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The Year's Best Australian

Science Fiction and Fantasy

(VOLUME 1)

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&

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Introduction

The kangaroo peered over the crest of the sand dune at the invaders. Little wooden boats with little flags fluttering in the breeze carried little white men to shore. And the little white men wore silly red and white uniforms that be could have seen kilohops away, even if he hadn't smelled them first. The didn't just look like they had spent six months on a ship, they smelled like it, ripe and rancid. They wouldn't be as tasty as the goanna the roo had eaten for breakfast, but it was going to find out. It shifted the AK-47 in its paws, and pulled a hand grenade from its belt.

The wooden boats looked silly. All sails and things. No steam, no diesel. And who did they think they were going to scare with those ancient muskets?

Where had these idiots come from? But that wouldn't matter, as long as they were tasty…

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The popular fiction genres, such as romance, fantasy and crime, are only twenty years old in Australian mass market publishing, at least in the current incarnation. There was an earlier boom in Australian speculative fiction, largely caused by WW2 and the import restrictions on pulps from England and the US. The result in those decades was a flourishing pulp fiction industry in all genres: science fiction, romance, crime, horror, war stories, etc. That boom died away in the 1950s. Parts of it hung on until the 1970s, such as the publishing house Horwitz with J. E. MacDonnell's novels of naval adventure. Then Australia was left with publishing programs in literary and children's fiction, both supported by government grants, but little else. Popular fiction became the preserve of multinational corporations importing books printed and published in the UK.

The break-through book for the re-establishment of an Australian popular fiction industry came in 1983. It was a crime novel, and not anything to do with speculative fiction at all. That book was *The Empty Beach*, by Peter Corris (who is still active in crime fiction), and it had to be published by an independent

textbook publisher in order to see the light of day. Why a textbook publisher? Well, the mainstream publishing industry has always been conservative and unused to risk-taking (still its greatest drawback in this country), and the popular fiction distributors of the time were all UK companies.

Even now the majority of Australia's larger publishers are multinationals. A book published in Australia was one less book that could be exported from the UK by the parent company. If the Australian subsidiary published mass market fiction, it would be competing with its parent company, and that competition wasn't allowed. Even in the late 1980s, Australian publishers were being told by their English superiors not to publish popular fiction.

Despite proven sales figures, local popular fiction publishing took time to build momentum. Crime writing led the way, followed by other forms of fiction, including fantasy. The early leader in fantasy publishing was Pan Macmillan. That first surge died away, due largely to derivative, poor quality fiction. The inexperience of the publishers with genre fiction showed. With the notable exception of generic high fantasy—imitations of Tolkien, Eddings and Feist—that inexperience continues to this day. (Pan Macmillan have since re-entered the field with their Tor imprint.)

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The leader of the little white men marched up the beach and tripped, falling onto its hands and knees. With some assistance from the others it struggled back to its feet and brushed sand from its dress uniform. It pulled a scroll from its pocket and held it high. "I claim this land in the name of… "

The kangaroo had a family to feed. And these idiots were just too silly to live.

It was now or never! Tasty or not tasty. She loves me, she loves me not…

He stood to his full four metre height and aimed.

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There is very little science fiction or horror published by the multinationals in Australia. Most of what they do publish is reprinted from US or English editions, a comforting proof that the book already has an international track record. The majority of Australia's best known science fiction writers, Greg Egan, Damien Broderick, Sean Williams, Sean McMullen, Shane Dix, are published internationally. These authors then have their international editions imported into Australia.

Why are the major publishers only interested in fantasy? If a fantasy novel sells 5000 copies, and a science fiction novel sells 3000 copies, a major publisher will publish the fantasy novel. Both will make money, but in a marginal market place niche marketing is ruled out by the bean counters who have invaded much of the role editors once held. The lower selling genre is sacrificed. Horror? Well, most story-telling in any genre of fiction contains a degree of horror. Call it crime, call it drama, call it literature, call it young adult, and that's okay. Call it horror and the old stigmas and prejudices surface. Local writers interested in anything other than generic high fantasy must remain in the independent presses, or seek publication internationally.

The dominance of fantasy in Australian genre publishing is such that Jennifer Fallon's recent *Second Suns* trilogy, which is science fiction in the vein of Anne McCaffrey's Pern novels, or Marion Zimmer Bradley's Darkover books, was published and marketed purely as fantasy by HarperCollins.

But with fantasy, the overseas publishing phenomenon has worked in the other direction. The best Australian authors were published locally first, and then had their work sold overseas. The best known, Garth Nix, Sara Douglass, Juliet Marillier, Kate Forsyth and Ian Irvine, are becoming household names, perhaps because all are telling their own stories, and finding their own direction out of the generic morass. Here are a few more names international readers will discover on their shelves: Tony Shillitoe, Glenda Larke, Simon Brown, Jennifer Fallon and Trudi Canavan. But what seems derivative to an Australian audience can be fresh to an international audience. The signature Australian blurring of good and evil in mass market fantasy is the flavour of the month internationally.

More interesting is the new, less easily defined, cross-genre phenomenon called 'slipstream', which China Mieville recently called the New Weird. Despite the marketing label of 'New', Australians have been happily at work in this genre for decades, most notably in the Tom Rynosseros stories of Terry Dowling. Dowling's is a surreal, fantastical future Australia, neither science fiction nor fantasy, but blending both with a sense of the mythic and the power of the landscape. Dowling's works shows that there are advantages as well as disadvantages to the independent press phenomena and not having to satisfy the commercial needs of multinational publishers. He has been successful because he wasn't forced to compromise, but the success has been limited by the limitations of independent presses.

While the current prominence of slipstream is a recent phenomenon, the sub-genre itself has been around for decades, often hiding in other genres. The works of Peter Goldsworthy, Janette Turner Hospital and Peter Carey also often fit the definition, although those writers have come from a literary background. What is interesting is that a large amount of the short fiction published in the independent small press magazines and anthologies also fits this slipstream subgenre. Generic fantasy is on the wane in short fiction. Readers, writers, editors and publishers in the independent press field are simply bored. Is there a grass roots trend emerging here?

But in the mass market, publishers are looking for generic fantasy trilogies, and very little else. Some science fiction is published into the techno-thriller market, witness John Birmingham's *Weapons of*

Choice. Some horror, such as Anthony O'Neal's excellent *The Lamplighter*, in which a gruesome serial killer mystery is played out by the power of an abused young woman's imagination—is published in the literary genre. Kim Wilkins, who proved that the mass-market horror novel can work in the Australian market place, is now being marketed as paranormal romance.

The short story field is almost totally the preserve of the independent press. Once again, a number of factors are at play. A whole range of new talent, in writing, editing and publishing, is at work: people who have been inspired both by what has been happening overseas in the independent presses, and by their own talent. The inability of mainstream publishers to take risks in what they still see as a minor genre of the derivative pulp mass market industry helps drive the new talent.

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Later that night, around the campfire, the roo's mate belched and said: "Use some salt and wild lime next time. And please *peel them first." She picked cotton from between her teeth. "Or better yet, I'll cook." Her expression softened when she saw her mate's face. "They* were *delicious though, darling. And thank you for catching, killing* and *cooking dinner. I'll wash the dishes*."

The roo brightened. "I hope they send us more! And I caught a koala for desert. But it needs a few more minutes —"

"Koala?' Again? We're going to eat grass at this rate!"

"- *marinating in the brandy. "*

"Oooh, that sounds delicious."

* * * *

A major factor in the independent press arena is new printing technology. Small presses once photocopied their magazines and fanzines, or used a whole range of expensive backyard production techniques whose names have been forgotten. Now we have effective desktop publishing software, print-on-demand technology, and the capability for cost-effective small print runs. We live in a world where anybody with the will and the ambition can have a go at publishing. That is both a strength and drawback—will, ambition and resources do not equate to talent and experience.

The real publishing experience lies with the established mass market publishers, who have little knowledge of speculative fiction. The talent most often lies with the independent press. It is one of the ironies of the field that the place where the speculative fiction talent and the publishing experience meet is most often overseas. That is changing.

Where to for Australian speculative fiction? The independent press phenomena will continue. The cottage industry publishers will become more experienced and more knowledgeable. The mass market publishers will always be driven by the commercial imperatives of a small marketplace but, hopefully, will also learn enough from grass root trends to allow the genre to develop.

Science fiction, fantasy and horror are literatures of ideas. Science fiction looks into the future, or at what could exist, given what the human races knows or can imagine about the universe. It looks also at different versions of our past and present—a sub-genre called alternate history. Horror looks at the supernatural, or at particularly disturbing versions of what can exist, given the perversions of human nature, and here horror crosses with the crime genre. Fantasy looks at worlds or subject matter which can't exist, which we acknowledge as impossible. All are literatures of ideas. Australian writers draw on the vast, often unforgiving, landscape we live in, the multicultural nature of the society around us and the lessons we're trying to learn from our history. The best stories feature characters in conflict with the idea, in search of resolution. The best stories provoke, inspire and entertain.

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The real invasion, of course, came later. The kangaroo and his partner were driven out of the Sydney basin to haunt the vast interior of the continent, where their descendants can still be found today, bounding through paddocks, slouching in the shade in the desert heat, fighting sheep and cattle for food—or dead under the wheels of trucks and on the meat racks of supermarkets…

… or bounding out from behind a tree, machete in one paw, can of beer in the other, shouting "Your money or your life."

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In 2004, the Australian short fiction market was dominated (again) by independent presses. In researching this anthology, we read every speculative fiction story we could find by Australian residents, published anywhere in the world. Nearly four hundred stories by one hundred and seventy writers. One and a quarter million words of fiction.

The trends are obvious. Internet publishing is up, and flash fiction—stories under a thousand words in

length—is also disappointingly on the rise. Speculative genre short fiction is at its best when it has the space to consider plot and character as well as idea, and flash fiction rarely does justice to its subject matter.

The most energetic publisher was Ion Newcombe, of the webzine *Antipodean SF*, which managed a dozen issues, reinventing the tropes and ideas of science fiction's heyday in the 1960s. *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine* also met their publishing schedule with six bi-monthly issues. Australia's longest running speculative fiction magazine, *Aurealis*, managed a single issue. New Western Australian magazine, *Borderlands*, managed a single issue, as did the Canberra-based *Fables and Reflections*. The Florida, USA, webzine, *Oceans of the Mind*, devoted an issue to Australian writing.

The new horror webzine, *Shadowed Realms*, put out two issues, the second devoted to flash fiction, a trend which will continue with this market. *Orb*, the best, and the best-looking, of the local speculative fiction magazines, produced a single quality issue. The webzine, *Ticonderoga Online*, put out two issues.

There were fewer anthologies in 2004 than in 2003. Agog! Press produced the third of their annual anthologies, *Agog! Smashing Stories*, edited by Cat Sparks, and the Canberra Speculative Fiction Guild produced their third, *Encounters*, edited by Maxine McArthur and Donna Hanson.

The year also produced three single-author collections. *Black Juice*, by Margo Lanagan, published by Allen & Unwin, was the stand-out volume of the year, and 'Singing My Sister Down' the outstanding story of the year. HarperCollins published a second volume of erotic fantasy and horror by Tobsha Leaner, *Tremble*, with a number of strong stories. Altair Australia Books published the story collection, *We Would be Heroes*, by Robert N Stephenson, and a poetry collection by Kate Forsyth, *Radiance*.

In addition, Australians placed stories with a number of anthologies, magazines and webzines, from major publishers and independents, around the world.

For details of websites, subscriptions and addresses of all the Australian based publications, please see the Appendix.

If we had produced a Years Best for 2003, it would have been dominated by horror fiction; 2005 is already shaping up to be the year of the adventure story. 2004? Well, you'll have to read ahead and find out.

Bill Congreve & Michelle Marquardt

Sydney, 2005.

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Singing my Sister Down

MARGO LANAGAN

Margo Lanagan grew up in the Hunter Valley and Melbourne, and now lives in Sydney. She has published poetry, teenage romances, novels for children and young adults, and speculative fiction short stories. Her short-story collection *Black Juice* won a Victorian Premiers Literary Award, and the story 'Singing My Sister Down' won an Aurealis Award for Best Young Adult Short Story, as well as the inaugural Golden Aurealis for Best Short Story. Two stories from *Black Juice* were selected for inclusion in the Datlow/Link/Grant *Year's Best*, and an unprecedented four stories made the *Locus* Recommended Reading list for 2001. Margo has conducted creative writing workshops in many primary and secondary schools throughout Australia, and was a tutor at Clarion South 2005. She is currently working on a speculative fiction novel and a third collection of short stories.

'Singing My Sister Down' was inspired by a documentary I saw on SBS about a town in Africa that was built on the edge of a tarpit. People warmed their feet in the tar, as described in the story: they also had to re-adjust their houses every year as the ground slowly shifted; they also had accidents like parking trucks on the tar and finding them gone the next morning. The point of view is one that I use regularly: a person who's not yet equipped to process what they're seeing. The events will shape him in times to come, but at this point he passes through the experience without properly understanding what's going on.

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W

e all went down to the tar-pit, with mats to spread our weight.

Ikky was standing on the bank, her hands in a metal twin-loop behind her. She'd stopped sulking; now she looked, more, stare-y and puzzled.

Chief Barnarndra pointed to the pit. 'Out you go then, girl. You must walk on out there to the middle and

stand. When you picked a spot, your people can join you.'

So Ik stepped out, very ordinary. She walked out. I thought...hoped, even...she might walk right across and into the thorns the other side; at the same time, I knew she wouldn't do that.

She walked the way you walk on the tar, except without the arms balancing. She nearly fell from a stumble once, but Mumma hulloo'd to her, and she straightened and walked a straight upright line out to the very middle, where she slowed and stopped, not looking back.

Mumma didn't look to the chief, but all us kids and the rest did. 'Right, then,' he said.

Mumma stepped straight out, as if she'd just herself that moment happened to decide to. We went after her...only us, Ik's family, which was like us being punished too, everyone watching us walk out to that girl who was our shame.

In the winter you come to the pit to warm your feet in the tar. You stand long enough to sink as far as your ankles...the littler you are, the longer you can stand. You soak the heat in for as long as the tar doesn't close over your feet and grip, and it's as good as warmed boots wrapping your feet. But in summer, like this day, you keep away from the tar, because it makes the air hotter and you mind about the stink.

But today we had to go out, and everyone had to see us go.

Ikky was tall, but she was thin and light from all the worry and prison; she was going to take a long time about sinking. We got our mats down, all the food-parcels and ice-baskets and instruments and such spread out evenly on the broad planks Dash and Felly had carried out.

'You start, Dash,' said Mumma, and Dash got up and put his drum-ette to his hip and began with 'Fork-Tail Trio', and it did feel a bit like a party. It stirred Ikky awake from her hung-headed shame; she lifted up and even laughed, and I saw her hips move in the last chorus, side to side.

Then Mumma got out one of the ice-baskets, which was already black on the bottom from meltwater.

Ikky gasped. 'Ha! What! Crab! Where'd that come from?'

‘Never you mind, sweet-thing.’ Mumma lifted some meat to Ikky’s mouth, and rubbed some of the crush-ice into her hair.

‘Oh, Mumma!’ Ik said with her mouth full.

‘May as well have the best of this world while you’re here,’ said Mumma. She stood there and fed her like a baby, like a pet guinea-bird.

‘I thought Auntie Mai would come,’ said Ik.

‘Auntie Mai, she’s useless,’ said Dash. ‘She’s sitting at home with her handkerchief.’

‘I wouldn’t’ve cared, her crying,’ said Ik. ‘I would’ve thought she’d say goodbye to me.’

‘Her heart’s too hurt,’ said Mumma. ‘You frightened her. And she’s such a straight lady...she sees shame where some of us just see people. Here, inside the big claw, that’s the sweetest meat.’

‘Oh, yes! Is anyone else feasting with me?’

‘No, darlin’, this is your day only. Well, okay, I’ll give some to this little sad-eyes here, huh? Felly never had crab but the once. Is it yum? Ooh, it’s yum! Look at him!’

Next she called me to do my flute...the flashiest, hardest music I knew. And Ik listened, who usually screamed at me to stop pushing spikes into her brain; she watched my fingers on the flute-holes and my sweating face and my straining, bowing body, and for the first time I didn’t feel like just the nuisance-brother to her. I played well, out of the surprise of her not minding. I couldn’t’ve played better. I heard everyone else being surprised, too, at the end of those tunes, that they must’ve all known too, too well from all my practising.

I sat down, very hungry. Mumma passed me the water-cup and a damp-roll.

‘I’m stuck now,’ said Ik, and it was true...the tar had her by the feet, closed in a gleaming line like that

pair of zipper-slippers I saw once in the shoe-master's vitrina.

'Oh yeah, well and truly stuck,' said Mumma. 'But then, you knew when you picked up that axe-handle you were sticking yourself.'

'I know.'

'No coming unstuck from this one. You could've let that handle lie.' That was some serious teasing.

'No, I couldn't, Mumma, and you know.'

'I do, baby chicken. I always knew you'd be too angry, once the wedding-glitter rubbed off your skin. It was a good party, though, wasn't it?' And they laughed at each other, Mumma having to steady Ikky or her ankles would've snapped over. And when their laughter started going strange Mumma said, 'Well, this party's going to be almost as good, 'cause it's got children. And look what else!' And she reached for the next ice-basket.

And so the whole long day went, in treats and songs, in ice and stink and joke-stories and gossip and party-pieces. On the banks, people came and went, and the chief sat in his chair and was fanned and fed, and the family of Ikky's husband sat around the chief, being served too, all in purple-cloth with flashing edging, very prideful.

She went down so slowly.

'Isn't it hot?' Felly asked her.

'It's like a big warm hug up my legs,' said Ik. 'Come here and give me a hug, little stick-arms, and let me check. Oof, yes, it's just like that, only lower down.'

'You're coming down to me,' said Fel, pleased.

'Yeah, soon I'll be able to bite your ankles like you bite mine.'

Around mid-afternoon, Ikky couldn't move her arms any more and had a panic, just quiet, not so the bank-people would've noticed. 'What'm I going to do, Mumma?' she said. 'When it comes up over my face? When it closes my nose?'

'Don't you worry about that. You won't be awake for that.' And Mumma cooled her hands in the ice, dried them on her dress, and rubbed them over Ik's shoulders, down Ik's arms to where the tar had locked her wrists.

'You better not give me any teas, or herbs, or anything,' said Ik. 'They'll get you, too, if you help me. They'll come out to see and make sure.'

Mumma put her hands over Felly's ears. 'Tristem give me a gun,' she whispered.

Ikky's eyes went wide. 'But you can't! Everyone'll hear!'

'It's got a thing on it, quietens it. I can slip it in a tar-wrinkle, get you in the head when your head is part sunk, fold back the wrinkle, tell 'em your heart stopped, the tar pressed it stopped.'

Felly shook his head free. Ikky was looking at Mumma, quietening. There was only the sound of Dash tearing bread with his teeth, and the breeze whistling in the thorn-galls away over on the shore. I was watching Mumma and Ikky closely...I'd wondered about that last part, too. But now this girl up to her waist in the pit didn't even look like our Ikky. Her face was changing like a cloud, or like a masque-lizard's colours; you don't see them move but they become something else, then something else again.

'No,' she said, still looking at Mumma. 'You won't do that. You won't have to.' Her face had a smile on it that touched off one on Mumma's too, so that they were both quiet, smiling at something in each other that I couldn't see.

And then their eyes ran over and they were crying and smiling, and then Mumma was kneeling on the wood, her arms around Ikky, and Ikky was ugly against her shoulder, crying in a way that you couldn't interrupt them.

That was when I realised how many people were watching, when they set up a big, spooky oolooling and stamping on the banks, to see Mumma grieve.

‘Fo!’ I said to Dash, to stop the hair creeping around on my head from that noise. ‘There never was such a crowd when Chep’s daddy went down.’

‘Ah, but he was old and crazy,’ said Dash breadily, ‘and only killed other olds and crazies.’

‘Are those fish-people? And look at the yellow-cloths...they’re from up among the caves, all that way!’

‘Well, it’s nearly Langasday, too,’ said Dash. ‘Lots of people on the move, just happening by.’

‘Maybe. Is that an honour, or a greater shame?’

Dash shrugged. ‘This whole thing is up-ended. It’s like a party, but who would have a party in the tar, and with family going down? I don’t get it.’

‘It’s what Mumma wanted.’

‘Better than having her and Ik be like this all day.’ Dash’s hand slipped into the nearest ice-basket and brought out a crumb of coconut-ice. He ate it as if he had a perfect right.

Everything went slippery in my mind, after that. We were being watched so hard! Even though it was quiet out here, the pothering wind brought crowd-mumble and scraps of music and smoke our way, so often that we couldn’t be private and ourselves. Besides, there was Ikky with the sun on her face, but the rest of her from the rib-peaks down gloved in tar, never to see sun again. Time seemed to just have gone, in big clumps, or all the day was happening at once or something, I was wondering so hard about what was to come, I was watching so hard the differences from our normal days. I wished I had more time to think, before she went right down; my mind was going a bit breathless, trying to get all its thinking done.

But evening came and Ik was a head and shoulders, singing along with us in the lamplight, all the old songs...’A Flower for You’, ‘Hen and Chicken Bay’, ‘Walking the Tracks with Beejum Singh’, ‘Dollarberries’. She sang all Felly’s little-kid songs that normally she’d sneer at; she got Dash to teach her his new one, ‘A Camo Mile’, with the tricky chorus, made us all work on that one like she was trying to stop us noticing the monster bonfires around the shore, the other singing, of fishing songs and forest songs, the stomp and clatter of the dancing. But they were there all the time, and no other singing in our lives had had all this going on behind it in the gathering darkness.

When the tar began to tip Ik's chin up, Mumma sent me for the wreath. 'Mai will have brought it, over by the chief's chair.'

I got up and started across the tar, and it was as if I cast magic ahead of me, silence-making magic, for as I walked...and it was good to be walking, not sitting...musics petered out, and laughter stopped, and dancers stood still, and there were eyes at me, all along the dark banks, strange eyes and familiar both.

The wreath showed up in the crowd ahead, a big, pale ring trailing spirals of whisper-vine, the beautifullest thing. I climbed up the low bank there, and the ground felt hard and cold after a day on the squishy tar. My ankles shivered as I took the wreath from Mai. It was heavy; it was fat with heavenly scents.

'You'll have to carry those,' I said to Mai, as someone handed her the other garlands. 'You should come out ,anyway. Ik wants you there.'

She shook her head. 'She's cloven my heart in two with that axe of hers.'

'What, so you'll chop hers too, this last hour?'

We glared at each other in the bonfire light, all loaded down with the fine, pale flowers.

'I never heard this boy speak with a voice before, Mai,' said someone behind her.

'He's very sure,' said someone else. 'This is Ikky's Last Things we're talking about, Mai. If she wants to you be one of them…'

'She shouldn't have shamed us all, then,' Mai said, but weakly.

'You going to look back on this and think yourself a po-face,' said the first someone.

'But it's like...' Mai sagged and clicked her tongue. 'She should have cared what she did to this family,' she said with her last fight. 'That it's more than just herself.'

‘Go on, take the flowers. Don’t make the boy do this twice over. Time is short.’

‘Yeah, everybody’s time is short,’ said the first someone.

Mai stood, pulling her mouth to one side.

I turned and propped the top of the wreath on my forehead, so that I was like a little bride, trailing my head of flowers down my back to the ground. I set off over the tar, leaving the magic silence in the crowd. There was only the rub and squeak of flower-stalks in my ears; in my eyes, instead of the flourishes of bonfires, there were only the lamps in a ring around Mumma, Felly, Dash, and Ikky’s head. Mumma was kneeling bonty-up on the wood, talking to Ikky; in the time it had taken me to get the wreath, Ikky’s head had been locked still.

‘Oh, the baby,’ Mai whimpered behind me. ‘The little darling.’

Bit late for darling-ing now, I almost said. I felt cross and frightened and too grown-up for Mai’s silliness.

‘Here, Ik, we’ll make you beautiful now,’ said Mumma, laying the wreath around Ik’s head. ‘We’ll come out here to these flowers when you’re gone, and know you’re here.’

‘They’ll die pretty quick...I’ve seen it.’ Ik’s voice was getting squashed, coming out through closed jaws. ‘The heat wilts ‘em.’

‘They’ll always look beautiful to you,’ said Mumma. ‘You’ll carry down this beautiful wreath, and your family singing.’

I trailed the vines out from the wreath like flares from the edge of the sun.

‘Is that Mai?’ said Ik. Mai looked up startled from laying the garlands between the vines. ‘Show me the extras, Mai.’

Mai held up a garland. ‘Aren’t they good? Trumpets from Low Swamp, Auntie Patti’s whisper-weed, and star-vine to bind. You never thought ordinary old stars could look so good, I’ll bet.’

‘I never did.’

It was all set out right, now. It went in the order: head, half-ring of lamps behind (so as not to glare in her eyes), wreath, half-ring of garlands behind, leaving space in front of her for us.

‘Okay, we’re going to sing you down now,’ said Mumma. ‘Everybody get in and say a proper goodbye.’ And she knelt inside the wreath a moment herself, murmured something in Ikky’s ear and kissed her on the forehead.

