

Flashmen

TERRY DOWLING

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Dowling's stories have appeared in *The Year's Best Science Fiction*, *The Year's Best SF*, *The Year's Best Fantasy*, *The Best New Horror* and *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*, as well as anthologies as diverse as *Dreaming Down Under*, *Centaurus*, *Gathering the Bones* and *The Dark*. He is a communications instructor, a musician and songwriter, and has been genre reviewer for *The Weekend Australian* for the past sixteen years.

"Flashmen" was inspired by what is commonly known as a mondegreen - the mishearing of a line in a song lyric. It concerns one of Terry's favourite themes: the depiction of the truly alien.

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S

am was sitting over a pot of Boag's and a Number 9 at the New Automatic on the banks of the Yarra, watching the old riverside fire sculptures - the 'pigeon toasters' - sending gouts of flame into the night sky.

That was how Walt Senny and Sunny Jim found him, staring out at the sheets of plasma tearing the dark. Dangerous and wonderful friends to have, Walt and Sunny, and a dangerous and wonderful place to be, given what Melbourne had become - been forced to become. All the coastal axis cities.

"Sam," Walt Senny said, just like in the old days, as if grudging the

word. He wore his long flashman coat, a genuine Singer flare, and had little hooks of colour on his cheeks. They were called *divas* after famous women singers and each one was a death. Knowing Walt, each one was a ten-count.

Sam returned the greeting. "Walt."

"Sam," Sunny Jim said, looking splendid as usual in his dapper Rock fall crisis suit.

"Sunny."

Both men carried their duelling sticks in plain sight as if it truly were ten years before and the contract shut-downs and call-backs had never happened.

"What's the drift?" Sam asked, falling into the old ways in spite of himself, as if the ten years were like smoke.

"Raising a crew," Sunny said. "Trouble out in the Landings."

"Someone thinks," Walt added.

"Flashpoint?" Sam asked, going straight to it. *Major strike? Even: A new Landing?*

Walt studied the crowd, using a part of his skill few people knew about. "Not sure yet."

Sam almost smiled at the melodrama. "Someone?"

"Outatowner," Sunny replied, which meant protected sources and need to know and told Sam pretty much everything. Possibly no strike, no flashpoint at all. But official. Some other reason.

Sam was careful not to smile, not to shake his head, just like on those long-ago, never-so-long-ago days when Sam Aitchander, Wilt Senny and Sunny Jim Cosimo belonged to as good a flash crew as you were likely to find. "Bad idea right now, Sunny, Walt. The Sailmaker is still there."

Telling it like it was. The Landing that could reach out. Snatch and smash even the best.

"Need to make five," Walt Senny said, a spade on gravel. Affectation,

most like, though how could you know? Sergio Leone and a hundred years of marketing departments had a lot to answer for. "Figured Angel for point and you for star again, Sam."

But the ten years were there. Things *had* changed.

"Other business right now, Walt," Sam said, trying to keep the promise he'd made to himself. "Not sure the Landings are the place to be."

Walt and Sunny expected it. They played their main card.

"Another crew going in as well," Sunny said, which could very well be *before* the fact knowing Walt and Sunny, a lie but a likelihood and a serious one, what it implied. "Punky Bannas is putting it together. The Crown Regulators ride again!"

"Punky? Then -"

"Right," Walt Senny said, his ruined voice like a shovel against a sidewalk.

And got me, Sam thought. Punky and Maisie Day and the rest.

But *ten* years. Probably not Maisie. Still, Punky Bannas liked known players no less than Sunny and Walt did. His Regulators would need to be solid, as familiar as he could get.

"Who's their pure?" Which was saying yes, of course. *Let's re-activate the Salt Hue Trimmers*. Sunny even managed his lopsided grin, two, three seconds of one.

Walt Senny knew better than to smile. "Kid named Jacko. Henna Jacko. First class."

"Who's ours?" Sam asked. Should have been: who's yours? but he slipped.

"New kid. Thomas Gunn, if you can believe it. Thomas not Tommy. He's prime. Talent scout found him in a doss out in Dryport."

"The rest," Sam said. "I need it all."

Sunny gave his grin. Walt Senny spun his stick in a splendid bonham.

Spectators ahhh'd. One, trying too hard, called out: "Bravo!"

"Not here," Walt said. "Come out to Tagger's. Meet the crew."

Sam had to grin back at them. Tagger's. All of it, just like ten years before. Ghosts out of the smoke.

And the possibility of Maisie Day.

* * * *

Sam didn't have to wait until Tagger's. Sunny had borrowed a clean van from Raph Swale, and as soon as they were on the city road and he'd switched on the dampeners, Sam asked it.

"A new Landing?"

"Not as easy as that," Sunny said.

"Sailmaker's had a kid," Walt said from the back. "Replicated."

Sam was truly surprised. One hundred and eighty-six Landings across the planet and all of them pretty much stable since The Sailmaker had arrived. "Hadn't heard."

Sam didn't need to look back. Walt would be giving *that* look.

"Have to know if it's something local or a new arrival," Sunny added, hardly necessary but these *were* new days. Maybe Sunny was worried that Sam would ask him to pull over and let him out. "Couldn't risk it back in the Automatic. World Health wants known teams. Two of the best."

The World Health Organization in full stride again. The WHO doctors!

"How bad?" Sam asked, remembering how the original Sailmaker had started, how it had changed everything, destroyed so many crews, discouraged the rest.

"Nowhere near mature, but they've tracked fourteen towns to date, half in Europe, rest in Asia. None in the Americas this time. Another six are possible, but overlaps are still making it hard to tell."

"Stats?"

“Last posting for the fourteen: two hundred and forty thousand people down. Recovery teams got to the European sites, but you know how Asia can be.”

Used to know, Sam almost said, ready with attitude. But kept it back. *Nothing ever really changes, considering.*

“How far from the original?” he asked, thinking of The Sailmaker out there in the hot desert on the edge of the Amadeus Basin, so far away.

“Right near Dancing Doris. Sixty ks outside Broken Hill.”

