to the ground and turned it lightly a few times to mark a pilot circle in the dirt. The shovel would have been more practical, though he was happy with his decision to bring the digger and he had seen his father use it before to make holes for strainer posts and he appreciated the elegance and specificity of such a device. He pushed his sleeves up and leaned over the handle and began drilling clockwise, half-circle bursts at a time.

A dozen or so turns in, the sun started coming through the pines in sharp, splintery shafts. The boy stopped and rested against the digger and bit his top lip and looked at the trees and the earth. The trees glowed. He thought about them for a moment, then tried turning the handle again.

“Why didn’t you bring the shovel?” he said to his dog. The earth was hard and orange and unworkable. The shovel would have been better.

The dog came and stood at his feet and stared him straight up, jaw hung in a kind of salivary, half-open grin.

“Fetch it, you bastard,” he said to her. She nudged forward another inch, until her chin was pressed against his knee. “How many times do you need to be told?” When she did not obey him he let go of the digger and set back to the shed to find the shovel he knew he should have brought with him in the first place. His dog trotted to keep up.

At ten to seven the boy was using the long-handled shovel to work a flange into the bottom of the hole. It was still quite a shallow hole

and he thought it was okay that it be shallow like this so long as it were bell-shaped. Ever since he had begun chipping at the edges with the shovel he had imagined that the hole should finish perfectly bell-shaped. This image had become very important to him. Of course it was important to make strainer holes bell-shaped. He knew that. With strainers it allowed the concrete to set around the post's base and plug it in the earth so that it would not lift once tension was applied to the wire above ground. The importance with this hole being bell-shaped, though, had something more to do with the boy's perception of persistence, which he also considered to be shaped a lot like a bell. He kept chipping and smoothing away the rough overhangs and as he worked he thought that his obligation and pride were bells in the middle of his chest and he tried not to think about them as bells. Especially his pride. To him pride was a much uglier thing than this hole which was almost perfect and finished and not at all ugly or egotistical.

"Learn to do that and you'll be a specialty dog," he said, and his dog looked at him and then at the hole.

When everything looked good and just how he had imagined the boy put his hand on the back of his neck and held it there with his elbow pointed out in front of him. Both of his hands had turned rust-coloured and on each palm, just below the middle finger, the skin had been pinched into a ripe glue-coloured blister. The blister on his right hand felt smooth and firm against his nape and he liked the feel of it. His nape was bony and damp. When he tried to let go of the shovel with his other hand his fingers refused and he had to concentrate on unlocking them one at a time. They clicked open then and that gave the boy some amusement and when they were all open he tried closing and reopening them to see whether it would happen a second time.

At his feet, the dog had become interested in something further off and she was showing her interest by pricking up all serious and erect. The boy turned and looked in the same direction but he could not see anything and he could not hear anything either, and the dog could hear something because she kept changing the angle at which she held her ears. She kept checking with the boy too, to see whether he was hearing this great and intriguing thing. Perhaps an elephant hunter brings a dog when he has a rogue bull to track.

"Don't get too cocky. You're no rogue elephant dog."

Lying neatly on top of the sty post, in the full sunlight now,

the kitten's fur had become a stronger lustre of orange and its milky underside had changed to a stark white. The boy took hold of it around the midsection and put it into the hole. He began kicking dirt back in on top of it. His dog lost interest in the sound coming from the paddock and trotted over.

"Get your nose out of that," the boy said to her, and she sat back obediently, watching him work.

When he had kicked enough dirt back into the bell hole, and the kitten was no longer visible, the boy began stomping it with his boot. In his head, he was not crushing the kitten with each blow but compacting earth tightly around it, setting it like a bronze clapper. It was almost seven o'clock now and he could hear the under-gear note of the motorbike himself and knew that he needed to hurry.

"Let's go, you black bastard," he said, looking off at the trail of dust coming from beyond the cattle yards.

The dog barked to reinforce the good and important discovery she had made in being first to spot the old man elephant, and she led the boy quickly back to the house, stopping every five or six metres to check on the progress of the motorbike some more. The shovel and the elephant gun stayed lying in the dirt beside the filled-in bell hole.

Fanning's was the biggest shed of the run: eight and a half thousand ewes, plus rams and progeny on top of that. The shearing took more than a month every year and then there were two weeks in February for crutching and a day in January for polling. Polling was the worst. The smell of pheromone along the board was sickening. It could make a dog go mad and start licking at itself like it was injured. You left a dog chained up at home if you knew you were going to be polling. And even then, the dog would be able to smell it on you that night as strongly as if she had been there all day rolling around in the wool herself. She would circle about, frustrated and sniffing at the stains on your pants, licking at your forearms and nervously pissing everywhere. The only way to calm her would be by kneading the loose skin on the back of her neck with your fingers, which was something that would make her eyes close into perfect contented slits.

Fanning's was a merino stud, owned and run by a woman called Gail Loy. She was the widow of Morrie Fanning and had been Doctor Gail Loy before he died. Most people in the district thought she probably should have stayed Doctor Gail Loy. Farmer Gail Loy was something of a joke to them. She was too rich and too unlike them to be taken seriously.

Standing in the yards when the boy and old man arrived at seven-fifteen, the length of poly-pipe in her hand – not hitting any of the animals, just uselessly waving it around behind them – she looked like someone trying to conduct an orchestra, not someone trying to pen sheep.

“There’s a joke,” the boy said. He had wondered what it would sound like when one of them finally spoke. The whole trip had been silent and he had taken the silence to be a condemnation which by contrast had filled the car with a very loud clanging sound.

The old man kept his hand on the gearstick. His other hand stayed on the steering wheel. He had not said anything about the noise or the silence, and he had not mentioned the missing kitten or even noticed its absence, it seemed.

“Bitch shouldn’t be doing it in the first place,” he answered.

Yes, there it was. Boy, it will sound like this. This is how it will sound, boy. You can promise yourself that. Get over there and do your damn job.

The boy did as he was told. He let the dog off the back and marched after it, ignoring the thistles that fanged him through the denim and on the shins as he went and telling himself that the stupid old bitch should not have been doing his job in the first place.

When the boy climbed the fence into the yards Gail turned and waved to him.

“They’re being real pains this morning,” she said.

The boy did not answer. Do not answer, boy. It was good not to answer, it showed you were not impressed by anyone’s money or name or by the way they spoke, always pronouncing things like this and like this, with their hands on their hips and their collar pulled up beneath their dark-grey ponytail, looking like a stupid and likely bitch.

“It’s a lucky thing you came along,” she went on. The boy was closer now. “Poor old Rusty. I think he’s almost ready for retirement.”

Rusty was the name of her dog, a kelpie-collie cross with white markings on its face, chest and one of its front legs. Markings that betrayed it for a thoroughly useless mongrel. No dog of substance would have tolerated markings like that, the boy advised himself. And he checked with his own dog for confirmation. She was black and tan and well-marked and seemed in agreement.

Gail pointed at the sheep. They were milling in front of the gate and refusing to go through.

“This is the end of the mob.”

“I know,” the boy said.

“Do you think there will be enough here to last the men through until lunchtime?”

The boy did not nod or say yes. He only put his bottom lip inside his mouth and whistled loudly and told himself that this woman was a stupid and ignorant woman who did not know the first thing about what could or could not be done by lunch, and that her acting at head farmer was as lousy as her dog’s acting at being head sheep dog of some clapped out old merino stud.

“Get in there, you fucking bastard,” the boy yelled. Fucking was a good word. Not one for play acting, he told himself. Not a play farmer’s word, fucking.

His dog did as she was told. Straight away. She broke the edge of the mob and rushed the bulk of the sheep through the gateway in one dumbfounded clump. Rusty stood behind her and barked two or three times: harmless, innocuous barks: stupid barks, the boy told himself.

“Good Rusty,” Gail said to her dog.

“Get back,” the boy shouted at his, appreciating the cadence of his voice.

His dog moved back responsively, head sunken, ears brittle and cautious. She studied the few sheep that had been left behind the way all animals of prey study dumber, weaker creatures: with excitement and patience and superiority. The sheep noticed it too. They became panicky and even dumber, throwing themselves against the fence and against each other, trying to find a way through.

“Easy,” the boy said.

His dog raised her head a little. The three sheep recognised the open gateway and broke toward it. One of them got stupid at the last second and stuck its head through the railings in the fence.

“Oh, the darn thing,” Gail said. “They get themselves in there like that all the time.”

“Chrissakes,” the boy said. You are quite good with this play acting, he informed himself. Though, maybe bitch is more your word? Or fuck-lip? That is a good one for you.

“The darn things just won’t learn,” Gail said. “They get their heads in there, then they don’t know how to pull them out again. They end up getting stuck even worse.” She leaned forward and put her hand on Rusty’s head and Rusty took this for encouragement and dared himself to grab hold of a wrinkle of wool. “If you pull her from this side and I’ll try to free her up from around here,” she said to the boy.

The boy started on his end before Gail was ready. He pulled impatiently and felt the blood tighten and compress beneath his fingernails. His fingertips throbbed and stung and he knew as soon as he let go of the wool that the stinging would increase sharply and then fall back almost immediately and disappear and he would be left hating the cold morning and the cold dewy fleeces.

“See if you can just let her down for a minute,” Gail said. “I might be able to turn her head sideways.”

“I got it,” the boy said, and he pulled harder, making his grip tighter and more expensive.

“I think she just needs a little – ”

The boy paid no attention, twisting the sheep sideways, still without loosening.

Gail tried to take hold of the sheep’s head again and ply it through the fence.

“I got it,” the boy repeated, jerking the sheep back the other way.

“They’re quite stubborn,” Gail smiled. “Perhaps if you roll her over completely?”

The boy relented and let go and felt it come, and it seemed more unpleasant than it was because it came privately: into his fingertips, into his knuckles, crescendoing like a colour wheel. It spun darker, darker, dark-er, and then the heat went out of his neck and face and he was able to grab the animal’s two back legs and tip it onto its arse. The sheep croaked a poor-sounding baa and sat with its head awkward and upways and still wedged between the rails. Mnaaghh, it baaed again.

“Let’s see if we can’t just – ” Gail pushed down on the sheep’s nose with her pale, wrinkled fingers. “There we go,” she said. And it was free.

The boy sniffed. He rubbed his cheek with the back of his hand. Hard. Then he put his boot on the sheep’s belly and rocked it until it bucked itself rightways and onto its feet. It ran through the open gate and joined the rest of the mob, which were bunched at the bottom of the ramp.

“Teamwork!” Gail said.

The boy did not say anything and he did not think anything.

Gail smiled at him and she looked friendly and apologetic.

“Rusty! Where are you now, Rusty?” Her dog appeared at the top of the ramp. “Rusty, come down here! You can’t be up there, you silly thing.”

The boy's dog waited for Rusty to come down and through the mob. Waited, the boy imagined, to show that she knew dogs were not meant to be up there while the sheep were still down here, or maybe because she knew there was no point trying to push sheep up a ramp while there was a stupider and poorer-marked dog blocking the end. For a moment, the boy imagined his dog to be as smart and embarrassed and annoyed as he was. He understood the way she barked louder when there was a second dog around and the way she was more aggressive when she was being instructed, and the way she was just as effective, though passive and calculated, when she was given the chance to work alone. The boy found himself thinking that she was the type of dog he would be if he had to be a dog. Then he told himself that this was a stupid way of thinking. He whistled and called her to push up.

"She's well-trained," Gail said.

The boy nodded and reminded himself that it was a stupid way of thinking. Be a dog somewhere else, he said to himself. Be a dog in another life. Dogs do not have second lives. Dogs do not and neither should you, he thought.

"Rusty doesn't enjoy yard work very much," Gail went on. "He's too old for yard work. I really must stop bringing him over." She looked at the brown and white dog, which had forgotten about the sheep completely and had come and sat in front of her. "You're not a cow dog and you're not a yard dog, are you?" He put his paw on her knee. "You're too old for all that, aren't you?" She scratched him lightly on the nose with her fingernails. He tossed her hand up, the way dogs do, trying to throw it behind his ears for a good scratch. "Trusty Rusty," she said, resisting and teasing him on the nose some more.

Rusty and Gail stayed down below while the boy and his dog pushed the sheep up the ramp and through into the shed. They ran better than the boy expected, filling the pens from the front and taking all the work out of it. The boy did not ever turn to see if Gail was still behind him while he worked, but he shouted at his dog more often than usual and expected that she was. When it was all done, he called the dog off and closed the gate.

"I guess we'll leave you two with it, then," Gail said.

The boy rattled the gate to check its sureness. He had done the job well and was not disappointed to know that Gail had seen him work. For a moment longer she watched him, and then she left him there with his dog at his heel and a bell-shape in his chest, one he did not fully trust.

At twenty-eight past seven the old man was holding his handpiece at eye level to make certain the cutter was going to throw evenly. Too far back it would drag, forward and it would not ride. It took an experienced hand to get right and the old man had the experience in both hands and had used it to adjust the tension so that the cutter was singing now as he scissored it across the metal comb plate checking its balance, and it was singing both evenly and sharply.

Nick Cant's handpiece was already loaded and calibrated. It was lying on the floor and the down-tube was unlocked and spinning around inside the ferule and the torque was making the floorboards hum.

"Do us a favour, would you, old man?" Nick Cant said.

"Nick, don't you ever talk about anything else?" the old man said.

"I didn't even tell you what I was going to say, old man."

"Okay, Nick. Was it something important?"

Outside, the boy had jumped the fence and was running up the paddock to catch Gail and Rusty, who were dawdling back to the main house, stopping every couple of steps to play some game that involved Rusty trying to get hold of the mystery object Gail kept hidden under the sole of her boot and in her pocket. He sniffed around the heel and barked at it and then Gail would feign at picking it up and putting it back in her pocket. Sometimes she would mock throw the object and Rusty would chase after it, determining its suspected landing spot only by having followed the flight path of his master's hand. It was a good game for a stupid dog and the boy did not think that as he ran toward them with his own dog following nobly and intelligently behind him.

"Hello again," Gail said.

The boy did not speak but held his breath in and tried to make his heart slow. For him, there was something childish about being out of breath and he knew it was a controllable thing.

"Did I forget something?" Gail asked.

The boy pointed at his dog.

"Do you have any dog biscuits that I could borrow?" he said, all of his breath rushing out before he had finished the word biscuits.

Gail did not understand, and the boy had to fill his lungs to re-ask her. This time he spoke more carefully and he concentrated on releasing his breath evenly and slowly.

"Oh, yes. Rusty has a great big drum of them," Gail said.

The boy nodded in thanks.

"In fact you would be doing Rusty a favour," she said. "He only likes

eating kitchen scraps now anyway. Don't you, Rusty? Lamb chops and vanilla pudding. Don't you?"

The boy went with Gail and his dog skulked along at the rear as if she sensed that she were the cause of the humbling and embarrassing matter. Rusty ignored the boy and his dog and tried to restart his game.

Four blows from the brisket to the udder, Nick Cant was past the first leg, around the crutch, and breaking open the second leg, wool foaming onto the board like sea froth. At the topknot he straightened and stepped forward into the neck, burying his handpiece amongst the folds. He pushed upward and the handpiece broke free under the jowl and hummed and rolled over once in his hand.