We kids all went one by one. Felly got clingy and made Ikky cry; Dash dashed in and planted a quick kiss while she was still upset and would hardly have noticed him; Mumma gave me a cloth and I crouched down and wiped Ik’s eyes and nose...and then could not speak to her bare, blinking face.

‘You’re getting good at that flute,’ she said.

But this isn’t about me, Ik. This is not at all about me.

‘Will you come out here some time, and play over me, when no one else’s around?’

I nodded. Then I had to say some words, of some kind, I knew. I wouldn’t get away without speaking. ‘If you want.’

‘I want, okay? Now give me a kiss.’

I gave her a kid’s kiss, on the mouth. Last time I kissed her, it was carefully on the cheek as she was leaving for her wedding. Some of her glitter had come off on my lips. Now I patted her hair and backed away over the wreath.

Mai came in last. ‘Fairy doll,’ I heard her say sobbingly. ‘Only-one.’

And Ik: ‘It’s all right, auntie. It’ll be over so soon, you’ll see. And I want to hear your voice nice and strong in the singing.’

We readied ourselves, Felly in Mumma's lap, then Dash, then me next to Mai. I tried to stay attentive to Mumma, so Mai wouldn't mess me up with her weeping. It was quiet except for the distant flubber and snap of the bonfires.

We started up, all the ordinary evening songs for putting babies to sleep, for farewelling, for soothing broke-hearted people...all the ones everyone knew so well that they'd long ago made ruder versions and joke-songs of them. We sang them plain, following Mumma's lead; we sang them straight, into Ikky's glistening eyes, as the tar climbed her chin. We stood tall, so as to see her, and she us, as her face became the sunken centre of that giant flower, the wreath. Dash's little drum held us together and kept us singing, as Ik's eyes rolled and she struggled for breath against the pressing tar, as the chief and the husband's family came and stood across from us, shifting from foot to foot, with torches raised to watch her sink away.

Mai began to crumble and falter beside me as the tar closed in on Ik's face, a slow, sticky, rolling oval. I sang good and strong...I didn't want to hear any last whimper, any stopped breath. I took Mai's arm and tried to hold her together that way, but she only swayed worse, and wept louder. I listened for Mumma under the noise, pressed my eyes shut and made my voice follow hers. By the time I'd steadied myself that way, Ik's eyes were closing.

Through our singing, I thought I heard her cry for Mumma; I tried not to, yet my ears went on hearing. This will happen only the once...you can't do it over again if ever you feel like remembering. And Mumma went to her, and I could not tell whether Ik was crying and babbling, or whether it was a trick of our voices, or whether the people on the banks of the tar had started up again. I watched Mumma, because Mumma knew what to do; she knew to lie there on the matting, and dip her cloth in the last water with the little fading fish-scales of ice in it, and squeeze the cloth out and cool the shrinking face in the hole.

And the voice of Ik must have been ours or others' voices, because the hole Mumma was dampening with her cloth was by her hand movements only the size of a brassboy now. And by a certain shake of her shoulders I could tell: Mumma knew it was all right to be weeping now, now that Ik was surely gone, was just a nose or just a mouth with the breath crushed out of it, just an eye seeing nothing. And very suddenly it all was too much...the flowers nodding in the lamplight, our own sister hanging in tar, going slowly, slowly down like van der Berg's truck that time, like Jappity's cabin with the old man still inside it, like any old villain or scofflaw of around these parts, and I had something like a big sicking-up of tears, and they tell me I made an awful noise that frightened everybody right up to the chief, and that the groom's parents thought I was a very ill-brought-up boy for upsetting them instead of allowing them to serenely and superiorly watch justice be done for their lost son.

I don't remember a lot about it. I came back to myself walking dully across the tar between Mai and Mumma, hand in hand, carrying nothing, when I had come out here laden, when we had all had to help. We must have eaten everything, I thought. But what about the mats and pans and pots and all? Then I

heard a screeking clanking behind me, which was Dash hoisting up too heavy a load of pots.

And Mumma was talking, wearily, as if she'd been going on a long time, and soothingly, which was like a beautiful guide-rope out of my sick difficulty, which my brain was following hand over hand. It's what they do to people, what they have to do, and all you can do yourself is watch out who you go loving, right? Make sure it's not someone who'll rouse that killing-anger in you, if you've got that rage, if you're like our Ik...

Then the bank came up in front of us, high and white-grassed, and beyond it were all the eyes, and attached to the eyes the bodies, shuffling aside for us.

I knew we had to leave Ik behind, and I did not make a fuss, not now. I had done all my fussing, all at once; I had blown myself to pieces out on the tar, and now several monstrous things, several gaping mouths of truth, were rattling the pieces of me around their teeth. I would be all right, if Mai stayed quiet, if Mumma kept murmuring, if both their hands held me as we passed through this forest of people, these flitting firefly eyes.

They got me up the bank, Mumma and Aunty; I paused and they stumped up and then lifted me, and I walked up the impossible slope like a demon, horizontal for a moment and then stiffly over the top...

...and into my Mumma, whose arms were ready. She couldn't've carried me out over the tar, or we'd both have sunk, with me grown so big now. But here on the hard ground she took me up, too big as I was for it. And, too big as I was, I held myself onto her, crossing my feet around her back, my arms behind her neck. And she carried me like Jappity's wife used to carry Jappity's idiot son, and I felt just like that boy, as if the thoughts that were all right for everyone else weren't coming now, and never would come, to me. As if all I could do was watch, but not ever know anything, not ever understand. I pushed my face into Mumma's warm neck; I sealed my eyes shut against her skin; I let her strong warm arms carry me away in the dark.

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Dreaming Dragons

LYNETTE ASPEY

A long time ago, a girl just a tad older then Elaine in ‘Sleeping Dragons’ sat by a fireside and spun convoluted tales lo her indulgent father. These stories all concerned a kid with a destiny and a magical, far away realm in need of rescuing. Many years later, that same girl, now a middle-aged mother, discovered the treasury of myth that belongs to the Vietnamese people. She asks their forgiveness for having appropriated one of their ‘sons’ for her own purposes. In the meantime, Lynette continues her journeying, imaginative and otherwise, since home is a small yacht called *Melika* currently cruising the Caribbean, enroute to Neverland where kids don’t grow up and beloved fathers never die. If she finds it, she promises to send a postcard.

* * * *

W

hen I was a little girl, I thought that all babies hatched from golden eggs. I don’t mean that Ryan’s egg was made of real gold. Rather, it was like a smooth rock the colour of beach sand at sunset, and when Dad put it into my arms, my skin tingled. That it would hatch, after all the care I lavished on it, seemed perfectly natural to me, although Dad was surprised. He had brought it back for me from Vietnam as a gift, and it was *supposed* to be a dragon’s egg.

The first sign we had that something might be happening was when fine veins appeared in that smooth, hard surface and it started to leak. Soon after, I was disappointed to find myself with an infant brother instead of a baby dragon, but Ryan was hard to resist. When he smiled he looked just like a chubby Buddha, with soft black hair and honey coloured skin.

One day, Dad warned, someone might come to take him away but until then, he was our secret. It was an easy one to keep, living as we did a long way from anywhere, even by Australian standards.

I was seven years old, and Ryan nearly two, when the old man came. I remember being cross because Ryan had plonked his fat bottom into the middle of my play, sitting on my paper and chewing my crayons.

The afternoon sun was too strong for the old curtains to keep out, but I enjoyed playing on the carpet amidst the patchwork sunlight. There was the hum of insects and the squawk of birds in the eucalyptus trees outside. From my father’s study, I could hear the tap-tap-tip of his keyboard.

As usual, Yellow Dog lay stretched across the entrance to the hallway, from where he could keep an eye on us all.

"'Ainie," said Ryan, levering himself up the way toddlers do. "Knock. Knock."

I didn't bother looking up. "Who's there?" Usually it was Dog, or Dad, or Dino the dinosaur, but instead of playing, Ryan trotted out of the living room, into the kitchen. When he had nearly reached the door, Yellow Dog rose up on stiff legs to follow. I could see them from where I sat; the little boy with his hand on the back of the old dog, looking out. A moment later, Yellow Dog started barking.

Then came the scrunching sound of boots, and a shadow appeared at the door.

"Daddy?" I called, but he was already there, standing with one hand on the wall, the other on his heart. He paused for only a beat, before a few long strides took him across the kitchen. He scooped the baby up and hugged him close. Yellow Dog's hackles were bristling.

I got up and sidled closer. The shadow at the door resolved into a man-shape as I approached, the outline blurred by the dirty grey of the fly screen and the bright sunshine behind. I could see that the stranger was shorter than my father, but I had the peculiar impression that he was also much *bigger*. It was his shadow, I thought, noticing how it reached across the room. It fell over the dog and my father, and I was afraid to come any closer in case it touched me too.

The stranger stared at Ryan. "Bac Vüöng," he whispered. *King*.

"Chüa Bac." *Honoured Grandfather*. My father's voice was shaking. "Bac cên gì?" *What do you want* ?

"Your Vietnamese is still terrible, Jon Ashton," said the shadow man. At the sound of his voice Yellow Dog's hackles settled, as if a hand had stroked them down.

Ryan burbled from his perch on Dad's hip. I think a cloud must have passed over the sun then, for the bright light suddenly faded and the stranger resolved into nothing more threatening than a sturdy old bloke with neat grey hair, bushy eyebrows and eyes like shiny black pebbles in a nest of wrinkles. "We must talk," he said.

I remember thinking that Dad was acting very strangely. He turned and saw me standing in the corner, where the carpet became linoleum, the demarcation between our living room and the kitchen. He brought Ryan over to me and wrapped my arms around him.

“Don’t come outside, Elaine,” he said. Then, to the dog, he commanded, “Stay.” Yellow Dog sat back on his haunches, ears pricked. Dad stroked the dog’s wide, smooth head, slipped his hand under his muzzle and lifted his head up so that they looked eye to eye. “Guard,” he said, and then he went outside, shutting the fly-screen door firmly behind him.

Yellow Dog padded over to the door and lay down beside it. The crafty animal knew me far too well. I gave a few good tugs on his collar anyway, just for good measure, before Ryan and I lay down across his tummy so that we could watch and listen through the screen door. I was delighted to see his merciless baby fingers grabbing a handful of thick fur.

Yellow Dog, aware of the price to pay for his obedience, gave a huff of discomfort, settled his muzzle onto his paws and waited for Dad to come back and relieve him from duty.

I could only hear snippets of their conversation. The two men were standing side by side; my tall, fair father and the stocky, dark stranger. Dad murmured something and passed his hands over his eyes, as he sometimes did when he was very tired or sad. He kicked at the ground with his boot, sending up little clouds of red dust.

A wide firebreak of bare earth surrounded our house and, beyond that, nothing but bush—scrubby saplings and tall ghost gums, their skin of bark peeling away to reveal smooth, silver trunks. The afternoon breeze was heavy with the smell of eucalypt.

“He is too vulnerable here,” I heard the old man say.

Dad muttered something, shoved his hands into his pockets.

The stranger laughed out loud. “Hide him? And if you could, what do you think he will become in that time?” He gestured towards the house. “You cannot protect them both.”

From somewhere close by a kurrawong warbled, and another joined in chorus. I breathed in the tangy bush smell. The whumpf whumpf of Yellow Dog’s panting was loud in my ears.

Dad’s voice was a low, angry hum.

The old man shook his head and it appeared to me that dust motes danced around his shoulders. Dad's hands came out of his pockets and clenched into fists and his voice rose. "You think I'm going to give him up? Just like that?"

"It is a mistake to think of him as your son."

I glanced down at Ryan. He had stopped torturing Yellow Dog, his attention captured by the old man. I wondered if he knew they were talking about him.

"I have guarded his secret all my life, as my ancestors have done for thousands of years. His destiny is not with you."

"The egg came to me legitimately," said Dad, sounding desperate.

"And my daughter will pay the price of her betrayal. Oh yes. In the meantime, where is the proof that this child is yours, eh?"

Dad started to say something else, but the old man held up his hand. "I do not blame you for what happened and I do not threaten lightly. It is my duty. I *must* take him back."

Dad put his hands back in his pockets. I caught the words: "Not now, so sudden, let me."

The old man was quiet for a while, then he nodded. He looked back at us and waved, as if he was the nicest person in the world, before walking off down the rough dirt road and quickly disappearing amidst the ghost gums.

* * * *

Dad hardly spoke for the rest of the evening, and I knew that look on his face well enough not to pester him. After he had put us to bed, I heard the creak of the veranda's old wooden floor at the back of the house and the slap of the screen door.

I got up and went to my window, hut I couldn't see anything, so I padded out to the verandah, stepping carefully in the dark, knowing which floorboards would not complain. The night breeze was cool and

pleasant. I pressed my nose against the fly screen, careful not to breathe in too deeply in case the dust made me sneeze.

He was standing in the yard, naked, head thrown back and long brown arms wrapped around his pale chest. I could see his shoulders and the muscles down his back all bunched and bulging. He was looking up at the stars, and he was crying.

I stepped backwards, sorry for having spied on him, and my foot came down on the wrong floorboard. It betrayed me with a loud *creak*.

Dad turned towards me, although I don't think he could see me in the dark, and there was so much pain in his face that I was sure I had done something terrible.

"I'm sorry, Daddy."

"What are you doing out of bed?"

I said the first thing that came to mind. "You didn't tell us a story." Which was true enough.

"Go to bed, Elaine."

"But, Daddy," I whined.

"Now!"

I fled back to the bedroom and dived under my blankets, burrowing as deep as I could. I counted the long minutes before I heard the footsteps outside my door and breathed a sigh of relief.

The bed tilted down as he sat next to me. He gently pulled the covers from over my head, and tucked them around my shoulders.

Dad had put on his dressing gown. He toyed with the frayed edge of its belt while looking at the cot,

where Ryan slept. “I do have a story,” he said.

I snuggled up against his knee and he absently re-tucked the edge of my blanket. “A long time ago, there was a man called Kinh Duong and he was the ruler of the Land of Red Demons. Kinh Duong fell in love with the daughter of the Dragon Lord of the Sea, and they had a son, whom they named Lac Long Quan. In time, Lac Long Quan grew up to become the Dragon Lord of Lac, and he ruled the land of the Red River delta. One day, Ti Lung, the Earth Dragon, warned him that there would be trouble with the people in the north unless he found a wife from those lands to keep the peace. After a long search, Lac Long Quan met a beautiful woman called An Co.”

“That’s a funny name,” I said.

“And you think ‘Elaine’ wouldn’t sound strange to her?” He asked. “Do you want this story or not?” I nodded enthusiastically. “Okay, then. Au Co had already lived for a long time and some even believed that she was immortal. Even so, she married Lac Long Quan and it seemed that they were happy, but then she did something strange.”

At seven years old, I could imagine things very weird indeed, but Dad no longer seemed happy telling me this story. He looked down at his feet for a long time, absently picking at his dressing gown.

“Something strange?” I prompted.

Finally he said, “The story goes that instead of babies, Au Co had a hundred eggs, from which were born a hundred sons.”

My skin tingled with the memory of Ryan’s egg.

“The Dragon Lord loved his wife,” Dad continued after a pause, “but she didn’t want to live in the lowlands, where he ruled. She craved the high places of the world. So, Au Co took fifty of her sons and went into the mountains, leaving Lac Long Quan and their other fifty sons in the delta lowlands.”

“She had another egg, didn’t she?” I interrupted again. “Or maybe the last one didn’t hatch.”

“I don’t know, ‘Lainie,” he said softly.

The baby stirred in his sleep. Chubby fingers opening and closing like caterpillars.

"You won't give Ryan to that old man, will you Daddy?"

"His name is Mr. Pham," he said, standing up.

"But—"

"Enough!" Then, in a gentler voice, "Go to sleep."

He closed the door firmly behind him when he left the room. I turned over on my side and saw that the moon was just rising. Some of its pale light filtered through the sparse trees outside, and caught the bars of Ryan's cot, making a shadow bridge across the space between us.

* * * *

The next day, we drove to Wallindah for supplies. Ryan sat in the middle of the front seat, strapped into his baby chair. He had a terry-towelling hat pulled down over his forehead to shade his eyes, one chubby fist gripping his beloved dinosaur. He was chuckling, happy to be going on a car ride. I was happy too, because I knew that he would fall asleep almost straight away, and it would be nice to have Dad all to myself.

I remembered to bring some cushions to sit on, so that I could see out the window, and so that the bouncing of Elsie, our ancient Landrover, wouldn't make me bite my tongue.

Wallindah is a typical one-street town, with a hardware store, a bakery, and a general store that is also the post office. It has a petrol station and a farm equipment supplier and two pubs. A few cars and trucks were parked in the street, some with panting dogs lying underneath. There were only a few people moving around. It was the middle of the day, and sensible folk had retreated out of the heat into one or the other pub.

Dad parked in front of the general store and told me to stay in Elsie with Ryan. He made sure both of us had our water bottles and left my window wound down. The sun was behind us, but it was hot and I was

sure my bottom was melting into the pile of cushions.

Dad opened the back door and Yellow Dog jumped out, happy to stretch his legs and find something to pee on.

Ryan woke up as soon as we stopped. I could tell, from the way his eyes followed Dad into the store, that he was preparing to yell up a storm. I knew just how he felt. Since it was going to happen anyway, I couldn't be accused of having started anything. I snatched away Dino and threw it out the window.

Ryan's dark eyes narrowed vengefully, even as his face crumpled into an agony of distress, and his little legs started kicking in fury. I felt a rush of joy at having triggered such a reaction, but the anticipated yells never came. Distracted by something outside, Ryan suddenly forgot his tantrum.

"Caw, caw," he said.

I turned, and there, looking in at us through the dusty windscreen, was a huge crow. It tilted its head to one side, studying us from a bright, black eye. Its beak was half-open, probably from the heat, but it seemed to me that it was smiling at us, or laughing.

Ryan kicked again, bouncing his little body up and down against his restraints. "Caw. Caw."

I didn't like the bird. "Shoo!" I said, and lunged forward, wanting to scare it away. It hopped back a few paces, lifting its wings slightly, and then ruffled its feathers. It turned its head to one side and studied me, then hopped up to the windscreen and tapped its huge beak against the glass. Tap, tap, tip.

Elsie was old but well built, Dad said, and I knew that there was no reason to be afraid of a stupid bird when I sat behind solid, reassuring glass. I quickly wound up my window anyway.

Ryan leant forward in his chair, staring at the bird. He waved a chubby arm about as if he, too, wanted to shoo it away.

The crow watched him for a moment, and then bounced away on its skinny, leathery legs. Its claws click-clicked on the dirty metal of Elsie's hood. It jumped onto the metal frame of the bull-bar, at the front of the car, turned around, jumped into the air and flew straight for us. BANG! It hit the glass in a fury of exploding black feathers, beak and claws.

I screamed and threw myself over Ryan but he didn't even whimper. When I looked into his eyes, they were as black and round as those of the bird. I scrabbled for the door handle, suddenly desperate to get out of the car. Behind me Ryan cooed, "Da, Da."

There was Dad, with Dino in his hand, staring at the bloody smear on our windscreen and the crumple of black feathers on the hood. He looked down at me from beneath the wide brim of his hat, and we connected in a moment of instant understanding.

Run away, I thought. We have to run away.

He put the shopping in the back seat, letting the dog jump in, before going around to the front. He lifted the bird by a broken wing and dropped it on the ground. He jumped into the car, and without a word, handed Ryan his toy, checked our restraints, then gunned Elsie's engine and drove out of town as fast as the old car would go.

Ryan squawked in my ear, making his Dino noise, "Raar, raar". I steeled myself to look into his eyes but I saw nothing there except baby innocence and stubborn insistence.

"Daddy, why did that bird want to get at Ryan?"

"It was probably sick in its head, honey."

I looked over at my beloved father. His face was hot and red, his hair dark and flat from having sweated beneath his hat. His Adam's apple bobbed up and down. He usually drove with one arm out the window, but both hands were clenched on the wheel.

"Where are we going?"

"Sydney."

I didn't need to ask why. I turned to stare out my window, letting the flow of familiar country pass by in a blur, knowing that he did not believe what he had said about the bird.

“Ryan killed it,” I said.

He glanced at me, eyes squinting. “Don’t be silly.”

“He did!” Dad kept his eyes on the road, but he was frowning. “I think the old man sent it.” I continued.

He shot me a quick look. “What?”

“The crow. It was watching us. It had his eyes.”

This time he *really* looked at me. “A bird is just a bird.” he said.

I stared back. “And babies don’t really hatch from eggs?”

Between us, Ryan was pulling Dino’s legs with his grubby little fingers. He looked up at me, from beneath the floppy brim of his hat. “Raar, raar,” he said.

* * * *

Ryan soon fell asleep again, the dinosaur slipping by degrees from his curled fingers, his long lashes nested above the curve of his chubby cheek. A line of drool spooled from his soft lips, spiralling down to the car seat.

We stopped to fill up the tank and get some snacks. I was mad at Dad for taking us away from home, and took it out on him by pinching Ryan until he woke up, cranky.

Yellow Dog and I both needed to pee, so I let the dog out of the car and we both took off in search of a toilet. When I got back, Ryan was happily chewing on a biscuit and Dad had found a bucket of water and a sponge to wash the windscreen. I watched as the crow’s blood mixed with the soapy water, trailing down the filthy glass, carving red channels like river deltas into the caked dirt, until it was all washed away.

That night we stayed at a roadside motel. There was a 'No Pets Allowed' sign, so we kept Yellow Dog hidden in the back of Elsie until we could sneak him into our room.

"You love Ryan, don't you?" I asked, as Dad herded me into bed. Ryan and I shared the double, but he was already asleep, lying flat out on his tummy.

Dad looked unhappy and tired. "Of course."

"I bet Mr. Pham doesn't."

Dad gave me an exasperated look. "'Lainie, I'm tired. Please don't try it on."

I knew I had to keep the whine out of my voice, I had to make him understand. "I'm not, Daddy. It's just that I don't care about Mr. Pham, or his ancestors. Ryan hatched for *us* and we love him. That must mean he was *meant* to be with us. Doesn't it?"

Dad stared at me for such a long time I became upset, thinking that he was mad at me for listening to his conversation. Suddenly he got up and went into the bathroom. I heard him washing his face. He came back in and sat down.

"Ryan needs someone who understands his nature," he said. "Someone who can help him become what he is meant to be."

I was crying now. I wanted to stay serious and calm, instead I wailed, "But *you're* his Daddy!"

Disturbed by our voices, the baby stirred and hiccupped, but he didn't wake.

"What are you going to do?" I whispered.

"What I have to," he admitted. "I will make sure that Mr. Pham has everything Ryan needs, and then we'll say goodbye and go home."

I felt my temper rise, the one that Dad said was just like his. “He’s *my* baby dragon!”

It was only later that I realized what I had said.

Dad understood. He was a good listener. He looked away. “I love Ryan too,” he said, “but I should never have taken the egg—”

The burn of my temper was already fizzling out. I groped for something to say. “Did you steal it?”

He shook his head. “If someone tried to sell you a dragon’s egg, would you believe them?”

I shrugged. *Why not?*

“I didn’t, but I had promised to bring you back something beautiful, and although she told me the stories, she didn’t believe them any more than I did.”

“She?”

He gave me a small smile. “Mr. Pham’s daughter. I liked her, and I wanted to help, so I bought the egg.” This time it was his turn to shrug. “She used the money to leave her village, and I don’t think Mr. Pham, or I, will ever see her again.”

I didn’t want to think about my Dad liking *anyone’s* daughter. “Do you know any more stories about Au Co?”

Dad rubbed his eyes. Sighed. “A short one, then sleep. Deal?”

I accepted with a serious nod. “Deal.”

He gathered his thoughts for a second. “Do you remember those nights, when we counted stars, and I told you that around some of them are worlds?”

I nodded. Of course I remembered.

"Well, somewhere out there is a world called Kandoarin, and that is where Au Co came from."

"How?"

"I don't really know that part. The story goes that Au Co had a special power, something called *Kansaith*, which meant that she could travel long distances very quickly."

"Like flying?"

"No-one knows. Au Co was the only person to ever come here from Kandoarin, and that was by accident. She used her power during one of Kandoarin's eclipses, but the forces that she harnessed were too great for her to control. Instead of travelling from one part of her world to another, she tore a hole in the fabric of space."

Yeah, right. "Are you making this up?"

"Okay, so I've modernized it a bit in the retelling," he admitted, grinning. "That's what happens to myths."

"It doesn't matter," I said. "I like the idea of Au Co falling through a hole in the sky."

Dad was in full storytelling mode now. "Maybe she did fall out of the sky, but before she could get here, she had to build some sort of bridge."

In my mind's eye, I saw the arc of the Milky Way. "Do you think it's still there?"

"Even if it is, I don't think it would be the sort of thing you or I would recognize. But Au Co only came to Earth because she couldn't go back to Kandoarin."

“Why not?”

Dad sighed, a little theatrically, I thought. “How am I going to finish if you keep interrupting me?”

I ran my finger across my mouth, zippering it shut.

“Better,” he said. “So, Au Co realized that she had done something terrible. There are dangerous things living in the cold between the worlds. One of these things slipped through the hole that she had made and attacked Kandoarin.