“It’ll all depend on our pure!” Sam said, stating the obvious, the too obvious, but giving them the old Sam Aitchander standard. Part of him, too big a part of him really, suddenly wanted things as they were back then. Known.

They let it be. He let it be. They drove the rest of the way to the Bendigo Gate in silence. Another time it would have been companionable and welcome. Now there was too much fear.

A Sailmaker almost at the perimeter, Sam thought. *They’re closing in.*

* * * *

Tagger’s was on the very edge of the Krackenslough, that glinting landflow from the only Landing phenomenon, globally, ever to involve striking back at civilization from inside a Landing perimeter with large-scale coarse action above and beyond the shut-down fugues. There was that single calamitous event, tearing up so much of eastern Australia, then The Sailmaker arriving eight years later. Perhaps, experts argued, The Sailmaker had caused that singular event, already on its way.

Now this. Sailmaker Two. Sailmaker Redux, whatever you could call it, and here in Australia again, would you believe? However it fell, proof that the Landings were there: a constant in all their lives. Ongoing.

They left the clean van in the holding yard at Becker’s, and Sam went with Walt and Sunny through the Bendigo Gate, finally made it to the large taproom of Tagger’s with the windows showing the red land and red sky before them. The forty-six Australian Landings were a day away, scattered over three hundred and forty thousand hectares, twenty days across on

foot, six by WHO slow-mo ATV. The Sailmaker Redux was two days in.

“Hi, Aitch,” Angel Fleet said, meeting them at the tap-stage. She looked older, leaner, wasted with too much sun and not enough care, but it was so good seeing her, seeing her alive and still keen, though what other careers were there really for hard-luck warriors, God’s-gift crusader knights, once you’d fought against dragons? “The kid’s in the blue room swotting the manuals. Sunny said you’d do good cop on this.”

Sam had expected it, but it was beside the point. Being at Tagger’s again overwhelmed everything. Seeing Angel, any version of Angel.

“How have you been, Ange?”

“Managing. Glad to have this. You, Aitch?”

“Coming round.” He nodded to the door. “What’ve you told him?”

“Standard run. They’re alien zones. Dangerous. We came on hard, Sunny and me. Figured bad cop was the way to go.”

“Get much?”

“You kidding? He glazed over two minutes in. These kids can name the flash crews up and down the spread, but the basics - forget it. Walt said leave it to you. Just like old times.”

“Just like old times.”

* * * *

His name was Thomas Gunn and no-one called him Tommy. He was sixteen, lean, of medium height, with a good open face, pleasing enough features, the habit of tipping his head to one side when he was really listening.

“Glad they sent you, Mr Aitch,” he said when Sam took the other hardwood chair in the blue room. “They’re all so intense. I was hoping you’d be good cop.”

The kid knew the procedures.

“And why’s that, Thomas?” Though Sam knew the answer. When had it ever been different? Sam had steeled himself to give a listen-or-else,

grassroots spiel: the first Landings appearing, going active, shutting down whole communities across the planet with no pattern, no *apparent* pattern, sending thousands, hundreds of thousands into catatonic fugue. The flash crews going in to break the signal before too many out of those thousands started dying. Getting some back. But Thomas had been playing doggo.

“You’re - more approachable. They say.”

“Used to be. It’s been a while.”

“You came back. I checked that. Some keep away.”

Sam made himself stay civil. It was how you started any working relationship.

“You don’t reach escape velocity, you keep coming back, yes.”

“Born to it.”

No use denying. “Bit like that.”

“So, which are we going to, Mr Aitch?”

Sam paused, studying the newbie, liking most of what he saw - the alertness so at odds with what Angel and Sunny had seen, been allowed to see, the edginess sensed. Though the Mr Aitch got him. His shelf name. Field name. Damn Walt and Sunny. Sam endured it, just as he had so many times before.

“Not sure going in. Not this early. Out near The Horse, I think. Not as far as The Pearl.”

“The Horse. I really want to see that. What about The Sailmaker?”

“We keep clear. Always. It’s a cull set-up.”

“You think?” Thomas’s eyes were wide at the prospect.

“Work it out. Nothing for years. Teams getting cocky. Then the Krackenslough. Eight years later The Sailmaker arrives.” Treating him like he did know.

Thomas was nodding. “It’s like the name, isn’t it? Landings. Something has landed. Something has come in, been sent.” Talk jumping

all over the place, but obvious stuff, common with any newbie.

“Surely seems like it, Thomas.”

“But not ships? Heard Mr Senny say loose lips sink ships. What it sounded like. Didn’t like to bother ‘im.”

“Not as easy as that. But you’re right in a way. It’s where something *has* come in. Arrived. Best to think of them as nodes. Accretion points.”

“Scusing, gov.”

“Sampling probes, some say.”

“Not tracking, Mr Aitch.”

“Places where things appear. Gather things to them.”

“They’ll go someday, you think?” Jumping again.

“Twenty-three years this summer. They may simply go, like you say. But something is needed now. To get us through. That’s why the scout picked you.”

“They bombed them.”

“They did, yes. Lots of times. They keep trying in some places, trying new things, sending troops in, poor sods. Hit squads. But it gooses them, gets them active. Regardless of what people say, World Health’s way is better. There’s the other thing to consider too. When they go active, start locking on to folks, a Landing in Australia locking onto a street, a town, maybe half a world away, you bomb them then, *all* the downers die, every one of them. Some sort of broadband trauma. We think we’re ahead of things there. Better it’s done gently. Flash crews are told which Landing has struck down a community somewhere, we go in, target the particular flashpoint, tweak and twist things there in little bits so the Landing never quite knows what’s happening and switches modes. It seems. That’s all we ever hope to do. Switch modes.”

“But in those towns - whole groups of downers come back.”

“Right. So better to keep the WHO quarantine, track which Landings become active, go in and tweak. That’s the extent of it, Thomas, though some will tell you otherwise. The WHO authorities track which communities

have been targeted, counted out -"

"Whole communities. It's like they've been assigned or something."