Behind him the old man was shearing slowly and brokenly. The old man always sheared brokenly. Sometimes he was fast and broken, but mostly he was slow and broken. He worked hard to be slow and broken. Nick Cant worked effortlessly and was fast and fluent. But that was an inborn thing. The old man had that with his drinking.

Nick Cant had sheared the sheep out to its last hock in under a minute and a half and the old man was jabbing at the brisket and Ray was making a butt for the A-pieces. It was cold and dim along the board with the peppercorn tree scaffolding the whole eastern wall of the shed. Neither shearer was saying anything about the temperature, and both were wearing singlets and wearing them untucked so that the long tails hung over their arses, halfway between their knees and the tops of their legs. The old man even sweated a little as he ignored the temperature the most convincingly and avoided jokes about broken condoms.

Nick Cant pushed the first shorn sheep down the chute and into the count-out pen.

"Wool away," he called, when he had come back out with the second sheep and the fleece had not yet been removed. "Wool," he called again.

Ray raced across from where he was and picked up the fleece and threw it onto the skirting table.

"Too slow, Ray," Nick Cant said. "That's one beer you owe me."

"I don't owe you no beers," Ray argued. "It isn't my job. Where's the bloody ouseabout. He's the one that owes you a beer."

The boy had been given the biscuits from the drum and was carrying them back toward the shed in the front of his shirt. It was the same makeshift technique the old man used for carrying eggs

from the chook yard to the house when he did not have a bucket with him. The dog walked beside the boy with her head tilted up, studying the shape.

“Where is he, old man?” Nick Cant said.

The old man shrugged.

“Probably pulling himself in the toilet with one of them ancient Miss Picture Homegirl magazines.”

“Don’t you ever talk about anything else, Nick?” the old man said.

“All faded and full of big bushes,” Nick Cant kept going. Then he stopped, struck by the old man’s comment amidst his own. He smiled and looked back over his shoulder. “I learned it from you, old man. Just trying to be like my hero. Them old ginnies must have had big wild bushes, did they, old man?” Both he and Ray laughed.

“Too heroic and old to remember any of that, Nick,” the old man answered him.

“Can’t be too heroic and too old.”

“Been too heroic and too old for a long time, Nick.”

The boy knelt down beside the peppercorn tree and tipped the biscuits from the front of his shirt to make a small pile on the ground.

“Slow down, you stupid bastard,” he told his dog as she ingested more than she could chew, coughing hunks back out over the pile. He pulled her away by the collar and kept her at a distance until she had understood what he meant and then he let her back at them.

“There he is,” Ray announced, coming to stand by the window.

“Jesus, give him some privacy in there, Ray.”

“He ain’t in the toilet, Nick, you idiot. He’s outside playing with his stupid dog.”

“Tell him to come inside so that Nick can finalise his enquiries,” the old man said to Ray. “Nick is very interested in overgrown pubic hair. Tell the boy that.”

“You tell him,” Ray replied. “You’re his old man. You should be the one telling him what to do.”

“Tell him your sister’s got a C-section, Ray.”

“Stuff you, Nick.”

“Doesn’t he ever talk about anything other than stuffing?” Nick Cant said to the old man.

“Sometimes he talks about twelve-gauges,” the old man said.

The old man pulled his handpiece out of gear then. He bent forward to lever the sheep down the chute and it bunted him in the chin and

he stuck his thumb in its eye socket and gouged it. The sheep kicked and twisted its neck and he jammed its head against its arse and pushed it down backward. The sheep baaed and tried to escape up the chute. The chute was steep and slippery and it kept sliding back to the bottom.

“Where is he?” the old man said, dragging his feet as he walked.

“Right there,” Ray pointed.

The old man looked through the window and saw that the boy was kneeling beside his dog still and his dog was stuffing herself with the kibble, pushing it around greedily as she tried to force more down than she could properly manage.

The old man paced over to the front door and opened it. A rectangle of light blew into the shed and marked him out onto the floorboards. A long, thin, shoulderless silhouette. He stepped down onto the top step and the silhouette shortened itself accordingly. The boy looked up.

“Gail said I could take them,” he began to explain. “I asked her and she said it.”

The old man stepped down onto the next step and the boy stopped speaking. He watched his father’s knees come down onto the next, and then the next, and then the next. At the bottom the boy got out of the old man’s way and the old man walked straight past. He walked until he was at the peppercorn tree. The dog looked up as he got close and she tried to coil back, but the old man’s foot was quicker and it found her under the jaw and turnstiled her through the dust. She came back onto her feet again and skulked off with a light sideways gait. The old man kicked the biscuits into a scatter across the ground.

“Next time,” he said when he crossed the boy again at the bottom of the steps.

The old man did not sign on to compete. Only to drink. Said impressively enough throughout the morning that he was waiting for the barflies and overs section. Asked the shearers coming in and out, buying rounds for their mates in the beer garden, what time barflies and overs was starting. Wanted them to let him know. He would be inside practising, he told them. Warming up. And every time he finished another practice round he explained to Gritter that it was like a boxer toughening his fists against the wall of the dressing shed. Got to be tough to fight. Got to have sore knuckles before you can make somebody else sore. Knuckles have to know what they are in for. Gritter liked how that sounded and refilled the glass with a tea towel over his shoulder and a hand on the takings. A sound manager.

Gritter was some miserable bastard, the shearers who had booked rooms upstairs were now saying. They were the ones who had arrived for the quickshear the night before and were complaining today that they wished they had found someplace else to stay. No noise after eleven sounded like a bullshit rule to anyone staying in a pub. Forty dollars a night sounded like a bullshit rate. Nick Cant explained that Gritter might have been a true bastard of a landlord, but he was a true bastard of a landlord with a complex cunt of a wife and that was another thing altogether, a thing that deserved some compassion. The shearers he spoke to shook their heads to show how they appreciated the situation, or felt satisfied with it at least. Nick Cant could be a hell of a compassionate bastard sometimes.

Nick Cant was patron saint of Bribbaree quickshear. Champion for fourteen years running, he had martyred himself after every victory by getting religious and finding some other religious bastard with whom he could debate the existence of God. The fight at the end of the night was as annual as the competition and a black eye was better than a cheque for five hundred dollars. A black eye was the only

thing more loyal than a hangover and there was nothing loyal about a cheque for five hundred dollars. A cheque for five hundred dollars would sign itself over to a publican without any remorse or nostalgia.

At two o'clock in the afternoon the competition began. Learner shearers were asked to come forward and draw numbers. When the hat was passed to him, the boy selected number four and was happy. There were only five learners competing and number four was a good position to have. A position was good if it allowed you to watch others make the mistakes you were likely to make. Hopefully somebody before you would hamstring one of the lambs and then you would have nothing to fear. After a cut hamstring there was nothing you could fear. And you could not cut one if you had watched somebody else do it either. If you had seen it happen before your turn, you would have made yourself promise to think of those hamstrings like they were a piece of your own body. Think of them like you think of the humiliating little hamstring dangling between your legs, you would have told yourself. They would have shrivelled back up into themselves then, to the point where you could not have pictured them taut and erect beneath a sore blonde with fairy floss tits.

The competition stage was recessed into an opening in the wall of the beer garden. A little to the stage's left was a table, and to the left of the table a microphone and amplifier speaker. The event was sponsored by a particular brand of handpiece and there were posters for the handpiece either side of the microphone. The advertised handpiece did not look like the handpieces loaded and calibrated and lined up on the table beside the stage. Those looked brown and dirty like worn-down beetles. The one in the posters looked elegant and lithe as a stick insect.

The lambs to be sheared were penned together behind the wall of the beer garden. It was not until you had been called to compete that you were able to gauge whether you had chosen a good one. The lamb with the number four raddled on its back was slightly smaller than most of the other lambs and the boy hoped this meant it was a good one. The man in charge of opening the gate said the smaller ones were good if you could hold onto them. That sounded honest and the boy thought that at one time he had heard Nick Cant say a similar thing.

Nick Cant was the boy's principal shearing instructor. During lunch hours and at the end of runs Nick Cant would allow the boy to shear belly fleeces and practise making blows up the neck and down the last side. He would supervise and tell the boy to lighten his hand. You know how to play with a girl's pussy, right, boy? Everything

Nick Cant had to say about shearing could be aligned to this one apt metaphor. Move those comb teeth like fingers, boy – like you were fondling a little virgin. Apart from his own little virgin the boy had not fondled any little virgins. He fondled his own with a tight, almost spastic grip, and that is how he sheared. His father sheared heavy and spastic and tight. Such mentorship as Nick Cant's was not uncommon in the shearing sheds, and it was seldom as altruistic as it appeared. The boy thought it was probably more connected to tallies than to goodwill and he listened to the things Nick Cant said and could not understand why his hand would stay heavy even when he drilled it over and over to lighten.

The three learners who had gone before the boy had all sheared their lambs well and within the time limit. A well-sheared lamb was one with no cuts or scratches and no wool left on it. A poorly-sheared lamb was one that could not stand up because it had had its hamstring severed with a blunt-coloured handpiece. The time limit was one minute twenty. The boy told himself not to think about hamstrings. Think about pussies, he told himself. He forced the lamb into position, lamb number four, telling himself that the front right leg had to be tight behind his arse and that the head had to be still and calm and that the hind legs had to be straight and that the belly had to be stretched open and that the teats had to be covered and that the knees had to be and the fingers and that all the while the hamstring and your hamstring and make it so the hamstring thing is and stop thinking about the hamstring thing, think about what it would be like with everybody watching, and ready, sonny? Say when, sonny.

“No, not yet,” the boy said.

“Just say when, sonny,” the gentleman holding the microphone said.

“A second,” the boy answered.

The boy slowed his breathing and tried to imagine the handpiece as an extension of his arm. He looked at it and told himself that this was an experienced, worn-in set of fingers, a set to be used as perversely and pleasingly as possible, a set which had never even seen a hamstring, a set which had spent all its time fondling pussies, a set for pleasuring. His father's set.

The old man was blowing half-hearted smoke rings toward the ceiling. He had said yes to loaning the boy the handpiece because it was an old handpiece which he no longer used. The back-joint cover was missing and the cogs were arthritic and locked together. It had taken the boy twenty minutes to free all of its static parts, and when he had finished oiling and working the pieces, it remained dry and claw-like and almost unusable.

He was drinking very well now, the old man, as a heavyweight should drink. The muscles in his neck seemed tense and ready and his heart was beating in time with the ceiling fan. It was noticeably hot for the time of year, twenty-one degrees. The time was two thirty-seven. Outside, the heat was making the lambs sweat, and their fleeces had opened up and they were shearing superbly and marvellously.

“Hey, old man. Quick.”

The old man snapped his head forward. A partly formed ring sailed up into the blades of the fan.

“Quick what, Nick?”

Nick Cant pointed back through the doorway.

“Boy’s going,” he said.

“Marvellous,” the old man said. Marvellous sounded exceptional and unconvincing without the microphone and amplifier backing it up. Through the amplifier speaker it sounded gentlemanly and trustworthy.

“Come and watch.”

“When he’s in the barflies and overs I’ll go and watch him, Nick. I’ll go and watch how marvellous and superb he is in the barflies and overs. What time does the barflies and overs start? It’s twenty minutes to three now, Nick.”

The gentleman at the microphone who was using words like marvellous and superb and sonny to describe the action of the competitors was a famous gentleman in the shearing industry. Famous because he had broken a lot of records a long time ago. He had come to Bribbaree primarily to be famous and to sell handpieces that looked like shiny stick insects and not at all like actual familiar tools built as practically as possible for the purpose of making money – one eighty-four times two for every cancery, flyblown hogget you could drag – not for making fame or breaking records. People knew the gentleman’s name without having to be told. They knew one eighty-four times two equalled three sixty-eight without having to think.

“Barflies and overs is already finished, old man. You came first, second and third,” Nick Cant said to the old man.

“Marvellous,” the old man said to Nick Cant. “When do I get my marvellous prize?”

Nick Cant was wearing a red singlet which had white hemming around the neck-scoop and armholes. The bottom was white-hemmed as well and it hung just below his waistline at the front and fell into a tail at the back. The back of the singlet said KICK-ASS

and on the front there was a picture of one ass kicking another ass. The old man was wearing a black polo shirt with a logo for Bribbaree Hotel on its pocket. It was a marvellous-looking shirt.

“Stop being such a funny bastard,” Nick Cant said to the old man.

“What’s so funny about wanting to get drunk in peace, Nick?”

“Alright, then. Be a funny bastard,” Nick Cant said.

“Okay, Nick. Can I be a funny peaceful marvellous bastard?”

“You can be a funny peaceful marvellous homosexual bastard if you like.”

“I wouldn’t want to steal your act, Nick.”

On stage the shearing machine gripped into gear and the boy began his campaign. He ran his first blow slowly and thoroughly and the gentleman commentated along, telling him, good job, sonny. The next four blows were also run nicely and the belly was shorn then. The boy shifted his weight and ran one along the lamb’s hind leg. Stroke the inside of their thigh with your left hand and they will open right up for you, boy. Not too gentle, they do not want to feel as if they are being done over by their sister. When he had steered the handpiece through the crutch and out the second leg, he turned it back to face the hip. He broke the hip open by rotating his wrist counter-wise and then he made five short blows over the tail. The famous gentleman said he was shearing like he had been shearing all his life. Superb and marvellous, the boy told himself. Shut up and think about your bleeding hamstring, another voice chastised.

“Better be quick, old man.” Nick Cant was turned toward the boy now and was speaking to the old man as if he were a child, easily panicked into action and obedience.

“Is he shearing superbly?” the old man asked, proving heavyweight champion of tantrums and nonchalance and disobedience as well as drinking.

“Why don’t you have a quick look?” Gritter suggested. He had already encouraged the old man to look much earlier, before the competition had even started, and the old man had encouraged him to go and lie down with his wife and he had encouraged the old man to go and lie down with her himself and the old man had encouraged him to shut his goddamned mouth in that case and to go and lie down with somebody else’s wife – somebody whose wife did not have a rabbit trap between her legs.

“Why don’t you go and have a look, Gritter?” he encouraged him this time.

“If he was my boy I would.”

“If he was your boy, Grits, he wouldn’t be out there. He’d be in here learning his trade behind the bar. If he was your boy I’d be happy to watch him learn his trade behind the bar too. I’d even help him learn his trade behind the bar. And if he was my boy he would be in here learning his trade on this side of the bar while your boy learned his trade on that side of the bar. And Nick could leave us in peace too. And wouldn’t that be marvellous and superb and marvellous?”

Nick Cant started banging his hand against the door at that moment, just as a football crowd bangs on the car horns when their team has scored a try: bursts of three: honk-honk-honk, honk-honk-honk. The crowd outside were like the fans seated at field level, calling players by name, saying, good job, Simmo, and, nice pass, Hubsy. It was customary for the shearers to be clapped home in this fashion, when they were only four or so blows away from finishing.

“Boy’s in here every night learning his trade on that side of the bar,” Gritter argued with the old man, ignoring the home crowd.