“She was the only one who had the power to destroy it, or force it back through the rift, but she was too afraid, or too tired, to fight. This thing from space coiled itself around Kandoarin’s heart and made the mountains tremble and cities fall.”

I loved it when Dad waxed lyrical, but outrage forced me to break my vow of silence. “She ran away!”

Dad took an alarmed look at Ryan, and put his finger to his lips to shush me. “Maybe there was nothing she could do,” he said quietly. “The tragedy had happened, and if she tried to go back it would only kill her. Instead, she used her skill and power to survive. She found herself washed up on Earth, where she had to learn how to live amongst people very different from her own. That takes courage, doesn’t it? She never tried to use Kansaith again. Maybe she was afraid of making the same mistake, or perhaps she had used up all her power, but Au Co spent the rest of her life thinking of what she had done, and wondering how she could make it right again.”

“She didn’t!” I whispered fiercely. “She got married and had eggs instead.”

“She was a long way from home,” Dad said patiently, “and you watch too much television.” He came over and gently pushed me down, pulling the blanket up to my chin. “Anyway, that’s how the story goes. It was all a very long time ago. Since then, the Red River delta became the land of Van Lang, then the kingdom of Nam Viet became Vietnam.” He finished tucking me in and stared down at Ryan. “All that time, Au Go’s descendents guarded the last egg, until even they stopped believing in the stories.”

I leant over and stroked Ryan’s hair, until it occurred to me that it was the colour of crow’s feathers. I looked up at Dad, disturbed by the thought. “Is he going to breathe fire when he grows up?”

Dad got up and turned off the light. “We had a deal, remember?”

“But—”

“Sleep!”

Something woke me up later that night. Through bleary eyes I saw Dad carrying the baby around on his shoulder, a half-empty bottle in one hand, singing nonsense tunes in a soft, exhausted voice.

* * * *

Dad was short tempered with the both of us the next day. I thought that was unfair, since it was Ryan who had kept him up all night. It wasn’t my fault that it was hot in the car, and boring. Even Yellow Dog demanded breaks more often than usual.

I watched the scenery change from countryside to dense forest. “What do you think Kandoarin is like?” I asked, wanting to fill the silence.

“Da,” said Ryan. He leaned against his seat restraints, and started to wave his hand backwards and forwards beneath the sunlight streaming through Elsie’s windscreen.

Dad took off his sunglasses, squinting at the road while he rubbed one eye and then the other. He scratched the stubble on his cheek.

We caught up with the traffic ahead; a red Toyota tailgating a long, wide truck, waiting for its moment to overtake.

“Maybe like here,” Dad said after a long pause. He took a quick glance down at Ryan. “Probably different.”

Ryan looked up at him, finger shadows danced across our laps. “Da, ook.”

Dad's smile was the saddest thing I'd ever seen. The lines around his mouth had deepened. He brought his eyes back to the road and gave a jaw-cracking yawn. "I'm going to have to take a coffee break soon," he said.

"How different?" I demanded, feeling ignored.

Ahead of us, the driver of the red Toyota had still not succeeded in overtaking the truck. I could see him arguing with the woman next to him, even while he moved the car out into the opposite lane to check for oncoming traffic. He nipped back into his lane just in time.

"Bloody idiot," said Dad.

"Da, ook," said Ryan. "Uddy idiot."

I giggled.

"Oh well," murmured Dad. "Just get on with it," he told the red Toyota.

Ryan turned to me. He pointed to the truck. '"Ainie, ook!"

"It's just a stupid truck," I said. "Bloody idiot."

"Elaine," Dad warned.

Ryan was jumping up and down in his seat now. "Ook! Ook!"

Yellow Dog started whining. "Oh, for goodness sake," exclaimed Dad. "What *is* it?"

The red Toyota pulled out into the other lane and started overtaking the truck.

"Bang. Bang," Ryan said softly. He looked up at me, put his hands to his ears. "Bang, bang, 'Ainie."

There was a loud crack, followed immediately by a BOOM! A cloud of dust billowed as the truck swerved first one way then the other. Its front tires hit the verge, kicking up a cloud of dirt and pebbles that spattered and clicked on Elsie's hood and windscreen.

"Shit," swore Dad, breaking hard. Ryan and I were thrown against our seatbelts and I felt Yellow Dog hit the back of my chair with a heavy thump. Dog and I both yelped.

The road was suddenly strewn with long, thin shreds of rubber, writhing like big black snakes, and the front of the truck listed to the right. It swung across the road and caught the Toyota, dragging the small car underneath its high chassis. The truck's huge, double tires locked into a skid, jammed against the already crumpled Toyota. There was another agonized screech of metal, and a horrible crunch, as the truck's load shifted, and, in slow motion, it twisted and started to go over.

Elsie shuddered and jounced, slowing but still carried forward by her momentum. Dad shouted something I didn't understand. I could only hold my breath as the distance between us, the mangled Toyota and the overturning truck, shrank.

Then we hit the oil. Elsie's brakes locked, we spun and slid sideways even as the truck landed with a crash and a long arc of sparks flew out like firecrackers. The accident was still happening; smoke, dust and burnt rubber, my father's shouts and Ryan's high-pitched wailing filled my world.

The wreckage ahead of us became a creature of motion and form. As we slid towards it, I saw a face emerge; not the face of a person, but of something dark, alive and angry. The cloud of dust and smoke opened at the centre, became a mouth into which we were sliding. Smoke belched out of its jaws and the vague shape of the red Toyota was its tongue. The bright sunlight pierced the clouds, and became two hot, white eyes.

Beside me, Ryan struggled against the pressure of his seat restraints. He was gasping, his hands pushing palm outwards. His 'go away' sign.

Go away! Go away!

I moaned. The mouth of the smoking monster closed in around us and I waited for the crunch, knowing that it was going to hurt. I felt a pressure push me *back* against my seat, the Landrover stalled, and then there was nothing but dead quiet.

The darkness began to shred as light wove its way back into existence. Dad's breathing was a hoarse whisper. I think he was trying to speak. His hand touched my arm.

"I'm okay," I tried to say, but nothing came out except a croak.

The tattered smoke and dust cloud thinned and then blew away, revealing wreckage, but no monster, except the accident's carnage and Elsie, safe—on the other side of it.

I looked across at Dad, slumped in his seat, his hands clenched to Elsie's steering wheel. Then he sat back and took a shuddering breath. He started the car and drove us off the road, on to the verge. "Stay here," he said.

He got out of the car, took a few steps and vomited. Hands on knees, he breathed deeply and then managed an unsteady shamble back to the accident.

I unclipped my seat belt, turned around and knelt over the back of my seat. Yellow Dog was still in the space between the seats. He looked up and whined, too shocked to move.

'"Ainie?" Whimpered Ryan. I looked at him and his eyes were huge and wet. "Raar, raar," he sniffled. He rubbed his nose, spreading snot across his cheeks. I pulled out the hankie Dad kept behind his car chair and wiped it away. He pawed at me, wanting to be released, so I unclipped his belt. He crawled onto my cushions and we clung to each other.

The police and ambulance came soon after and Dad returned to us. He sat in his seat for a long while, staring out the window. "Those two people are dead," he said quietly, and then he turned to look at Ryan.

He leant over and picked him up, put him back into his seat and clipped him in. Ryan protested until Dad kissed him on the cheek, pressing his nose against the little boy's soft skin. "Thank you," he murmured.

A policeman appeared at Dad's window. He handed Dad a piece of paper. "Here's the station address, Mr. Ashton, if you recall anything else, let us know. You'll probably be asked to appear as a witness."

Dad took the paper. "Of course. Thanks." The policeman nodded, glanced curiously at Ryan and me, before turning on his heel.

“Did you tell them what happened, Daddy?”

“The truck’s front tire blew-out, the driver lost control and hit the Toyota,” he said. “They know what happened.”

“But, we were behind the truck, and then —” I faltered, my voice trailing away.

Dad started Elsie, looked over his shoulder, and pulled out onto the road. Something crunched as he mishandled a gear. “Yes,” he said. “Aren’t we lucky.”

* * * *

That evening, we were lost in Sydney city. Dad pulled a tattered old streetmap out from the glovebox, studying it during stops at traffic lights. He seemed to know where he wanted to go but ‘they’ had apparently changed the road system since he had last visited the Big Smoke. I drifted in and out of sleep, with my head against Ryan’s chair and he with his head slumped to his chest in deep exhaustion.

I woke when Dad opened the door on my side and gently lifted me out. Monkey-like, I wrapped arms and legs around him, my head on his shoulder. Holding me with one arm, he unclipped Ryan from his seat and, with a practiced scoop, put him up onto his other shoulder. He kicked the door shut.

Through half-closed eyes, I could see tugboats and rotting hulks moored alongside huge wooden pylons. There was the slap of water against slippery stone walls and the smell of spilt diesel. I heard the familiar eek of rats and the scuttle of things disturbed by our passing. Yellow Dog whined and pressed close to Dad.

The warmth of my father’s body and the broad expanse of his shoulder lulled me back to sleep. I tucked my thumb into my mouth and remember nothing more until the morning.

* * * *

I woke up to sunlight slanting through a broken glass window, on a comfortable mattress, with a soft blanket tucked around me. Ryan was asleep next to me, curled up around his thumb and Dino, a rich

smell wafting up from the gap between nappy and back. I crinkled my nose and looked around.

We were in a warehouse. Narrow shafts of light found their way through the mismatched corrugation of the roof and dirty glass windows high on the walls, spotlighting clouds of dust. Aromas came from everywhere; hanging baskets full of herbs and grasses, drying flowers hung from the rafters and from the rusting iron girders that crisscrossed the space above, a wok set upon a huge old fashioned iron cooker in one corner.

Scattered around the warehouse floor were an expanse of garden ornaments and strange relics of all shapes and designs. Carved stone beasts with tusks and huge eyes crouched next to plaster flamingos. Fat, grinning Buddhas sat next to toga-draped Venuses. In the spaces between there was a sense of pressure, like an oncoming thunderstorm. The air felt electric.

I saw Yellow Dog lying on a patch of carpet in the corner, near a stove and small washbasin. A door opened behind him and Dad came through, ducking his head beneath the doorframe, with Mr. Pham close behind. The old man was dressed in loose, white cotton trousers and a long overcoat with wide sleeves. He looked comfortable and cool.

Yellow Dog's tail thumped on the carpet. Mr. Pham paused to pat him, but he ducked his head away. I could see his thick fur shivering, like it did when flies annoyed him. Mr. Pham stood, with his hand outstretched, until Yellow Dog whined and rolled onto his back.

I heard the old man chuckle and didn't like it. Dad didn't seem to care. He stood listlessly to one side, stoop-shouldered, one hand leaning against the edge of the stove. He had changed his shirt for a clean t-shirt but he still looked bedraggled, as if with one small push, he too might roll over.

I went to the mattress and knelt next to Ryan. He stirred, opened his sleepy, dark eyes. His thumb came out of his mouth with a sucking sound and he gave a little sigh of resignation, "'otty?"

I nodded and he rolled over onto his bottom and opened his arms to be picked up. There was a damp squishing against my hip, and I grimaced, trying not to take too deep a breath. Ryan's head was against my shoulder, his soft hair fluffy against my cheek.

"Ryan's needing a change," I said, taking him towards Dad, but Mr. Pham intercepted me with ease. With a firm hand, he herded me back to the mattress. He produced *a* nappy and a small towel from one voluminous sleeve, and pins, wipes and powder from the other.

I stared at him in astonishment, wondering what else he might produce, but that seemed to be all for now. He put the towel down on the floor and gently prised Ryan from my grasp. With practiced hands, he quickly cleaned and changed him, while Ryan gazed up solemnly.

I saw Dad staring at us, with the same look on his face that I had seen when he had cried to the stars.

"Daughter, please take this to your father."

My name is *Elaine* I wanted to say. I took the folded nappy but didn't move.

"Ryan used *Kansaith* yesterday," I said. It sounded like an accusation. I sensed the words hanging in the air, amidst the flowers and the baskets, heard faint whispers bounce from Buddhas and stone creatures, echoes that sounded like a breeze through dry grass.

I lowered my voice. "What is this place?"

The old man glanced around. "It is an edge," he said.

"That doesn't make sense."

Mr. Pham pursed his lips. "A shore, a threshold—a door." He lifted Ryan to his feet and spent a moment admiring his handiwork. "And here," he said with pride, "is the key." He studied the little boy for another moment, as if he were memorizing every crease, every fold of soft skin. Ryan squirmed, wriggling to get free.

'"Ainie," he pointed to the strange collection of *things* surrounding us. "Ook."

The old man smiled at this. "He knows. Oh, yes. He can *feel* it." He cocked his head sideways, looking at me in a way that reminded me of a bird considering its next meal. "Can *yon* feel it, daughter? There is great power in the relationship of simple things to each other." He looked from me to Ryan, back again. "I had not considered that such power might also exist between children."

Relationship of simple things—was he calling me stupid? "What about the crow that attacked us," I demanded. "And yesterday—I saw a face, with big jaws and white eyes."

“What about it?” He asked. “Perhaps you have one of those overactive imaginations, eh?”

I know it was you, I wanted to say. *You’re trying to scare us*. I shook my head firmly.

Mr. Pham was still kneeling, so we were eye to eye. I studied that broad face, as brown and lined as drought-cracked mud, with cheekbones so high they cast shadows. His long silver hair was drawn back from his face into a ponytail, and beneath grey eyebrows bristling with unruly hairs were eyes so black I could not see the pupils. Strange eyes.

Ryan’s eyes.

“I don’t like you,” I said.

The old man nodded. “Good. I don’t like you, either.”

Ryan had crawled onto the mattress to retrieve Dino. “When he grows up, I’m going to teach him to fly,” I declared. “And he’s going to breathe fire.” *And eat nasty old men*, I finished silently. At that point, Dad came over, clearly intending to scold me. He went to take my arm, but Mr. Pham motioned him away and he stopped in his tracks, swaying like a drunk.

“Daughters need a firm hand,” he told Dad. “They must be taught respect.”

Mr. Pham rocked onto his toes, rising gracefully to his feet. He didn’t look so old any more. “Are you a sorceress? You will need to be, if you are to hide from that which hunts him.”

“I’m not scared.” *Of you*.

His bushy eyebrows drew together. “You should be.”

Ryan decided to rejoin us, bouncing his way across the mattress on hands and knees. Gripping his toy with one fist, he put his other arm around my leg. “‘Ainie-ay,” he sang in his lispy voice.

I put my arm around his shoulders. “Ryan hatched for me.”

“And you think that I am jealous?” He seemed to think about it for a moment. “Perhaps,” he admitted, “if I permitted such feeling. But I do not. Nor grief. Such things must be put aside.” He gestured at Dad; fingers moving in slanted light, shifting dust motes and shadows.

“We have to go now, ‘Lainie,” said Dad in a toneless voice.

I pulled Ryan closer and he hugged me back. He pointed Dino at the old man, “Raar.”

Mr. Pham’s eyes narrowed. Suddenly he raised his arms and the light in the warehouse dimmed. A copper coloured gloom descended upon us. The sleeves of his white tunic slid back to his shoulders, revealing muscled, brown arms and a fine layering of tattoos, like glittering scales.

I quailed. “Daddy?”

“So, *you* would teach him?” Thundered the old man. “And when Kandoarin’s eclipse comes and its doom awakens, what then? Tell me, little girl, will the Youngest Son be ready?”

Between us, dust motes danced as if the air was fluid, their movement captured in shafts of filtered light, whirlpools of motion, like froth stirred into coffee.

A low, deep sound pulsed above my head, the beating heart of some great beast crouching amidst the rafters and beams. The shadows deepened, melded into a darkness that pooled around our feet.

“Already the hunter is stirring. Without me, it will find him, and crush him, and all will fail.” He lowered his arms and the throbbing sound dimmed, became the panicked beat of my own heart.

Mr. Pham held out his hand to Ryan. “Bac Vüông,” he said. “Come to me.”

“No!”

Startled, I saw my exhausted Dad draw himself up. Yellow Dog had come to heel. He crouched at Dad's feet, brown eyes focused on the old man, lips slightly raised over sharp canines.

Dad's voice was hoarse. "I don't care what you are," he said. "Do not threaten my children." He rubbed a hand across his forehead. "I've had enough."

Mr. Pham nodded stiffly. "Yes. It is time for you to leave."

"Right," said Dad. "Ryan."

He immediately left me and waddled over, lifting his arms. Dad hauled him up, put him on a hip.

"Elaine." I gleefully dropped the dirty nappy and rushed to take his hand.

"I nearly made a terrible mistake," Dad said. "I was afraid of things I half-believed. Now I do believe, and you know what? I don't care. I don't care what he is. I am a father. That is *my* duty. C'mon Dog."

We turned our backs on the old man. The door was just *there*, we were headed towards it. I felt the brush of Yellow Dog's fur against my leg. I felt like skipping.

We walked fast, but I hadn't realized how *big* the warehouse was, our efforts to reach the door only seemed to push it away. Dad stumbled to a stop. "You bastard," he muttered.

"Daddy?"

"It's okay, honey. Everything will be okay." We turned around again, slowly.

I was half expecting a drum roll, or Mr. Pham to sprout fangs or wings, or perhaps the beasts of plaster and stone to come alive. As Dad said, I watch too much television.

Mr. Pham was just standing there. A strange, magnetic old man, with eyes that glittered in the weird light and a shadow that stretched across the warehouse, pooling around our feet like black ink.

"The Youngest Son knows what he must do," he said. He lifted a hand and motioned. *Come*. Ryan wriggled out of Dad's arms, as impossible to hold against his will as an eel. In a blink, he was out of our reach and toddling over to the old man. It happened so quickly. He took a few steps away from us and suddenly he was enveloped in dust motes twisting into forms that swam in the air and shimmered like a mirage -multicoloured scales, the curve of horns and claw, the glint of black eyes.

The old man threw back his head and laughed out loud. Then, with a conqueror's flourish, he went down on one knee. As he did so, his shadow shrank back, like a dark tide receding. He put out his hand for Ryan to take and I knew that the moment he did, they would disappear, like Alice's rabbit.

Into that outstretched hand Ryan gravely placed Dino the dinosaur. "Uddy idiot," he said cheerfully. Then he turned around to come back to us, leaving the old man stranded in confusion, holding a thoroughly gnawed and misused rubber toy. Mr. Pham looked straight at me and I saw his fury, felt the heat of his intent across the space between us.

A wide, cheeky grin split Ryan's face as he put up his arms, ready for take-off.

"Well, I'll be damned," said Dad, scooping him up.

Mr. Pham surged forward, only to be met halfway by a bristling, furious Yellow Dog, flashing canines full of promise. So we stood, my father and I, and the dog, in a little triangle, and we were as one.

"Simple things," I reminded the old man.

"Willful, disobedient child," he said to me. He looked at Dad and his face was suddenly very sad. "Your love will cost you dearly," he said. "I would have spared you the suffering." He locked eyes with Ryan, and then he opened his hand, letting Dino drop to the ground. It bounced once, and vanished.

Like a screen coming down between us, the gloom gathered around Mr. Pham, softening his form, blurring his features. He stepped back, into the shadows.

We turned and rushed for the door and this time nothing conspired against us. We emerged into a tiny

shop front, stacked full of rolled-up carpets and dusty furniture. A pair of floor-to-ceiling windows, half-covered in tattered posters stuck to the outside, faced out onto yet another bright, sunny day.

There was old Elsie parked outside. We were going home. Nothing bad had happened. Dad had kept us together and I sensed that I had changed. I felt grown-up, a big sister, strong in ways I couldn't describe. One day, Au Co's youngest son will cross his bridge, but not yet. For now, he chooses to be with us, and that is a powerful magic.

I looked up and saw my little brother gazing down at me from over Dad's shoulder. "Knock. Knock," he said.

I grinned back at him. "Who's there?"

"Me!" He announced. Lifting his hands, he curled them into claws. "Raar."

Number 3 Raw Place

DEBORAH BIANCOTTI

It's new," Ted apologized. The bank clerk stared flatly ahead. "Never heard of it."

Seated behind Perspex, she was blurred around the edges like a crayon drawing.

"Maybe because we're the first to move in?" Ted offered.

The clerk didn't care. She pushed a thin piece of paper under the Perspex and it came out sharp. Clean and white; not blurred at all. He was surprised.

"Should I fill this in?" he asked. He smiled, encouraging her to smile back.

She didn't. Only kept staring; the thick lines of her eyes unmoving. Ted wondered if he should take the form to a bench, or fill it in right there. Did she have to witness his signature, after all? He looked around to see what others were doing, but there was no one else. So he wrote where he was, using a pen on a string that was too short. He wrote with his hand all cramped up-Then he slid the form back under the security screen and watched its edges blur. Like handing it to a deep sea diver; perspective skewing where the water began. The woman took the form with soaking fingers and held it in front of her face. She seemed to read it okay.

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Number 3 Raw Place

DEBORAH BIANCOTTI

Deborah Biancotti published her first story in 2000. winning the Aurealis Award for Best Horror and subsequently winning a Ditmar Award for Best New Talent. She has also received a Ditmar for Best Short Story and has earned four Honourable Mentions in Datlow and Windling's *Year's Best Fantasy and Horror* over the past three years. Her stories have appeared in *Borderlands, Orb, Redsine* and *Altair,* as well as anthologies such as *Ideomanrer Unbound. Southern Blood* and assorted *Agog*! volumes, you can find her online at http://deboral1bia11col.ti.11et and http:// www.hvejourüaI.coin/users/deborahb.

'This story is a kind of 'The Gifts of the Magi', but without the happy ending. It's about trying to provide what you think someone else wants, and failing.'

* * * *

I

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"Ten working days," she said, and filed it away.

Ted nodded, and returned to the house.

* * * *

Walking home took over an hour. All uphill, too, so he had to do most of it bent forward, breathing heavily. He looked ahead once to see his roof pushing upward from the landscape like a flint. Apart from that one construction, and the road on which he walked, everything else this far from town was bushland.

As he climbed, the rest of the house emerged bit by bit and curled over him. He swore it was the house that advanced on him, and not the other way around. The thought made him dizzy and for a moment he believed that if he lost his footing and fell, he would be swept away to follow the road on and over the hill.

He hesitated by his front door. When he couldn't avoid it any longer, he slipped inside. It was gloomy

and dark, even without curtains. In the loungeroom the answering machine flashed twice and paused. Two messages.

"Hello?" said each voice. "Hello?"

They sounded confused. Ted slapped the delete button. More wrong numbers. Didn't these people check before they dialled? He crept upstairs to his study to wait for Jemma.

When he thought about it later, moving restlessly along the corridors, watching the afternoon light ripen to gold, he couldn't even say what his own phone number was.

* * * *

"Hello? Is anybody there?'"

* * * *

Jemma was back right on time, like always. From the bedroom window, he was able to watch her progress for a full ten minutes, climbing the arterial road from town. Her car began as small as a toy, winding through folds of green bedspread. Advancing, it swelled, until finally it was big enough to stop and let Jemma climb out.

"Here I am, Teddy!" she called.

Her long black hair was tied at her neck, and her cheeks were flushed. She held up two pizza boxes and made as if to throw them, laughing when he flinched. She hugged him instead, pizza boxes balancing on one arm, then dragged him inside.

"Good day?" she asked.

She pulled them both along the corridor to the kitchen, flipping the pizzas and car keys onto a bench. There was a spot on the hall table for keys, but she kept ignoring it. Ted didn't mind. It suited her, this careless abandonment. Brought a flush to her cheeks.

Jemma spun so fast it disoriented him. She fixed her hands to his shoulders and smiled, drinking him in. It always undid him, the intensity of her crystal eyes. He held onto her and tried not to feel washed away. He focussed on the forgotten pizza boxes.

"Credit cards," he said, distracting her, "take ten days."

Jemma's eyes went wide. "You went into town?"

"Uh-huh."

"And?" she asked, willing him to say he loved it. Loved the house, loved the town, loved it all. "Pretty, isn't it?"

"Oh, yeah," Ted assured her. He moved to the cupboard to get plates and, as he spoke, he addressed himself to the ceramics inside. "It's pretty. Very quiet."

"Just what we wanted, right?" Jemma said

"Right," Ted said, although he couldn't remember what he'd wanted.

Jemma took the plates from him and cradled them to her chest. She had her head on one side, searching his face.

"Anyway," she said, "with our big, beautiful new home —" she leaned in softly to kiss his cheek, "- we won't need to leave."

Ted nodded and smiled, because she seemed to need him to. In reality, the house she loved so much belonged mostly to his father's designs, but he could never bring that up. Jemma would only wave her hands in the air between them and assure him his best work was yet to come. It didn't seem to matter to her what he did.

"Except," he said, "you'll have to leave to go to the office."

“Oh, sure,” Jemma looked as though she’d already forgotten the conversation. “Well, there’s that. Speaking of which, I’ve got a new project.” She rolled her eyes to show him what she thought of new projects.

Ted laughed at last, watching her pull her clown faces, imitating her boss, whom he’d never met, and an apparently deranged colleague of hers. He reached for the pizzas, but something in the Ioungeroom confused him and for a moment he swore it was a demon by the windows, biding time, its red eye blinking.

He froze.