"- then we go in, tweak and retrieve. That's all it is, all we do. We get some back."

"Some die."

"Most don't."

"And you just happen to have the power?" He was marvelling, not being sarcastic. His head was tipped to the side.

"Right. Again, why the scout picked you. Gave you all those tests."

"They're revived just so they can get shut-down again some other time."

"Sometimes goes like that. But it all has to do with numbers. We work to cut down the thousands who die through neglect, arriving too late to help. You saw the stats."

The kid nodded, which could have meant anything. Angel was right. So many newbies didn't know any of this.

"Do I get a coat and a cane?" Thomas said, perhaps working to hide his smarts. "Like the leones wear? Learn the bonhams. Wear the divas." Jumping again. Newbies always jumped, dealing with the excitement, the nerves, the fear. But likely dumbing down, this time.

"You decide to stay on, sure. If it works out. That's up to you." As if.

"The blue serge crisis suits."

Maybe the kid was just a kid after all. Sam allowed it.

"We have them - if you want one."

"You don't. None of you."

"People used to like the official look. Prefer this now."

"You mean business but you don't like looking owned. It's the robin

hood. The zorro.”

“Borderline outlawry is what it is. We’ve gone through official. Survivors reassure more than badges sometimes.”

“Go figure.”

“Go figure.”

“You’re a hard lot. I like that. I like all that.”

“Merely flashmen, Thomas. We channel power. Deflect the bad kind. Break the signals from the Landings so the modes switch and people come back. Restore some of what the Landings shut down.”

Thomas paused, just sat looking out. Such a silence boded well. It was the 70/30 again - 70 percent action, 30 percent thoughtful.

“How do you?” Thomas finally asked.

Sam shrugged. It was easy to answer the old unanswerables in a way. “No idea. Some people can. All magic bird stuff.”

“Magic bird?”

“Old saying. Put us in a team, the right mix, we can do it. Just can. For all we know the Landings did that too. Created an antidote system.” It was a favourite line, all that made it tolerable ultimately, the chance of being part of an autoimmune system against the bogeyman.

“The Landings retaliate.”

“Seems they do. No-one’s sure about any of that. May be just power readjustments. But better a hundred dead than five thousand in shut-down, yes?”

“That’s the old 70/30. The old WHO/UN ruling!”

Sam blinked. The kid had surprised him again. “It is. What do you think?”

“Seems right. Seems fair. What do you think, Mr Aitch?” Also unexpected.

“No matter what I think. People insist on it. Would rather gamble that way than stay a zombie, maybe die through neglect when there aren’t enough carers soon enough.”

“True death is better.”

“They reckon.”

“You reckon?”

“We’re merely flashmen, Thomas. All we are. Do what we’re hired to do.”

“You’ve been out of it ten years.”

Here it was.

“That’s the cafard, the funk, the downtime debt. It drains you, wastes you. Gets so you need to be away.” The words ran off his tongue.

“But the shut-downs continued. How could you?”

“There are always other crews. Seemed like a good idea at the time.”

It was a slap-down - none of your business - but the kid accepted it. “So why now? Why this?” *Why me?* he didn’t say. Or: *What happened to your last pure?* He just needed reassurance.

“Personal business. People we know going in.” The beautiful lie. No point mentioning The Redux yet.

“You’re worried they’ll find something.”

“That they’ll upset something more like. Despite The Sailmaker’s power, things have been pretty stable since it arrived. *Fewer* shut-downs. *Fewer* communities going under. They could change the balance.”

“So like I said. You’re looking out for us.” Jumping, jumping.

“Whatever. One team usually needs another to watch it. We’ve been hired to keep an eye on this other team.” Not the truth, but near enough.

Thomas nodded, looked out at the day through the prep room

window.

“One more thing, Mr Aitch. They say there are two secrets all flashmen keep.”

Sam feared: *Tell me what they are*, but the kid was smarter, better than that. He jumped, but knew what *not* to say.

“How long before I’m trusted enough to be allowed to ask what they are?”

Two secrets indeed. The make or break when it came to the flash crews.

“Ask again when the mission’s over. Now a question to you, Thomas.”

“Shoot, Mr Aitch.”

“How come you played dumb with the others?”

Thomas Gunn spread his hands in a ‘you know how it is’ gesture that was probably as old as Cro-Magnons. “First thing I learned about flashmen. Always keep something back.”

Sam almost smiled, but stood instead to hide the rush of emotion. “Time to make a move.”

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As it turned out, quite a few of the old Big Name crews were going in. The wildfire, pond-ripple, rumour mill prevailed as ever it had. Word of one team activated meant something happening on the QT; best keep an eye out just in case. Sponsors appeared like magic: governments, corporations, citizen protection groups, patents and futures speculators old and new. Good sense. Contingency and precaution.

One of Punky’s former lieutenants, Baine Couse, had put together a rag-tag band - the Argentics on the registration database - with Rollo Jayne and Toss Gatereau in the lineup. Molly Dye had re-activated her Lonetown Farriers, once definitely second stringers all, but a real force now that Rod Sinner had been brought in to replace Corven, lost at The Sailmaker in ‘35. Julie Farro and Yancy Cada had a new line-up of their Spin Doctors ready to go. Other names he knew. Many he didn’t.

Riding the wind-tram out to the Baylieu Gate, Sam shook his head at the wonder of it. Conspiracy theory always messed things up. The chats were crazy with it, the seaboard axis abuzz. All the new coastal cities were making a feature of it. Four teams now, forty later. They'd be tripping over themselves before they were an hour along - most of them makeshift tagger groups of newbies and quarterhands duelling it out on the fringes, maybe risking The Spanish Lantern, The Moonraker and The Three Spices, then scuttling back to the bars and chats with improbable stories that grew larger with every telling. Not just in Australia either. The African coastal axis had groups stirring; the West American axis preempted everyone by sending a team to check the sub-Saharan Landings. French teams were heading for the Gobi Desert outside Sagan. The flashmen. The leones. Darlings of the WHO doctors. The ten years were like smoke.