“He isn’t learning it too well, then, Gritter.” The old man was ignoring it also, and he was ignoring it better than Gritter, since he did not feign to raise his voice even slightly.

“He’s learning it all right, old man.” Gritter lowered his own voice. The conversation was taking place at a whale’s frequency now.

“You reckon he’s learning it well enough to take me?”

“He’ll take you, old man.”

“You sure, Gritter? I take some taking.”

“You’re one of the best I’ve seen,” Gritter whispered back.

At the final whipping blow the lamb began to wriggle away from the boy. It freed itself just slightly and the famous gentleman at the microphone began calling instructions – quick-quick instructions, which the boy did not understand or could not interpret fast enough.

“Get your foot under its hind leg, sonny,” the man said. “Pull its head back up.”

The lamb kicked the boy along the knuckles and the boy jammed his thumb into its eye socket. He did not think, he just jammed. He gouged at its eye too, and the man said something else and it was not marvellous or superb, and Nick Cant forgot about the old man and banged against the door more loudly, and the crowd – mostly shearers yet to compete themselves – went like this with their hands on their knees, and then the lamb kicked again. Only this time it threw its leg into the mouth of the handpiece. The handpiece cut through the hamstring like a thin cord of rubber, like an interceptor through a backline.

The famous gentleman, who was famous for breaking a lot of records and was now using that fame to sell shiny grasshopper-coloured handpieces, put the microphone down and pulled the boy out of gear. The lamb had pissed itself all over the stage and was jerking back and forth now as it tried to stand on its ruined hind leg. An unshorn tuft of wool remained, covering its nubby tail. The fifth and final learner stood up and fearlessly approached the stage. The boy moved aside. A lot of people laughed and drank from their glasses.

Last competitor of the day was Nick Cant. That was an honour extended to all defending champions and patron saints. Learners. Intermediates. Opens. Patron saints. Last stroke of the day. And when it was finished he was champion of virgins and their privates for a fifteenth year. Thirty seconds was a good time for him to have won with. The next best had been thirty-three, which had looked unbeatable for a large part of the afternoon. In the learner division the best time had been one minute and one second and that had belonged to the fearless fifth competitor. After the presentations were completed Nick Cant took his cheque for five hundred dollars and turned it over to Gritter. It became loud-mouthed cash, black-eye money, money he could betray himself with. The beer garden became a place for women only.

The old man was no longer just gone. Nor marvellous, nor peaceful. He had been drinking since ten o'clock and was now steeped in appropriateness. God-fearing, idol-mongering, self-sacrificing appropriateness. He had made promises in the order of being the last surviving barfly and over left on the earth – definitely the last one still shearing – and being so, he was willing to challenge anyone for a take at the title. Gritter had told him that no one would ever come close, not even the boy, and he had even gone so far as to make a public summons for anybody who thought they could take the title from the old bastard to come forward. No one thought they could. Some of them bought double quantity drinks for the prize fighter, trying to knock him out on the sly, but none of them would challenge him openly and in full show.

At six o'clock Nick Cant was a little gone also. Nine beers gone. Nothing too dramatic. His appropriateness was less assured and less ridiculous than the old man's and was directed not so much toward himself but more toward the two women sitting at a table nearby. They had come in from the beer garden and were sipping their drinks through a straw. One of them was skinny and sipping a bourbon and coke and the other was fatter and sipping a soda water with nothing

so detrimental as alcohol or sugar in it. This fatter one was eating original-flavoured chips from a torn-open bag as well, and she was eating them at a painfully slow pace, completely sucking the salt from each one as she held onto its edge with an ant's grip.

The skinny woman was called Mel. Nick Cant had screwed her a couple of times already. She lived in a house behind the primary school. She did not have a car or a licence. The fat friend had a car and a licence. And she had very big ones, this fat one. Even for her size they were very big. When she laughed inwardly and soundlessly, facing front-on to Nick Cant, they did not move or jiggle about, they just pressed together and looked bigger. Mel's were flat and useless looking. Mel's shoes were flat too, unpolished, and her hair was pulled tight. The fat one wore her hair out and it was shoulder-length and thin.

"You have big tits," Nick Cant said to her when he could not take it any longer.

"And you have a small dick," Mel spat back at him. The fat one did not spit anything, just sucked more salt.

"Wasn't talking to you, princess," Nick Cant said.

"Good. Don't talk to either of us, pindick."

That was that. Nick Cant returned to where he had been sitting and the fat one giggled and pressed her big ones together some more and did not make any sound.

Two beers later Nick Cant decided to broach the topic again.

"You two lesbians or something?" he said.

The fat one did not look at him and waited for Mel, the skinny one, to answer. It was very loud inside the pub at this point. Some shearers who had taken their singlets off were singing irregular couplets from Advance Australia Fair.

"You would turn anyone to a lesbian, Nick."

"What's the matter with your girlfriend? Doesn't she know how to speak?"

"She doesn't speak to pindicks."

"Does she speak to lesbian no-tits? Tell her that her tits are too big to waste on a skinny little no-tits like you, Mel. Tell her if she is a lesbian and wants to see some pussy getting screwed, then she can watch me screw yours. When I've finished I'll screw hers as well. That should get her off."

The fat one spoke up for herself then, saying she did not want to see some of anything getting anythinged and she would appreciate it if Nick Cant would get lost. It was by no means a

forceful recommendation and Nick Cant was by no means forcefully recommended.

“Are you frigid? Or just self-righteous?” he asked her. “Because, you know, you can fix self-righteousness.”

The boy had heard Nick Cant discuss the finer points of self-righteousness and frigidness before and after listening to him the boy had considered that the two traits were very much the same thing, only one was more determined than the other. And where was the boy now?

The fat one became a little less timid then and asked Nick Cant whether he was really as big a pindick as her skinny friend said he was, or whether he was just too stupid to know where to put it. Both her and her skinny no-licence friend chuckled and Nick Cant pulled the instrument in question out through his unzipped fly and swung it around in front of them, accentuating its size by means of centrifuge. Both of them stopped laughing and looked disgusted.

“Those big tits of yours are very self-righteous when they’re not being pushed together,” Nick Cant said, to mark the moment.

The skinny one threw her bourbon and coke over his skipping rope appendage and told him to find someone else to lick it clean. Nick Cant used the fat one’s soda water to wash the bourbon and coke off. He left the two of them without anything to sip on and the shirtless men sang, In history’s page and every page and advance Australia fair!

The old man had been drinking since six five four three two one twelve eleven ten o’clock and was very appropriately drunk and was sitting at his spot at the bar. Marvellous and superb were out the window now; it was all pissing and technical and knockout talk.

“Pissing yourself is a technical knockout, Nick,” he said when Nick Cant sat beside him, wet crotch and fly still unzipped. To the other side of the old man a guy with thick sideburns punched another guy with sideburns in the ribs and they both started laughing. The puncher had a tattoo of a snake on his upper arm. The punchee had a tattoo of a snake on his upper opposite arm. Both snakes were brothers, by the looks.

“I thought pissing yourself was first step in becoming champion, old man?” Nick Cant replied.

“Pissing yourself is only first step in becoming champion of shitting yourself,” the old man told him.

“Are you the champion of that too, old man?”

The group of men standing to Nick Cant’s side had noticed his

wet patch and were joking amongst themselves and trying to tip beer over each other. Gritter was taking orders for every spilt beer and some of the beers were being repoured into the same glasses and the people drinking them did not care or even notice. Eventually one of them broke through and managed to wet his brother's crotch with a full schooner. The others thought this made him Nick Cant's brother and they tapped Nick Cant on the back saying, Look here, you and him must be brothers. There was a lot of this brotherising going on.

"I am champion of lots of things, Nick. I was once champion of screwing gins, you know?"

The old man had a habit of discussing his greatest achievements when he was at his most appropriate and most modest. He would boast of the type of depravity that could not have been exaggerated and the boy would listen to him from his seat by the window and tell himself that one day he would have to bury this old man and there would be no gravestone big enough to write a suitable epitaph and then smash down and leave in broken fragments all over the ground as he would wish. A smashed up gravestone was what the boy most often envisaged when he tried to visualise his father's perspective and personality and all the other intangible qualities. All of it very symbolic and pointless.

After cutting the lamb's hamstring the boy had run home. It had taken him half an hour to run home. He had run lightly along the railway tracks, his feet rarely touching on those blue-coloured rocks which were laid unevenly between sleepers. Half an hour. And how long was it taking him to walk back in the other direction? Ask him. How long were you gone for, boy? You chained that dog up while you were there? Fed her? You would not have forgotten to do that, would you, boy? What else were you up to? Why are you so heavy-footed and eager to get back? Nearly there. Your father has been drinking since ten o'clock and is very drunk and is acting champion of barflies and gins and you may take some consolation in the victories he is having. You have had some victories of your own, surely. Your obedient stomach is your night's best victory.

"The skinny one with no tits doesn't have any tits," Nick Cant repeated himself, more insistently this time.

"Does she have a hole between her legs, Nick?"

"She has two holes between her legs, old man. No tits on her chest, though, old man."

The boy came in the side entrance. The side entrance of the pub was reserved for people who liked using side entrances. The boy

told himself he was the kind who liked using side entrances. Nobody seemed to notice him. He slammed the door loudly and still they did not notice. Only a gentleman with a soft drink in his hand noticed. Fuck the gentleman with the soft drink in his hand. Gentlemen with soft drinks in their hands were not the kind. Nick Cant was the kind who liked using side entrances. Nick Cant is over there, the boy told himself. I know he is, the boy told himself. He slugged his way past the teetotaler who was not the kind. Some piss-ant with gravy on his chin went Ouch! and grabbed hold of his hamstring and laughed and the boy ignored him too. The piss-ant's mate went Ouch! also. The boy ignored him. Another guy went, Watch out for them hamstrings, young fella! and put his hand on the boy's shoulder. The boy ignored them all.

"Nick!" The boy called out. That will shut them up, he told himself, opening his stride some. Nobody got out of his path and some of the ones he bumped into did not seem to notice they had been bumped into until their friends standing beside them pointed out that it was that abo kid who had hamstrung the lamb and then run off looking like he was going to burst into tears. "Hey! Nick!"

Nick Cant and the old man both peered around. The boy grinned at them. Damn idiot. He chided himself for grinning at them. For not being as he had planned to be. Ugly and full of sarcasm. Sitting by himself at the bar ordering drinks without even speaking, just motioning the pile of coins laid out in front of him. Probably some spew on his chin from where he could not have been bothered. And a guy with big muscles and snake tattoos telling his friend in the background that that kid over there should give up on shearing and take up full-time drinking, look at the bastard go.

"Featherweight champion of hamstrings," the old man said. That is the sort of sarcasm, boy. "You look like you've had your piece stuck in a pot of honey, featherweight champion of hamstrings. Why are you so impressed and happy, featherweight champion of hamstrings? Where have you been?"

"He is happy because he is featherweight champion of hamstrings and he has been impressing himself into a pot of honey," Nick Cant said. Both he and the old man laughed. "That's enough to make anyone happy. He's champion of pots of honey now too. What comes after pots of honey, old man?"

"Arseholes and jam," the old man answered. They laughed again.

The boy said nothing. Do not ruin it, he told himself. He could not help from ruining it. The taste inside him was making him ruin all

his big plans. It had ruined his big say nothing just sit there with a scowl and pile of money plan. It had ruined his first wait here until it is finished and then walk in with it tucked empty under your arm and sit scowling plan. It had turned both these plans into a new and combined leave it here at the edge of the tracks carefully so that it does not tip over and spill everywhere and that way you can finish it on your way home after you have grinned your way in and out of the pub plan.

“Are you champions of arseholes and jam too, boy?” Nick Cant said. “Or just champion of impressing yourself into pots of honey?”

Talk about impressing yourself was pretty common. So was talk about impressing arseholes and honey. The old man no longer bothered with impressing arseholes and honey – not even the ones you paid to impress. Mel, the skinny no-tits was not really one of these sorts, but she had no car and no licence and her fat friend was not always at hand and sometimes when she was out of money she would allow herself to be impressed by somebody’s generosity and when they had finished impressing her and herself she would ask them for a lift to Young so that she could visit her sometimes boyfriend who could not come to Bribbaree because of the apprehended violence order she had taken out on him. The boyfriend was an unimpressive bastard who worked at the abattoir. Fists and meat were the only things that impressed the unimpressive boyfriend. He and Nick Cant had tried impressive-swapping at last year’s quickshear.

“At least I am not champion of impressing gins,” the boy said to his father.

Nick Cant went slurp-slurp-slurp.

The first time the boy impressed himself it was listening to the too-old old man with one of those proper paid-for types. It was several years ago against his bedroom wall and it was ugly because he did not know what he was doing. The old man was not too old for impressing anything then and the boy was just old enough. He did not do it right this first time, though, and it hurt as much as it felt good. To begin with it hurt much more than it felt good, then it hurt and felt good the same, then the goodness was the only thing, and then he did not know whether it had really ever felt that good, or even whether it had hurt to begin with. It was a mustard-coloured memory and a difficult one of which to be certain.

“I am too old to be champion of impressing anybody now.” The old man had been drinking devoutly since ten o’clock. He was very drunk

and the boy could see this and felt that they were brothers because of it. The boy had run home and walked back by himself and the old man had not left his seat, even to piss, and the boy thought that this sort of dedication made them brothers many times over.

It was a long way to walk. Have you walked it, brother? I stayed here and paced round and round this glass, brother. Okay, brother. Does that make us brothers, brother? Our stomachs make us brothers, brother, not our legs. Good then, we are brothers, brother.

“But seeing as though you are the new champion of everything, my boy, you might like to be champion of not acting like a smartarse,” the old man continued, after having taken another pull on his drink. “Now, why don’t you try your hand at being champion of pissing off before I stand up off my chair and make you champion of swallowing your tongue in front of everyone?”

The old man spoke quietly and emphatically and the boy did not feel they were brothers at all now. Very quickly he felt that his only brother was the dog he had kicked in the head for refusing to drink from the bottle too. You have not forgotten to chain that thing up, have you, boy?

“You can be champion of making me swallow my tongue,” the boy answered back. Nick Cant went slurp-slurp-suck. It was the stuff in the boy’s stomach that was his brother now, and his brother was commanding him to laugh at the threat in spite of himself and it was telling him that this laughing was the great self-condemner’s trick. You have it now, he told himself, enjoying the grin on his face which was not cordial and friendly as he had first despaired, but absolutely spiteful and ugly and perfect. “Can you also be champion of teaching me how to screw gins and end up raising their bastard sons?” And the bottle left sitting carefully at the side of the tracks was much more than half-finished and the lamb with the cut hamstring was much more than just stuffed and Nick Cant was more than just slurping spit off his top lip.

“Yes, I will teach you how,” the old man said. He took his wallet from his back pocket and produced a single twenty-dollar from its leather gills. “Take this with you and tell that no-tits friend of Nick’s over there that you would like to beat the hell out of yourself and would she mind in letting you do it with her. Tell her twenty dollars is much more than your poor gin mother ever got for touching her toes.”