Jemma followed his gaze.

“Oh,” she breathed. “So you got the phone line working, too?”

She was already crossing to the answering machine, where the light flashed slowly. One message.

“No,” said Ted. *No, don’t play the tape*. “I mean, it’s been working for… a few days.”

Jemma stabbed at the play button.

“Hello?” said the machine. “Hello? Who’s this?”

There was a pause and a clunk as the caller hung up.

Jemma twisted, looking at Ted. “Who’s this?” she repeated. “They’re ringing and asking ‘who’s this’? What is that, a joke?” Then, more softly, she added, “The question is, who’s *that?* Ringing us?”

She tried to grin, but it came out strained.

"There's been a few of those," Ted said. "They must be recycling the phone numbers. You know, using an old one somebody else had."

Jemma nodded, but she was slow to do it. Her knuckles whitened around the edges of the plates. "That must be it," she murmured.

She was staring at the machine. Ted moved around her to the delete key.

"Don't worry, Teddy," she said, brushing the back of her hand along his arm as he passed. "I'll take care of it."

Ted nodded. *Good*, he thought. He liked it better when she took care of things.

* * * *

"Bob's Trucks and Services, no job too small. Hello, Bob speaking… Hello?"

* * * *

The house was too big.

Sometimes the thought struck him, like today, right after breakfast. After Jemma had gone and the place was empty. Then the walls thickened, ambushing him. Even the air was bloated. Not enough windows, so the darkness kept winding around him, wrapping his arms and legs like leeches. He was pinned, rocking in the centre of it, the house ebbing and flowing, and rolling like an ocean over him.

He had to get upstairs.

There, the light could still get in, and the air wouldn't be so thick.

He made a break for it, rushing across the loungeroom, taking the steps two at a time, darkness pulling on his ribs.

In the study, the floor rippled with sunlight. *Much better*, he thought, red spots dancing in his eyes. He leant onto the doorframe to gather himself. When he could, he crossed to the window, legs shaking. If Jemma could see him now, he knew, rubbing the cold from his arms, she would be so ashamed for him.

He sank into his desk chair, but spun it so he couldn't see the desk at all. This way, he faced the bay window at the back of the room. This window always seemed to lean in on him, the weight of the bushland too heavy to hold. It made Ted feel small, but there was a kind of safety in that. He felt contained. Today, though, the sight of all that mottled green bushland so close only added to the sense he was drowning. He didn't dare look away, though, because he knew if he did, he'd be forced to confront his desk. His empty desk, the blank slate, the daily reminder.

Jemma's gift to him. An architectural ensemble with an adjustable angle. Perfect, she'd said, for netting ideas. She'd treated it like a game. Still, Ted's ideas leaked away. His head was littered with half-formed creations. Bright, noble planes and sweeping curves. Open plan homes with atriums, mezzanines, grand staircases, sliding wall panels. Rooms for all sorts of lives. Once snared by the page, they dulled to grey.

He never discussed this with Jemma. She thought the world of him.

The desk still squatted at the corner of his eye, so he rolled the chair to the set of drawers where his plans were held. The drawers were old, made of dark wood, long and shallow and mostly empty. He couldn't bring himself to look at his old designs. He knew what he would find.

Instead, he opened the lowest drawer where remnants of his father's works were held. Fine, bold constructions with assertive, almost aggressive, lines and pencil marks so strong they sometimes scored right through the page. That, he thought—not for the first time—is what architecture is meant to be. A power with which to create new worlds for people. He put the stack of blueprints back in the drawer and replaced his father's notebooks on top.

Ted leant back in his chair and rubbed his eyes. When he took his hands away, his vision blurred and danced. To his right, the bay window had come apart, and swung giddily like Siamese ghosts. Ted blinked, waiting for it to pass. But when the window finally pulled back into focus, it brought something else with it. Something he hadn't seen before.

Foundations.

Bushland crowded the left side of his window, of course, and the road was a narrow strip on the right.

But between them, he now saw, someone had begun work on a house. Square, concrete patterns in the ground, grey bricks stacked up. Wider and longer than his own house, but similarly proportioned. It was set back from the road, allowing space for what would undoubtedly become a small garden.

For no reason at all, it occurred to him that Jemma hadn't wanted a garden out front.

He stared at the space, allowing himself to be captivated by the idea of it, the potential, the new beginning. When he thought about it later, it occurred to him that he hadn't heard any building work. Nor had he seen any builders. Yet, there they were, rock-solid foundations, almost as if they'd grown. As if the bush had finally tired of trees and plants and birdlife, and decided to throw up a home. Somewhere for people to plant roots instead.

Jemma had wanted to get away from it all.

She wouldn't like this at all.

* * * *

"*Radio TBR, we're here to listen. Can I take your call?… Are you there*? "

* * * *

She hated it.

She'd come home, like always (this time, with Chinese takeaway), wrapping her arms around Ted, almost daring him to carry her inside. She'd thrown her keys at the kitchen bench and turned to get plates for dinner. Then she saw it. Above the sink, framed perfectly by the porthole window, the beginnings of the house.

"Brand new," Ted said.

"Sure is," Jemma replied. She moved to the glass and put her hand on it, looking out at the monster through splayed fingers.

After that, they'd had dinner in silence, and hadn't mentioned the new place again for two weeks. Ted was surprised by her resentment. He continued to live around the edges of his own home and Jemma's mood, moving from window to window, avoiding the dark at the core. He kept an eye on the other place. It was three doors up, or would be when someone got around to building doors between him and it.

The cement on the foundations had dried, and construction workers had appeared. It all seemed so mundane. Ted forgot to wonder how he'd missed that first day of work. Lumber had been laid for floor framing.

"It had to happen," Ted consoled her.

They were eating toast by the French doors in the lounge, Jemma having tired of take-away.

She shrugged. "You think?"

"You can borrow cups of sugar," he said.

"What would I do with sugar?"

Ted nodded. True. The only thing he'd ever seen Jemma make was toast.

"I kinda like the idea of having neighbours," he said at last, but softly, not wanting to disturb her.

Jemma looked up at him. She was about to speak, but stopped abruptly.

"Did the phone ring today?" she asked, moving to the blinking eye of the answering machine.

In truth, the messages came most days, though Ted usually remembered to delete them. He never heard the phone ring, and assumed the tone was set too low. It didn't bother him. He didn't want to talk to anyone anyhow.

Jemma was playing the messages; something Ted had long stopped doing. The first voice was old. Perhaps a man, perhaps a woman, hard to say. Next were two women.

"Hello?" they all said. "Hello?"

The final voice was young, a man.

"Pizza Palace," he said. "What can I get you today?"

"Why would a pizza place ring us?" Jemma asked.

"Maybe it's a joke," Ted suggested. "Or a new way to drum up business."

But his answer was a little too fast, because Jemma looked at him, frowning. For the first time, he saw her face as it would look decades from now. It was careworn, with a soft crease where her frown would sit. He felt suddenly lost. Where was he, in that future?

"Let's get an extension in your study, Teddy," Jemma was saying, "so you can hear it." She added, nearly under her breath, "I'm sick of this."

"Sure," Ted replied straight away.

Jemma wrapped her arms around herself and stared out the windows. She was almost shivering, although the evening was warm. Ted didn't have to follow her gaze to know she was watching the new house where it lay with twilight pooling in the wooden frets of its floor.

Looking for all the world like rows of coffins.

* * * *

“You break ‘em, we fix ‘cm. Windows our specialty. How can I help? ..I”

* * * *

The man from the phone company was meant to arrive first thing. He didn’t, of course. Up the road, the builders were back. Just four of them, draping the frame of the house with a tarpaulin. They must be expecting rain.

Ted was fascinated. He squeezed around the inside edges of his home until he reached the front door. It was early afternoon and the sunlight felt milky. Now that the place was covered—its modesty protected, so to speak—he had an urgent need to go over there, to sneak past the builders and peek under the tarp. He wanted to check nothing was still inside. He felt an odd mix of professional curiosity and greed. He wished it was his house.

It was then the van pulled up.

“Sorry,” said the phone technician, squeezing out. “I woulda been here sooner only I had trouble finding the place.”

“Yes,” said Ted, “they haven’t put it on any maps yet. Still, you could’ve called. We do have a phone, after all.”

“Yeah,” said the man, with indifference.

There were to be three extensions, according to Jemma’s instructions: study, kitchen, bedroom. Ted pointed out all the places and then fidgeted, waiting for the technician to finish. It took hours, surely much longer than it should have.

The builders left silently, and in the gathering gloom the tarp shifted and itched. Occasionally it puffed out and then flattened, exposing the rib of a wall, the cheekbone of a window frame.

When at last he was able to wave goodbye to the technician, Ted found three more messages on the machine. He deleted them without listening.

Jemma was late that night.

* * * *

“Who is this? Why do you keep calling?”

* * * *

“What is it?” she asked.

She was staring at the house again, at the empty wall frames where the panels would go. The tarp was gone. Roof trusses extended across the cavity of the house. At the very top, towards the back, was a square shape like a cage.

Ted thought of it as the skull.

He shook his head vaguely. “I think I’ve seen something like it before, someplace.”

He gathered his father’s notebooks from the study. Jemma was curled up tight on the lounge when he returned. She shifted to rest on his shoulder as he flipped through the notebooks. Of all his father’s works, Ted loved the notebooks the most. Pages of ideas and designs, all done in his father’s hand. Notes were added alongside the most complex pieces, to decode them.

“Here,” he said at last. “A widow’s walk.”

“A what?” Jemma started.

Ted read the accompanying note. “A small, windowed room at the top of a house. So wives can watch for their sailor husbands, returning from the sea.”

“Only,” Jemma whispered, “there’s no sea here.”

“No,” Ted agreed, and felt the house rock shut around them. “I suppose they’ll use it as a kind of viewing platform. To look at the bushland. It’s kinda nice, don’t you think?”

“All those wives,” Jemma said, “pacing up and down. Watching for husbands that never returned.”

Ted squeezed her arm. “I meant architecturally, it’s nice.”

Jemma was quiet for a while, fingering a loose thread in the lounge. “I don’t want one,” she said.

Of course not, Ted thought. That wasn’t what he’d meant.

She was quiet so long he thought she had fallen asleep. He waited as long as he could, listening to the steadiness of her breath. He had a cramp in his arm, and when he finally made to move out from under her, she said,

“Who’s moving in there, Teddy?”

* * * *

“Is that you, dear?”

* * * *

Proper siding had been put up, although the widow’s walk was still bare. The window spaces on the lower floors were huge, almost floor to ceiling.

Ted sat in a puddle of sunlight in his study. He was flipping through another of his father’s notebooks, but he was staring at the house. Funny how it was the windows that gave a place its personality. This one seemed open and generous. The new people would need blinds, though, to stop neighbours looking in. He supposed he’d have to get blinds himself. Then they could start shutting each other out.

He noticed a page had come loose from the notebook in his lap. Pulling it free, he found it was a piece of folded blueprint paper, the edges shorn roughly with a ruler. Unfolding it, he found a house. With a widow's walk.

He'd been through these notebooks a thousand times and never seen this, but it made sense to him that his very need to discover this thing would make it so, at this time. Automatically he stood, pressing the blueprint to the window above the new neighbours' house. Even without looking, he knew it was the same place. Window for window, wall for wall. Cut from the same cloth.

Ted turned and stalked downstairs, passing through the dark guts of his own home without a thought. He moved stiffly up the road towards the workmen. He did all this without vomiting, though he felt sick to his shoes.

"You," he said to the nearest builder. "Whose house is this?"

They all turned like bumblebees, sluggishly, gazing at him.

"Where did the plans come from?" Ted snapped. "Who's the foreman?"

"Problem?" said one of them. He was crouched by the steps, sorting nails. When Ted approached, he stood and gazed warily.

"I want to see your plans," Ted said.

"They're at council. Been there for months."

"I want your copy."

The man shrugged, indecisive. He rubbed his forehead where the hardhat marked it. Then he took Ted to his truck and—slowly, slowly—unspooled his plans across the bonnet. They each held a side of the paper flat, the corners folding over their fingers.

Ted scanned the print.

“This isn’t what you’re building,” he said. “These plans are nothing like that house.”

The foreman frowned blearily, unable to wake up. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Ted shoved his own blueprint in the man’s face. “*This*! This is what I’m talking about.”

The foreman peered at the drawing, chuckling at the old fashioned handmade marks and shorn edges. He looked back to the pristine, computer-perfected plans on his bonnet.

“Are you qualified to interpret these?” he asked.

Ted was choking. He wanted to scream *how dare you*. Instead, he backed away, letting the blueprints roll loosely back along the bonnet. They were all watching him. Not with malice, but with a kind of listless curiosity. Ted could feel their eyes on him all the way to his front door.

He hid from the windows for the rest of the day, standing just outside their light. In the centre, the house was like ice, so Ted had to circle and circle, rubbing the warmth back into his arms.

As he passed the answering machine for the twelfth time, it sprang to life.

“Hello?” came a strange voice. “Hello?”

Ted snatched up the phone before he had time to think better of it.

“Who is this?” he shouted.

“Hey, what d’you mean?” said the stranger. “You called me, buddy.”

“No, I didn’t, I —” Ted began. Then stopped.

He put the phone back on the receiver.

It wasn't him. It had never been him.

Had it?

* * * *

"Justin, is that you? Have you been calling? Why don't you come home? Say something, son. It'll all be okay, I promise. Just come home."

* * * *

Jemma was back early, pleading flu. She was home before the builders had even left for the day, and she lay on the lounge looking at Ted with thick eyes. If it hadn't been for her, he would be at the other house. He couldn't help it. Something about what he'd seen that afternoon was nagging him. But Jemma was like an anchor, so he stayed.

Just before he drifted off to sleep that night, he realized what it was.

The new house didn't even have glass in its windows yet. But he swore he'd seen furniture behind its empty frames.

* * * *

"Your call's important to us. Please hold the line."

* * * *

He'd never noticed how quiet the bush was before. Not a bird-song, not a cricket. No cicadas, nor the soft rush of creatures in the undergrowth. Pure silence. As though the countryside was a painted backdrop for an empty theatre.

The house was finished.

He hadn't slept for days, and perhaps it was fatigue that made the new place shimmer like that in the sunlight. It had an Arcadian glow, as idle and serene as an oil painting.

There was a verandah at the back of the house, with a flat aluminium roof. On the second floor, louvres had been added almost all the way around. At the very top, the widow's walk had its siding at last, and large windows that would open out.

Jemma wouldn't look at it. She barely even looked at Ted. Not directly, anyhow, although he felt her watching. During the three days she had off sick, Ted retreated mainly to his study. She shuffled past his door every so often, bent over, like she was dragging something invisible behind her. Eventually, she had to leave and return to work. Ted was glad. It meant at last he could come up for air.

Sure enough, the new house had a garden out front, with piercing orange flowers and full green leaves. There was even a mat beside the front door. Ted would bet it said *Welcome* in warm, red letters. Behind the louvred windows of the second floor, blinds were pulled shut. But on the ground floor, where there were no blinds, reflections in the windows made it look like movement. Like somebody was in there.

In a heartbeat, Ted was outside. It was warm, almost hot, in the sun. He didn't even feel the distance between houses anymore. One moment, he was by his window and the next, he was here, where the mat by the door did indeed spell out *Welcome*. There was a bright copper door handle in front of him and he twisted it, but it was locked tight.

So he went to the windows. There was an oily sheen to the glass, but if he pressed the side of his face against it, he could just make out the insides. Heavy curtains were pulled back on soft ropes. Beyond them, the light was mottled and dense. It trapped strange shapes, shadows with rough-hewn edges like old wooden furniture. Ted had the impression these shapes had been sent to mark out the spaces where real furniture would go. It was as though the house was making plans of its own.

Ted moved around the walls, trying each window. They were all locked. He cupped his hand over the panes, breaking the morning glare, trying to see what was inside.

When he passed the back sitting room, he saw a man.

Though the man's back was to him, Ted could make out every detail of the clothes he wore. Dark trousers, pale yellow shirt, sleeves rolled up. He could see the colour of the man's hair. He was about to call out, but thought better of it and then a minute later, wondered why. The man was leaving the room. Ted hurried further around the house and caught sight of him climbing the staircase.

"Hey!" he called.

He rapped the glass with his knuckles. The man continued up. Not wanting to be left behind, Ted rushed onto the back verandah. This door was locked, too. He looked around for a way to climb to the second level. There was only the balcony railing, but when he pulled himself onto that and stood upright, he found the flat verandah roof was at eye level. With his left hand, he was able to grab hold of the nearest window frame. Wedging his foot against a corner of the building, he hauled himself high enough to hook his elbows over the gutter. From there, he dragged himself along the roof, more by will than design. Eventually, enough of him was on the roof that he could roll over and pull his legs up into a foetal position.

His ribs hurt, and when he sat up, his shirt was torn and dirtied. He took a few breaths to steady himself and found he had never felt better. He was thrilled, fascinated by what was inside.

He crawled across to the louvred windows and peeked in. No shadows in this room, and no blinds either. No mistaking what he saw. This room was fully furnished, complete with bedspread stretched across an old-fashioned bed. It was warm and rosy, the morning sun making it shine.

"Hey," Ted said softly.

The man was there. He was shutting a drawer in the dresser and turning back towards the door. Not once did he look in Ted's direction, not even when Ted began beating frantically at the glass.

There was no reason to think the man had gone up to the widow's walk, but Ted knew it was true. He looked to the roof above him. It wasn't possible to climb any further on the outside of the house. It was too steep and high.

But it was easy enough to begin pulling out the louvres, making a space to crawl inside.

* * * *

“Is this a hoax? Stop calling here. I mean it!”

* * * *

When Jemma got home, it was quiet.

“Ted?” she called.

She thought to call again, but knew he was gone. She checked all the rooms, anyhow.

In the loungeroom, the answering machine winked nearly a dozen times. While she wondered what to do, she listened to all the messages, keeping her back to the French doors and the house beyond.

The final message had her mother’s voice.

“Is that you, Jemma?” her mother said. “Have you been trying to call?”

“No,” Jemma whispered, letting the tape rewind. “Not me.”

The presence beyond the windows drilled into her back, so she turned at last. There it was, the house. It was perfectly complete, perfectly still. Some trick of the light made the windows glow so it looked almost welcoming.

She knew. She’d known all along. She hadn’t wanted to leave that morning, but what good would it have done to stay.

She went at last to the new place.

There was no sound except for her shoes on the road, and while she walked, she pressed one hand to her stomach, one to her mouth. Twilight was descending, transforming the greens and browns into bruised purples. Beside the front door was a mat with black lettering.

Welcome.

"Ted?" she called.

The windows still shone, but whatever was behind was obscured by thick curtains. The frames were locked tight. She took her time circling the house, trying each window. She reached the back balcony, which seemed to float in the thickening dark.

"Can you hear me, Ted?" she called. "Come home."

Come home, come home.

She waited. There was no response from the house. There couldn't be, but she stayed anyway.

The bushland had become a wall of black to her left and above that the sky was a twisted mess of darkness. Standing in the silence was like being at the bottom of a tank. It was hollow here, and empty, and the walls felt thin.

"Ted?"

She was surprised her voice didn't echo.

Sometimes she stood, sometimes she sat on the verandah's balcony, wondering how he'd gotten inside, and why, what compelled him. Eventually, the windows lost their evening glow and the world was as dark as it was silent. It made no more sense to wait here than it did to wait anywhere. So she went home, stumbling, almost crawling, searching out the front steps with her hands. She flipped on the hall light and the sudden luminescence was a slap to the face.

She used the phone in the kitchen to call. It rang three times before someone picked it up.

"Hello?"

“He’s gone,” was all she said.

“Darling. I’m so sorry,” said her mother. There was sympathy in her voice, but no real surprise.

Jemma filled the next silence.

“I thought it would be enough for him, but he kept wanting more. He kept adding things. Windows, everywhere, all these bloody windows. Every shape and bloody size. What did he want to see?”

“Oh, sweetheart,” said her mother.

“All these stupid bloody windows, and not a moment to ourselves,” she was rambling. She was crying.

“It’s time you got out of there,” her mother was saying, “and came home.”

Home, thought Jemma. Good word. “*This* was meant to be our…”

She didn’t finish. In the loungeroom, the French doors gaped like mouths. They belonged to Ted, of course. Bigger and bigger windows, trying to let the outside in. Now it felt like the insides would be sucked out. Nothing protected her against the vacuum of the world.

In her mind, it was all destroyed. She was tearing it down, pulling the buildings apart, ripping up the roads, laying waste to the damn bushland, the people. Folding it all back into itself like dough. She pictured it gone, just gone, and nothing left but dirt and this house and the other house, where Ted was. In case he was still there. In case he hadn’t slipped right into the walls and been drowned by that place.

The new world was a bland, featureless place, and she promised herself it would be enough. At least for her, at least for now.

The porthole window above the sink gave her a perfect picture of darkness. She knew it framed that other place, and she hated it for that. She used her free hand to press at the frame, kneading it, pushing at it the way someone might push on a flap of skin to seal over a wound.

“I can’t leave him in there,” she whispered.

“Darling,” said her mother. “He was made to fit that world. But you, dear, you can’t stay. It’s not healthy for you. After all, it’s not like he’s real.”

Tears rolled down Jemma’s face.

Real, she thought, had never been the point.

<<Contents>>

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Flashmen

TERRY DOWLING

Terry Dowling continues to be one of Australia’s most awarded, versatile and internationally acclaimed writers of science fiction, fantasy and horror. He is author of *Rynosseros, Blue Tyson* and *Twilight Beach* (the Tom Rynosseros saga), *Wormwood, The Man Who Lost Red, An Intimate Knowledge of the Night, Antique Futures: The Best of Terry Dowling* and *Blackwater Days*, and of the computer adventures *Schizm: Mysterious Journey, Schizm II: Chameleon* and *Sentinel: Descendants in Time*. He is also editor of *Mortal Fire: Best Australian SF* and *The Essential Ellison*.

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.

* * * *

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.”

* * * *

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 Sagran. The flashmen. The leones. Darlings of the WHO doctors. The ten years were like smoke.

* * * *

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 Gorvernax," 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.

* * * *

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 cooee'd 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 aylings 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 ayling 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. Autotropics 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 fugue.”

“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."

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Tripping Over the Light Fantastic

KIM WESTWOOD

Kim Westwood lives in the leafy green of Canberra with her partner and her RSPCA special dog. Biscuit.

In 2002, thinking that the term 'speculative' might apply to her, she sent a potentially true story to a competition, and won it. 'The Oracle' was subsequently published in *Redsine 9* and won an Aurealis Award.

She's had three more stories published since then: 'Temenos' in *Agog! Smashing Stories*: 'Stella's Transformation' in *Encounters*, soon to be reprinted in *Year's Best Fantasy #5*, edited by David Hartwell and Kathryn Kramer: and 'Tripping Over the Light Fantastic', first published in *Orb #6*.

This year she is taking her first novel on retreat, thanks to a Varuna Fellowship.

"'Tripping Over the Light Fantastic' is the final exorcism of a job interview I once had. The Immaculate One exists."

* * * *

Gabrielle stares through kohl at her mother's eyes in the mirror. Darkly almond, accusatory, they tell her how disappointed they are. A row of Celtic symbols curl down one bicep, the result of an intimate relationship with a tattooist; the matching curves of black-edged fingernails reveal her current relationship with a Datsun.

Earlier that day a slick, sequined world had beckoned: the After Dark Dance Studio was advertising for well-presented trainees. Despite knees that attracted gravel and the capacity to make even new clothes look like they'd recently been in an explosion, Gabrielle had always harboured a sneaking desire to float around a polished floor in a fluffy white chook-bum dress.

Outside her paint-peeled bedroom window the freshly planted real estate sign shouts 'Renovate or Detonate!' Limned with reflective strips it glows in the dusk, a message of portent with each passing car. She sighs. Just once, she wants something to remain intact in her life. The moths in her wardrobe and the silverfish in her drawers don't agree. Immune to camphor they will gorge and move on, a slithering, fluttering battalion, to the next in line of doomed inner-city rental properties.

* * * *

Things begin to unravel very early on.

The Datsun's carby splutters ominously as Gabrielle persuades it into a parking space. She uses a torch to check the gaffer tape on her high heels, and the Blundstones à la *Stomp* in their plastic bag, then swivels her black-stockinged legs carefully out of the car to avoid snagging them on the cracked vinyl of the seat. But when, in the darkness beside the car, she tries to hitch them up in order to bring the crotch back in line with her own, she puts a finger through the left leg at thigh level. This small detonation in a previously unmarked landscape is covered by her skirt—until she moves, and feels the soft whirring of several little ladders racing each other to her ankle. They arrive as she gets to the dance studio.

It sits on a corner at the bus interchange, the entrance marked by two neons. One points to the Funky Kitten nightclub; the other has a silhouetted couple in the throes of what might be a tango, with one partner's head buried in the ecstatically arched neck of the other. While the funky are directed underground through a studded silver door, the rest climb to a dim wallpapered corridor with a musty smell of earth, and black velveteen tendrils reaching along tarnished gold trim.

Gabrielle walks to a door with deep crimson lettering. Behind it, tucked among the oversized vases of arum lilies, four well-presented applicants are filling in forms. As she heads for the reception desk, her feet making unfamiliar tapping sounds, all eyes are drawn to her pantyhose.