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The WHO perimeter units gave the teams access in twos, and the Trimmers and the Regulators were promised a clear day's lead before the Argentics and the Farriers, then the Spin Doctors, The Sneaky Pete Regulars and the rest of the official line-up. Some newbie crews would jump queue around that vast boundary. Some would be wasted quick smart, the rest would be nabbed by the authorities on the way out. Easier to let the Landings tidy things up first. There'd be penalties, token sentences in the new barrios, but ultimately WHO didn't care so long as flashpoints were dealt with and data - any data after all this time - was forthcoming. Better they risk another Krackenslough, they secretly figured, secretly gambled, unofficially believed, than not know anything about their deadly visitors.

At Baylieu Gate there was more waiting, of course. The orbitals needed to track the complex fluxes, wait for what they considered to be suitable hiatus readings before giving the go-ahead - all frustratingly unnecessary from a crew's hands-on perspective. It was 1400 that afternoon before the Trimmers rode their WHO-provided slow-mo ATV through Checkpoint Sinbad and left civilization - human civilization - behind.

Then, yet again, they were a law unto themselves. Champions of the hopes of the world. Officially indispensable. Unofficially expendable.

The first site reached from the southeast, soon after full radio noise-out, was Winwa Landing, what had once been The Firewalker because of its random plasma screens and dissociated spark-ups. Some of the Landings failed, fell away, re-located in new forms elsewhere, who could ever know? All that was left were the pylons, struts and gantries of the

old WHO/local natgov access piers. It was like that at Winwa.

Working with World Health, most national governments had set up inspection piers early on wherever they could, long raised causeways with observation towers and telemetry nodes. They looked like the promenade piers of a previous age, and were as much to frame the phenomena as anything, to provide frameworks, form and sense, things you could put on a map and treat as quantifiable, borders around chaos. Sand drifts had moved in, the wind and heat had stripped the paintwork. Winwa Landing was a ghost town that had never lived.

They spent the night in the lee of the seventh pylon, listening to what were left of the causeway struts ticking and cooling overhead and watching the faintest play of bravura lights tricking around the inward flare-tail - all that remained of what The Firewalker had once been.

They repacked their slow-mo before dawn and moved on, making forty ks along the Delphin Track and passing The Arete before it became fully active. Then it was The Pure off to their left, three ks distant but already flexing and extending its clear-glass 'soul-finders' in the day.

They were passing The Lucky Boatmen when they saw their first whirter assembling in the distance - three of its fourteen pieces spinning in the warm air, orbiting each other as they sought lock-point for the rest. The Trimmers would be well past before it posed a threat, but some other team would have it to deal with. How it usually happened - one group triggering sentinel responses that wasted another. Proof either that no other crew had come in at Winwa yet or, far less likely but not impossible given how UN agencies competed, that enough had done so to complete one fourteen-stage whirter cycle and start another.

By mid-morning they were passing The Spanish Lantern on its eastern side, keeping their focus on the trail ahead and only using peripheral vision to note the flickering orange, blue and red semaphore-at-noon running lights amid the balconies and bastions of the fluted blast-furnace form. They wore their headsets to dampen the teeth-chattering Castanet siren rhythms that gave it its name. So many taggers and newbies would go closer, wanting to see the fiesta lights on the lower balconies, never believing that anything could happen to them. Some would get the approach rhythms wrong and end up as part of the deadly *duende* of the place. It was Thomas who said he could see bodies, 'dancers' who had missed those syncopations and couldn't get free in time, and were now pressed into final service. No-one acknowledged his lapse of form. He was left to work out for himself that you never mentioned the

dead and dying. You accepted and moved on.

They reached The Horse on the second day, considered by many the most remarkable of the Landings - image after life-sized image of horses from every artistic period in known Earth history: as if the governing intelligence, AI, tropism, whatever powered the thing, had locked onto that one bioform and replicated it again and again - in bronze, in wood, in ceramic, resin, volcanic glass, bone and sewn skin, line after line of stylized equiforms scattered across the spinifex hills.

The Horse also gave Thomas his first glimpse of a burrus. The veteran Trimmers had been preparing him for it, each of them filling the time by telling him what to expect. Even Walt had managed: "It's all eye-trick shit. Just make sure your coal's there."

The profile had been in the WHO database. The typical burrus - a handball-sized knob of airborne porcelain - usually travelled at chest height and aimed for the thymus, tucked away behind the breast bone. No saying why it did, no knowing things like that, just that it did. Carrying lumps of anthracite in your pockets seemed to deflect most of them - where the old name 'coal-pockets' came from that some people still used for flashmen in some parts of the world. But anthracite, for heaven's sake, to ward off something that went for your immune system, that seemed to live to do just that.

This small white avatar came streaking up to them from among the closest equiforms, hovered, held, stayed with them for an hour, sometimes bobbing, twitching in sudden, unnerving ways, then streaked away, soundless.

Two aylings came at them next, all high comedy were they not designed to detonate, flechette-fashion. Sam did ayling duty as usual, briefing Thomas as the constructs approached.

"Watch now. These are faux-boys from what one overzealous WHO scientist christened Smart Landings. Leave it to me."

"Foe boys?" Thomas said, eyes never leaving the two figures on the trail.

"Faux." Sam spelled it out. "Old word for fakes. *Maquettes*. Made and sent by the Smarts."

"They're so human."

“They think they are. They’re aylings. Clones. Synths.”

“The Landings that sample g-codes.”

“Right. If the Landings are traps, they’re taking bits of whatever they can get to do their trapping. We’re the most advanced local lifeform, so they sample us, turn out these.”

“Parts of the trap.”

“But the aylings don’t know it. The thing is, if you play along, they stay friendly, finally reach a range limit and turn back.”

The aylings spoke a strange clipped teev dialect gleaned from a century of vintage sat transmissions.

“Holoner De Governax,” the taller, rangier one introduced itself as, affecting a human male voice to go with its not-quite-right male mannequin appearance. “We’ve found a good route.”