“I’ve got my own money for that,” the boy said. He put his hand into his back pocket and took out a bundle of money. Maybe a thousand dollars. Certainly eight or nine hundred. He had collected and counted it from the sock drawer where all of his cheques and

cash wages went. Both men laughed and the old man put his miserly twenty dollars on the bar. Gritter soon poured him another and the pub was very full. Someone screamed, Go get stuffed! and that was followed by a lot of cheers.

The boy had learned to distinguish the proper types from these ones like Mel a long time ago. The proper sort did not care what the old man said or how drunk he was when they arrived, and they always made certain the bedroom door was closed and the car doors were locked. Often the boy felt the desire to slip into the backseat of a paid-for's vehicle and jerk himself while his father had her glistening over the headboard of his bed. When he found the car was locked he would retreat back to the house and pivot himself against the wall where his brilliant career first began. These proper sorts were never as loud with the old man as the ones like Mel, who were forced to take some enjoyment from the act to compensate for the small tender they had secured. However, the old man was always louder when he was with them. The boy thought loudness had something to do with money. He appreciated also that the old man had the same contempt for one lot as he did for the other now, and it was the sort somebody will have for a thing they know they do not need.

"I hope you get the fat one with big tits for that as well," Nick Cant said to the boy. "Tell her she has big tits and you might get her for free. She likes watching pussy getting screwed. That's too much money even for the both of them. Put some of it away, boy."

Nick Cant was narrow champion of proper types. Narrow over Ray. Ray was not here. Nick Cant laughed. There was a proper who visited town twice a month from Wagga and she was Nick Cant's favourite. She was Ray's favourite too. She had an ad in the classified section of the paper and in the ad she was called Abby blonde and trim and she would come to your house or meet you somewhere discreet for romance and fantasy with three Xs and a mobile phone number that was easy to remember because it contained only fours and zeros and ones. How many times had the boy thought of calling that number? Nick Cant said Abby's real name was Fiona and Ray said it was Rachel. The two of them were always going on about what her real name was and who had been the first to nail her and who would be nailing her next and nailing her so hard she would have triple orgasms and have to take a week off just to get over it. You needed a big one to make these proper sorts have triple orgasms, and Nick Cant could make her have them every time. So could Ray. The boy thought her real name was probably not Fiona nor Rachel. He imagined it to be something like Debbie. A secret she would only

reveal after someone had managed to give her quadruple orgasms.

“He shouldn’t be in here if he’s been on the piss,” Gritter interrupted. It was very noisy and Gritter was very busy and all three of them stopped looking at the skinny one with no tits and the fat one with big tits and looked at Gritter. “I’ll lose my licence,” Gritter said, finishing off a beer for someone.

“This here is the champion of propositioning women,” Nick Cant said to the publican. “You couldn’t kick him out after that.” He slapped his hand down on the boy’s shoulder.

“You keep an eye on him then,” Gritter said. “You, old man. You hear me?”

“I’m too old to stop him,” the old man said to Gritter. “If he’s going to take me, then let him take me.”

“You knew he would take you,” Gritter replied.

“I knew he would take me and you knew it too, Grits. Did you know it, boy?”

The boy grinned and did not know it.

Before the proper ones with three Xs and the not-proper ones with no Xs, there was Trisha. She was a not-at-all one. In five years the old man did not ever hit her. If they fought he would restrain himself and allow her to call him all sorts of names. He would only sit there and laugh and drink, and when she came out with a good one he would clap and say, Good one, whore. The day she decided to leave though, packing her clothes into a garbage bag and her makeup supplies into a red plastic bucket with no handle, the old man grabbed her by the whore hair and pulled her whore head down against the kitchen table. He put the end of the rifle up to her whore temple and she screamed and cocked her whore legs and tried to back-kick him like a horse. The old man told her she should stop carrying on like a woman who wanted to have the end of a rifle pointed at her face if she did not want to have the end of a rifle pointed at her face. That blubbery mascaraed whore eye, with the barrel end almost touching it, which looked like a horse’s because of how big and unblinking and panicked it was, was something the boy still remembered perfectly and without ever meaning to.

The champion of propositioning women approached the table. The women looked at him.

“What do you want, pindick? Did your pindick boyfriend send you over here to show us your pindick?” The skinny one with no tits leaned past him and stuck her middle finger up in the direction of the bar. Nick Cant laughed and waved back.

“No,” the boy shook his head.

“No,” the skinny one with no tits meekly impersonated. She began crunching ice from the bottom of her glass. “Do you need a babysitter, then? Is that it?” Both her and the fatty with big ones laughed and the boy could hear Nick Cant and his father laughing also. He put his hand on the turd of cash in the back of his pants, the steaming brick of twenty-dollar notes. More than nine hundred dollars in cash. Hamstring money. He pulled a single twenty out and sat it on the table.

“Tell your faggot father I would not let him inside me if he had a gold dick,” the skinny one retaliated, raising her finger again. She brushed the twenty off and onto the floor and the fat one pursed her lips and sucked through her straw.

“You’re making us look bad, champion of propositioning women,” the old man called.

The boy turned and then turned back. He put his hand into his pocket again and retrieved the entirety of the money. He laid it on the table and it stood bright and clean and tall, as a wad of cash should stand, a red throbbing pillar between Sampson and Zeus. The skinny one with no tits and no licence, who was skinny and teethey and yellow-fingered, put her hand on it like a card player. The boy felt himself go erect and she laughed.

Like a school camping trip when he was eleven. Five other boys in the tent, bragging about movies they had found in their brothers’ and fathers’ sock drawers, pulling the folded video jackets from the bottoms of their bags for proof, violating them with torches and greasy thumbs. And then, when they were sure he was the first asleep, the torches were switched off and there was creeping and laughing and pouring same-sock-drawer aftershave on his face and crotch. He could hear the laughing, but he was dreaming now. In his dream it was rain: they were laughing storm clouds over him. The deluge was hot and it was cold. It ran past his eyes and into his ears, down his arse crack. It made him say things. Sad things. Vivid things. Violent things. They became worried and one of them shook him awake. He sat straight up, still talking dangerously, then stopped and looked around. They knew that meant he was okay and they quickly remembered how funny it was. Then came the sour waft of wet polyester sleeping bag, sickening with the scent of the aftershave. He tried to breathe it all in but it was too much for one set of lungs. The laughter turned to gagging. A teacher opened the flap and took

him to the cabin where the girls were sleeping and called his father. It was the middle of the night and he was teary when the old man arrived. They had made him remove his pants and he had a towel around his waist.

The whore with no tits, whose friend had big tits and a soundless laugh and did not drink anything other than soda water or eat anything other than chips which she sucked back to saltless greaseless transparent slivers of plain vegetable, told the boy to hold it upways and be careful. She told him if he spilt any out of the end he would owe her money for cleaning. The boy took it off carefully and carried it to the toilet bowl. He dropped it in and it stuck to the side like an animal's tongue. A camel's, he thought, yellow and thirsty. He aimed his thing at the tongue and the stream of urine quickly peeled it away and emptied it into the water. After pissing he crawled into the bathtub and fell asleep. Outside the bedroom his father was waiting to screw this part-time whore the remaining nine or so hundred dollars' worth.

Can you feel it coming, sister?

He was still very drunk. His eyeballs moved slowly and seemed disengaged from each other. After a few seconds they calibrated and he stared damply through them, trying his hardest to focus on a cracked wall tile just above the rim of the bathtub. The enamel beneath his cheek smelt like dry soap. It was a green-coloured bathtub, the tint one associates with oxidisation and quarantine hospitals. The boy listened with his ear and cheek pressed to its bottom. He listened for the precise moment when his father would tell her that it was really coming. He did not ask himself how he knew it was his father. He only listened. Patients listening for the sound of footsteps and keys maybe. Submarines for the sound of battleships. Echoes dense enough to make whales beach themselves and hysterics smear shit on their own pillowcases.

In the bedroom, the patriarch whipped at that skinny woman with no tits like she were a draught horse. He pulled back on her hair, keeping her straight-hipped, splint-lipped and sightless. When she brayed and snorted and said that she could feel it coming he reined back harder and told her to squeeze it out. She pushed and squeezed and tightened her flanks. The boy leaned forward and did the same.

Dilation came to the boy first. Surfacing from his intestines like an octopus. His throat burned. His pancreas burned. The acidic taste made his ears hum. It forced through again, throwing tentacles like pieces of spleen. Using his index finger and middle finger he cleared the blockages from the plughole and heaved a third time. The showerhead dripping over his skull was truncheoning. His testicles hanging between his flanks were jowly and plum-coloured. His other bit looked widowed and cruel and breathless and happy. Twice more he went. Then nothing. Maybe you are empty, he told himself. He could feel the mollusc working around in his gut, however, and knew this was a hopeful lie.

When he was finally convinced it had settled into a more permanent reprieve, the boy put a hand on each of the tap handles and pushed himself into a squatting position in the middle of the tub. He breathed heavily and rested his head between his knees. The woman on the bed breathed heavily. The old man driving her breathed heavily. Water leaked from the loosened tap end. The boy cupped some into his mouth to rinse the taste and retightened the handle. He was still very drunk. His movements played adjacent to his thoughts. The old man was still very drunk too, and his movements were adjacent and vicious. The woman was not very drunk and was swearing that she could feel it coming. The boy spat the water and counted to four. Tell me you can feel it now, sister.

It had been coming without actually arriving for more than twenty-five minutes for the old man. He was still very drunk. Oh, God, yes, the skinny woman with no tits was promising him. Begging him. She was skinny and was not very drunk and did not have any tits save the nipples on her chest which sat out to mark the spot where tits should have been. The boy had bitten one and she had driven a knuckle into his temple. She drove the same knuckle into the face of a stuffed animal now and shouted to convince the old man it was coming without his even knowing it. The bed was covered in stuffed animals. Perhaps she had visions of the old man believing her and pushing forward in a climax of bent notes, pitch problems and vibrating hamstrings. A climax of sweat and plush. For her the whole narrative of sex was a game of solicitations and severances and everything in between was a trick. Each new act of perversion she invented was an attempt to shorten the lapse between beginning and end, between capital letter and full stop, penetration and climax. The squealing and bucking and promising were all directed at camouflaging the inevitable, making him desire it in whole new ways, convincing him that there was novelty in climax, and pleasure beyond. Repetition disguised as momentum: a whore's favourite device. She moaned and twisted and treated her body like it was guilty of sainthood. She used all of the best tricks and conjured up some very old ones. The old man became shallower and shallower and his hamstrings indeed tightened. He began to sense it. She sensed it also. It became a battle then, to see who could sense it without sensing it. The old man tried to un-sense it. He was a chainsaw mating with a stump. A mosquito inside a waterlily. She reached around and inserted two fingers into his arsehole. She was an old whores' trick.

Finding the spot with her fingernails. A shucking knife prising open an oyster shell. From there the old man could not un-sense anything. He became adjacent to himself. She had beaten him and his own pale prostate muscle had beaten him with her. Goddamn, the mollusc family was working hard tonight.

It was all finished then and the old man was still very drunk. He entered the bathroom and stumbled forward over the toilet bowl. Piss scalded and hissed like steam against the ceramic cistern. He tripped again and his stream shot sideways and blistered across the boy's bare bottom half. The boy took it like a galley slave and did not lift his head or attempt to mutiny. He did not trot away to find a spot alongside the fence where no nettles were growing and he did not tell himself that he ought to have known about being a good one either. He was still very drunk and remained crouched over in the middle of the bathtub. From there he had sensed the defeat as strongly as the old man had sensed it. The thing between his legs had listened and had sensed it too, and had shrivelled back into itself like a starving ringworm. The old man's was a tomcat with both eyes scratched out, hissing and pissing over the seat and tiles.

When the old man finished he addressed the boy, telling him to stand. The boy was still very drunk and did not stand. The boy considered himself one-part old man now, and perhaps his father considered him one-part old man too, he thought. One-part old man, four-parts drunk brother. He breathed heavily. The old man breathed heavily. The old man was still very drunk and he bent forward and grabbed hold of his four-part drunk brother at the back of the neck. The boy struggled against him like a whale being pushed back to sea or an hysteric being restrained and medicated. The old man staggered and held onto the shower curtain to keep his balance. He tried lifting the boy onto his feet, and the boy became a deadweight whale, a stubborn hysteric, a no-parts brother. The old man breathed heavily and gripped tighter and jerked the boy up onto his haunches and the boy heaved, though nothing came out. The old man who was still very drunk found this too much and he laughed and kept the boy pinned at the back of the neck and propped against the tiled wall breathing heavily.

"You'd be champion of taking your own father up the arse, if you were any more gallant," he told the boy. With his spare hand he grabbed hold of the boy's cruel widowed breathless, and he stretched it out. The boy resisted and tried to free himself. The whore hid her

payment in the belly of a stuffed animal and left the house. It was her house. It was the boy's cruel widowed breathless. The old man was still very drunk.

"Show me how gallant you can be, boy." The old man let go then and it shrank away. "You can't be champion of taking your own father up the arse if you're not prepared to be gallant all the way through. Are you prepared to be gallant all the way through, boy? You can do all of my screwing for me from now on, boy. Since you're so goddamned gallant. Look how gallant you are." The old man made another grab and the boy protected himself by lifting his right knee.

"I can be gallant and do all of my own screwing," the boy said.

The old man laughed and released the boy altogether. Knocking a shampoo bottle off the shower rack he took up the razor which had caught his eye instead. He ran his thumb down over the blades to get an appreciation for its tang. He laughed again. He was still very drunk and the whore with no tits had left the house for the pub and the razor was plastic and pink and full-tanged.

"You haven't learned all the tricks yet," he said to the boy. The boy tensed his stomach muscles and did not lower his knee and expected to be hit. The old man laughed and both of them were still very drunk. The old man did not hit him. The old man was still very drunk and breathing heavily.

"I don't need to know them all," the boy said. "I know the important ones and that's enough."

"Which ones are the important ones, then?"

"The important ones are the unimportant ones, and the unimportant ones are the important ones." The boy was feeling two-parts old man now. Three, maybe. He coaxed himself into laughing aloud and lowering his knee to show his parts. He had already put his foot on it once tonight. He put his foot down on it again. Do you want to be a dog all of your life? Or do you want to be an old man some day? He had taken it by the snout and tried to fill its mouth directly from the bottle. It had resisted and he had laughed and called it a goddamned unimportant black bastard. Drink up or I will shoot you, you unimportant black bastard, he had said to it. It had jerked around, refusing to drink. Eventually he had left it and returned to the pub via the railway line. It had twisted itself into a knot of chain and desire and hunger, until eventually the chain part had let go and allowed it to slip its collar.

“Do you think these whores with no tits are the important ones?” the old man asked him. The razor was twin-bladed and full-tanged and the old man gripped it like a skinning pen.

“I think they are the most unimportant important ones,” the boy answered bravely. The boy was being very brave now. He was still very drunk also.

“You talk like an old man, boy. But I still think you do not know all the tricks. As long as you think you can screw the value out of them all.”

The seam between the blades was narrow and the boy could see straight through. Instinct was never so rife or pleasurable as the moment between two razor blades. Like two hipbones smooth as cork. Or the opening between two black and shiny thighs. Capital letter and full stop, you unimportant black bastard. He felt it buckling beneath his foot.