The receptionist is sheathed like a lizard in velour, and seems sucked of her red corpuscles. Smokers' lines converge at a mouth drawn thin from countless lost opportunities. Ticking a list, she pulls a form off a clipboard and motions Gabrielle to a seat beside a girl who has got *her* outfit right: shiny shoes and a shiny dress. Gabrielle sneaks a look at her knees. Just as she suspects—unscathed.

The young boy on Gabrielie's other side is the size of a rugby forward and makes valiant little snorting noises as he writes. Her attention caught by the hair wisping at the neckline of his muscle shirt, she wonders what terrible twist of fate has brought him here. The dole office comes to mind.

Shiny Girl is scribbling industriously, which makes Gabrielle want to revive an old habit and peek at her answers, but it's pens down time.

The receptionist takes their forms. With tight, practised steps, she walks bloodlessly through a door beside a Japanese bird screen.

They wait below the arum lilies. Gabrielle kicks her plastic bag of boots further under the seat, and feels the gaffer tape on her high heel dislodge. Opposite, a smartly suited kid with a bow tie and slatherings of Brylcreem is chewing the end off a red Dance Studio pen. Someone has gone overboard on the Old Spice, and Gabrielle suspects the kid's father of trying to be helpful.

She smiles encouragingly at a young woman wearing a *Happy Days* jive dress and a bouffant hairstyle who does not smile back. Gabrielle wants to tell her how smiling is a permanent state of mouth in the dancesport business. This means that Jive Girl has unfortunately just missed a valuable opportunity to practise a basic skill.

Snorting Boy stops snorting, Shiny Girl smoothes her layers of dress. Across the expanse of polished wood pocked with a multitude of tiny heel marks, casement windows look out onto night and the corrugated roofs of bus shelters. A late-to-bed bird flops briefly against the glass, misled by the gilt mirror reflecting neon on one wall, or maybe the faux birds stretching their necks invitingly on the bamboo screen.

Jive Girl, one knee jiggling, is eyeing the exit for a 'Ladies' when the manageress glides from behind the bird screen. Immaculate and smiling, hair slicked into a ballet class bun, she carries their forms. The applicants watch wide-eyed as she traverses the dance floor on knife-edge stilettos and wafts into a

chair, an outer layer of leopard-skin chiffon settling like batwings over her black dress. Above her, on the benefactors wall, a framed row of high-collared aristocrats stare piercingly down. She begins an introductory round, where each young hopeful has to say their name and why they are there. Gabrielle has already asked herself that question.

The circle turns inexorably. Snorting Boy says, "I came runner-up in the Funky Kitten talent night, and my girlfriend reckons I could've been on *Stripsearcb*—or something."

The Immaculate One smiles a wide white smile, her eye teeth gleam: someone has been revealed. She looks him up, down, and makes a mental note. As her sharp gaze slides across the little band of try-hards and dream-ons with chinks in all their armour, the light shining out of all the wrong orifices, a whirring on Gabrielle's leg signals another ladder pulling and running like hell. She knows how it feels. The boy watches her leg. He knows too.

Gabrielle's fear of doing anything in a circle began at primary school in her first drama class. They had sat around the room, each holding a scrap of paper with an action written on it. When it came time, they would have to get up and mime it in the centre. 'Wood chopping', hers read. Stumbling into the ring, she'd clasped her hands tightly together, closed her eyes and flung herself into a chopping motion. "*And where's the axe?"* the teacher had shouted.

Now she gets residual panic when forced to be in a circle, her body afraid that it will be asked to chop wood again. Her hands map the air in an effort to reassure her that this time they will remember to leave space between them for the imaginary article, no matter what.

The introductory round over, chiffon trails slender limbs as The Immaculate One, emanating the light of the righteous, tells of a service industry where undreamt-of riches are reaped from slaking the fox-trotting desires of others; where, with time and dedication, thoughts of family, friends and significant others will fade; and where they will always *always* be smiling, no matter how sick, how tired, how footsore. Gabrielle, mesmerized by the stilettos, is remembering the time when stepping into pointy patent leather had seemed inevitable: five years old, she'd just been told that she was a girl.

Unable to estimate the long-term cost of anaesthetic foot spray, she wants to ask which union is it again that they will be in and will she often have to visit the podiatrist, but her bravery has plummeted like a bungee-jumper into a bucket. This is mainly because the manageress, to illustrate a faulty attitude, is using the information on Gabrielle's form. It's true she had admitted to a dislike of the dark and a compulsion for wood chopping, but she'd divulged in good faith—and so had whoever it was who'd mentioned their hernia.

The description finishes with a cautionary tale about untimely departures. One recent inductee had abandoned his clients mid-Rumba, selfishly throwing himself out the window onto a passing bus, and

another weak-willed individual was still having bed rest and iron shots. The Company had realized that they'd been too nice to their employees and had tightened up the contract. "Which means," she says, sharp-toothed and watching them all, "people will no longer be able to just *leave* like that."

Litmus-tested for guilt, the innocent sit even straighter in their seats, pressing their unblemished knees together even more firmly; the rest, coveting visions of weekend beaches and early bedtimes, get smaller and more Gollum-like.

This is the receptionist's cue. As the Blue Danube winds up over loud speakers, Shiny Girl rises like it's Christmas, and Snorting Boy is already tripping over Jive Girl, who's having trouble not getting cross. Gabrielle, struggling to put on her Blundstones, is left with the Brylcreem Kid.

They traipse onto the dance floor after Shiny Girl, her dress rustling like it has sparrows. As Snorting Boy treads on Jive Girl's foot and she squeals, something strange begins to happen to the receptionist's face. Years of impacted bitterness eases from jammed facial muscles and she begins to smile. Gabrielle sees that she too has overly sharp teeth. Her boss has a sixth sense for trouble, and glides, a box jellyfish with leopard spots, to a vantage point behind a large Grecian urn.

The Brylcreem Kid, eyes down, is blushing wildly. Even sockless in Blundstones, Gabrielle is very tall; while he, it is now apparent, is particularly short. Across the room Jive Girl squeals again, and Gabrielle whispers, "It's okay—mine are steel-capped." The Kid leans full-stretch away from her, eyes wide and agonized, imagining his toes being crushed inside his dad's best shoes. Gabrielle is sorry she mentioned it.

The receptionist has given in to the urge and is bent over in a belly laugh, eyes streaming, runnels of mascara pouring through the pancake.

Shiny Girl, alone and unpartnered, has risen above it all. Silvery, beatific, she is waltzing with herself. The Immaculate One is in raptures behind the urn, eyes fixed on Shiny Girl's marvellously revealed expanse of creamy neck.

Snorting Boy manages to kick a chair on the way around and, as it hurtles in a smooth clean arc above them, everybody ducks. It's clear he has real talent. It topples the Grecian urn. The Immaculate One moves with the speed of a creature of the night, and Gabrielle has a portentous flash of insight about the couple in embrace on the neon outside. Clearly, something very important has been left out of the job description.

She forces her attention back to the Brylcreem Kid, who's still hanging on, and really doing very well with his feet. She looks at his pasty, soap-scrubbed face, his soft cheeks downy as lambs' ears. Eyes

only for Shiny Girl, he is copying her every move.

The manageress raises a slender, scarlet-tipped hand. The Blue Danube stops mid-flow and the candidates trickle back to their chairs. As chiffon folds into stillness, three pairs of eyes follow obediently: acolytes caught enraptured by the body language of their mistress.

Across the room the receptionist, looking dangerously anaemic, sharpens long red nails on a large file. Behind her the birds on the screen have taken on an aura of decay. Gabrielle realizes that although it cut her mother to the quick at the time, she has been saved by her back-of-shop dalliance with the tattooist. She looks at Snorting Boy who, no doubt, was deflowered behind the sports oval grandstand. He's gauging the distance between his chair and the door.

But just as they can smell the air of escape, The Immaculate One begins another round of the circle.

Her eyes are a cavernous black. "Now it's question time," she says. And they each have to state, in turn, whether they have any.

All his toes miraculously intact, the Brylcreem Kid, like the Little Red Engine, has discovered that he *can*. Adam's apple bobbing invitingly, he asks how long before he can run his own dance studio. Jive Girl, sitting now a little akimbo, says dreamily, "But what if a client breaks my leg?" Shiny Girl just smiles a lovely big smile. Gabrielle opts for a simple "No". She knows it's not the absence of chiffon that plays against her.

The scent of earth rises like damp; the arum lilies tilt, mouths open, waiting for butterflies. The Immaculate One, grown taller and more terrible, is showing all her teeth to the shiny-shoed and languid-limbed, while behind her the benefactors stare. One is named Vlad.

Gabrielle's hands suddenly stop trying to remember the right way to chop wood, and Snorting Boy shifts in his seat. He too has said "No", and sits ready in a sprinter's lean towards the exit.

"It's time," says The Immaculate One, "for those who don't feel they are *suitable* applicants to go."

Snorting Boy is already bolting for the door. Gabrielle is a split-second behind.

* * * *

From the midnight calm of her kitchen and the comfort of her teapot, Gabrielle contemplates her mould-pocked Datsun, bonnet-up in the drive. No closer to discovering how to trip the light fantastic, she'd come home to find a SOLD sticker across the real estate sign, and all the moths gone. She pours a rich amber tea into her favourite elephant mug, trunkless from numerous collisions with the cutlery.

Three virgins were very likely lost this evening, but a chook-bum dress had been saved from certain destruction.

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Bones

RJURIK DAVIDSON

Rjurik Davidson is a writer, teacher, researcher and activist. He has travelled widely and now lives in Melbourne. He speaks crippled French with a perfect accent, which can cause all sorts of mix-ups. Rjurik has published short stories, essays and reviews. He has recently completed a PhD titled. *Paradises of the Reborn Sun: Science Fiction and American Radicalism in the Sixties*. He is currently working on a novel and a science fiction script (with filmmaker Ben Chessell).

'Bones' is based on real historical details. The Communist Party *did* run the Uptown Club and introduce jazz to Australia. Since then Australian jazz has retained its progressive politics.

* * * *

Each night for the last forty years I have listened to the rhythmic dissonance and strange ragtime of Lester Green's *Blue Nights*. Sometimes I get the urge to dance, to feel the ecstasy and jubilation of that smoky room, long ago on that summer night, when we finally reached that feverish and hallucinatory state and took off our skins and danced around in our bones. How I remember the heat of the night, and Lester Green on his piano, thumping out odd clusters and brilliant yet strangely dislocating runs with his right hand. How I remember the band as they reached the state of grace, swaying to the music like reeds in a gentle wind. And how I remember Carmody Reece, as she stood there by the piano with her porcelain beauty, smoking a cigarette, unaware of the disaster that she and Green and all of us were headed

towards. Even now I can feel the magic of that night, and the horror that was to follow.

I first heard of Lester Green and his band on a humid summer night, the sort that is rare in Melbourne. Around me the pub was filled with the bustling bodies and booming voices of the workers from the wharves. The room had the slightly damp, almost tropical smell of sweat and humidity and cigarette smoke, and although the crowd had begun to thin out, it was still hard to hear yourself over the background noise. Jack O'Grady sat opposite me, his hair slicked back like a movie star and his teeth yellow and crooked.

"This Lester Green is from New Orleans," O'Grady said to me, the sweat running down his forehead before he dabbed it with an already stained handkerchief. "And I hear he can play the piano like no-one else—so well that you lose yourself in it, like a snake charmer." Jack puffed on his cigarette and breathed out slowly so that he was enveloped in a little cloud of smoke.

Jack O'Grady worked down on the docks where no one cared that he was a bludger. You came across people like him—who were so over-excited by their latest scheme, or their most recent revelation, that they were more concerned about sharing it with the rest of the workers than getting on with the job. O'Grady was a thin little Irishman who wore dapper suits that were old and ragged, smoked pungent cigarettes that stained his fingers a deep yellow, and talked constantly. He was universally liked, except when he went on about the oppression of the Irish Catholics, and the virtues of communism. Then everyone just took the mickey out of him, and he got all hurt and serious while the others laughed.

To me he was always full of energy and enthusiasm, like when he spoke of Lester Green.

"He's that good you reckon?" I asked.

"A genius, and I'm going to bring him out. Me and a couple of others in the Party. Care to be involved?"

"What do you want?"

"A few bob, for starters. But you're an educated man, a cultured man —" O'Grady started his spiel, but I wasn't taken in.

"Don't give me the smooth talk," I said, shaking my head, an ironic smile creeping onto my face.

“Sam, Sam, Sam,” he said, as if shocked, “I only wanted your help, you know, publicity. You can get some of your mates along, build it at the University, in the eastern suburbs.”

“I’m not really connected with those people.” I said.

“C’mon Sam,” he said, grinning. “They’re *your* people.” By this he meant that I was middle-class, originally.

“I rejected all that, that’s why I’m working at the wharves, Jack.”

“C’mon Sam, I need you, I need a front man, I need Sam Berman, the captain of style, the chief of suave. I need the magic Sam—you’re the man.” And he grinned persuasively.

* * * *

We organized it from the Uptown club at 104 Queensbury Street, sitting there in the corner of the hall with its cracking wooden floorboards and grubby interior. It was quite a different place during the day. At night it was the pre-eminent jazz venue in Melbourne, run by the Eureka Youth League—the Communist Party’s youth group. When the bands came on the hall was transformed; it filled slowly with smoke as a hundred cigarettes glowed in the shadows. The stage rose to twice its height and the musicians grew in stature until they were larger than life: giants blowing through their horns all the colours of the moon and the sun and the language of the motion of stars. It was the music that first brought me there against the urgings of my parents.

“Don’t go, son.” My father used the word ‘son’ as if it had the very meaning of condescension inscribed within.

“No, don’t go, love,” my mother reiterated. “It’s black music.” she said, as if *that* was an argument, as if, as an argument, it held the most compelling force.

Through their words I could hear all the fear and hatred of white Australia, with all its racist connotations. They expected their young son to be drawn in by these dangerous natives—into an orgy of writhing to the jungle music, that might lead to the total victory of the body’s urges, that might lead to orgies of an entirely different sort.

These views were prevalent in 1928 when Sonny Clay's Colored Idea came to play in Melbourne. Shortly into their stay police raided their flats and discovered six of the band with six white women in various stages of undress and sobriety. One of the women escaped by jumping out the window, while the others were arrested and charged with vagrancy: they were aged between seventeen and twenty-three. There was one god-awful scandal—white girls with blacks, no thank you very much. The six band members were deported on the first steamer.

My parents would have approved.

To my parents I said: "What's wrong with black music?"

For a moment they sat there, and in those uncomfortable moments they felt the weakness of their argument. Their minds would not allow the feelings to surface. Instead they held them down in the deep unconscious, and there let them struggle feebly and drown.

My mother sniffed and my father's eyes tracked across the room but refused to meet mine.

I stood up and walked away, and walked away from more than the argument. I left my parents' home because I couldn't bear their straitjacket world of tea and cakes and walking the dog along the beautiful boulevards of Malvern amongst the quiet parks and lush plain trees, and I broke their hearts by dropping out of university and working on the wharves. And I went to the Uptown club, even though it was run by Communists, and I listened to the jazz.

* * * *

Now it's commonly thought that after Sonny Clay, it wasn't until 1954 that another complete American band led by an African-American was allowed into Australia. But it's little known that one was smuggled in without fanfare in the summer of '48, under the veil of secrecy: Lester Green's.

The fist sniff I caught that something was wrong was a week before Lester Green was due for arrival. O'Grady and I were at the pub. O'Grady was bursting with energy and enthusiasm.

"We're talk-of-the-town matey," he said.

I gulped at my beer. It was almost closing time; in those days it was still illegal to serve alcohol after 6

pm, though it was a law that the Uptown Club regularly flaunted.

"It'll make us celebrities, Sam. You know, this might just open the doors for us. We could start a business, you know, touring people, leave the wharves, have a little office. Make a bit of dough. It could all start from here." O'Grady got to his feet, about to go to the toilet. "What'ya reckon?"

"Get me another beer on your way back will you."

O'Grady shook his head, disappointed, and then headed off to the toilet. I wondered about him and his strange contradictions: a communist who wanted to make money. I guess he was Irish, through and through.

A round, slightly bloated, man slipped into the vacant seat opposite me.

"Hello," he said. His skin was smooth and rosy like an overripe fruit. "Hi." I introduced myself: "Sam."

"Hot weather."

"They say it's the start of a heat wave," I answered. "It's gonna get hotter before it breaks."

"Ah," the man nodded earnestly. "Where's Jack?"

"In the toilet," I said, wondering why he didn't introduce himself.

"He should be careful, he's small enough to get lost in there."

I didn't say a word.

"Yep, he's a little man, a *little* man." He spoke the words viciously and stood up, began walking away before turning back and saying: "Give my regards to the little fella will you?" And he was gone.

O’Grady was back as excited as ever and my discomforting thoughts dissipated.

The next day O’Grady didn’t come to work. He was missing the day after, also. When he returned his eye was black and yellowing bruises ran over his eyebrow to his forehead. Occasionally he grasped his side, as if pained.

* * * *

A few nights later we returned to the Uptown Club. There were perhaps fifty people when we arrived. O’Grady and I joined a couple of young men from the Eureka Youth League. One of them, a young ruddy-faced man called Johnno, was puffing vehemently on his cigarette and trying desperately to recruit me to the cause. Most of them had already given up on me, assumed I was a fellow traveller and left it at that, but Johnno refused to give up. Whether he just couldn’t calculate the odds, or simply didn’t care, I don’t know. Personally I thought him not just over-zealous, but not particularly bright. No matter what I said, he just kept coming back.

“But it was Russia that beat the Nazis, comrade.”

“Yeah,” I said, “how’s that?”

“They took the brunt of the Nazi’s attacks. Already by the time we went in, the fascists were losing on the eastern front. Stalingrad… when was that Ray?”

“1942.” Ray added.

“1942. We didn’t land until 1944. By then the Comrades were already in Hungary. Yep, it was Communism that beat the fascists. Not us.” He nodded to his own satisfaction as if impressed himself by his own logic.

“I’d still rather live here than in Russia,” I said, “it’s too cold there.”

“But that’s not the point,” he said earnestly. “The point is to bring it here.”

“It’s cold enough in Melbourne, thank you very much.”

“No, Communism” Johnno said, as if I hadn’t understood, and I had to admire his perseverance.

I nodded again, unable to tease him any more, and noticed O’Grady looking across the room. I followed his line of sight: she stood there, calm like the night, a cigarette being smoked through a long cigarette holder that she held in her gloved hands. The gloves reached her elbows. Hair that seemed sculpted rolled down over her shoulders, framing her porcelain face.

“I think Jack’s been distracted.” I said to the others.

O’Grady turned his head and in that moment I realized he was captured by the woman whom I came to know as Carmody Reece.

If you hit an animal or a person on the head hard enough, there’s a moment when they are motionless, except perhaps for the blinking of the eyes, a moment in which motion and speech are impossible. The strange thing is that in every other way they seem entirely normal. This was the effect Carmody Reece had on Jack O’Grady.

“Why not go and talk to her,” we suggested.

“Oh, couldn’t.”

“Why not?” Even while suggesting it I realized that O’Grady would have as much chance as breathing underwater—for that was the issue, he was out of his element. Carmody Reece was a water creature and O’Grady walked on the land. They would be foreigners to each other.

O’Grady understood this instinctively. Yet, like all of us, he possessed humanity’s greatest failing: hope, that emotion that keeps us going whether we are floating alone in a sea of sharks or freezing to death on the dry plains of Antarctica; that emotion that defies logic and sanity: hope.

I convinced him to come with me and we walked over to the tall woman.

“Hello,” I smiled calmly while O’Grady fidgeted beside me.

She smiled, revealing teeth that seemed smooth and polished.

“This is Jack, and I’m Sam.”

“Carmody Reece,” She turned her head inquisitively, and looked at O’Grady as if he were an oddity. He shifted on his feet uncomfortably.

I can’t recall that conversation. I remember there were pleasantries and comments on the band, and all the while I was caught in her eyes as if in a dark whirlpool, struggling to keep afloat. All the while O’Grady was speechless next to me; he stared and moved as if not quite sure what to do with his hands and body.

I do remember though, our parting words.

“Jack and I are bringing out Lester Green, a pianist from the states, if you’re interested in coming.”

“Oh, *you’re* the men.” She reacted with interest. “I’ve been wondering where I could find you. I was hoping to help you.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, you know, with the trip.”

“Ah, of course,” I nodded.

“Of course!” O’Grady yelled, the sound erupting in an embarrassing bleat.

“Well, we’re meeting here on Wednesday for the last arrangements, but we’d welcome anyone.” I spoke calmly.

“Yes!” yelled O’Grady, “Anyone, anyone!”

“Six o’clock, after work.”

“Six o’clock.” O’Grady grinned awkwardly and I could have kicked him.

“I’ll be here.” Carmody spoke softly and smoothly.

“We’ll see you then.” I grabbed the little man.

She agreed and I dragged O’Grady over to the bar where he took a couple of shots of whisky.

* * * *

When Carmody Reece graced into the club heads turned and conversations fell into the silence of distraction. Maybe Carmody was oblivious to her effect; I believe she knew exactly what it was that she was doing. She came in, hair glistening raven-black, a crimson silk dress clinging to her body like a spiderweb, great black glasses like insect eyes covering almost half her face. How could she have not known? But then again, children of the ruling classes live in worlds of oblivion. What was certain was her effect on little jack O’Grady, who broke into the shiver of a nervous animal, his little legs twitching beneath the table.

“Hello Jack,” she said leaning forward and kissing him on his cheek. The poor fellow startled with fright.

Ray and Johnno looked at each other from under their alarmed eyebrows. They sat bolt upright as they received their kiss like a vaccination.

I was used to such affectations and smiled at Carmody’s emotionless face as it came close and brushed my cheek.

The meeting was a disaster.

O’Grady sat silent.

Ray and Johnno spoke haltingly, addressing themselves only to me, as if Carmody Reece was not there.

Meanwhile Carmody interrupted while others spoke, dominated the agenda and, in a phrase, got her way.

It ended with the plans to pick up Lester Green and his band from the steamer down by the docks.

“So Jack and I will pick them up.”

“But they won’t all fit.” Carmody said.

“We’ll take the party van.” I said.

“But then some of them will have to sit in the back—there’s no seats.”

“It’s only a short ride.”

“Oh, it just won’t do. I’ll take the band in my car and Jack can take the equipment.”

“But it’s already arranged,” I protested.

“Johnno?” Carmody turned her head sharply towards the young man, indicating that behind the giant sunglasses, she was glaring at him.

“Well, I guess it would be better if they could sit on seats now, wouldn’t it?”

“Ray?” Carmody turned to him, and he nodded in agreement.

I could have killed them.

“Well, that’s settled then.”

* * * *

Perhaps O’Grady felt that we were now bound together, in friendship, or comradeship. Whatever the case, he came to me after the meeting and said, mysteriously, “Come on, come with me.”

He took me to a little alleyway between Elizabeth and Swanston streets, one of those tiny cobblestoned alleys that you pass everyday, barely noticing them. An alley that held overflowing rubbish bins and stray cats eking out an existence on the refuse. The kind that shows all the backs of buildings, each decayed, dilapidated, with peeling paint and windows with broken panes. These were the sort of buildings that symbolize the mendacity and deceit that is modern life—that behind the facade of freshly painted signs and neon lights and glistening displays lies another world. As I look back on it, I picture it with a jet of steam being periodically let off from a tangle of pipes along the alleyway—pipes like intestines wrapping around each other. But that may be just the romanticism of a hundred and more Hollywood movies.

We climbed up some old wooden stairs. “Watchit here,” Jack told me, as we passed several slippery, slightly green, stairs that obviously soaked up the Melbourne rain. The rail was rusting, with strips of yellow paint peeling off it. Behind me I could hear the noise and the traffic of Melbourne. I had left the world in which I lived and entered the shady one in which O’Grady moved. I knew he did not control it, that he existed in it like a small fish in a powerful river, darting from rock to rock along the bottom where it was safest, where the current was weakest and only battered him on occasion.

Despite my misgivings I did what I always do, I followed him.

Jack pulled the door open and I heard music in the background.

A number of cries came over from the group that sat around the one table: “Jack-o,” and “Ah, here comes the little Irishman.”

There were three of them, suited men with *that* look about them—the one I came to recognize as a warning sign. One introduced himself as Neil, all pock marks and protuberant bones; another was a toothless chap, huge, bulking, but with gentle movements, called Len. And the third I had met before, a middle-sized man with smooth and glistening skin as if it were ripe fruit. He didn’t say a word.

“Back again ‘ey Jack?” Neil said, lifting a glass to his ruddy face.

“This is my spiritual home,” said Jack O’Grady, grinning.

“I didn’t know you Irishmen had spirit,” Neil poured himself another.

“That’s because you’re a proddo-dog,” Jack snapped back, by which he meant that Neil was Protestant.

To my right the nameless man brooded. I could feel his absence from the whole conversation.

“How much is it to go in?” Len asked.

“Two pound! How many times do I have to tell you—Jesus—anyone’d think you’re a moron Len,” Neil glared, his ruddy face becoming even redder.