So simple, so obvious.

“Hutman Von Vexator,” said the other, affecting female and as unreal as a well-made store mannequin. “Hol’s right. Quick run out by The Four Doormen. Get you through in no time. None of the fluxes.” Voice surprisingly good.

“That right?” Sam said. “Need to see The Quilter first. Business to attend to out by The Quilter. Then we’ll try your way.”

The aylings frowned at each other, sensing deflection but not sure how to make a No out of a provisional Yes.

Sam kept up the banter, making them run whatever menus they had. “Be good to see The Four Doormen again. Just need this quick detour first. Be good to have you along.”

Sunny took the Trimmers straight for The Caress then. No time to do the usual Quilter deflection. Not with a flashpoint. The Redux had struck. People out in the world were dying.

The Caress already had someone in its moil, a young male tagger who must have jumped the border undetected. Solitaries could manage it.

He was already stripped and marked for portioning. You could see the terror on his face, the acceptance, the shocked fascination at having his body marked out for vivisection, then the beatific calm as the modals shifted, even more terrifying to see.

It had taken eleven years for WHO to figure out that what had been known as whirters - assemblages of fourteen accreting parts - were actually the hunt avatars of this uniquely tripartite Landing called The Caress. Once the whirter had assembled and its prey was caught and phased away, the victim hadn't been sent to oblivion as first thought, despite the measurable energy release, but had been sent off to the Landing itself. A whirter had tracked and caught this youth, faxed him home to where he now hung unsupported three metres in the air, by turns being lulled and soothed, then shown the full measure of his pending demise - as if the Landing drew on the rapid shift of disparate emotions. This cat-and-mouse function applied to The Caress's other parts in central Africa and the American mid-west.

"You wait by those outer flanges," Sam told the aylings. "We're ahead of time. We'll just check our route, and then we can see The Four Doormen."

The aylings suspected nothing. They went towards the outer questing arms of The Caress, were snatched, lofted, then promptly cancelled as the Landing identified them as something of their own kind. There one moment, gone the next.

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As the Trimmers' route brought them closer to The Redux, it was inevitable that they finally catch sight of Punky's Regulators. Towards evening they had their first glimpse of their old rivals, saw another campfire start up a mile or so off in the dusk a few minutes after theirs did. Direct com remained out, of course, but Sunny used the radio handset to send the *braka*, the switch-on, switch-off static rhythm that meant 'come hither', 'no threat', 'parley'. Coffee was set going. Extra cups and rations were laid out.

Twenty minutes later, a deputation of Regulators cooeed approach, then were there: Punky, Jack Crowfeather and, yes, Maisie Day.

Again the ten years were forgotten, impossible. There in the dark, Sam grinned wryly at having even tried to make another life. Among flash crews you either owned what you were or pretended. You never signed off - not having seen The Breakwater turn careless friends to clutches of sticks, seen the Lantern set them twitching off to their doom, seen the lines

of antique horses frozen mid-stride across the spinifex ridges, the fierce nacreous gleam of The Pearl with its - surprise! surprise! - reverse-pattern oyster trap designed solely to lure the curious. It *seemed*. The Trimmers, the Regulators, shouldn't be here. No-one should be here. But having tasted, having *turned* them, switched the modes, there was no staying away.

Then, seeing Maisie large and limber as life, a bigger woman than ever he'd preferred till he'd met her, Sam realized how his smile must seem and lost it at once, probably way too late.

So much resolve here, so many realities disregarded in the instant. Two crews meeting again, protected by the braka truce, the cooee, the old courtesies.

"The Trimmers, as they cleverly appear to live and breathe!" Punky said, lean and powerful in his Singer duster, big smile and white crew-cut like a double night-light in the dusk. Crowfeather had a smile too, but like a smug surgeon, a good foil for Walt Senny any day but without Walt's final kiss of style. "Best aytings ever to grace the sand-box!" Jack said. Maisie Day gave a civil nod but looked way too frosty and focused. She *had* seen Sam's smile on the way in.

Sunny and Angie gave generous greetings. Walt managed a cool hello. Sam heard his own voice murmur something, managed most of a new smile, thin, careful. Then he introduced Thomas, who sat wide-eyed, taking it all in as they got down to business.

"Sailmaker Two, if you can believe it," Sunny said, all easy, playing good cop as he always did. "The Redux, if you agree."

Punky eased himself onto the cooling sand, stuck out his long legs and raised his palms to the fire.

"Indeed," he said. "Bringing up Junior. Who would've thought? How we playing this?"

"Make an offer." Walt said, before Punky had finished speaking.

Punky flashed his smile, warming his hands in the desert chill. Sam watched the night, watched Maisie, watched the night again. For all he knew, the rest of the Regulators were out in the dark, getting ready to settle old scores outside the courtesies. There was little demonstrated love here, but perhaps Sunny was right. Perhaps they should always allow the

possibility of something more.

And Maisie. She looked good. Fierce and wonderful. Fuller. Heavier. Vital.

“Working the mode shift is all that matters,” Punky said, eminently practical. “Share the fee. Go tandem, turn about. Your call, Sunny. Dibs on first unless you want to toss for it.”

“Generous,” Walt said, like a knife.

“Traitor’s market,” Crowfeather said, testing.

“Stet,” Walt replied. *As was*. Calling him. Put up or shut up. And with it: know your place!

“Cousins,” Sunny said, keeping the focus, keeping the braka, the best of the old ways. The songs would always be written about the likes of Walt Senny, but it was flashmen like Sunny Jim who were the real heroes here. “Your dibs. We’ll follow you in at first light.”

“Others coming in,” Punky said, which said it all—explained the visit, the civility. *Cover our back, we cover yours*. Just like the hateful, treacherous old times.

There was hesitation. Muscles locked in the firelight though you’d never know it. There were old scores indeed, Sam and Maisie the least of them. This was make or break.

“New threat, new start, I figure,” Sunny said, bringing what he could of decency and civilization into this strange alienized place. “We’ll ward off. Give two hours. You do the same. Split the fee.”