“There’s no need to screw the value out of them all,” the boy suggested. “One is enough. When you have screwed the value out of one, you have screwed the value out of them all.” He was still very drunk, and was being very clever and self-reflexive, and did sound very much like an old man.

The old man did sound very much like an old man too.

“Boy, it’s no less difficult to screw the value out of one of them than it is to screw the value out of all of them. The trick is in screwing the value out of yourself.”

“I’ll screw the value out of myself,” the boy answered quickly. “Should I screw the value out of you too?” he asked. Yes, the boy was all-parts old man now. He told himself he did not fear anything. He was still very drunk and he told himself he was capable of performing all the old man tricks. He told himself he was older and drunker than the old man even. Both of them were still very drunk.

“I’ll teach you a thing about value, boy. You don’t know all the tricks yet.” The boy laughed. The old man did not. He took hold of himself and began to slice crossways with the razor. He punctuated the length with parallel incisions, thin as paper cuts. He showed the boy what it was to have length. He carved cross-thatches into the head and base. “You can’t play at it in halves,” he said, cutting through as much loose skin as he could, making the thing in his hand look old and contemptuous and spiteful and disgusted with its own failure to die or circumcise. Blood dripped onto the floor like sap.

The boy stood frightened and defeated in the middle of the bathtub. “Not all of the tricks are as pleasurable as getting drunk and sticking your wallet up some whore, boy.” And when the old man had finished this old man exhibition he let go of the razor and propped himself dripping and amused over the top of the toilet bowl. Some old man exhibition.

The old man was still very drunk and was asleep on the toilet when the boy left the bathroom. The boy was still very drunk too. He had not attempted the old man way of falsely ringbarking himself, and, before falling asleep, his father had taunted him and told him the only way to really screw the value out of yourself was to cut it right off and shove it up your own arse anyway. You would be the old man of old men if you could master that one, he had advised. The boy had convinced himself that there were probably other ways and he could not think of any and in his failure to do so the old man had proven there were still some tricks for the boy to learn.

In the bedroom the boy dressed into his father’s dungarees and did not worry about underpants or socks or belt, but pulled his boots on over his bare feet and hitched his forefingers through the front belt loops to keep the pants from sliding down. He was careful not to wake the old man. Like that he ran out of the house and toward the pub. The compass needle in his pants bounced up and down as he ran and tried pointing him in the direction of his home, onto the railway tracks and past the silos, through the line paddock and up the drive. He ignored it and listened to the keys which bounced and jingled in the back pocket. He breathed heavily.

At the entrance to the pub the boy stopped and fished the keys from his pocket and threw them onto the roof. Forget your goddamned old man games, he chided himself. He was still very drunk and the instinct was rife and doubted he could ever match his father and did not want to anyway. He told himself he did not want to. You do not want to be like that goddamned old man and that is why you never will be, he reassured to himself. Be like some other old man. Nick Cant does not need to go about hacking at his own piece to prove anything. Be like Nick Cant. Nick Cant could give them triple orgasms. Some kids who were standing around beneath a street light followed the boy’s lead, throwing a cluster of like-sized rocks and glass pieces onto the pub’s tin roof. One of them tossed the bottle of rum he had found at the causeway beneath the railway tracks. It hurtled through the air like a malfunctioning firecracker.

When it hit the roof it slid off and landed on the footpath and did not break. A firecracker without a bang. The boy barged through the side entrance of the pub.

Nick Cant was already laughing and lurching and lathering over himself when the boy entered the bar. The skinny woman with no tits, who had returned to the pub to be with her fat friend, was laughing also. The fat friend who had massive ones and who, an hour earlier, had been laughing inwardly and soundlessly, laughed outwardly and titteringly now. This fat friend had allowed Nick Cant to put his hand in the space between her thighs. Nick Cant had his hand going back and forth and the boy understood just what old man games were all about. They were not about screwing the value out of anything, they were about out-screwing everyone around you. Triple orgasms. Quadruple orgasms. Quintuple orgasms. Decoy orgasms. The boy rushed in and punched Nick Cant in the side of the face, and Nick Cant's back-and-forth hand, which was also his shearing hand and his toast-making hand – "Here's to the champion of hamstrings and breastfeeding!" – let go of the schooner glass and became his fist hand. He knocked the boy down onto the floor. Choose some other old man, boy. Two men taking shots at the bar turned around and poured tequila over the boy and toasted his success. The boy got up and ran out of the pub and the fat friend with big ones let Nick Cant make another anatomical toast concerning her specifically and the scene was merry and rife with old men of all ages and varieties.

From the pub home was six kilometres. Closer to four if you were walking because you could run and hold your pants up and make it feel like two and be there in one. The boy ran and could hear the younger kids outside the pub shouting behind him and he did not stop to listen to what they were saying or to show them his bloodied old man pub-fighter's nose or to show them that other thing tucked inside his father's pants as worthless and heroic and gallant and modest and undersized as an empty bottle of rum which refused to smash. The boy was still very drunk and the top part of his body seemed to be orbiting in an opposite direction to the bottom part and both parts seemed to be diametric to the middle part and every three hundred and sixty degrees both parts came swooping toward one another, passed, and continued on their breathless repetitive counter-ways, while the middle part never went anywhere except for in and out like a combustion engine heartbeat. The faster the boy ran the more frantic the revolutions became and by the time

he had reached the driveway he did not know what kind of old man he wanted to be, and the razored peppercorn trunk had stopped dripping into the toilet and was healing over faster and thicker than ever before, and the saintly hand was trying its hardest to work the value out of the fat clitoris, and the skinny mouth was introducing itself to other cashed-up old men mouths, feeling that this was its night to shine.

The boy footed it across the house paddock. His lungs felt as if they were giving birth to his stomach. The blood had turned his face to a spider web of red and purple. He did not think of his dog. She had slipped her collar much earlier. He thought of the rifle. I will show you how to play old man games, the boy thought. You too, Nick. Then he yelled it.

“You too, Nick!”

The silos yelled back at him. Their voices metallic and booming. It was the inside of a drum. It was a firing chamber. In the distance the dog stood prick-eared and responded to each reverberation by barking. She had slipped her collar. The pigsty had been destroyed in a storm. You did not play old man games by doing things in halves. You too, Nick. Stop believing in quadruple orgasms and old man tricks. Old man tricks are as bad as whore tricks and the only old man is a committed old man, old man.

The boy ran past the dog's kennel and did not notice her slipped collar. It was lying there slipped. Perhaps he was still very drunk. He did not feel very drunk. Drunkenness was like fire, which required oxygen. Perhaps the drunkenness was smouldering in his belly, waiting to reignite as soon as he stopped running and caught his breath. You could not be drunk while you were out of breath. At the front door of the house the boy did stop running. His dog had positioned herself there. In her jaws was the body of the dead kitten.

“Goddamned black bastard. Black bastard of a bastard.”

The dog did not move and did not release the kitten. The boy kicked at her. She growled when he tried to pull the kitten out of her mouth. Her saliva made its head glisten like a seal's.

He stepped over the dog and went into the kitchen. This black bastard could be as slipped and stubborn as she wanted. The door slammed behind him. Old men did not play games with dogs.

He took the rifle, along with the coffee tin containing a faded box of eight slugs, and sat down at the kitchen table. He pulled the bolt back and placed a bullet into the firing chamber where it had been

a thousand times. Maybe the old man was as heroic with rifles as he was with shaving razors. The dog sat watching through the screen door. She had slipped her collar, the black bastard, and had given herself over to instinct, digging up the body of that black bastard of a kitten with its black ginger-coloured fur. The boy looked into the barrel of the rifle and remembered the horse's eye, panicked and unblinking.

"Look away, you goddamned black bastard."

The dog did not move away from the door, but stayed peering in at him with the exhumed kitten hanging limply in her mouth.

"You goddamned black bastard," he said to her. "You're a goddamned black bastard, you goddamned black bastard."

The dog lowered her head and kept her ears pitched. She dropped the kitten on the piece of rubber in front of her and barked once. A loud high-pitched bark that rose up through the ceiling and raced across the corrugated roof, into the downpipes and beneath the floorboards.

The boy snapped the rifle into place between the floor and his head like a parading soldier. He used the end to feel for his temple. Then turned it to make a pilot hole. It felt good pressing in there. The metal was smooth and dull and cold, and the fit was right. With his head on its side, he tried laughing at the dog to show her how good it felt. The specificity and elegance of it was too much and the laughter refused to come. She barked at him again.

"You'll be a specialty dog when you can learn this one," he said.

The dog pressed her nose to the gauze and he told her to get back. She stepped away, then came forward again and snapped the kitten up in her mouth.

"For chrissakes."

The boy went for her through the gauze. First with the toe of his boot and then with the rest of him. He clubbed out with the butt of the rifle. She was too quick for him, the goddamned. He had a bigger gait though, the black bastard of a, and was able to pin her with his foot. He tried jerking the kitten from her hole of a mouth of a hole. Instinct had set into her jaw muscles like tetanus and she could not make herself unclench for him. It began to come apart in his hand. First a leg. Then a lick of milky-coloured skin. In the sheds the lick would be called a skin piece and nailed to the panel above his stand. He would be laughed at and called a gouger.

The dog squirmed beneath him and he drove the sole of his boot in harder, as though her head were the head of a shovel. He jammed the barrel of the rifle in like a crowbar chipping away the edges. She was as hard as dirt, the black bastard of a boy, and refused to round out no matter how he worked at her. The pants he had kept hitched for six four two one kilometres fell to his shins. The dog snarled and the boy knew why his father had not gone any deeper with the razor. An old man is no different to any living thing. The dog-damned bastard of a goddamned bastard. Left off his chain overnight, he will go out into the dark and kill. Called old man enough times in one afternoon, he will pretend this is his name. There are some lessons even dog-damned black bastards do not need teaching.

And so with the kitten snarling and the dog refusing to take shape, the boy squeezed, sending the thousandth-time-lucky bullet away from the prostate chamber, down the barrel and out into the world of dogged, godless instinct. Where nothing sensed can ever be un-sensed, and where you do not need to be any kind of specialty creature for the bell inside your chest to go on ringing, in spite of all else, and in spite of itself.



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KeatleeLine Kruimink

**NEWS  
FROM  
A  
RADIANT  
FUTURE**

# **NEWS FROM A RADIANT FUTURE**

Katherine Kruijnk

with illustrations by Anthony Calvert

Protein //  
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COMPOUND BETA  
BULLETIN

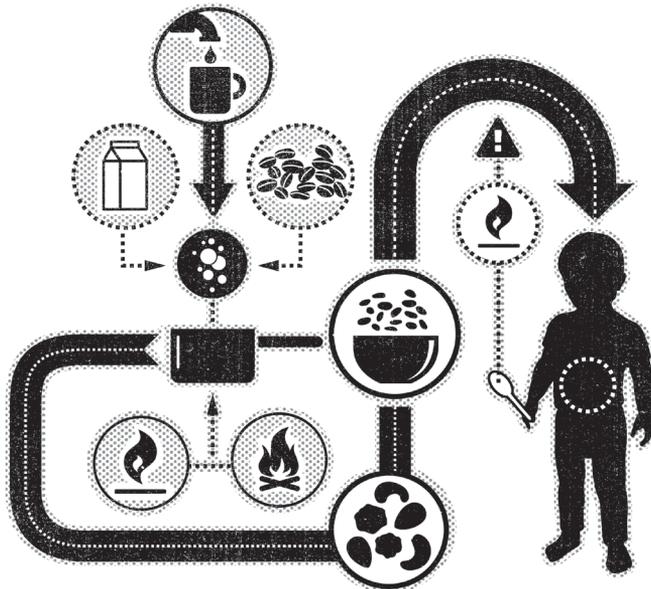
TYPE: FOOD/KITCHEN (JOHN)  
FOR THE ATTN OF: ALL  
RE: JOHN'S BFAST

**PLEASE DO NOT REMOVE THIS NOTICE**

John has porridge for breakfast. If you are making this for him, please follow these directions precisely.

1. Use the blue enamel cup. Fill it with water and put the water in one of the small saucepans.
2. Unless we have gas for the burners, put it on the metal plate over the fire. If we do have gas, it is permitted to use the burners **ONLY FOR JOHN'S FOOD UNLESS AUTHORIZED OTHERWISE.**
3. **BRING THE WATER TO THE BOIL.** This is vital. This means there will be bubbles in the water. If you are unsure, ask for help.
4. **AFTER** the water has boiled, add **ONE** scoop of the milk powder. The milk powder is in the tin in John's section in the pantry. It is labelled. The scoop is in the milk powder. Once you have finished, return the scoop to the tin, and close the lid tightly. Do not get the scoop wet, even to wash it. If you get water on the scoop, ask for help (in the book see 'Washing Utensils').
5. Stir the powder into the water. It will turn into milk. **BRING THE MILK BACK TO THE BOIL.** It will bubble again. You must stir it constantly otherwise it may burn.
6. **AFTER** the milk has boiled, add one cup of oats. The oats are in John's section in a plastic container. They are labelled. The cup is in the container. Please do not wash the cup. Return it directly to the container after use, and remember to put the lid back on tightly.

7. Stir the oats into the milk and keep stirring until bubbles appear and the oats are thick.
8. Look at the NOTES section at the bottom of this bulletin. It will tell you if there is dried fruit or honey. If we have one of these things, add one large spoonful to the oats. If we have more than one of these things, choose one only. They will be in John's section and clearly labelled.
9. Use only crockery and cutlery that has been boiled. This is kept in the green (clean) cupboard. Transfer the porridge to a clean bowl. John likes the white plastic spoon with the sheep on it. If it is not in the green cupboard, do not use it.
10. Remind him it will be hot. We do not want him to burn himself.
11. Please remember the milk powder is strictly for John only as it is in very limited supply. Porridge for the adults is made with water.
12. If reading is hard for you, do not guess words you do not know. Ask for help to make sure you understand as this is a very important notice.



COMPOUND BETA  
BULLETIN

TYPE: GATHERING  
FOR THE ATTN OF: ALL  
RE: FIONA AND MOSES

**PLEASE DO NOT REMOVE THIS NOTICE**

This is to remind everyone that there will be a service in the dining hall for the much-loved and already missed Fiona Ng and Moses Leehan. The usual mourning programme will be utilised.

Please do not visit the bodies, as they are now hazardous waste.

Remember instead Fiona and Moses' non-physical qualities.

COMPOUND BETA  
BULLETIN

TYPE: FOOD/KITCHEN  
FOR THE ATTN OF: ALL  
RE: CAN YOU EAT A RAT?

**PLEASE DO NOT REMOVE THIS NOTICE**

It is always good to kill a rat, but not always good to eat one. Several people have asked about this recently, so here are some guidelines.