“Fair go,” Len mumbled sadly.

“Leave Len alone,” O’Grady said calmly, “you know his memory’s shot from the footy.” He turned to me: “Len played a few games for the Magpies before going back to the country league. He’s been cleaned up a few too many times.”

“C’mon, let’s play,” said the man without a name, as if the conversation was boring him.

We each threw two pounds into the middle and the cards were dealt.

From the very first hand Jack forgot caution, threw in twenty pound, which was five times as much as the biggest bet, and I knew he was headed towards disaster as surely as he was towards death.

The table sat stunned.

Neil, Len and the nameless man put in the money. I folded.

And so it went around until it reached two hundred pounds.

“He’s bluffing,” Neil said adamantly.

“Of course he is,” Len agreed.

“We’ll go on, call him,” said Neil.

“You call him,” Len said throwing his cards down on the table as if to say, I’m out.

Nobody moved.

“He’s bluffing.” Neil repeated. It was his turn.

We waited quietly.

Don’t call him, I thought to myself, please god, someone, don’t let anyone call him.

“Well c’mon,” Len said, getting impatient.

“He’s bluffing, he’s definitely bluffing.” Neil repeated, and each time he sounded less confident, each time he said it as if to convince himself. Still he didn’t move.

“Hurry up!” said Len.

Neil scratched his head.

“Hurry the fuck up.”

Eventually, he broke. “I’m out.”

“You know what happens to a rat when it’s poisoned?” The nameless man spoke the first words emotionlesslv. “Its guts liquefy in its stomach. It just sits there, quivering, while its guts turn to blood and shit, and then it leaks blood and shit. Just like you, Neil,” he ended vitriolically, and his words meant violence. “That’s your fucking problem, isn’t it, Neil,” said the nameless man, “you’ve got no fucking guts have you? You knew he was bluffing but you wouldn’t call it, would you, no you wouldn’t, instead you sat there shitting your pants like a poisoned rodent. Didn’t you?”

And at that moment I realized that the nameless man was going to call the bet. I knew at that moment that Jack O’Grady had made one more mistake in his already mistake-ridden life.

It happened in an instant, rapid-fire:

“See you and raise you my savings, that’s two-thousand pound,” the nameless man spat.

“See that with my car and bet my house.”

“See you my house.”

“Whoa,” Neil eyes boggled while Len beside him grinned nervously.

One moment the game was for a few pound. Next thing it was cars and houses.

“Alright then, if you two are serious about this, you’re gonna have to write out contracts,” Neil said.

“Sure,” said O’Grady.

They brought out the pen and paper, and I cursed O’Grady for having such pride that he didn’t pull out of it then and there.

They wrote it down, all of it: the savings, the car, the houses.

“What have you got?” O’Grady asked.

“A full house,” the nameless man showed three aces and a pair of sevens.

Jack stared at the cards as if he couldn’t believe it.

“Someone must have cheated,” Jack said, holding his cards tightly in his hands.

The nameless man smirked.

“Ho-ho-ho, you’re fucked son, you’re fucked.” Neil said with relish, “You’re…”

“Four of a kind.” Jack put his cards down triumphantly, to silence. “Now who’s fucked?” he asked leaning to the nameless man, “I’d say it’s Terence Gibbon over here, Terry the monkey hey? Isn’t a gibbon a monkey, Neil?” Jack asked. No one responded so he continued, “Sure sounds like one.”

Jack certainly had a sense of drama.

He took the sheet that promised him the house and the savings.

We left quickly after that.

“Will he pay?” I asked.

“Maybe.”

“But can you trust him?”

“Of course not,” O’Grady grinned, “He’s a copper.”

A few streets away O’Grady slipped me the agreement. “You’d better hold this for me mate. It’d be safer.”

Somehow I found myself taking it, and stashing it in a secret place at home, and as I slipped into sleep that night I heard O’Grady’s voice and saw his crooked smile after I had remonstrated with him.

“How could you have done that? How could you have bet your house?”

He grinned impishly, shrugged, and said: “Luck of the Irish.”

* * * *

Jack was supposed to meet me at the Uptown Club at one o’clock. From there we were to drive to the docks before the steamer’s arrival at 2.15pm. I waited in the van out the front of the club, smoking cigarettes as the time passed. The heat wave had been building each day, and sitting in the car was unbearable.

Jack was not there at one. By quarter past I was getting fidgety and began pacing along the sidewalk, but the sun was searing and I moved beneath a sad and drooping tree, its leaves brown. By half past I was downright worried. At quarter to two I had reached another level, alternating between furious anger and anxiety. One moment I was cursing O’Grady. How could he do this? He knew that Lester Green’s band was arriving. He knew how important it was that we arrive on time. The next moment my mind was troubled with dark thoughts full of fear. Where was O’Grady? Would he arrive at all?

About two o’clock, just as I was preparing to leave, Jack rushed around the corner, blood gushing from his nose, a dirty handkerchief held ineffectually against the flow.

“Jeez mate, I’m sorry,” he said. “I got caught up.”

“Come on, let’s go.”

We jumped into the van, blood dropping on the seat and Jack's pants as we sped off.

Along the way I said: "What happened?"

"I think it's broke."

"But what happened?"

"Jeez, I really think it's broke."

"How could you do this? You *know* we'll be late. You know they'll be there any moment, don't you?"

I sped along the streets, overtaking traffic when I could, through the city, down towards Port Melbourne and the passenger terminal by the docks. Despite having my foot pressed to the floor, despite squealing around corners and cruising through lights as they changed to red, it was two-thirty before the passenger terminal rose before us. A lone black man sat on a suitcase surrounded by musical equipment.

"Hey man, lucky you arrived because I was gettin' worried, you weren't never gonna arrive." He introduced himself as Malcolm Harvey. He was of the build that could be called generous: large bones and heavy muscles, all of this without being fat.

"Where are the others?" I asked.

"Oh, they went off with Miss Reece. Hey what happened to your nose, brother?" Malcolm asked O'Grady.

"I think it's broke."

Malcolm and I loaded the equipment in the van, while O'Grady wandered around, holding his bleeding nose.

We then headed to the hotel on Queen St, where we dropped Malcolm off.

The rest of the band had settled into their rooms. Lester Green was already in his, with the door closed.

Jack insisted on meeting Lester Green. He walked grandly up to the door, his nose still bleeding, though not as heavily as before, but enough that he still needed to hold his handkerchief up against it, and knocked loudly.

“Lester, Lester are you in there?”

No one answered him.

“Perhaps he’s gone out,” I suggested half-heartedly.

“Lester, Lester, it’s Jack O’Grady, I just wanted to have a quick word.”

“C’mon Jack,” I urged, already halfway down the hall.

“Lester…”

The door creaked open, and I heard the voice of Carmody Reece: “Oh hello darling, listen Lester’s just having a little rest. You don’t mind if you have that chat a little later, do you?”

The door closed while Jack O’Grady stood expressionless, blood running in little lines along his handkerchief and hand before dropping silently onto the floor.

* * * *

Carmody kept Lester Green to herself, and I had no doubt that she presented herself as the organizer of the tour. It was not until the evening of the first gig that, when the band arrived, Jack and I introduced ourselves.

Lester Green simply nodded and looked at us with intelligent eyes, and in that gesture lay, I believe, the key to his character. In the brief time I knew him, he barely spoke, except through music. Despite this silence, he emitted such charisma that people orientated their words to him, as if he were the only one present. In a crowd, it was he who silently dominated. Sometimes other members of the band seemed to speak for him. For example, Malcolm King would say: “Lester needs a drink, could you get one for him?” And all the time Lester Green would be standing silently.

When we introduced ourselves, Lester Green simply nodded.

O’Grady was encouraged to ramble on about the secondary logistical details of the tour: the train to Sydney and then Brisbane, the times that it left, the expense of the hotel, the various sandwiches one could order from the bar. Meanwhile Lester Green caught my eye and held it for a brief, intense moment, and I felt rooted to the spot. My heart skipped a beat and my left leg began to tremble. In the background I heard Malcolm King say: “Lester likes cucumber sandwiches. Could you arrange some cucumber sandwiches?”

Lester glanced away at O’Grady and I was released from his gaze. I could breathe again.

O’Grady rushed off to see if he could arrange some cucumber sandwiches.

“It sure is mighty hot here in Melbourne, ain’t it Lester,” Malcolm said. “Is it always this hot, Sam?” As he spoke he wiped the sweat that was beading on his broad forehead.

“Sometimes, but this is about as hot as it gets. The unusual thing is the length of this heat wave. It’s more like Sydney weather though, all this humidity. I suppose it will rain sooner or later, and then things will probably cool off.”

“Can’t wait for that rain. It’s too hot to play,” Malcolm said.

At that moment that Carmody Reece cut through the crowd like a breeze.

“Hello Sam,” she kissed me on the cheek.

O’Grady arrived with a couple of sandwiches, which Malcolm took and began to eat. O’Grady seemed not to notice, instead he stared briefly at Carmody Reece, before looking at his feet.

“Sam and Jack here are the chief organizers of the tour, Lester,” Carmody spoke and her voice was cool, almost soothing in the heat. She gave us the credit. I had misjudged her earlier. It would not be for the last time.

Later, when the night had passed into early morning, Lester left with Carmody on his arm, dark glasses hiding their polished faces, leaving Jack and I and others behind as if we were mere mortals.

O’Grady drank in the dark corner of the club, at the very end of the bar, as it joined with the wall. He was brooding.

Eventually I approached him. “Holding up the bar, eh?” I joked.

O’Grady glanced at me, squinted, and then took another gulp.

I ordered a drink and sat beside him, and watched as the crowd slowly thinned. I watched couples leave, arm in arm, young men laughing and drinking, older men holding cigarettes that trailed smoke—tiny thin lines that slowly dissipated into the haze of the club.

For fifteen minutes I sat next to Jack O’Grady and watched and waited.

Finally he turned to me and spoke.

“Why… why did god make me so ugly?” O’Grady moaned, slipping momentarily, as he sometimes did, from his communist persona back to his Irish Catholic one. “Look at this, look at this body,” his eyes widened with desperation. “Look at this: legs and arms spindly like a spider’s, my face gaunt and thin, my teeth crooked and yellow, what kind of a man is this? Look,” he took off his hat, “see how my hair thins? See how the scalp is visible through the hair, see? Sometimes I think god has put us on the earth to suffer, and we die old and meek. Submissive, yes quiet, those of us who aren’t amongst the chosen. There’re two kinds of people in this world—the lucky and the condemned, and the very thing that *we* want is taken away from us and given to the blessed. The very thing that could salve our wounds.”

* * * *

The next day the hot north wind blew hard through the streets of the city, picking up the dust and throwing it in great clouds so that I had to shelter my face with my hands. But later the wind eased and the humidity set in again, a thick grey roof covering the sky and releasing a number of misty showers that swirled down softly, lasting only a few minutes and bringing no release from the heat.

That night the band played in the crowded and sweaty club and people downed the illegal alcohol as respite against the weather.

It was some time after the last set, as once again the club began to empty, that Carmody grabbed my arm firmly and said: “C’mon, we’re going.”

I sat in the back of her polished sedan with Lester and Malcolm and O’Grady. We drove out eastwards, the windows down to let in the air. Above us I could see the moon as it broke intermittently though dark clouds that kept the heat and the humidity. Sweat trickled ceaselessly down my neck and face.

As we drove, Malcolm leaned back to me: “Hey, when’s there gonna be a change in the weather, man?”

I just shrugged. Everyone was asking the same question. None had any answers.

We approached the hills, dark smudges against a dark horizon, and then passed through the little valley that housed the little town of Upper Ferntree Gully, and then Belgrave and Monbulk, and from there I lost my sense of direction. Perhaps we travelled onwards through the hills, towards Emerald, or maybe we doubled back in the direction of Ferny Creek. On those windy roads, unlit as they were in those days, direction can be a tricky thing. All I recall were the shrouded houses scattered here and there amongst the hulking shapes of giant tree ferns and the towering trees like giants stretching their arms above us. The mansions that loomed occasionally out of the darkness, great wooden and stone constructions, were beautiful, with balconies overlooking the green valleys, and great glass windows, and little turrets climbing towards the sky. I wound down the window, and leaned out, feeling the air, cooler as we drove through it, in my hair. Above me I saw the stars occasionally break through the lumbering clouds, and I saw the forest dark and silent all around, and it seemed to me that I had entered the world of Gods, some Garden of Eden, a primeval forest. And that beside me, in the car, rode the gods and it seemed that Malcolm was the God of Pleasure, and that Carmody was the God of Love and that O’Grady was The Messenger and Lester the King of the Gods or, of course, the God of War.

The sight of the mansion broke my reverie. It towered before us, its great windows bright with light and cars parked beneath its eaves and under the surrounding trees like animals asleep. We entered and it was splendorous, with brass fittings gleaming like gold and chandeliers like hanging plants of glittering jewels. The floor was of polished wood and all about were purple and gold and blood red flowers, sprouting from vases of delicate china and crystal.

A waiter whisked by and handed me a glass of champagne, which I sipped as I followed the others into a grand ballroom now filling up with people. O'Grady stayed close to me, for now he was really out of his depth, while the band members flitted amongst the patrons who were all dressed in their black suits or tuxedos, or flowing gowns with deep emeralds and rubies glittering.

In one corner a grand piano stood, polished, gleaming, and beside it a drum kit, and a double bass against the wall.

Even I, who once had some connections with this world, was overwhelmed by the opulence. Even I felt that I did not belong amongst these people.

The waiter came and went and each time filled my glass with sparking wine and each time he seemed to come a little sooner, though perhaps it was the distortion of time and space that came with the alcohol. At some point a reefer was passed from hand to hand, and I remember breathing in its pungent fumes and my head becoming light and my vision blurred. My thoughts came slow and calm and everything seemed to take on a whiteness as if a cloud surrounded me. From that moment the sequence of events and their causal links fell apart.

I stumbled to the toilet and Malcolm, who was coming out, spoke to me: "It's just like performing for the folks back home." And I thought I could hear bitterness in his voice.

The waiter came by, or perhaps it was another one, and I said to him, "Excuse me, what's your name?"

"Pierre," he answered, smiling.

"French?"

"Australian."

I nodded and he winked and with that, was gone.

The stairway loomed before me, and I didn't recall for what reason I was there.

“Sam!” A voice called my name.

I turned around and there was O’Grady, smoking a cigarette. I turned towards him and found myself back in the ballroom, but the little man was not beside me. There in the ballroom stood Carmody Reece, leaning against the piano, dressed in a silk gown of deepest crimson, the colour of blood, and in her hand the cigarette in its long holder, burned a vicious orange as if it was the heart of the night.

Suddenly I was beside her, and she was lighting the cigarette I had in my mouth. Our cheeks brushed, hers was smooth next to mine, a marble wall.

“How has your evening been, Sam? You seem to be swaying on your feet.”

I smiled and puffed on the cigarette and the acrid smoke burned my throat and my lungs.

“My father would pray for you. He’s a preacher you know. Each morning he wakes and lies prostrate.” She gave a little laugh. “Before God, it’s supposed to be. He’d pray for you communists.”

“I’m not a communist.”

“Well, you know what I mean. You practically are. He would pray for you.” She stopped a moment, and then continued in a soft voice: “And for me.”

“Really,” and though I understood, I kept it to myself. I didn’t want to talk of families or their expectations.

“But this here, Sam, this is my life, this is my freedom. This is the where I want to be, with whom I want to be.” She stopped again, thoughtful. “Lester’s an amazing man, don’t you think, Sam?”

“Remarkable.” I answered softly, for I too was in thought.

I left her then, at the first moment I could, for I could not stand her intensity. I took another drink, and I remember brushing my way through a crowd of bodies and making my way to the open window where it was slightly cooler. Another drink found its way into my hands, another reefer to my mouth and things became quiet for a while, as if the voices from the crowd were muffled, or from far away. I grabbed the

windowsill for a moment and regained my balance. Once again the sounds of the party burst violently into the air around me.

"Oh," the woman said, "are you going to do that forever?"

"Do what for ever?" I asked, wondering who she was.

"Work on the wharves. Haven't you been talking to me about it for fifteen minutes?"

"Oh, right," I nodded.

She looked away annoyed and adjusted the tiara, which had slipped sideways, back to its position on her head.

A moment later I heard the first note on the piano, and she said, "Oh look, they're playing!"

Seconds later the bass and the drums burst forth and a trumpet and we started to dance.

As if everyone had waited for just this moment, the ballroom filled with the crush of hundreds of bodies, jostling for position on the polished floors, and the music seemed to emanate from the very air around us, like a fine mist caressing us with its soft touch. Each of us entered the world of music and motion and the stomping of feet recalled to me the legendary circle shouts of Congo Square in New Orleans. I lost sense of time and space and swam amongst the dazzling notes.

We danced and danced. Legs and arms moving at crazy angles as if we were puppets being jerked by young children. It was a jalopy, a powerful and mesmerizing ritual, with the heat and the lights and the music pounding with odd clusters of chords and rambunctious runs. For a moment it seemed that I *was* the music, that a strange and disturbing fusion had occurred, and my body was filled with ecstatic rapture.

No longer did I have control of my snapping and waving limbs, but instead I surrendered myself to Lester Green and his dreadful momentum. How he crouched over the keys like some demented sorcerer, conjuring beats from nowhere, how the beats came from the percussionists with primeval rhythm and fury. How the bass pounded along with my heart, filling my head with the sound of blood and heat. And in those moments I gave myself fully to this music, I surrendered myself with all the willingness of a junkie falling into the dreamless reverie of those spaces between life and death shortly before the heart stops

beating.

I felt the heat of the lights and the sweat as it rolled down my forehead and into my eyes. My skin tingled, and then the tingling became an itch, and still I danced, maniacally, like the inmate of an asylum hearing the music only in my head. My skin burned, and still I danced, despite the pain, as if acid had been splashed upon me. I suffered and I danced, and then, just like that, it happened. In the fog of the pain, in the jubilation of the music and the dance, I reached, as if it were the most natural thing in the world and, along with a hundred and more people, I peeled off my skin and left it below me as I danced around only in my bones.

Around me came the sound of a great rattling that beat to the sound of the music like a multitude of syncopated percussive instruments. Bone clattered on bone. Feet struck the floor in one great symphony of joy and madness. Each of us was stripped to our essentials, laid bare to each other.

Then, sometime later, just as it had happened, without fanfare or hoopla, we stepped forward once more and slipped back into our skins, as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened at all.

Was it the strange delirium that I was in? Could it really have happened? Even now I wonder if it was but a hallucination, some consequence of my fevered mind, some consequence of the reefer that I smoked, or the alcohol that had been mixed with it.

I wonder if I had not just dreamed it, in the moments between the motions of my body and the striking of the musical notes.

Later I remember fragments and snatches: lying on the cool grass behind the house as someone passed me another reefer; someone laughing as they led me to a car; the journey back through the hills and the moon far off on the horizon, sallow and huge. I recall falling onto my bed, which seemed soft and comforting, and falling into a deep and dreamless sleep.

* * * *

The next day has faded from memory, but this I remember: we came the next night to the Uptown Club with expectations fluttering within us like moths in a jar. We came, and pushed through the line that crept out the front of the Uptown bar, along the road, and around the corner. Jack, who had met me earlier in the pub after work, edging his way inside first, and then I, all the memories and feelings of the night before tingling in my head distractingly.

I didn't notice at first that there was something wrong. At first I wandered around unknowing and uncaring.

I chatted to a few of the comrades, before I noticed that the members of the band leaned up against the bar, while Carmody sat alone, smoking at a table, her marble face revealing nothing. Alone, as if it were the most natural state in the world. Sometimes when I think of her, and the events that were to transpire, I think that was the most symbolic moment of the whole story, for she was ever alone, even in that brief time that she was lying in Lester Green's arms.

Jack took the opportunity to sit next to her. By this time his jealousy had conquered his fear. Even then I could hear the waver in his voice as he tried, while Carmody sat emotionless answering in monosyllables, if at all. I moved away for I could no longer bear it. Had I been kinder I would have told him the truth: Carmody Reece would never see anything in him, other than a little man who would buy her drinks. Had she been kinder she would have told him herself.

Slowly the crowd built up, greater than the night before. I had not spoken a word about the previous night, and I sometimes believe that *no one* had, for perhaps it seemed too ludicrous a thought, too absurd a notion, for us to speak of. Perhaps we gave in to the belief that others would think us mad.

And yet from the very first note, from the very first chord, Lester Green and his band were a disappointment. Was it the drain of the travel, and the ceaseless playing?

Whatever the case the band played and people watched, or swayed, but I remained unmoved. The night dragged on and I fell to daydreaming.

I was shocked, then, when Lester Green appeared before me, and in that quiet, husky voice, asked me for a lift home.

We spoke little as I drove through the quiet streets, and I didn't mention the big black sedan that followed us. At first it seemed a coincidence, but as I drove my eyes were drawn ever to the rear-vision mirror and ever it was behind us, with lights bright enough to burn themselves onto the back of my irises, leaving there the imprint of worry and fear.

Lester simply hummed to himself oblivious and I thought it best not to mention the sedan.

When we arrived, Malcolm was leaning against the balcony of his room. He came out to greet us, following us into Lester's room where we drank whisky and talked.

“Harvey,” he explained to me, “was the name of that son-o’-bitch that owned my grand-parents. My daddy told me all about that man, how he treat my old folks, how he was always’a touchin’ ma grandma where she don’t wanna be touched, and how one day the old bastard was rolled on by his own horse.” At this Malcolm laughed heartily. “Guess he got what was comin’ to him. Right Lester?”

“Guess so,” said Lester pulling at his goatee.

Suddenly Malcolm leaped up and said: “See you then.” And off he went, smiling to himself.

For a long while Lester and I sat in silence.

Eventually I stood up, rather awkwardly, and Lester stood up with me.

“I’d better go,” I said quietly.

“Guess so.”

And he took a step towards me, and touched my face with the tips of his fingers and I felt the tingling on my skin that I had felt the night before, my heart leaped in my chest and I felt my left knee tremble. A second later it gave way and I fell to my knees and in a moment his penis was in my mouth with the taste of salt and sweat.

* * * *

I come now to the events of the final night, and these I recall as if it were yesterday, as if it was the only night in my life. It is burned into my memory like no other. It stands as the nadir on which all else is built.

It was like a parody of the nights before, where all things were turned on their heads, where light became dark.

The crowd was restless from the first, as if waiting for something to happen. They shuffled from one foot to another, whispered under their breaths irritably, and only seemed to listen to the music in order to

heckle and mutter.

The crowd seemed to have some in-built dynamic, some trajectory that I feared was sending them from frustration towards murderous rage.

At least Carmody was not there, and in that I took comfort, for I don't think I could have faced her and her bulbous glasses and enamel skin.

And then, from the crowd, a projectile flew towards Lester, over his head, and crashed against the back wall. In a second a hail came down upon the band and shouts drowned out the sound. The band stopped for a break and things calmed down for a while.

The second set was worse. It seemed that the band were shaken, and they dropped beats, struggled through solos as if they'd never played the tune before. I noticed Malcolm at the rear, sweat beading down his forehead and occasionally grimacing. Only Lester Green seemed oblivious to it all. Playing as if there was no one at all around him, as if the audience was nothing but rocks upon which he could break his waves of music.

I knew it would happen, in the way that you know of your coming death: with that mixture of disbelief and deep repressed horror.

And so it took me by surprise.

The band messed up the ending of a tune. On and on they played, trying to wind it up. And yet they couldn't, each time a member of the group would slow down, or stop, the others seemed oblivious. The problem was Lester Green, who was oblivious to all this, and continued to play the groove, adding little frills and variations, so out of the feel of the rest of the group that they didn't know what to do. They tried to follow his lead. But he wasn't leading anywhere.

There comes a moment in a crowd where one tiny action, one step forward, one raised fist, one tiny imperceptible action starts the flood. More often than not you do not notice it, and the mass which has been waiting for this action as the solution to its desires, seems to act as one. And at that point, one tiny action can turn the tide.

I saw the action that broke the crowd: a large juicy apple flew from the front in a smooth arc, spinning in the air, before it smacked into Malcolm's forehead with an audible 'tock', before bouncing onto his drums.

The crowd surged, and I was carried forward with them.

I knew this would be the end of Lester Green and his band. Madness had gripped our minds, feverishly swallowing our rational thoughts with something savage and primeval. I was caught in the surge and carried onto the stage, fighting to keep my feet. I pushed myself sideways, wedging myself against the piano, and then I suddenly pirouetted on the spot, driven by some unknown force. I gripped the piano with my arms, and one of my legs lost all feeling. Looking down I saw gushes of blood pouring from my leg and somewhere on my torso.

Only then did I hear the two explosions of sound. The mob stopped dead in their tracks, looking back over their shoulders.

This is madness, I thought. What's happening? It was as if everything had broken loose, like refuse floating randomly on the sea. Why was I bleeding?

I raised my head and saw Carmody Reece, gun pointed at me. Her face was like a cracked plate, all warped and distorted, cold and steely eyes offsetting the tendons that bulged in her neck, the chin askew. I saw the agony on her face and knew that she had been the one following Lester and I in the black sedan. I knew that I was lost.