“Done,” Punky said, holding out his cup for a refill instead of rising to go as they’d expected. “Half cup for the road.” And then, as if just thinking of it: “Sam, think Maisie would like a word, sotta-votchy.”

Sam was up and walking, moving away from the fire, into ambush, into trouble, he suddenly didn’t care. He was only aware of Thomas looking after him, wondering what the hell was going on, aware of footsteps following. He walked forty paces and turned, saw the campfire back there, the mixed crews filling this lonely place in the night, as improbable as a Landing, truth be known, saw Maisie’s shadow right there, backlit.

“Sam,” she said.

“Mae.” He’d never called her by her given name.

“Never expected this turn-out,” she said. “Never expected collateral damage.” Here it was. She had the right.

“Never ever that, Mae.” All he could say. And the word ‘ever’.
Precious envoy.

“Put aside the Trimmers, put aside the rest.”

“Denial gets like that.” Inane, simply true. *The Sailmaker*, he might have said. But she knew. Had to know. Losing Boker and Steyne, almost all of Croft Denner’s Larrikins. Despite the songs, the glamour of the chats, they’d been cruel years, even for the best crews. Especially the best.

“Bastard.”

“Never personal, Mae.”

“Everything is, Sam.”

Four beats. Not turning away. *You were with Punky. Rival crew.* “You know how I feel.”

She made a disgusted sound. Four beats. Still not turning. “You came back.”

Walt and Sunny, he might have said. Or *Time’s right*. Even *The Sailmaker*.

“Yes,” he said, which was all of it, encompassing. Hoping she’d see. One word as emblem for so much.

“Bastard.”

His conditioning had him. He almost shrugged. The zorro. Eternally cool. But didn’t. Didn’t.

“Be with me,” he said, kept her gaze for it, as hard as that was, saw all of her contempt, real or feigned, the old raw emotion powering whatever emotion it truly was.

Two beats.

“Be damned.” And she turned and went.

Afterwards, bare minutes later, then hours later in their clear-sky trackside doss with the Regulators’ camp-fire out in the cold night, he went back to it again and again, filled out the spaces with words. “That night at the stay-away,” he could have said. “The Sailmaker fuming and sewing. Teams torn up, played off against one another most like. Braka barely holding. No ships in the night for us. There was a reason for the different teams. We never settled. Never made it easy. You know that.” And the words would have been wrong. All wrong.

Mae knew. *Two* beats before turning. Mae knew.

And what was any of this if not redemption? Mae was with Punky again, but so what? There in their own meagre doss, in the close dark, Sam saw Punky and The Sailmaker and the Landings as just parts of a lock that could be broken, opened at last. Nothing was ever enough, and nothing was written. Be with me. What more could anyone ever say?

* * * *

At the first pink wash of dawn, the Trimmers were up, dusting off, doing ablutions, mantras, serving coffee, heating rations. The Regulators were no doubt doing the same. Little was said, considering, and when Sunny had the Trimmers move out it was in classic ‘diamond wand’ formation with standard two-metre separations: Angel at point, Walt behind her shoulder to the left as hawk, Sunny to the right as gauntlet, Thomas as pure, finishing the diamond proper, and Sam behind as star. When they engaged, Thomas would step into the middle of the diamond; Sam would move forward to close the diamond again.

In a sense, the movies and the chats had done the training here. Thomas knew to expect the first of the focal drugs when Sunny passed it to him five minutes along, just slapped on the patch and played it straight, no questions, no hesitation. As if born to it. Who would have thought the movies, teev and chats could save so much time, constantly updating the mindset?

And there were Punky’s Regulators ahead - same open diamond, their ballistic and laser weapons raised against new avatars, whatever whirter, burrus and aying variants the Redux might serve up.

And The Redux rose beyond, so clearly an embryonic Sailmaker. Same clutch of sculpted fossil masts, already six metres high in places, same array of flensing frames (they weren't, nothing like it, but try convincing anyone that those stretched and bellying tarps weren't human skin), same distinctive keening and slap-snapping sound that helped give the Landing its name. It was for all the world as if limp sails were being snapped full, a repeated jarring tattoo in the chill morning air. Silence but for the keening, the gunshot slap-snap of 'shrouds' and 'rigging', their own rhythmic tread.

Within seconds the Trimmers had their shades on macro, and Sam saw the Regulators' pure - Henna Jacko (suddenly remembering the name) - dutifully slap on the final patch. The assault patch. Saw Jack Crowfeather and Martine Atta and Mae slap on their link patches almost in unison. Saw Henna step into the centre and Punky close the diamond. They were engaging. Taking no chances.

The Redux was at two hundred metres when the avatars came. Not whirters, aylings or burrus variants - those oldest of Landing progeny. These were like the running dolls that had plagued Western Europe when The Rickshaw and The Rasa had first appeared. The most conventional after the aylings, the most -

No, not progeny at all!

Human!

"Down!" Walt cried, and Sunny saw it too.

"Hit squad!"

The Trimmers folded as one, Thomas dragged down by Walt, pushed down by Sam, went to lying unsupported positions in seconds, ballistics and laser up and aimed. Autotronics locked on as best they could in the interference caused by the Landings.

No thinking about it. *Crack. Crack. Tear. Crack. Tear. Crack.*

Dolls were falling, spots of ground kicking up where doll-strike hit back.

"Who?" Thomas yelled, huddling, terrified. There was the smell of piss.

No answer. *Work it out, newbie!*

Between shots, Sam managed a glimpse of the Regulators - down and firing - but couldn't see the damage there, who was safe and who wasn't.

Dolls were falling, falling. But so many. Too many. Thank the gods that autotropics were skewed.

No time to discuss it. Sam rolled to the side, targeted the outer skins of The Redux.

The others saw. Walt added his own ballistic strikes, Sunny swung his laser over the outer watch-screens.