1. If you find a dead rat, **DO NOT EVEN THINK ABOUT EATING IT**. It may have died from illness or infection and is therefore dangerous. Follow the protocols or ask for help (in the book see 'Disposing of the Dead' and 'The Pit') .
2. If you kill a rat, congratulations! You're helping keep Compound Beta clean. Follow the protocols in the book for collecting and transporting dead matter, or ask for help. Remember: guilty until proven innocent! Always assume it is unsafe until you have found out otherwise.
3. Bring the dead rat in the appropriate wrappings to Dr Han, Henry or Melissa in the lab. **DO NOT BRING IT TO THE SICK BAY.**
4. Leave the rat with one of the specialists. **DO NOT** leave it



COMPOUND BETA  
BULLETIN

TYPE: GENERAL  
FOR THE ATTN OF: ALL  
RE: WHY THE COUNTRY IS BAD

PLEASE DO NOT REMOVE THIS NOTICE

Dear friends,

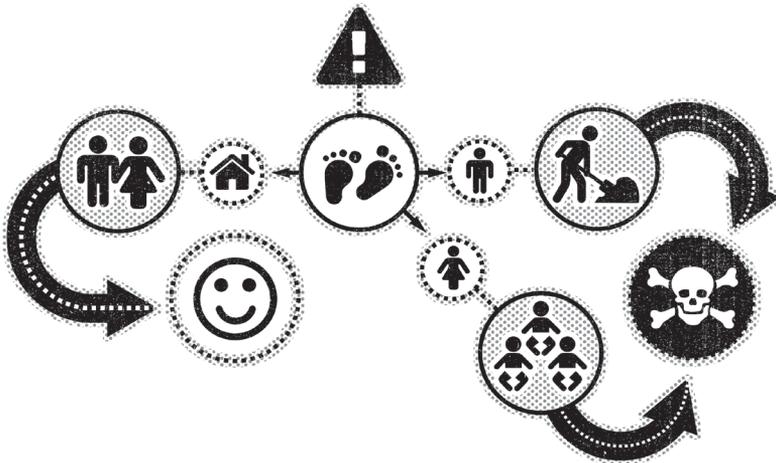
This is an emotional topic! There has been some unhappiness lately regarding the country. We don't want to single anyone out, but this tends to come from those of us born after They came. Of course, such interest is not limited to the second generation! These questions affect us all. We are all curious, and we would all like a better life.

The Compound Committee is made up of people who remember how it was before They came. We know we are older than many of you, and you might not think we understand you. But we have more information than you and we love you. You are our children, even though you are young adults now, and you are our hope for the future. We are not trying to keep anyone from a good place. There are no good places. But some places are better than others. This place – Compound Beta, and more widely, Hobart – is better than the country. Here's why.

1. It is true you can grow food in the country, but you need special knowledge to do so. There are people in the country with this knowledge, but they are busy trying to grow enough for themselves, and may not be able to teach you, EVEN IF THEY DO NOT ACTIVELY WISH TO HURT YOU (see point 6).
2. Dr Han, Henry and Melissa are working on a safe way that we can grow our own food right here in Compound Beta.
3. We know that They are in the country. They leave us alone if we live in the Compounds, but if you move to the country They will get you! If you are a young woman, there is a very good chance They will take you and put you in a Female Farm. If you are a young man, there is a very good chance They will take you and make you work until you die.
4. Even though most of you cannot have children naturally (through a male/female sexual pairing), it is not good to be put into a Female Farm. The children you have there

will not be yours; They will put them in your bodies. The children you have there will not love you. The children will be our enemies because when They put them in your body They make them very stupid, so They can use them for work or for fighting us! In the Female Farms, you will have enemy babies until you die!

5. The young men taken away to work for Them never come back. We can assume they are killed. We have evidence that the men are surgically experimented on.
6. People in the country live in villages and don't like new people coming in from outside. Think of our policy: what do we do with outsiders? But here we have rules and answer to the Integrated Compound Authority. In the country they don't answer to anyone.
7. It can be sad here and there isn't much growing. But we have food, shelter, community, medicine, and a child of our own, born naturally to a young woman of your generation! We are your family and you are ours. Stay in Compound Beta! Compound Beta for life!
- 8 . If reading is hard for you, do not guess words you do not know. Ask for help to make sure you understand as this is a very important notice.



COMMITTEE BETA  
INTERNAL MEMO

Thanks everyone for a beautiful service for Fiona and Moses, and to Dr Han, Melissa and Henry for their safe removal from the Compound to the Pit. Thank you for continuing to provide this difficult service.

Please be aware that there was a deviation from usual practice re: disposal of corpses/corpse parts. Moses' torso, though only partly attached to his head, continued to show signs of life after death. No brain activity, Dr Han tells me, but a small amount of oxygen continued to circulate via the lungs, and the heart presented spasming behaviour. Therefore the torso has been kept for observation.

Please maintain strict secrecy on this matter. The torso is in the third Hazard Room. It is strictly off limits and the story is that it (the room) is still being decontaminated.

T.A.

COMPOUND BETA  
BULLETIN FROM THE FIRST  
GENERATION AFTER THEY  
CAME (YOUR CHILDREN WHO  
ARE NOW ADULTS)

TYPE: GENERAL  
FOR THE ATTN OF: ALL  
RE: WE DO NOT BELIEVE YOU

PLEASE DO NOT REMOVE THIS NOTICE

Dear friends,

Thank you for your recent bulletin regarding the country and why you believe it is bad. We found it very interesting. We were especially interested in your point that we are now adults. Thank you for reminding us, as sometimes it is easy to forget.

We do not know where you get your information about the country, and would be very interested to inspect your sources for ourselves. Unfortunately, you have said they are not available for our inspection. We have therefore decided to see for ourselves. Here's why.

1. As your (adult) children, we want you to be properly informed. We will go to the country and in due course report back with up-to-date information.

2. We want to have enough to eat.
3. We are young and strong. If a village will not take us we will start our own village. Our village will be open to all newcomers. This includes you.
4. We are more confident than you about our ability to make friends in the country. We want to meet new people and exchange skills.
5. Besides this, we have begun a library of useful books. So far, we have:  
*The Practical Australian Gardener* by Peter Cundall  
*The First Book of Farming* by C.L. Goodrich  
*Dry-Farming: A System of Agriculture for Countries under a Low Rainfall* by John Andreas Widtsoe.
6. Besides this, we are not idiots.
7. We are dying here.
8. Victoria, despite being one of us, has decided not to come with us. We will miss John but maybe a healthier lifestyle will help us have children ourselves. Now that you are too old to have children it is up to us.
9. We are not afraid of Them.

SIGNED

KELLY BI  
LING FEI  
FINN DOYLE  
LIZA DOYLE  
HARRY LIM  
SARAH LITTLE  
JOSHUA MCNAMARA  
CHRISTIAN NG  
RUPERT NG  
MAY QUINN  
JASMINE REED  
JAMES SHAUGNESSEY  
HUGO SHORT  
LEAH STRAHAN

For my dear Mother and Father,

I hope you were not alarmed to see that today's idiosyncratic and unofficial bulletin (RE: WE DO NOT BELIEVE YOU) was composed in my handwriting. I trust you quickly ensured my name was not amongst those listed. I will remain here in Compound Beta; the group wishing to leave approached me to act as their scribe as none of them knows how to spell. Two of my fellow scholars had declined to help due to irreconcilable moral differences. I am not in agreement with the transgressive party, yet I am sympathetic to their reasoning, and would not cite my differences from them as irreconcilable.

As an aside: I understand how confused and difficult it must have been for their parents – your friends and peers – to raise them whilst adjusting to the drastic changes in living conditions engendered by Their sudden and destructive arrival, but really my peers were done a terrible disservice by being denied systematic education. Some of them can barely write their names. It is little wonder then that they feel disaffected; they feel excluded from a special club in which we lettered persons (who are with very few exceptions of your generation) enjoy secret knowledge.

If you wish to convince this faction to remain with us, I would suggest offering an educative programme. Not only will this help each rebel feel actively included in Compound communicative and intellectual life, but it will give the gift of higher thought. I was deeply fortunate in my parentage and am forever grateful for the importance you both placed upon my education, even to the procurement at times of books over food.

It is a comfort to be able to read and enjoy great books, to understand the history of not only our island but the world at large, and our place in it, to try the abstract perfection of mathematics, to sample other languages – to even know other languages exist – and to explore and discuss poetry, with you and my fellow scholars. It is, I feel, vital to the human spirit to have some means of ascension from the filth and hardship in which we are forced to dwell. Indeed, my poor unlettered peers are blindly seeking out such ascension in this quest to 'greener pastures' in the country.

It is true that unlike you we do not have a golden past to reflect upon. Nevertheless, we are human beings, and even without education – even without being told it was not always like this – we crave something better.

Guide them! The impulse is natural; show them its finest manifestation!

“To learn to read is to light a fire; every syllable that is spelled out is a spark.” Victor Hugo

“Literacy is a bridge from misery to hope.” Kofi Annan

“One of the greatest gifts adults can give – to their offspring and to their society – is to read to children.” Carl Sagan

But I am preaching to the choir.

With fond regards,  
Your son Noah.

P.S. I am hunting with Marcus etc. today. You were asleep when I wrote this. I wished to ensure there was no doubt in your minds as to my continued residence.

COMPOUND BETA EMERGENCY COMMITTEE MEETING  
MINUTES

Present are committee members and representatives of group of young citizens proposing departure.

BETA COMMITTEE:

Thomas Arthur **Chairperson**  
Joshua Ng **Secretary**  
Leo Han **Advisor**  
Jen Doyle **Advisor**

REPRESENTATIVES OF REBEL GROUP:

Christian Ng  
May Quinn  
Hugo Short

ABSENT: M. Castellanos (**Advisor**), M. Strahan (**Advisor**)

Meeting called to order at 6.16pm on the 13th of June.

MOTION: T. Arthur moved to adopt the agenda of discussion of matter of country exodus; hearing of the reasons behind this; and finally convincing representatives of rebel group to stay.

C. Ng offered protest; suggests agenda is not objective.

J. Ng seconded original motion.

MOTION: M. Quinn moved to amend original motion: to adopt the agenda of discussion of country exodus from both points of view.

C. Ng seconded.

Vote taken: four ayes, three nays.

Motion carried.

MOTION: Original motion amended: to adopt the agenda of discussion of matter of country exodus from both points of view.

M. Quinn seconded.

Vote taken: six ayes, one nay.

Motion carried.

RE: ABSENCES: H. Short requested information as to whereabouts of absent Committee members, M. Castellanos and M. Strahan.

T. Arthur advised M.C. and M.S. hunting.

H. Short asked if M.C. and M.S. were aware of emergency meeting.

T. Arthur said they were not.

H. Short suggested they had been kept away purposefully, as sympathies likely to lie with rebel group.

T. Arthur responded strongly in the negative.

M. Quinn advised that hunting party had returned without M.C. and M.S., raising suspicion that M.C. and M.S. had been purposefully delayed.

T. Arthur again responded strongly in the negative, and suggested M.C. and M.S. were delayed by business unknown to Committee. He advised that rest of hunting party had been questioned as to whereabouts when M.C. and M.S. did not return as expected. Party reported M.C. and M.S. had left party at border of Zones 5 and 6 and instructed party to return to Compound without them, without advising party of intentions. Party acquiesced in respect of seniority.

T. Arthur further stated that allegations raised were outrageous, that there existed no precedent of deception, and that onus was on accuser to prove guilt, therefore matter closed.

C. Ng stated that he understood the Committee's official stance to be 'guilty until proven innocent'.

J. Ng responded that C. Ng was well aware this was merely a device used to raise awareness of safety, and that 'innocent until proven guilty' was basic tenet of law.

C. Ng stated that, to his understanding, there is no law or legal system.

T. Arthur called for order, advised that there is no legal system but still basic rule of law, and that digression had continued long enough.

MOTION: T. Arthur moved that Committee look into absence of M.C. and M.S. after meeting.

L. Han seconded.

Vote taken: five ayes, one nay, one abstention.

Motion carried.

REPORT: C. Ng presented a report, summarised as follows:

- That a group of fourteen members of Compound Beta has determined to peacefully depart Compound Beta.
- That these fourteen individuals are aged eighteen or older, and acting of their own free will.
- That the group requests to be assigned certain Compound items, to be removed from Compound and used in aid of the establishment of country life (see list attached).
- That the group requests to be allowed to depart peacefully.
- That the group wishes to maintain communication and friendship with Compound Beta.
- That, after a successful and productive country habitation is established, the group wishes to invite remaining Beta citizens to leave the Compound and join them.

MOTION: C. Ng moved that Committee give official sanction to departing group, and provide materials requested.

M. Quinn seconded.

Vote taken: three ayes, three nays, one abstention.

Motion failed.

RESPONSE: J. Ng responded to previous report, summarised as follows:

- Information presented in Committee's initial bulletin (see attached) was relayed directly from anonymous source known to ICA. There is no reason to doubt veracity.
- Compound cannot spare materials requested.
- Leaving Compound will greatly increase problem of ageing population. Generational ratio will skew towards first generation, some of whom are becoming unable to hunt.
- Group proposing to leave will be vulnerable to Them.
- There is no consistent way to maintain contact between Compound and departing group.

MOTION: T. Arthur moved that request for materials by rebel group be denied, and official support withheld.

J. Ng seconded.

Vote taken: three ayes, three nays, one abstention.

Motion failed.

POINT OF CONTENTION: As result of two failed motions, request for materials neither denied nor approved. Vigorous debate regarding outcome of matter. (Suggestion from L. Han it is not voting matter and must be decided independently. Unresolved.)

MOTION: J. Doyle moved that meeting adjourn and resume in morning after reflection.

H. Short seconded, on proviso that equal representation (from Committee and rebel group) be allowed.

POINT OF CONTENTION: Vigorous debate regarding suggested proviso.

EARLY DEPARTURE: C. Ng departed meeting before adjournment at request of Committee members objecting to use of physical violence to make point.

NB: C. Ng left under protest and requested his dissatisfaction with proceedings be recorded, as is here duly done.

MOTION (CONTINUED): J. Doyle moved again that the meeting resume after reflection.

M. Quinn reminded body of suggested proviso re. equal representation.

J. Doyle asked whether suggestion would be framed as motion.

M. Quinn declined to move.

T. Arthur advised matter would be considered, but not included in original motion.

Vote taken. four ayes, two abstentions.

Motion carried.

RESOLUTION: That all present will reflect on matter, that Committee will consider equal representation for rebel group, and that matter of absences of M. Castellanos and M. Strahan be investigated, and their whereabouts quickly determined, as night falling.

MEETING ADJOURNED 7.04PM

II

Sometimes I think you didn't die. That I just absorbed you into myself. Like all my molecules are twinned now. One of mine for one of yours.

I still have so much to tell you. And I can hear your responses in my head.

I saw your body die. But it was only your body.

The neon sunset stripes my retina with tubes of pink and orange.

We should have gone back to the Compound with the others.

We'd be there right now.

It'll be dark soon.

When I think, I think words. Whole grammatical strings pop into existence. My every notion is articulated in my head as it occurs to me.

Here's a name for you, from the deepest past: Steven Pinker. Remember him? His premise that thoughts are sub-lingual, or pre-lingual – you found it so intriguing you read me that chapter on the drive to Stanley for Geoff and Anna's wedding. The idea that thoughts are not in words, but come before words. Remember, Robbie? Thinking is a layer deeper than words.

But I don't have that layer deeper. All my thoughts express themselves in words. And I know why.