She would not miss with the next one.

"Drop the gun," I heard and, glancing behind her, I noticed Gibbon and two other cops. Only Gibbon was armed, his gun pointed at her back.

Jack O'Grady stepped in between them, shielding Carmody from Gibbon's line of fire.

There was, for a moment, a dreadful silence, and I felt my leg give way and I fell onto my knees. Around the four of us the crowd formed a circle, a cloud of shadowy faces and arms and legs, silent, watchful, menacing.

Carmody's hand didn't waver, and I closed my eyes, in disbelief.

“Get out of the way, Jack.” Gibbon said.

“Don’t shoot her, please.”

“Get out of the damn way.”

O’Grady didn’t move.

It happened in a split second. I heard a volley of shots. Fire spurted from Carmody’s gun. Behind her Gibbon fired and O’Grady went down like a falling leaf, all sidewards. Before me Carmody kept pulling the trigger, but she was out of bullets.

“Die,” she said to me, and I blacked out.

I came to as they wheeled me out to the ambulance and I felt the wetness on my face. Someone’s crying over me, I thought, but I was wrong. Outside it was raining, and a cool southerly breeze was sweeping over the city.

* * * *

Occasionally I meet people who were jazz fans. Sometimes the forties come up. Sometimes I think that there, in the flash of an eye, or a word slipped into context, they hint that they had been there on that night. With a brief meeting of eyes nothing more need be said. But always afterwards I begin to doubt.

Gibbon kept quiet because of the signed agreement that O’Grady had won from him in poker. He didn’t want to ruin his career by the contract coming to light. The Communist Party kept quiet because they had been illegally serving alcohol. They preferred not to have the police investigating their organization. And in that conspiracy of silence the story of O’Grady’s death and Lester Green’s tour of Australia was lost. In the minds of many the memory slowly faded. The gigs at the Uptown Club became nothing but another barely remembered night from years before: ‘Who was it that played?’ It became common knowledge later that Lester Green’s tour had been cancelled in ‘48, and then, in time, it was forgotten altogether.

At first I thought of Carmody Reece as responsible for those events, but later, after the women’s liberation movement of the seventies, I learned to think of things differently. Hers was the greater tragedy. She had tried to walk the lines of independence in a world that had no space for that. Things and events

bore down on her and trapped her and turned her confidence and power into something mangled and broken. They took her away to the Kew Asylum, and there she stayed an embarrassment I think, to her family. I visited her once, in the late fifties, in that cold establishment. She didn't recognize me, and I sat awkwardly beside her. The drugs and lack of exercise had broken her beauty. I felt I was sitting beside a middle-aged woman with straggly hair and pasty skin.

After about half an hour someone put on a record of Billie Holiday and Carmody immediately put her hands on her ears and screamed "stop it, stop it," over and over, her wail piteous and disturbing.

The nurse stepped quickly in, a syringe glistening in the light.

"I'm sorry sir, you'll have to go."

I left to the sound of Billie echoing down the hallway; and after I left that house on the hill I ran and ran, through the park, down the street, trying to concentrate on the air against my cheeks, but I could not get away.

I joined the Communist Party, of course, and left later as Kruschev's speech broke like a tidal wave against the parties across the world. Later, also, I returned to University and my parents were finally relieved as I gained a degree and started life once more in the decent and respectable vocation of teaching. Somewhere in those days though I lost the will to struggle and fight and resigned myself to the quiet life. For that reason I am at one with my generation who watched the sixties come and, though I supported those kids with their talk of freedom and liberation, I watched from afar as I have done for the rest of my life. I am only a chronicler.

Many times I searched for the mansion amongst the hills, heading up driveways to find only little houses, apologizing to owners irate at the intrusion, or entering some of the mansions that have become bed and breakfasts, or function centres, and realizing that this was, in fact, not the one.

You know, of course, that Lester Green's career was tragically short and that he never made it into the studio. It seemed he lost his spark sometime after his trip to Melbourne, and that from there his life was a descent so common amongst his contemporaries. He has dropped almost out of jazz history. As you know, a reference can be found to him in Gaoa's *Jazz History*, and that line in Jilian Smith's otherwise superlative *Jazz in Australia*: 'It was around this time that it was rumoured that a talented young pianist named Lester Green was to tour Australia.'

It was some fifteen years later, as I was perusing one of those little second hand stores, among the tree-lined streets of Carlton, amongst the ancient terraces and the plane trees just dropping their autumn

leaves, that I found a battered old phonographic record with a dusty and stained cover. The cover showed the outline of a trumpeter leaning back and blowing hard, and several spots, intended, I think, to be lights in the background. But what interested me was its title: Lester Green's *Blue Nights*.

From where could this have come? Was it some record from America that I was previously unaware of? Had Lester Green in fact made it into the studio?

I turned the record over with a beating heart and squinted at the writing on the back, that proudly proclaimed it: 'The definitive recording of a selection of Lester Green's three gigs in 1946.'

The details were wrong; surely this wasn't Lester Green.

I rapidly bought it, and rushed home.

From the moment I heard the tight clusters and the intensely disturbed runs I felt a shiver down my spine. And as I put it on, even now, I sense the drawing power of that man, Lester Green. And I feel my legs begin to raise themselves all jagged and awry, my arms, all odd angles and jaunty motions, and I feel a strangle tingling on my skin as I begin to dance.

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Occam's Razing

BRENDAN D. CARSON

Brendan Carson lives in Adelaide and occasionally Perth, with his wife, family and approximately fifty cats (true). He is returning to part-time writing after an absence of several years. By day, and often by night, be works in a small metropolitan hospital Emergency Department, which allows him to meet hundreds of interesting people with fascinating stories to tell, none of which he can ever use in his fiction. Previous publications have been in *Altair*. *Antipodean* and several indie magazines.

"I wrote "Occam's Razing' after coming back from a night shift, I'd been reading *A Distant Mirror*, by

Barbara Tuchman, and it sort of melded in my mind with the neurobiology I'd been studying, and this was the result."

* * * *

The Chatelaine Marguerite di Picard—first daughter of the Duc D'Orleans, related by marriage to the Navarres Dynasty, through title to Godefrey of Cherbourg (who three times unseated the English king at tournament), and through birth to the powerful Gascon nobility of Bordeaux and Poitiers—was the worst forensic neurotheologist in Christendom.

Still, you took what you could get at this short notice. Jean Doublet shivered in the thin Flemish rain and waited. Behind him the Chatelaine bent her broad back.

"Any joy?"

Chatelaine di Picard shook her head inside her cloth-of-gold containment suit, embroidered with fleur de lys: "It's been a while—twelve, fourteen hours —"

"Three."

"And with these summer temperatures —" A gust of wind spattered cold water onto Doublel's face. "- the temperature would have hastened the decay. The synapses in the frontal cortex are almost —"

Doublel sighed. "Is there anything you can get? Anything at all?" He glanced over at the body of the slim woman, almost a girl, swinging occasionally in the gusts of rain. His sargent, de Burley, sawed at the rope around her neck. It was plasflax, something local, Doublel already had men tracing the gene lineage. He glanced away when the wind caused the woman to gently rotate, her thin, wise face contorted by fear and anoxia.

The Chatelaine grimaced. "A little…"

Doublel raised his eyebrows behind the molecular mask.

"I think—the footprints—theological beliefs form certain, typical patterns in the frontal lobes. Nerves join

up to nerves in particular ways, synapses make certain characteristic pathways. The longer the deceased has held the beliefs, the stronger the patterns."

Doublel nodded. This kind of stuff always intrigued him. There was a part of him that imagined being born noble, having the opportunity to study. Predictably, he felt a heavy, full pain beginning behind his eyes. He squeezed them shut, dismissing the thought and the pain.

"She's a convert, not someone born to this. There's only diffuse neurotheological imprinting—background noise—until probably about a month ago."

"A month?"

"Give or take three. Six months at the outset."

Doublel contained his increasing rage. Speaking slowly, he said "So you've narrowed it down to between six-months ago and a few days?"

"Exactly," smiled the Chatelaine.

"Invaluable. And what about her religious conversion?'

"That's where it gets really interesting. It's hard to be sure, but I think she shows signs of Occam's Syndrome."

Doublel's eyes widened. "Occam's? Are you sure? But where would she get it from?"

The Chatelaine shrugged. "Definitely Occam's. Atrophy of the epiphanic tracts, skeptogenic neural configuration in Aquina's area, probable Avingnon Credo Score of less than five."

"Occam's been dead for seven hundred years. He was declared heretical by Innocent the—I think the Thirteenth. They exterminated his bloodline down to third cousins. There hasn't been a case since —"

“There was the Florentine outbreak,” pointed out the Chatelaine. “Guilia Ammannati and Vincenzo Galilei, five hundred years ago. And then nothing until —”

Their eyes met. “By Our Lady,” said the Chatelaine.

“The English outbreak. Less than a year and a half ago. They tracked down the ship, sunk it off the coast of some islands in the Atlantic, the Galapagos. The *Beagle*, went down with all hands. But they could have docked here. They could have docked at Bordeaux, infected people —” He scrambled for his horse.

“I’m trying to remember. Patient Zero—was that Charle Du Wynne?”

“Something like that, may Satan tear his stones. I have to go to Bordeaux, my lady.”

She nodded. “It may be that it’s only the early stages. Not an epidemic yet. Perhaps only the susceptible are infected so far.”

De Burley trudged towards Doublel, raising his eyebrows.

“Quarantine the nearest three towns. And her home town, seal off Curie. Then clean it. Clean all first-degree, second-degree, childhood friends, possible sexual contacts. The father and mother are still in Curie, burn their bodies and their house. And don’t forget to decontaminate yourself.”

De Burley nodded.

Doublel swung into the saddle. His eyes were already scanning the horizon for smoke, fire, the signs of anarchy, scepticism, rebellion. Now the girl’s face didn’t look wise, but threatening. How many people had she doomed before she took her life?

“Burn them all” he shouted. “Tell them it is the last will and testament of Marie of Curie.”

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Birds of the Brushes and Scrub

GEOFFREY MALONEY

Geoff rev Maloney lives in Brisbane, with his wife and three daughters. During the 1980s lie travelled though India and Africa. A collection of his stories. *Tales from the Crypto-System* was published by Prime Books in the US in November 2003.

'Birds of the Brushes and Scrubs' originated in several visits to Calcutta. It is a city on the verge of collapse, yet its museums are full of ancient artefacts and cabinets of little stuffed birds—like all museums. It has a magnificent cantilever bridge that spans the Hooghly river, and grand Victorian architecture left by the British. And it is full of poverty and decay. Thousands of people sleep on the streets. You step over them as you leave the restaurant after your evening meal, because you know that you belong somewhere else, and you've got a plane ticket in your hand that gets you back home.

* * * *

A short while ago we arrived at the cafe Doomaji spoke about earlier. It is an open shed, constructed, like so many of the dwellings here on this side of the bridge, of scavenged materials, of rusty corrugated iron and cardboard boxes, wrapped around and held together with sheets of torn plastic, structures born of the essential necessity of shelter and nothing else. The cafe does not serve coffee; no one inside is drinking, no one is eating; they sit and smoke and argue.

Across the river, before the bridge, on the other side of the city, when Doomaji had mentioned the cafe, I had imagined something more quaint, had hoped for something sophisticated, had expected, at the very least, a safe haven and a refuge; chairs and tables on a sidewalk would have been nice. A cup of dark roasted coffee and something to eat, a savory morsel or some sweet delicacy, would have been better—yet I would not have been fussy about the food, as long as it was clean; as long as it looked clean I would have eaten it, such is my hunger, as I linger at the front of the cafe, as Doomaji has instructed, feeling very much the stranger, automatically the enemy, automatically far too vulnerable. I want to shrink down into the ground, vanish there, become part of the roadway, insignificant, indistinguishable, merely part of the background noise, as important as a speck of dust.

I thought it would be easy after we crossed the bridge and, if you had heard Doomaji speak, you would agree with me. The bridge is the worst part, he had said, then as if he thought I hadn't been listening, or perhaps to reassure himself, he restructured his words and said, The worst part is the bridge. And after

the bridge we would arrive at the cafe, after the cafe I would be at the door and then, quite soon after the door—Doomaji assured me—I would be back where I belong. Belong. Such a strange word in isolation. Say it too many times and it becomes meaningless—belong, belong, belong—as if all of us don't really belong anywhere, or have little hope at all of finding where it is we belong. But I savor that word as I stand there. It feels warm, secure, it has a beautiful sense of relief associated with it and grants me the understanding that I belong somewhere else. Of this, I am certain, but as my mind begins to make these important connections, my eyes are diverted by a mangy dog running down the street.

It has hardly any hair, its ribs poke through its skin. It is frothing at the mouth, close to exhaustion, running as fast as it can. Behind it a gang of children, five, six, seven years old, urchins with sticks in their hands, chase the dog, screaming in shrill voices. Their faces are contorted in absolute joy, total fulfillment. They know the dog is within their grasp.

I knew what would happen, they knew what would happen—for them life does not get any better than this. They would catch the dog and beat it with their sticks. The dog would twist and turn in pain, it would turn its head and snap its jaws, fighting to the last to keep them off, but they would jump away from the snapping jaws and dance and weave and dive in with their sticks, throwing their child's weight behind them—still enough weight for the sticks to pierce the dog's skin, to stab into its life, to steal its life away.

Despite everything that Doomaji told me—don't interfere, be passive, don't do anything to make yourself a target—I want to help the dog, save it from the children. The reason for this is uncertain, but f move forward into the street with an inviolable sense of conviction, becoming more than a speck of dust, thinking to move between the children and the dog. I take one step, am about to take another, when a shot rings out. From behind me, from within the cafe. It hits the dog in the chest. The dog goes down, its head crashing against the dirt, kicking up the dust. The urchins are almost upon it, but then it is up and running again, struggling now, broken badly in its body. The urchins cry in anger. In the cafe the patrons laugh. To see the dog run, to see such fun.

It does not make it much further, a few more yards and it collapses, its legs kicking the air. The children arrive, drive in their sticks, tear it apart. A fire is prepared, the meat roasted quickly—the smell of the meat, even meat such as this, gnaws at my hunger—and they sit eating it in the middle of the street before it is properly cooked, pink juice running down their chins, a little tribe happy with their kill. Afterwards, their bellies full, they sing a song, the words of which are unfamiliar to me, but the tune is oddly pleasant, with a lilting air to it, the melody reminiscent of the song the executioners sang upon the bridge.

* * * *

There is not a lot to say about the bridge, yet there is so much as well. Physically, it crosses a river, like most bridges, so it serves its reason for being; it can get you from one side to the other, if you should be foolish enough to travel that path. But like me, one day you may have no choice, should you be seeking to find where you belong. The bridge is made of steel, in the cantilever design. Its girders criss-cross each

other like the strings of a cat's cradle. It is rusted in so many places. It looks like it was built a long time ago and has never been maintained, like it was built to break down and rust away, like somebody had designed it that way, was watching it, to see how long it would take a perfectly built bridge to rot away. If there were cars in this place, or trucks, you would think twice about driving across it; you would doubt, despite its weighty presence, that it would be able to carry the load. You would fear that one of the rusted girders might give way and, in its breaking, cause the whole bridge to collapse. Even walking across it, you fear that your weight will be the final straw. But there are no cars or trucks anymore. There used to be. In the streets that Doomaji led me through on the other side, I saw their hulks, empty, destroyed, useless in their decay.

The river which flows beneath the bridge is very old, very sick. It meanders in great green milky arcs. It is choked with thousands of ramshackle houseboats, like dry flaky scabs scarring the skin of some great tree snake. Yet it still has its pride as all rivers must. It divides the city in two, cutting and demarcating, serving still some ancient social purpose. On one side live the people who have nothing, on the other side live the people who have less.

Doomaji and I came from the side that had more. It was better over there. There was not as much tension in the air. The people seemed more accepting of their fate. To get to the bridge, Doomaji took me to a bar. It was better than the cafe; you could at least get a beer at that bar. Who knows what it was brewed from, but it was brown and sparkling and served in glasses. I cannot say if it was any good; I did not taste it. I only glanced at other people drinking it as we passed through. Doomaji led me straight to a door at the back of the bar. This is the quickest way through the city to the bridge, he said, as we passed through the door and out into an alleyway. We walked down the alley for half an hour or so. There appeared to be no exits except through other doors into the backs of other buildings. Finally when we came to a suitable door—it looked the same as all the others—Doomaji opened it and we passed through into the interior of a large building, along a corridor, then out into an open area, dotted here and there with old glass counter display cases.

Perhaps it had once been a department store, now it housed a large number of families, each with their own patch of floor marked out with their few belongings, mostly blackened cooking pots and rolls of dirty bedding. We passed through these people as if we were invisible. They paid us no attention, believing, I thought, that we, like them, had little to offer. Here we were not wanted for ourselves. There was enough food, barely enough, but there was enough.

I was not so different on that side of the bridge. Doomaji told me this shortly after he found me standing dazed and confused in the museum. I name you straight away, he said. Name you once, don't need to name you again. Idlon. I paying special attention to Idlons. It my duty, what my family does, our special job, no one else's. So all the time, I'm looking out for Idlons, to help them along.

I did not feel like an eidolon; I did not feel alike anything, except alive, alive in a vague sort of way. When Doomaji found me I was looking at an exhibit of stuffed birds—*Birds of the Brushes and Scrubs*, it said on the dirty brass plaque at the bottom of the cabinet—and wondering if it was important that all these tattered little birds were stuffed and captured behind glass, although most of them were scattered now

across the bottom of the cabinet, their feathers turning to dust, only the expertise of their original taxidermy continuing to maintain the appearance of their avian species; but it was important because I now realize that was my moment of genesis, that amongst those dead birds I began to remember life again. That was when Doomaji arrived. Those birds all dead now, he said. Mostly everything all dead now; except for people; lots of people. People better than birds, people worse than birds too, but logic there, if you follow logic.

* * * *

As we approached the bridge, I heard the song. I thought it sweet and melodic, thought Doomaji had been wrong about the bridge being the worst part, but on the first girder of the bridge there was a body strung up. It had been slit down the middle, turned inside out, so that everything inside it was now everything outside it. I asked Doomaji the significance of it, a body turned inside out, evaginated, strung up on the girders of the bridge. None, Doomaji said, for fun, just for fun, to see what a body looked like when you did that sort of thing. Then I was sick, dry retching over the side of the bridge shooting nothing into nothing, even as I heard the sweet song in my ears, and Doomaji laughed as though appreciating the joke of it.

On the second girder of the bridge there was another body, its intestines spilling in a pornographic display, but worse than this, the ribs were cracked and broken apart revealing a still beating heart inside. And so we went on, past girder after girder, body after body, with Doomaji badgering the executioners who stood beside their victims, badgering all the way until we reached the other side.

I have searched my mind for how to accurately describe the bridge and what happens there. The bodies strung up, the executioners singing their songs. Doomaji said they did it for fun. But I realize now that he didn't mean that; he had been searching for a reason—and fun was a reason, a justification no matter how slim—because he didn't want to tell me the truth, that it was for no reason at all, that it was evil done for the sake of evil. We imagine that we know this thing, evil for the sake of evil. We imagine…

Doomaji comes out of the cafe, his step is brisk, his stride important. Stop thinking about the bridge, he says. Move! Quick! He grabs me by the arm, pulls me along the street, drags me into a narrow side alley. This is the one, he says. Corrugated iron and cracked weathered wood surround us. It looks no different to any other part of this place, on this side of the bridge. I leave you here, he says. Go to the end. Don't stop, just go. Flooded with relief, I look at him, smile, try to move away, but still he holds my arm. You give me something, he says. I look at my wrist, searching for a watch that I might have once owned; it is gone. Had I given it to someone already? I search my pockets, find nothing but a ballpoint pen. He looks at it as if it is a stick, then I draw it along my arm, tracing one of my veins and show him the thin blue line that it leaves. He grabs it, then he is gone, disappearing between two sheets of corrugated iron.

I walk quickly towards the end of the alley. When I hear the noises from behind, I begin to run, until I

reach its end and squeeze through a gap in the corrugated iron. There is a metal door before me. I push against it. It opens freely. I close the door behind me and swing its heavy lock into place. Turning, I see a red carpeted corridor and at its end another door, less substantial, made of wood—brightly polished wood with little panels of frosted glass. I walk towards it, telling myself that I am safe now, that I have no more to fear, but there is some anxiety still for what lies beyond. I turn the brass handle, open the door and step into a dining room. There is a long table laid out. Several people are already seated there, already eating. A woman approaches, coming to me quickly; she wears a red silk dress, cut in an Asian style. She is perhaps fifty. There are grey streaks in her hair. She tells me to be quiet for a moment, not to speak, that it is always like this, that her name is Madame Liu, that I must be hungry, that I should sit down, join the other guests, have something to eat, enjoy.

So friendly. I obey her completely. And I am hungry. I can't remember how long it is since I have eaten, or what it was. She takes me to a position at the head of the table. The lighting in the room is subdued. The other guests are relaxed. They eat their food quietly, pass dishes across the table politely. Some food is passed my way, crab and lobster cooked in delicate sauces, fish roasted and baked, then wine too, crisp white wine, cool, refreshing. I watch Madame Liu as I eat. She moves around the table, speaking to each of the guests seated there. Some of them I think I recognize, but I cannot put names to faces. Madame Liu asks them questions, lets them speak, listens to their whispers, smiles, nods her head. Finally, after she has spoken to all the others, she comes to me. I hear the red silk rustling against her body as she approaches. Now she is bending down next to me, whispering in my ear. I can feel her warm breath against my skin.

Tell me, my dear eidolon, she says.

I turn my lips to her ear and whisper in return. There was an exhibit of stuffed birds, *Birds of the Brushes and Scrubs*, and all the little stuffed birds were rotting at the bottom of their glass cabinet.

A symbol of civilization in decay, she replies with a butterfly whisper at my earlobe, even perhaps when they were first killed, then stuffed and placed in their glass cabinet. It goes beyond the necessity of…

Food, I say, glancing at the banquet before me, meaning to draw the story out. There is plenty of time to tell her about the bridge. And later, when she is most interested, I will tell her about the other things that I have seen, and listening to this and the other reports, she will decide, as always, what needs to be done. Will it be a quick end, I wonder, as I a raise another morsel of lobster to my mouth, or will she let them die slowly and enjoy the decay.

Madame Liu takes my plate away from me, throws it against the wall. It smashes, cracks, becomes rubble on the carpet. Greedily, I take one more sip of wine before that too is snatched away and dashed to the floor. The others at the table pay no attention. Their plates and glasses sit before them, full and undisturbed. I have Madame Liu's full attention now. She will not allow me to draw it out.

Quickly I tell her what I have seen, then she returns my thoughts to the bridge.

There was one such body? she asks.

Many, I say, all strung along the bridge, some with their hearts still beating.

For what purpose?

Doomaji said just for fun, to see what it would look like, but he did not wish to tell me the truth, that it was evil for the sake of evil, for no reason at all.

Perhaps he said that because he felt embarrassed to tell the truth. Consider. Perhaps it was a butcher's shop, with all its meat on display; you said yourself there was little to eat, that you were always hungry.

A butcher's shop?

She pauses for a moment, smiles at me, raises a fingertip to the edge of her lips, narrows her eyes then asks, When did you last eat?

Just now, I thought, but that was not the answer. I don't remember…

Won't remember? she says.

Can't remember… a long time ago.

Was it on the bridge? she asks. Did the butchers pluck you a beating heart? Did they roast it quickly, cut it into juicy tasty gobbets? Was the blood still running as they fed it to you?

A streak of acid rose up my throat. My stomach turned green.

Did you eat it?

No…

But it was food. You were hungry. What did it taste like? she asks then changes tack. Doomaji served you well, and you… you gave him a pen!

I thought it a tradable commodity, I say. I had nothing else to give. I wished to give him my watch… I touched my wrist, indicating it was bare.

You gave it to a butcher on the bridge. The one that fed you the heart!

I didn't eat it, I say—my memory flickering—it was offered, but I refused. The watch was given to ensure safe passage…

On the bridge, she says, nodding her head. But so, here is your watch now, returned to you.

Taking my hand and slipping the watch over my wrist, she leads me to the door. Will you give it to Doomaji now?

I look back at the banquet table. The others are still eating. I can taste that food and wine in my mouth, and the acid burning my tongue—still see the heart beating, the fire that was prepared. For a moment, before, I felt I had arrived in safe haven, thought I knew these people, that I belonged here. But it seems I had been entirely wrong.

* * * *

Night falls like death on this city. The streets are silent as I enter them, the cafe deserted, the sky immensely dark, no stars to light the way, the air far too chilled, yet still I feel a creeping sweat across my skin as I pass unchallenged to the bridge. Thankfully, here too there is no one to bar my way. The carcasses have been pulled down, and now the butchers lay with them by their sides, protecting their meat, lining either side of the bridge as I pass, all of them like so many corpses awaiting burial. Only the girders call to me, groaning and screeching as they twist their rusty metal plates against each other. One day it will break, all fall down, and crash on the crusty back of the river that flows below. But not tonight. Tonight, I tread lightly on the bridge, trusting nothing, but not lightly enough. The singing begins as I leave

the bridge.