The Redux struck back, and - as Sam hoped - targeted the *moving* shapes. Reached out with whatever targeting protocols it had and plucked at faces. Just faces. Snatched them into the activation perimeter and stretched them on the sky - one face, vast and glaring in shock, then two, ten, twenty, vast hoardings, rushmores, sails, twenty, thirty metres across and with - impossibly - complete facial integrity, no distortion despite the size.

Making sails.

The Trimmers and the Regulators didn't dare shift position. The dolls were gone - transformed. The Redux was in full trophy display, just like its terrifying parent out on the Amadeus. No slap-snap now, just the keening.

But there'd be more. A hit squad - *that* level of resources deployment - meant a carefully planned mission. Not targeting The Redux! *Them!* The crews! Mission contingency.

A fire-strike, of course! Officially: bombing The Redux before it proliferated. Perhaps claiming it already had! Something.

Unofficially: getting rid of the top crews, one way or another.

Wanting The Redux to grow. The old strategies. Old mistakes. Everything old, new again. New science. New chances for young turks with theories, careers to mind. Forgetting the past. Busy seizing the day.

“Sky-strike!” Sam stage-whispered, not daring to say it loudly. All quiet but for the keening, maybe the white noise *shift, shift, shift* of gaping faces on the sky.

Sunny dared to move an arm, so so slowly, activating the audio seek on his headset.

“They have the range,” Walt said.

“We’ll never know,” Angel added. True, all true.

“Listening!” Sunny reminded them, not expecting ship-talk in the braka white-out but hoping for something, anything.

So then it was just the keening and the waiting, thoughts of Mae running through Sam’s mind, and anger and some amusement too that it had come to this. How could you not laugh? So easy to catch the heroes, set them up. Can’t help themselves, the pompous asses! Strutting like lords! Who cared about countless thousands dying in an overpopulated world? Pay lip-service, go through the motions. Be seen to be doing the right thing. Who cared about the flashmen and their two secrets - *two* secrets that only the prime crews knew, that the taggers, quarterhands and newbies desperately tried to learn? Wasted heroes of the people. Losses just added to the legend. Get rid of the old, bring on the new. Bread and circuses.

Sam laughed into the sand. Merely flashmen. All they ever were. Dependable.

Expendable.

“Incoming!” Sunny said, reading not voice transmissions of any kind but rather fluctuations in the static where they would be. Ghosts of talk. He switched to distance tracking, non-vested audio ranges, made his raw calculations. “Ten ks out and on approach!” Best guess, but he had the skill.

“What will they do?” Thomas asked.

“Missile,” Angel said. “Point blank.”

“They don’t know,” Sunny said, marvelling at those careless airmen and foolish mission chiefs, that there could be so much ignorance in - the joke was there - high places. Still. Again. However it played. This was a

Sailmaker, for heaven's sake!

"Wait for it!" Walt Senny said, targeting the sky, the faces. "We'll spoil its trophies."

"No laser!" Angel warned.

"Stealth grenade," Walt said. "No sustained source trail."

"We hope."

"We hope," Sunny confirmed.

Sam found himself thinking of Mae, of the Regulators, of poor Thomas lying in his own piss, silent, bless him, but alive. Needed more than ever now if Henna Jacko was lost.

Walt judged the approach, calculated vagaries like Sunny's ten ks, wind direction, engine noise, pilot caution.

He fired into the faces, scored the hit. One by one they burned, skewing, heaving on their invisible tethers.

Nil source detected, it seemed. No instantaneous retaliation, at any rate. Possibly too small, too slight, no constant follow-up signature.

Then, again. The Redux found something that *would* do, coarse movement, read the aircraft on approach. Reached out and made sails. More faces spread on the sky - a half-dozen, there, there, there.

The bomber continued over, a smooth high crucifix with no-one aboard left alive.

The braka static from the Regulators came almost at once - basic Morse - *Henna dead. Your dibs.*

And lying there, the Trimmers swapped strategy. Thomas worked a new patch onto his arm. The others slowly, carefully, added their own patches when they could, each stage-whispered "Check!" till they'd all confirmed. Lying there, sprawled on the sand, they made the flash crew.

The Redux was new, dazzled by trophies, possibly its first, distracted by the sheer overload of being in the world. It never suspected - were there truly a governing intelligence that *could* suspect, bring cognition to what it

did.

The Trimmers found their voice, their hold, their strike, started working the flashpoint.

Sam focused, focused, no longer daring to think of Mae, or surviving, or the people out there in shut-down waiting their chance. He concentrated on Thomas, on sending through Thomas to The Redux, to the faces in the sky.

His eyes glazed, cleared, glazed, cleared, then found one trophy face, eyeless, vast, distended on the sky, twenty metres across, yet impossibly intact, mouth open in a scream but with no other feature distortion. Young, young it seemed. Not Mae. Young.

He used that face to keep the resolve. *Through* Thomas to *that* face.

How long they worked it there was no telling. The day tracked. The sun was up and blazing, crawling across the sky. Late autumn heat still made it a hell, but distant, bearable.

That sun was well into afternoon when the modes began shifting, finally switched, when the keening fell away and the slap-snap began again. Somewhere people were waking from shut-down fugue, finding dust in their mouths, insects, their limbs cramped, broken, wasted by circulation necrosis. But alive! *Alive!* And somewhere a debt was being paid.

The trophies were gone - the sky above the masts and frames of The Redux was a washed blue.

They'd managed it.

One by one, the Trimmers stirred, stood, stretched, worked their own stiff and aching muscles, grateful to be in the world.

The Regulators hadn't done as well. Three up, two down. Two!

The Trimmers hurried as much as they dared in that fraught place, crossed the newly keening, slap-snapping terrain before The Redux and reached what was left of Punky's crew.

Henna Jacko was gone. Her young face had been the sail Sam had seen. Had used.

Jack Crowfeather was the other - hit twice by shots from approaching dolls. Punky, Martine and Mae were getting them into body-bags, slowly, no sudden movements now, preparing to haul them back to whatever decent distance would serve as a trail burial site in these dangerous wastes.

"Thanks," Punky said. "Fee's yours, clear." Not: Who were they? What happened? Understanding that.