If I don't think in words, how can you read my thoughts?

Cracks. I believe in cracks. They make a surface interesting. The windscreen is like a roadmap in cracks. We sit for a while, quiet and dark, and the orange sun catches at the fractured glass. The Time-piece blared seven times from the mountain a few minutes ago.

We're fine. No later than nine was the goal, so we're fine.

It's novel to be behind a wheel. It's nice. Funny how the old life imposes itself on the new, sometimes. I begin to feel at home in the rubble, scrabbling around, hunting for unperforated tins, ducking on foot between Zones, but then suddenly I'm driving a white ute like Uncle Peter's and I have to remember that I once lived a life in which I got food from shops with money I got from my job and took it home in my car to my (our) clean house. Warm clothes. Comfortable shoes. TV. No Pit, no body parts. Gardens. Politics. The fucking Internet. Women with big round pregnant tummies. Babies in pushers. Aisles in supermarkets.

"Penny for your thoughts," says Marcus.

Robbie. Cracks. Cars. Home. Warmth. Babies.

"Supermarkets," I say.

"Oh, bonanza," he says, and I know he's thinking of supermarkets as they can still be now, if you can work your way into one sealed by rubble.

"Yeah, bonanza."

"What about you?"

"What was I thinking about?"

"Yeah."

His hand is feeling around and all at once he jolts his seat back semi-reclined. "It's something I've been wanting to talk to you about."

"Ok."

"Ok, so it's old sayings. You know, like penny for your thoughts. Birds of a feather stick together. I worry about them. I worry about our words."

"Yeah," I say.

"My daughter speaks differently from me. Just like they all do, all that generation. They have that clipped, weird way. Non-referential. You know. Like, just now, what I said to you. 'I've been wanting to talk to you.' A familiar, like, arrangement of words. But somehow the kids – it hasn't filtered down to them. It's like they're reinventing how to talk." He sighs. I feel like he is addressing you, not me. That he knows you're still alive in me. I listen for you and after a moment he resumes.

"But, even so – they sometimes surprise you. Like last night we were talking about those kidney beans, and Leah said, 'Waste not,

want not.' And it's like, I don't know. It's so tenuous. She only knows it because I have said it to her and because somehow it has survived the transmission from my head, from my culture, into her very different head and culture. And who does she have to say it to?"

"You!"

"Yeah, so she can parrot it back to me. And that's all. It stops there."

"Noah does it too, sometimes," I say. "Noah knows them. When he was telling us about Christian and May and all of them – did you notice? He said they wanted to go to greener pastures."

"Oh, Noah. Noah's a one."

"He is. He said to me, just before the group split up, he said: 'It is not lost on me, Melissa, that it is eight years ago today that Robin died.'"

"Oh, fuck."

"No, it's ok."

"No, I'm sorry. I didn't register."

"No, really. I hadn't, either, until he said something." It's a lie.

"Are you ok?"

"Right as rain," I say. "How are you?"

"Even keel. Smooth sailing."

"Happy as Larry."

"Cool as a cucumber."

The ute doesn't have doors. It's cold. We should make a move.

"A friend in need is a friend indeed," I say.

He smiles. "It takes two to tango."

A word springs into my mind and I say it. "Obsolescent."

"What, Mel?"

"Obsolescent. Becoming obsolete."

"That's it," he says. "That's the very word. Obsolescent by name and obsolescent by nature."

"Come on," I say, and slide out of the driver's seat. His seat creaks upright as he pulls the lever.

We walk away a little and turn back to look. One white ute, no doors, large item in tray covered by tarpaulin.

"It feels strange, just leaving it out in the open." I look at him looking at it. Ugly, as I suppose I am now, too. Bony. Skinny. Sagging.

"It's only for 24 hours," I say. "Not even quite that. No one will

find it here.” I touch him now: on the ear, the bad one, with the chunk missing. He jumps when my fingers make contact.

We never touch, you see.

The climb home is long. We are not old, but we are old in the new world.

“Seeing her name on the list,” says Marcus.

“I know.”

“I’ll have to go with her. If she goes.”

I say: “An apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.”

He says: “Blood is thicker than water.”

Moses’ corpse isn’t quite dead. I wish it were your corpse whose heart was seizing in its chest.

Han’s got it in the third Hazard Room.

You remember, Robbie. Where you died.

“Things at the Compound,” remarks Marcus.

“Yeah. Not too good.”

You didn’t know what it was like for me. I knew how it was for you. I looked at you through the mouldy perspex screen. You didn’t look like a man anymore, undulating on the wet stain of your sheet. You looked like fighting animals. Like small yellow carnivores fighting over something dead. Once Dr Han in his homemade Hazmat suit took one of the yellow animals in his hands and lifted it and put it in a bag and gave it to another Hazmat suit that was Henry to take away. It had fingers and later it came to me that it had been most of your arm.

Eight years ago today. That year was a big year for Compound Beta. Not because you died. There were three births that year, in the desert of the years. Three.

Two living.

One viable.

You’d like John. Lately he’s taken to wearing the yellow hardhat I found for him where Princes Wharf used to be. The hardhat is cracked. Another mystery totem from the past. He speculated about its use: “To keep your head able to be seen from far away,” and, “Maybe to help you think better.”

He asked his mother if that was right and she said, “Yes, probably.” I told him to keep thinking.

“The shitstorm seems to have progressed,” says Marcus to me, when we see the crowd at the gate.

They lunge at us, angry and indignant. “Where were you?” asks Thomas, his face dark under his curly white hair.

Meanwhile May is saying, “Don’t you think we should have a fair say?”

“Stop, May,” says Hugo. “See if they’re all right first.”

All eyes on us. It’s evident there are two factions in this mess, now that we can see faces: the Committee and the second-generation group wanting to leave. The escapologists. The faces look at us in appeal. Each wanting to claim something.

“We’re all right,” says Marcus.

“Where were you?” demands Josh (Ng, not McNamara).

“I’m sorry,” I announce. “It was my fault.” Marcus glances at me. We had agreed to say we were hunting; that we knew of a cache of goods on the southern border of Zones Six and Seven, and that we wanted to go alone because of the danger, and that if we had told the others, they would have volunteered to help, and we wished to keep them from harm. It strikes me now this is too complex. We will have to lie for a long time while it is established that there is no cache. People could die. So I say, “It’s the anniversary of Robin’s death today.” The faces around us become sombre. A sudden bottling of the hectic emotion. “I wanted to walk a little bit. Marcus came.”

Even now, grief is sacrosanct. Maybe especially now. May in her young passion of sentiment touches my hand. Thomas pats Marcus gently on the back. “Can we go inside?” Marcus asks.

“Yeah, let’s go in and talk this thing over,” says Thomas.

We herd in silence to the doors, listening to the mechanism unlocking and the Timepiece blasting eight far above and behind us. The thunder of the mountain goes with us inside.

“Let’s go somewhere informal,” says Thomas. “The Committee lounge.”

“I’m going to bed,” I say, and charge away up the stairs.

They can’t begrudge me.

The perspex window is mouldier than when you died behind it. We try to keep on top of it, but honestly – as long as it doesn’t go septic, it’s ok.

The light is on in the third Hazard Room. Through the cloudy plastic I can see the outline of the narrow bed, and some bulk on it.

Moses' torso was rocking back and forth when I checked on it this afternoon. Now it's still.

Eight years ago today you died, Robbie.

I can't explain it, really. The Moses thing. Horrific, of course, to see your friend's body breathing on and his heart beating after three quarters of his brain and four fifths of his face are gone. But on the other hand – and here words fail me. On the other hand, what?

Life?

Bodily life? After bodily death?

In a week, it will be eight years since Luisa's uterus went septic and she died and her foetus died. In three weeks, it'll be John's eighth birthday. And in two and a half months, it'll be the anniversary of the birth of our child.

Three births that year. Two live. One viable.

The torso on the bed looks dead to me.

Vic's triumph that year. The immaculate birth. The purity of her pain. He slithered out wailing and perfect. A grandchild for my generation. And me, nearly forty, and six months gone – even with Luisa's screams still ringing in the corridor, I felt hope. Even with you gone. Hope.

"Better the devil you know," I murmur, somewhat at random, to the lump of human meat behind the window.

When my waters broke they were green and brown and stinking and it was almost miraculous, how instantly the hope died in me. I lay on the floor in our room and then got up and took off my clothes. The water in the bucket was freezing but I sluiced myself and dried carefully with the towel. Clean and cold I put on my other clothes, the wide old flannelette shirt and the baggy black leggings and my boots. Then I went down the metal stairs, avoiding the broken one, and brushing past young Noah Arthur I went with steady steps through the green corridor on the ground floor and out through the door at its very end. I took the steps down and turned left along the corridor at the bottom. The outside door there is only barred and I lifted the bar and pushed open the door and let it swing shut behind me. With the same steady pace I set out across the waste towards the Pit.

A contraction hit me once. I knelt for it and braced.

Beyond the Pit was the mountain against the low red sky, lying tethered and tamed like Gulliver. The shining arms already crept up

its sides; the cobwebbed network of silvered lines and scaffolds expanding outward from its hollowed interior. You'd lived to see Them mechanise the mountain. I was glad in a way you hadn't lived to see what came next. To witness the shameful spark of admiration I felt for Them. The moment, staggering towards the Pit, in which I felt the mangled mountain was beautiful.

Faces appearing in my periphery. Shouts nagging at my ears. Noah. Noah must have raised the alarm. Marcus came forward. Brought me in. I fought him. A contraction dragged through me and I bit into his ear and held on until a flap of cartilage came away in my teeth. He wrestled me down and heaved me back, away from the foetid soupy Pit and back across the waste, into the shit-smelling former college that was our Compound and back along the corridors, up the stairs and into the sick bay. Marcus was the one who held me down for Dr Han until I couldn't fight anymore. Marcus climbed up behind me and whispered and then shouted over my screams. He shouted that this was better. The freedom to have tried. That this was better than to be in Their Farms. Marcus said my monster was better. He didn't say monster. I only saw the word there in his eyes and on the tip of his tongue.

It moved and made a groan and I looked. I made them let me look. I looked down at our creature, Robbie, that lay there with its own tentacles wrapped around its neck.

Marcus had said that even failing at this was better. He'd said it. But then there was nothing more he could say.

Our creature hadn't been stupid. Before it suffocated, it had showed me its muddy eyes. It looked up at me from its gelid inhuman body with a preternatural intelligence and showed me it understood.

It doesn't matter how long I stare at this. The life has gone from Moses' remains.

Wot A Day Leah My Gel ses dad to me  
Yes A Reely Strang Day To Day i sey  
Leah Look We Need To Tawk Abowt The Cuntre ses dad  
We Hav Alredy Tawked Dad i sey I Hav To Go Hugo Is Goin I Think  
That Is Were Lyfe Is Now Not Heer Yu No It Is Not Heer  
Yu Shud Not Go To The Cuntre ses my dad to me Yu Mus Not Go  
Wy Not i sey  
I Wil Hav To Go With Yu he ses Yu Do Not Hav The Skils Nesesere  
To Suvive he ses And I Carnt Go Bcos Melisa  
Needs My Help With Sumthing Tomoro  
Wot Thing i sey this is getin wurd  
A Big Thing And I Wil Not Com Bak From It he ses So I Carnt Go  
With Yu  
Wot R Yu Tawkin Abot i sey Wot Big Thing Dos Melisa Need Yu To  
Do And If It Is Tomoro We R Not Goen To The Cuntre For A Week So  
Yu Can Stil Com We Mite Not Have The Skils Nesesere So Yu Can  
Com  
No he ses This Is Wot I Am Seyin I Wil Not Com Bak From Helpin  
Melisa  
Do Yu Meen Yu Wil Dy  
Yes I Wil Dy he ses  
Wy Wot Is It Do Not Do It i sey i am kring kriing krying hard it feels  
bad  
It Is A Secret Can I Trust Yu  
Yes Yu Can Dad  
We R Goin To Hert Them  
Who THEM  
Yes THEM  
No Dad i sey Do Not Go Com With Us To The Cuntre Insted  
No Leah he ses  
Yes Or I Wil Stay Heer If Yu Want I Wil Not Go To The Cuntre But  
Ples Do Not Go With Melisa She Is Krazy Crasy Sins Her Husban  
Dyed And Her Baby Was A Monste Monsta And Dyed I Wil Stay Heer  
With Yu It Is Ok Just Do Not Go And Dy Ples Mum Dyd I Do Not Want  
Yu To Dy To  
This Is Wat I Wil Sey seys dad And Yu Mus Aksep It I Wil Go With  
Melisa Becos She Wos My Frend From Even Befor THEY Came I Hav  
Knownen Her Al My Lyf I Wil Help Her She Is Not Crasy And Yu Stay  
Heer And Help The Others And Stay With Hugo

Dad No i sey Dad Ples Do Not Go I Wil Hav A Baby With Hugo And  
Yu Wil Be The Granfather And We Wil Be A Good Family

No Leah

O I Wil Go With Yu Then If Yu Wil Not Stay I Wil Help Yu And Melisa  
I No She Is Yur Frend

No Leah Yu R My Dorter Yu Mus Stay Heer Things Wil Get Beter I  
Promis Yu That But Promis Me Ples

Promis Wot

That Yu Wil Not Tel Enyone Abot Wot We Have Tawked Abot

Yes I Promis

And Yu Wil Not Go To The Cuntre Yu Need To Stay Heer Hugo Wil  
Stay With Yu If Yu Arsk Him To

No

Yes Promis Becos THEY Will Get Yu There

We R Not Afrayed Of THEM

I Know he ses shakin his hed But Yu See Yu Shud Be Afrayed  
Promis Me Leah Promis Me

I Can Not Promis i sey No I Can Not

The cracked windscreen has become familiar. There is a line in the glass that I think of as a river and one I think of as a fence and one that is a road. Beyond their tracery the darkness shoulders past fragmented flashes of stump and rock. Marcus is silent but the word LEAH hangs in the darkness above him, radiating the night with meaning.

“The devil makes work for idle hands,” I say. His face is closed. The gleam of the torches we strapped to the bonnet tugs and drags at his features. Shadows pool below his eyes. Everything echoing Leah. Her silent presence: a slim dark-haired girl with us in every way but actually. A white cloud of breath from me and one from him. Again and again.

“No rest for the wicked,” I say.

The road buckles and shudders in the void below me. I am going to have to stop, soon, and get out, and turn off the torches one by one. Despite everything, They do have eyes and They do use them. The heavy load in the tray slides around corners and jolts over bumps and each jolt is a potential apocalypse. Marcus is calm. When we first drove it from the Riverside den to our hiding place, he braced himself and screwed up his face ready to die at every jolt. Gasped. Cried with me.

We could have crashed then, and we could have died, which would have been a shame, but also a good thing, in a way.

It was better when he was afraid, because he was talking to me then.

I’m not having second thoughts.

“Caveat emptor,” I say.

“Melissa.”

“A woman’s work is never done.”

“Melissa, can you please just be quiet now.”

I try. It doesn’t last. “Did your mother ever say that?” I ask. “A woman’s work? Mine didn’t.”

The ute bangs into a pothole and I hear the weight in the back bang down into the tray. The silence in Marcus shatters and he yells for Jesus and covers his face. I brake and sit for a moment and wait for the end to come. The end doesn’t come and I hear instead the gentle chatter of water and the whisper of leaves and the great Timepiece belching the hour from up above. That means it is now 2200 and I am on time. I swing out of the doorless cabin onto the moist earth. This is forbidden territory and I haven’t been here

since before we tried to run, Robbie, to the country, but it's exactly the same as it was then, which was exactly the same as it was when I was a kid.

There is so little time but I find it hard to move. Is this peace? I stand there in the dark at the end of my life and Marcus' and everyone else's in an unknown radius. The rivulet sparks silver up at me and I hear the mystery of the creaks and calls of the bush at night.

Marcus says my name. I go to the tray and throw back the tarp. The cargo there is too loose. We need to secure it but don't have the time. Two of the octopus straps have sprung free and I reattach them and stuff blankets back around the bulk.

Marcus creeps up and I see how stricken he is, how ready to weep. He still has something to lose.

"It's all fine," I say. "A stitch in time saves nine."

For a moment I think he may hit me. Then all the air goes out of him and his eyes drop to the shadows clawing up our legs. "Easier said than done," he says.

"All's well that ends well."

"Never count your chickens before they hatch," he says and we actually smile.

Blankets and octopus straps. Like a camping trip. I pad it in as securely as I can and cover it with the tarp and hook that firmly down. I heave back up into the cabin where Marcus is waiting and I spark the wires together as you showed me twenty years ago, Robbie, when we requisitioned our first vehicle.

The engine murmurs and I ease on the accelerator and crawl forward and again the world doesn't end. I wonder if this will even work. Henry said it would. For all he knew.

"The lights," Marcus says.

I stop again so we can turn off the lights. It takes long minutes to adjust to the new depths of darkness before I can see enough to spark the wires together again.

It's funny, what you discover in yourself when you head towards death. I find I need to chat but I'm all out of small talk. I grope for something and finally say, "Cunt," as the engine growls. Marcus looks surprised but game. I don't know what I'm about to say. "You never hear cunt anymore," is what comes out. "Fuck, yes. Shit, yes. But I fear for cunt. I think it's obsolescent, too."

"True," he says. He smiles again. "Leah spells 'country' in a really unfortunate way."

We jolt and the device on the tray slides and he braces and waits. A few moments and he relaxes. "Having said that," he continues, and I know it takes courage, "I am going to stick to my old sayings."

"Give me some more," I say, and he smiles and leans back using the lever again and closes his eyes to think. The night whispers on around us, Marcus and the implication of his daughter and me.

We drive upward to where the air is air and the invisible road winds. It is greener here. The rubble is gone. Weighed down and collapsed under writhing ferns and bush. A hushed rime of frost. Wet drops hardening on the windscreen. We can no longer see the mountain because it is all around us. The great heaving arms clicking and interlocking over its face and in its bowels scrape and moan above us. They look so slender from the Compound. Here I see their size. Their rhythms thunder in the rock. The delicate spiderweb of the windscreen shivers. My hands are cold.

"Never look," says Marcus. "A gift horse." We stop before the cavern as a tortured arm bangs into place with a deadened cry over the opening. A few moments. Then, crying again, it wrenches free and on and the opening is clear.

The wall of heat is visible. The air is crisp and cold around us. It shimmers up ahead. Two currents meeting in an ocean. I spark the wires and we drive through.

"It's always darkest."

It's loud in the burning caverns. The echoing reverberation of deep machineries. "What?" I shout. "How does it go?"

"What?" The heat ripples. The windscreen sings and shatters. Safety glass explodes at us. A tiny premonition. I pull on the hand-brake and bump to a stop against a rocky wall. My hands are on fire. Too cold then too hot. My face feels corroded. I don't know – I just don't know, Robbie. I look at Marcus. He is in pain.

"It's always darkest," I shout. My face runs with sweat.

"Yes," he says. I can barely hear him. I see his lips move.

"Before the dawn," I shout.

"No," he says. "That's not what I was thinking."

Wet with sweat. Hands pulling at the cords. Throwing aside blankets. Clambering. Pulling.

"Many hands make light work," I shout.

"Too many cooks spoil the broth," he shouts.

“True,” I cry. “And people who live in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones.”

The rock walls glow. Our eyes burn. The moisture runs from our bodies.

There is, at the end, one switch. Painted metal. Burning hot. My slippery fingers on it.

Marcus says, “Nothing is certain in life but death and taxes.”

And we laugh, because there are no more taxes, you see.

I think my thoughts in words for you, Robbie. So you can read the words in my head. But even so – how can I explain the beauty of losing everything? The rubble spoke to me in a way you couldn’t hear. How can I tell you what it meant to me to see our house burning? To see all the houses burning? Even now, when there is so little left of you. Even now, I can’t tell you.

I see your body at night, sometimes. I see it dropping into the sludge of the Pit still alive with the bacteria that ate your face.

But it’s all right.

I know it was only your body, Robbie.



III

He is the centre of the entire universe. He is the most important person who ever lived. They say there will be other children, younger children, his cousins and his friends, but he knows they are wrong. His splendid conviction and his private truth: he is the last one, for ever and ever.

Sometimes he thinks forward into the hazy future, after everyone else has died. He is an old man. He does not have to be afraid of Them, because They are dead too. He is in charge of everything. He is big enough to go hunting. He goes by himself because there is no one else. The adults now have to go in groups but he can go by himself when he is in charge. One day he finds a puppy and it becomes his best friend. When it grows up it is a yellow boy dog called Yellowy. The black water lapping at the stones where there was once a house called Parliament House belongs to him and he goes on it in a cool boat with Yellowy. The fields of broken things are his. The five big Compound buildings. All the food in all of them is his and he knows how to cook it. He can go around and sleep in any bed he wants. He can read all the books because he is the best at reading and so he knows everything.

All the trees and green things poking up belong to him. The sky with the red sun in it. When it snows he lights a fire and has blankets. And the mountain all covered in machinery belongs to him. He lies in bed and in the moments before sleep he imagines himself ruling an unpeopled world.

His mother sighs from her bed next to his and he rolls onto his side. He is too big now to sleep in bed with her. He hears the footsteps of someone trying to be quiet walking past their door.

Some people are going to the country and Mum has said they are going too, John and her, but they must keep it a secret because the Committee will not let them leave if they know. John has not decided yet if he wants to go. It sounds cool but scary. You can

make plants grow that you can eat, out of the ground. If he decides he does not want to go, he will tell someone like Melissa or Dr Han. Maybe Dr Han. Melissa has weird eyes. Dr Han is nice. He keeps John healthy.

In his dream his mother is putting something over his face and he can't breathe. It wakes him up. She is lying in her bed. It is very bright and he can see she is on her back hanging onto the mattress hard. She is looking at him. She is trying to say something. Her mouth is open wide. He still cannot breathe. He feels like someone is pressing down on him hard. His head sounds funny. Like a mosquito only bigger.

Someone is hurting him. There is a crash and little stings all over his face. The air shouts. He can breathe again. Mum is screaming and shouting. She grabs him and picks him up and squeezes him. It makes the stings worse. He wriggles to be put down. They fall to the floor. It's shaking. The air turns brown.

It's dust.

COMPOUND BETA  
BULLETIN

TYPE: GATHERING  
FOR THE ATTN OF: ALL  
RE: MELISSA AND MARCUS

PLEASE DO NOT REMOVE THIS NOTICE

This is to remind everyone there will be a brief service in the dining hall for Melissa Castellanos and Marcus Strahan, followed by a general discussion. The usual mourning programme will not be utilised because of time and ethical constraints. It is optional to attend.

Remember Melissa and Marcus' non-physical qualities.

COMMITTEE BETA  
INTERNAL MEMO

Thank you for the vigorous debate of last night. There is no point in criminalising M.C. and M.S. They're dead. Let's move on.

T.A.

COMPOUND BETA  
BULLETIN

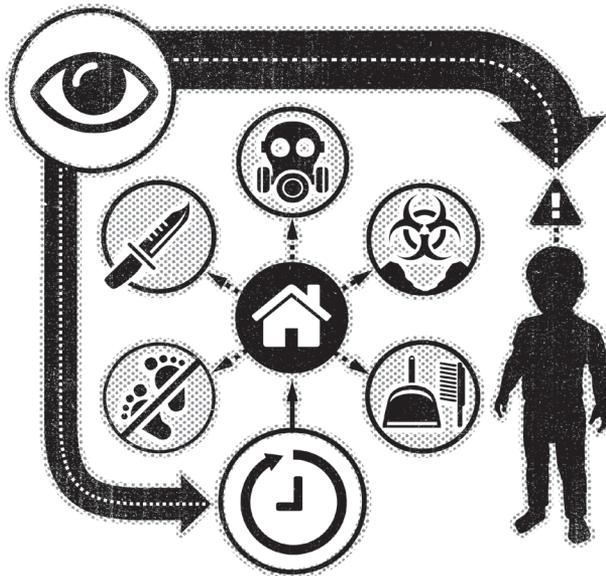
TYPE: GATHERING  
FOR THE ATTN OF: ALL  
RE: SAFETY

PLEASE DO NOT REMOVE THIS NOTICE

The dust from last week's explosion is settling, but it is still extremely dangerous to breathe it directly. Please take careful note of new safety procedures.

1. WEAR YOUR MASK. Wear it at all times!
2. WEAR YOUR GOGGLES. Even if it means you cannot see well, wear them at all times!
3. DO NOT GO OUTSIDE. We have enough food for a month. Hunting is suspended. Do not go outside.

4. **CARRY A WEAPON.** So far there has been no response from Them. This does not mean there will not be a response. Carry a weapon at all times. See Joshua Ng for assistance.
5. **WATCH JOHN.** John is never to be alone. Never assume he is looked after. Talk to each other. Where is he? Who is watching him?
6. **CLEAN.** We are launching a massive cleaning campaign. Please see Thomas or any Committee member.
7. **BEWARE THE PIT.** As you all know, the Pit has expanded in the shock from the explosion. The ground is very corroded. The Pit is now encroaching upon outbuildings behind the Compound. Everything stored in those buildings is considered lost. Do not go outside. Do not attempt to retrieve any items. Do not open any windows to the rear of the main building. The fumes are dangerous.
8. If reading is hard for you, do not guess words you do not know. Ask for help to make sure you understand as this is a very important notice.



COMMITTEE BETA  
INTERNAL MEMO

Hi all – please be advised Leah Strahan was apprehended attempting to leave the Compound. I suggest NO disciplinary action – I do not wish to penalise her in her grief. When I talked to her (questioned her), she believed her father was still alive. She said she had seen a white ute winding through debris to the far south of the Complex. She claims to have seen this through her bedroom window, so it is highly unlikely given a) the dust, b) her goggles, c) the filthy state the ute would be in if it had survived and d) the sheer distance.

She claims Marcus advised her he and M.C. would take a white ute to complete their mission. I asked how she knows what a ute is and she said he had described it to her. She said the explosive device was in the tray, that they drove it up the mountain together, and that she believes Marcus left Melissa there and drove himself back down. Her story is that Marcus had been unsure about assisting Melissa with the mission, which Leah describes as being solely of Melissa's devising (this, at least, I'm sure we can all believe). Leah said Marcus wished to help Melissa, but did not wish to leave Leah and did not wish to die.

I suppose there is a remote possibility that he and Melissa parted ways but it is highly unlikely given their mutual devotion. In addition, even if they had agreed Marcus should survive, there is too narrow a window of time between their arrival at the mountain (which would have been after ten) and the detonation. We can assume the ute was in no condition to go at speed, especially on icy, winding, downhill, rubble-strewn roads.

I mention all this not to entertain the possibility of Marcus' survival, but to give you sufficient background in asking you to please help me in keeping a friendly eye on Leah.

T.A.

Hugo i sey I Mus Wate Heer For My Dad To Com Bak

hugo seys It Is Danjerus Becos Of The Pit And The Dust Heer We Shud Go Strate Away

Hugo I Am Stayin Heer Now i sey And I Wil Com To The Cuntre With Dad Wen He Coms Bak Yu Can Go Ferst And Wate For Us Ther

Leah seys hugo Yur Dad Is Ded I Am Yur Famile Now Also he seys tawkin over me even tho i am tryin to tawk to he seys Yur Dad Wud Not Want Yu To Stae Wer It Is So Danjerus And So Many Pepel From The Compond R Comin With Us Now Yu Wil Be Nerly Alon If Yu Stay Onle Joshua Ng Tomas Athur Henry Amber And Some Others R Stayin Everyon We Car Abot Is Goin

I Car Abot Dad i sey And He Is Not Goin He Is Stil Heer Somweer I Wil Find Him

hugo seys Leah No he seys No

i sey I Am Stayin

hugo seys Leah

wot is the rite thing i do not no i do not no weer dad is or if he is alyf en i neerly sey ok i neerly sey ok i wil go with yu but then he hugo he seys this he seys Leah If Yu Stay Then I Wil Stay Heer To

Wot Abowt The Pit i sey Wot Abowt The Dust

he seys To Gether he seys It Wil Be Al Rite To Gether

COMPOUND BETA  
BULLETIN FROM THE FIRST  
GENERATION AFTER THEY  
CAME (YOUR CHILDREN WHO  
ARE NOW ADULTS)

TYPE: GENERAL  
FOR THE ATTN OF: ALL  
RE: NOW IT IS TIME

PLEASE DO NOT REMOVE THIS NOTICE

Dear friends,

The dust is settling more every day. We will be able to go outside soon.

Do you want to wait here while the Compound sinks into the Pit?  
Or do you want to come with us?  
Everyone is welcome in our village.

SIGN YOUR NAME BELOW

KELLY BI	CHRISTIAN NG
LING FEI	RUPERT NG
FINN DOYLE	MAY QUINN
LIZA DOYLE	JASMINE REED
HARRY LIM	JAMES SHAUGNESSEY
SARAH LITTLE	JOHN YALE
JOSHUA MCNAMARA	VICTORIA YALE

Leo Han, Anthony Arthur, Noah Arthur, Jennifer Doyle, Martin Doyle, Tim Doyle, Henry Quinn, Heinrich Wolfe, Maria Beck, Sarah Quinlan, Chris Morelli, Christina O'Riley, Ian O'Riley, Jeremy Rogers, Posy Little, Susanna Reed, Yuri Duggan, Tom Duggan-Jones, Matthew de Villiers, Tony Brown, Enid Fei, Sue Fei, Justin Fei, James Bi, Duncan McNamara, Lydia Ndugu, Mary Yale, Jesse Bi, Julia Bi, Frida van der Beek, Karen McConaughy, Jane Kelcey, Jay McArthur, Jill Polaski, Jennifer Blessed, Rita Walter, John Gregor, Sarah Finnigan, Gary Finnigan, Isabel Finnigan, Sophie Finnigan, Theodore Godfrey-Smith, Sally Godfrey-Smith, Elena Nikitaris, Robert Costa, Jake Clark, Paul Clark, Jonathan Little, Caroline Kertes, Matthew Smith, Dylan Krom, Melanie Krom, Kenneth O'Malley