"We share," Sunny said. "Braka." Keeping faith, building traditions that might well outlive them all. Went in together. Come out together.

Punky grinned at the foolishness, Sunny's dogged largesse. "In light of this?"

"Especially." And not hesitating: "You go southwest by The Praying Hands. We'll take northwest. Use braka Morse when we can, voice when it clears. Have to get this out."

"Agreed," Punky said. "Warn our people off."

Walt grunted. "See if *they* can get themselves a decent crew then."

Martine and Mae both nodded, Mae's eyes holding Sam's two, three seconds before sliding away to tasks at hand. The Regulators reached for the bags holding their dead.

Sunny beat them to that as well. "We'll take the girl."

Not Jack. The newbie.

Punky nodded. "Appreciated."

No dragging body bags here. No being slowed down now if it could be helped. The Redux had made sails, possibly its first, was possibly recalling the experience, sorting what had happened. It could swing again. Not likely, given logged behaviour ranges, but anything was possible.

The Trimmers and the Regulators went their opposite ways, walking smoothly, quickly enough, considering. They abandoned their slow-mo's - possibly booby-trapped, but giving too much signature anyway - and they walked it. Left their dead amid rocks and walked. It took a fair slice of forever, but everyone was glad to pay it out of their lives.

Only when the Trimmers had the northwest boundary in sight, well

clear of Checkpoint Reuben just in case, did Sam bring it up.

“Questions, Thomas?”

“What’s that?” the kid asked, off with his thoughts, then understood.
“The two secrets? I can ask?”

“This side of The Redux it’s only fair.”

Sam stopped. Thomas stopped. The others kept walking, the group separating now, dividing as precaution: Angel and Sunny going wide toward the north, Walt going alone to the west proper. Getting it out.

Leaving Sam as good cop - and bad, should it come to that.

“So, what are they?” Direct, not defiant. Watching the others go.

Sam didn’t hesitate. “First, to get back thousands, we have to sacrifice hundreds.”

“Seems right. Seems fair. You can’t save everyone. I don’t - wait, are you saying that when we switch modes, some *always* die? *Have* to die?”

Sam began walking again, slowly, making it casual. He always wanted to deceive at this point. Give the beautiful lie. “Take it further.”

Thomas was following. “Wait! How do I take it further? We’re causing coarse action. Naturally some will die. The trauma -”

“Take it further!” Sam rounded on him, stopping again. Good cop and bad. Gun and duelling stick ready.

“How further?” Then his face locked into a mask, his eyes wide, his mouth wide like a miniature of The Redux’s trophies. “*You* kill them!” And accepting: “We kill them!”

Sam’s voice was soft, nearly toneless. “We use the energies of the random few to let us free the rest!”

“You used *me* to do *that!*”

“Certainly did. Certainly do. Certainly will. Every time. A devil’s bargain, but the fairest trade we can ever make.”

“It’s murder!”

“It surely is. Collateral damage. Friendly fire. Never personal. Our powers have to come from somewhere!”

“But you kill them!” Thomas said it more softly now, beyond rage, beyond disbelief. And the *you* worried Sam. Not *we*. “You used me.”

“However it works, the power comes through the pure. Has to. We find. You send. Small price to pay when you think it through. Small enough price. Hundreds dead so thousands upon thousands can be saved.”

“It’s immoral!”

“Amoral more like. But which is better? There goes a village, a town. You’ll have hundreds dead outright or thousands dying slowly? Starving. Eaten by insects, dogs, lying there aware in the fogue.”

“But you’re heroes!”

Sam didn’t try to answer that. What could you say? *Merely flashmen, Thomas. Merely flashmen.*

“Which is better?” was all he said.

“What!”

“Do we try to get some or let them all go?”

“*You try to get them all!*” Tears were running down the kid’s cheeks.

“Doesn’t work like that. Which is better?”

“It doesn’t excuse it!”

“Never does. Never can. Explains is all. You did well today. You saved some who would have died.”

“You’ll kill me if I tell about this.” The look of terror in his eyes had turned to cold understanding. “That’s the other secret.”

“Doesn’t go like that,” Sam said, giving the final wonderful lie. “We give you the Lethe drug. You remember none of it.”

“The Lethe drug? What if I refuse?”

“We make you. Or the WHO doctors will. Or they’ll imprison you, take you away. The world can’t know.”

I could pretend, Thomas might have said. *Go along with it*. But Sam had seen the test results, the psych profile, and knew he couldn’t.

“Think it through,” was all Sam said, and started walking away.

“I hate you!” Thomas called after him. “I thought you were heroes! I hate you all!”

“You’ll be hero enough if you accept the responsibility. That’s why you were chosen. I’ll be at the perimeter.”

* * * *

Sam left him raging, weeping, sitting in the dust. Sat in the shade of some boulders himself as the last of the day fell away, and thought it through again. Because you always had to.

What do they want from us? Sam asked himself, yet again. *Clean answers? Salvation without a price? Something for nothing?* He ran them all, all the old questions and trade-offs. Came up hard and strong, thinking of Mae, of Sunny and Walt and the look on Angel’s face back at Tagger’s when she first saw him again.

You could tell them. Put it to a vote. Nothing would change, most like. But they wanted heroes, someone to believe in, more than they wanted statistics and the truth, not just someone to make the hard decisions, maintain the beautiful lie, but *hide* such things. Saviours who wouldn’t quit even when they were struck at from *both* sides, who without ever planning or wanting to, protected them from the truth. Even from the wayward bits and pieces of their own natures.

It was early morning before the kid came in. Sam always felt he could guess which way it would go, but this time he wasn’t entirely sure. His pistol’s safety was off just in case - Lethe - but the holster cover was clipped down. His duelling stick was carefully in its sheath.

The kid came strolling along, kicking dust.

“Wanted to be a hero, Mr Aitch,” he said, falling in alongside when Sam started walking. “That’s all.”

“I know,” Sam said. “So we do impressions, Thomas. There are times when second best just has to do.”