On the other side, in a maze of streets, fleeing from the song, I follow the pathway that Doomaji taught me, until I arrive back at the museum where I was born. I place the watch in the bottom of the cabinet amongst the bodies of the dead little birds, hoping that Doomaji will wake tomorrow, that the judgment has not yet been passed and he will come here like I am sure he does every morning, seeking a new eidolon to guide, and finding the watch amongst the dusty birds he will know that I have tried to repay him. Then I slip back into the night of the city, following street after street, listening to the executioners' song growing louder, trying door after door, searching for another way home, back to where I belong.

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Home by the Sea

CAT SPARKS

Cat Sparks runs Agog! Press. She is also a writer, graphic designer, photographer and desktop publisher. In 2004 she was a graduate of the inaugural Clarion South Writers' Workshop in Queensland.

Cat lives in Wollongong with her partner, author Robert Hood. Highlights of her career so far include: winning a trip to Paris in a *Bulletin* Magazine photography competition; being appointed official photographer for two NSW Premiers; working as photographer on three archaeological expeditions to Jordan, and winning seven DITMAR awards. She was a third place winner in Writers of the Future, 2004, and was awarded the Aurealis Peter McNamara Conveners Award in 2001.

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"Home by the Sea' was inspired by a green shack glimpsed during a walk along Mollymook Reach with friends.

* * * *

First impressions are everything—all veterans of the Pontoon Wall know that. But Jade was astonished when he first caught sight of the beach: the luxury and the waste of it, a broad expanse of golden sand, empty of everything, even footprints. So the stories he'd heard about Hemingway's were true: the hotel actually existed and he had finally found it.

Jade appraised what he could see of the rest of the island from the prow of the ship. The top storey and terracotta roof of Hemingway's poked out from a cluster of verdant foliage. He knew there would be other buildings hidden in the greenery.

Behind him, shouts of the crew filled the air as the ship prepared to dock, creating a pleasant ambience, a backdrop to his thoughts. He closed his eyes, heard the gentle thump of rope against the deck, felt the foam spraying his face as the vessel pulled alongside the jetty.

He thrust his hands into his pockets in a well-practised, casual manner, dipped his head, seductively flicking a lock of hair from his eyes. A party of six stood waiting: five military officers and a lady in an ankle-length red silk dress. The sailors opened the boarding gate, laid the plank across the gap and began unloading burlap sacks under the watchful eye of a uniformed man with a clipboard.

Jade smiled across the water at the lady. It was her. Contessa Bonnefort. Tess. Already, he had determined many things about her from the way she stood, her weight balanced on one hip, the way she brushed stray wisps of hair from her face. Jade sized her up—what she might like and what she would not, imagining the sounds she'd make when they made love.

Before the last of the sacks were off the deck he'd evaluated that ordinarily, someone like him could expect two years maximum in her service, after which the lady would be bored, and he would walk into her living space one day to find her casually flipping through the images in Mr Orlando's offshore catalogue in search of something fresh. But of course, there wouldn't be time for any of that.

He was the last piece of cargo unloaded before the sailors withdrew the plank. The lady's eyes twinkled as her hand reached out to clasp his.

"Jade. What a lovely name!"

"My lady," he replied, bowing. It was important to appear humble at all times with land people. "It is an honour."

"Nonsense," she said, lowering her eyes. "Tell me, is this your first time onground?"

“Yes.”

“I just know you’ll be happy here,” she gushed, looping her arm through his. “Shall we walk along the beach and get to know each other?”

The stillness of dry land made him queasy as he walked, but he knew he’d get used to it in a couple of hours.

“I am Contessa Bonnefort.” She smiled broadly. “Everyone calls me Tess.”

They strode arm in arm across the glistening sand. Jade’s overwhelming urge was to break free of the lady’s grasp and run, but he controlled it. There would be time enough for running once he’d established himself here. Above, Hemingway’s nestled into the jungle landscape. Jade heard the sailors’ cries carrying across the water. He didn’t look back.

The contessa prattled on about things he knew nothing of. Jade listened only for the change in her tone, a marker to indicate when he would be expected to comment. Pretending to be shy would see him through the first few hours. His sharp instinct for survival would help him negotiate the rest.

She stopped walking suddenly, raised her free hand to cup the side of his face.

“You’re so beautiful,” she said. “Such perfect skin. And Jade’s such a gorgeous name, unusual for a boy.”

“It’s ancestral, handed down from grandfather to father to son,” he lied. Back home, he’d been referred to as ‘Boy’ since birth, following sixth in a line of girl-children. He’d never met his father. Old Willie had been his only real father. His mother had put him up on the Pontoon Wall on his tenth birthday. Old Willie had taken him down, rescued him before too much damage was done, taught him how to survive, prepared him for the future.

“What a beautiful tradition!” said Contessa Bonnefort. “You’re going to look so perfect in the clothes I’ve chosen for you.”

She led him further along the beach, then back along a winding jungle path right up to the old stone steps of Hemingway's. She waved excitedly at two women giggling on an upstairs balcony.

"Yoo hoo, Marlene, Madolyn, darlings. Look what the tide brought in."

Jade stared out across the ocean. The gulls here were different from the ones he knew from home—sleeker and fatter, as were the people on this island. He watched a bird dip and soar on an updraft as the sun set. A metallic glint on the horizon caught his eye, probably nothing more than the hull of a motorboat, but for a second he thought he could see another island close to this one—another secret place in a billion miles of ocean.

* * * *

"We do have visitors, of course, but not as many as we'd like," said the contessa, leading him through a foyer filled with wicker chairs and potted plants. People strolled or stood about in idle groups, leaning against furniture, smoking pipes. Everyone turned a head to stare at the stranger. Jade noted their soft skin, unchapped by the ravages of salt and wind. Their decorative, impractical clothes, hands free of calluses. Was this island so bountiful that food dropped from the trees without the need for harvesting and cultivation? It was so much more than he'd imagined, more exotic than he'd pictured all these years.

"Cruise is here, although he doesn't leave his bungalow often these days… and see that woman over there in the purple lace? That's Nina Gallant. You've probably seen her movies on TV." The Contessa paused. "You do have TV where you come from?"

Jade nodded. Every pontoon slum sported its own tangle of aerials. There'd been a faded image of Nina Gallant taped to the wall in his section's kitchen, torn from an old glossy magazine. Beside it, a picture of the Blessed Virgin, and beside that a photograph in a chipped gilt frame. The photograph showed a valley bordered by grassy hills, carpeted with wildflowers of every imaginable colour—pretty, useless flowers that bore no fruit, as wasteful as the potted plants in this hotel foyer, each taking up the space of a man and requiring almost as much fresh water. He tuned back in to the contessa's monologue.

"… haven't been any new ones since The Rise. But the talent's here in abundance —" She made a sweeping gesture of the foyer. "The equipment too, I believe, but we haven't got a film crew. Although I suppose we could make use of the soldiers. It'd be a decent break for them, away from those wretched experiments. And then I suppose we'd need some writers, too. Should have thought of that before, only there just wasn't the room, you see. We do have writers, of course, but they're the literary kind, not the motion picture ones."

Suddenly the ground trembled, and a sonic boom echoed throughout the room. Jade braced himself against the lurching floor, an empty ache of anticipation beginning in his stomach. The contessa paused mid-sentence, catching his disquiet.

"Ignore that, darling. It's just the soldiers below, testing that silly gun of theirs. I hardly even notice it any more."

She looped her arm through his and led him deeper through the foyer to the foot of a giant marble staircase. Jade's mind raced at the thought of soldiers below. He could sense the military presence around him, uniforms mingled with the jewels and satins.

"But you must be exhausted from your journey. I'll show you to your room so you can freshen up and dress for dinner."

* * * *

He decided he would never get used to the space, to walking down a corridor without smelling the stink of close living quarters or brushing his skin against another's, to be standing in a place where he could see no other person, and no one could see him. Old Willie had told him about the years before The Rise, but he'd never been able to imagine it. The experience was surreal, as if he had gone back in time to another age, when human beings were gracious, civilized creatures.

He descended the marble staircase step by step, a pool of bejewelled citizens gazing up at him approvingly. A waiter handed him a champagne flute and the contessa appeared by his side to clink her glass against his.

"Welcome to Hemingway's, darling," she said, and a hundred glasses were raised in unison. Jade sipped the liquid cautiously, noting several uniforms mingling amongst the sequins and tiaras. Surely this was far too much attention to be paying a simple rent boy, even one purchased from the exclusive House Orlando. Did they all *know*? Had his cover been blown already?

There were faces amongst the crowd tonight that, although he didn't know them, were familiar in another way. Pontoon boys and girls carried themselves in a certain manner. You could spot it easily if you knew what to look for. No one of his kind had ever made it to Hemingway's and returned home to tell of it, and yet there had to be many servants here catering to the whims of these plump, jewelled creatures. *No one ever returned*… Jade took another sip of wine, his mind racing with thoughts of cannibalism and other, crueller sports, but the contessa merely placed her hand in his and led him to a grand ballroom, where tasty morsels were served on silver platters and wine flowed freely like bilge water from a sluice.

“We must teach you to dance!” said Marlene, a matronly woman in pearls, as an orchestra began to play at one end of the ballroom. Jade consented to a clumsy attempt after he realized that the women found his lack of grace amusing, rather than disappointing. Soon he had mastered an oafish waltz. Although the turning made him queasy, it filled him with a sense of freedom and power. So much free space, so much of it. Soon he was punch drunk from spinning. One of the ladies cooled his face with a feathered fan.

“Shall we stroll along the beach?” said Marlene.

“Why don’t we?” said another—Madolyn, who he recognized from the balcony earlier.

* * * *

The grainy sand felt delicious between his toes.

“Bet you can’t catch me,” said the contessa, tapping him on the shoulder before tearing off along the beach, champagne flute in one hand, high-heeled shoes dangling from the other. Jade grinned and gave chase, followed by the other ladies in various stages of inebriation.

He caught up with the contessa easily, tapped her lightly on the shoulder in return and stole one of her shoes.

“Naughty boy!” she shrieked as he ran with it, gulping in great lungfuls of salty sea air. He laughed as he ran, feet sliding in the sand, ignoring the false wails of protest from the ladies behind him. Nothing had ever felt so good as the wind on his face and the strain in his calves as he ran free along the beach.

Eventually he let them catch him, the group falling playfully into a heap on the sand.

“Let’s go skinny dipping,” said Madolyn, moonlight accenting her gaunt cheekbones.

“Yes, let’s,” said Marlene, her hands reaching for the collar of Jade’s exquisitely embroidered jacket.

Jade tossed his head back and laughed, but then stopped suddenly as a glint of gold on the horizon

caught his eye. “Look.” He pointed out across the water. “There’s something out there, isn’t there?”

The contessa shrugged. “Nothing special. Just the watchtower.”

Jade peered through the darkness, but the light had been extinguished.

“Watchtower?”

“Nothing you need to worry about,” said Madolyn. “Just some crazy soldier in a tower. They say he’s been in there since The Rise. Every few weeks a boatload of soldiers goes out there to check on it. They never go inside. Brody says it’s contaminated with nuclear radiation, although I can’t see how it possibly could be. Nothing for us to worry about, I’m sure.”

“But I’m curious,” said Jade.

“So are we.” The contessa giggled as she made a move to unbuckle the clasp of his trousers. Laughter started up again *en masse*.

“Now, Tess, you promised you were going to share him.”

“I promised nothing of the sort! And anyway, if I did, then I’ve changed my mind.”

“I say we play poker for him.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Marlene. There’s nothing you’ve got that I could possibly want more than this boy.”

Marlene sniffed. “You always were Vormister’s little pet. What makes you so special? You’ve been holding out on us, Tess, haven’t you? Got some nifty tricks up your… sleeve?”

Jade unbuckled his belt. His trousers slid down off his slender hips, crumpled to a heap around his ankles. He stepped away, shaking his shoes free. The women fell silent, watched intently as he pulled off his socks, and then his embroidered jacket and fine silk shirt.

Illuminated by a sliver of moonlight, he turned his back on them and walked toward the ocean. A few strides later he was ankle deep in the tide. He turned back to face the shore, held out his hand to the contessa and smiled.

Marlene laughed. “Well, Tess, looks like you’re definitely getting the first go. Come on, girls, let’s leave them to it. Time for another of Brody’s excellent lime margaritas.”

“You go,” said Madolyn. “I want to watch.”

“Suit yourselves,” said Tess, unfastening her zip at the back. Tess’s eyes never left Jade as she strode into the water, stripping off items of clothing as she went. He stepped backwards as she approached, a gentle smile curling the edges of his lips. When she was knee deep he lunged suddenly, pulling her first into his arms and then down on top of him into the water. She shrieked in delight, grasping for his strong limbs below the surface. He slipped away from her, swimming further out from shore with sharp, clean strokes. Tess followed, laughing every time she tried to grab him when he twisted out of her reach.

“Can you touch the bottom?” he asked. Tess felt for the sand with her toes. She steadied herself then stood up, the waterline lapping against her nipples. Jade slipped under the surface suddenly, reappearing seconds later before her, brushing against her skin as he emerged from below. He pressed his lips against her neck, cupped her breasts in his hands. He wrapped his legs around her thighs, pulling her close against his flesh.

“Oh yes,” she whispered as he ran his fingers down her back, coming to rest on her buttocks, which he gave a playful squeeze. His tongue reached out and flicked her earlobe, licked the skin, probed.

Madolyn and Marlene watched from the shore as Jade’s head disappeared below the water and Tess began to writhe, her deep moans carrying back to shore on the breeze.

“How do you suppose she got permission to buy a new one?” said Marlene sullenly. “She’ll never share, you wait and see.”

Madolyn leaned in closer. “From what I heard, *she* didn’t choose him at all, *Vormister* did.”

Marlene’s lips formed a silent ‘O’ as Tess climaxed loudly in the near distance.

“Now, ladies, that man is valuable property.”

Marlene and Madolyn looked up at a pair of regulation army trousers.

“Oh pooh!” said Marlene, pouting. “We were only having a little fun. You boys wouldn’t know the meaning of the word.”

The soldier stood by as the women clambered to their feet, brushing sand from the luxurious folds of their gowns. Jade and Tess breaststroked closer to shore. Jade stood up, rivulets of water cascading from his naked form. He offered Tess his forearm, helped her to her feet. He waited for the soldier to say more, but the man remained silent, turning on his heels and marching back to Hemingway’s. Jade expelled his breath slowly. This was the beginning.

“I suppose we should go back,” said Madolyn, attempting to shake remaining particles free from her voluminous lace sleeves. “Damnable stuff, this sand,” she said. “I can’t think why we imported so much of it.”

Jade placed his arm protectively around Tess as they walked back onto dry sand. He picked up his embroidered jacket and wrapped it around her shoulders before pulling on his pants and shirt, the silk clinging to his wet skin. Most of her clothing lay in the water, but she didn’t seem to care. She slipped her arms into his jacket and pulled it tightly to her body. Tess snuggled close to Jade as they walked back the way they had come.

“I’m sorry, darling,” she whispered. “I was going to tell you, honest I was. Those wretched soldier boys promised I could keep you for a while, but you know how it is.”

Jade steeled himself. He knew.

“And although Major Vormister promised that I can have you back again afterwards… It’s not that I’d mind you being *older*. It’s just that it’s such a long time for you to wait, not to mention how dreadful I’d look by then. We don’t have all the *facilities* at Hemingway’s, not like what we had before The Rise. But then, the Major said I wouldn’t be older, only you. It’s all so confusing, I can hardly get my head around it.”

The ground shuddered violently, the air reverberating with a sonic boom.

“That blasted gun again,” said Marlene. “I wish they’d hurry up and get it over with, whatever they’re doing down there.”

* * * *

The soldiers gave Jade a uniform, then marched him down a series of corridors and into an elevator with steel sides and a long strip of dark metal buttons. The carriage shuddered in its descent, taking several minutes to reach its destination within the earth.

The doors slid open and Jade stepped forward into the largest enclosed space he had ever seen. Thousands of people could have fitted into it if not for the machinery. His gaze travelled giant hulking contraptions with sturdy thighs of iron, massive wheels, ligatures and other peculiar devices. Uniformed men stood on gantries, patrolled walkways, drove machines that moved across the floor like motorboats with wheels.

The soldiers led him past all these wonders and more, around the bases of the giant metal machines and to a vehicle that looked like a segmented metal centipede. They boarded it and travelled further into the heart of the cavern, descending further into another cavern, smaller than the first, this one filled with desks and tables, rather than grand machines.

“Son, do you know what a mountain is?” said Major Vormister.

“Yes, sir.” Jade remembered the stories old Willie had told him, and the framed picture on the kitchen wall of his pontoon home.

“Are you aware that you’re inside a mountain right now?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Water tight, mostly.” Major Vormister gestured upwards. “Built six decades before The Rise as a precaution against nuclear attack, with Hemingway’s on top as cover.”

Jade nodded, staring upwards at the grey cement ceiling, noticing the dark stains and fissures sealed with

a white, flaky-looking substance.

"Course, things didn't pan out exactly as people expected," he said. "The Rise was faster than anyone had allowed for. You wouldn't know much about all this, would you, son? Most likely you were born on the ocean."

"Yes, sir," said Jade. He knew all there was to know about The Rise from Willie: the scramble of panicked humanity toward higher ground, the floating communities evolving from the wreckage of low lying cities, surviving by selling services and whatever else they could scavenge to passing ships. Willie had told him that some sought refuge downwards, burrowing inside the drowned surfaces of the earth.

The major strolled as he talked, indicating that Jade should keep pace with him and listen.

"We aren't the only surviving base, you know. There's Gibraltar, too, and several Rocky Range tunnelling projects that we know about, but we're probably the most important one. On account of this."

The Major pointed upwards at a strange, silver-chrome contraption with a massive ball at its centre, which was steadied by three thick prongs.

"This is what we refer to as the Gun."

It didn't look like any kind of gun Jade recognized. There was no barrel or trigger.

"It generates a particle beam chromatic displacement field."

Jade knew he should have feigned surprise at the concept, but he couldn't bring himself to fake it. He stood still, waiting for the Major to continue.

"It's a time machine, son. No reason to expect you'd know of such things, but that's what it is." The Major continued, adopting a more formal tone.

"This here base became the repository for all sorts of experimental stores and equipment: particle accelerators, long-range smart bombs, gene banks—highly classified material. Privately funded, you understand. If it weren't for the contessa and her rich friends here, then we'd all have been sunk like the

rest of ‘em.”

Jade’s concentration drifted. There was only one part of this scenario that he’d never fully understood. And because he’d never grasped the reason, he’d never explained it properly to Willie, and so Willie in turn…

“Work on the Gun was already underway by the time of The Rise, but the changes gave the program incentive. What you see before you is twenty-five years’ work from the best of the best, combining all their different sciences into the one big project that will one day save us all.”

A soldier approached and saluted Major Vormister.

“They’re ready for you in the briefing room, sir!”

The Major nodded and glanced at Jade. “You’re probably wondering why I’m telling you all this, son. Truth is, we brought you here for a reason.”

* * * *

The conference room was so large that it could have easily housed a dozen families. Jade was ushered to a seat around a large wooden table set with high-backed chairs. As he sat down the lights went out and a video projection appeared on the one blank wall not plastered with maps and charts. A few moments passed before Jade realized what he was looking at. Hemingway’s, only different. Hemingway’s without the beach, perched atop a hill with no ocean to be seen. The hill was covered in hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of trees.

“This footage was taken twenty-five years before The Rise, although global warming was in evidence way before that time - as far back as 1895, if you want to believe our historian. It wasn’t till the 1990s that people started talking about it seriously. So far, twenty years seems to be the limit of the gun’s chronological range. It seems to be the only distance we can shoot, and I emphasize *seems* to be, because we still don’t have any hard evidence that the darn thing works at all.”

Although neither Major Vormister, nor any of the other military personnel present, made eye contact with him, Jade considered his part in this military operation. They had built a gun, and now they needed a bullet. There were many worse ways to die than to be shot backwards in time. Despite what he’d seen and learned during his short life, part of him didn’t believe such a feat could be accomplished. Maybe none of it was real, and he wasn’t going to die after all… Jade imagined himself sailing through the air,

blasted from their giant gun. A gun without a barrel. That piece had yet to be fitted.

"I'm not pretending that it won't be dangerous, son." Major Vormister rested his hand on Jade's shoulder, bringing him back into the moment. "So far we've sent fifteen men back—not one of 'em's managed to contact us and confirm the success of the operation. But you'll have God on your side, boy, just remember that. God, and all the surviving scientific know-how of the former United States of America."

* * * *

"I thought I'd find you here," said Contessa Bonnefort, wrapping her pashmina tightly around her shoulders against the chill of the early morning breeze. Jade sat with his back against a palm tree, staring out across the waves at a speck on the horizon that he knew to be the watchtower.

"You think badly of us, don't you? I can tell." She nestled into the sand beside him, the jewels around her neck reflecting the embers of sunrise.

"Once I took a little girl in, from the sea. Her people arrived on an overloaded boat that the soldiers blasted from the water. She clung on to a piece of wood, survived and swam to shore. I was sure they'd let me keep her—just one tiny little child—but Major Vormister put a bullet in her brain on the patio one evening during cocktail hour, just so that we all knew who was boss.

"Now, Jade, my darling, I know you've seen worse than that, probably experienced worse, but you were born and raised a savage, whereas we… we used to be civilized."

Jade watched a seagull balance on the breeze, eyeing the waves below for tasty morsels. "How have you kept this place secret? I mean, I'd heard stories about Hemingway's. Old folks tell them to their children, but I never thought —"

"Hemingway's was designated for only the very wealthiest of the wealthy, and even then it wasn't for all. Those able to buy a piece of salvation had to make choices, if you know what I mean. Our money, while it was still worth anything, paid for the developments below—the scientists, the machines, the secrecy. And the military. They're ours too, you know.

"There were refugee boats for years. Women, children, lovely young men, their eyes all filled with hope when they saw our golden patch of sand. All of them were killed. It seems our resources had been carefully calculated. Were we to save others, the entire gun project would have been jeopardized. At

least, that's what the soldiers tell us. You know, I'm surprised they didn't kill us anyway. It's not as if ageing society folk are of any possible use for the future. Over time, I believe they have come to regard us like a kind of theme park, or recreation area. Anachronisms in a world gone completely to seed."

She withdrew a white rectangular packet from her purse and offered him a smoke. "Pre-Rise," she told him. "Genuine American cigarettes, not like the filthy weed they sell off the boats."

Jade accepted. The aromatic smoke permeated his senses, almost making his head spin with pleasure.

"Keep it," she said, taking one herself before tossing the packet onto the sand. "There are thousands of the damn things stored below. Fancy that."

She dragged deeply, blew a plume of smoke at the ocean, and made a dismissive gesture with her hand. She pinched her lips together tightly. "Those of us who made it here paid heavily for the privilege, both in money and in blood. We did terrible things, Jade. Obscene things, and we're all going to go to hell for it. I'm certain of that."

Jade pointed to the ocean. "That man in the watchtower. Major Vormister wants me to go back in time and take his place."

The contessa raised an eyebrow. "Does he indeed?" She smiled. "I suppose that makes sense. They shoot you back today so you can come out tomorrow and Vormister will be certain that the damn thing works."

Jade nodded, dragged on his cigarette. "The Major says there are food supplies in there. I guess there have to be, if the man's been in there all this time."

Tess smoked the last of her cigarette, stubbed the butt out in the sand. "I've seen him," she said. "So has Madolyn. He comes out sometimes in the early morning when he thinks no one is watching. He has a kayak."

She pulled another cigarette from the packet in the sand and lit the tip. "Jade, if the time gun works and The Rise can be prevented, millions of people will be saved and the human race will not become… what it has sunk to."

Jade nodded silently. *And I will never have been born*.

* * * *

The area around the base of the Gun had been cleared of unnecessary personnel, all except for the contessa, who had insisted on staying close to Jade.

"Why send me? Why not send a soldier back?" he said, as he knew he would be expected to ask. Two soldiers heaved open the door to the gun's chromium chamber.

"We've sent soldiers, son, without success," explained the Major. "That's why we're sending you this time. Maybe the fact that you're not one of us will be the differentiating factor. My men have been protected on this island—all the training in the world can't replace the kind of hard-honed survival skills that you've been acquiring out there amongst the floating ruins of civilization."

"What if the man in the watchtower doesn't let me in?" said Jade.

"That's your problem, son. I don't care what you have to do to accomplish your mission, but you have to get inside that tower and hold it for us until the present day. Once we confirm that the gun works, we can figure out how to boost its chronological range outside the twenty-year distance it's stuck fast on. When that's done we can *prevent* The Rise. You're our guinea pig. Our lab rat. Sit it out for twenty years in the watchtower, get yourself nice and fat on army-issue corned beef and beans. When tomorrow comes, let us in, and then you'll be a free man and have the run of this island."

"And what if I say no?"

The Major cleared his throat. "Then I'm gonna truss you up like a squealing pig and have my boys here ship you off to one of them floating slave markets—once my boys tire of you themselves, that is. Either that, or put a bullet between your eyes. Now come on, son, what I'm offering you here is a chance to be a hero and save the world."

Jade said nothing, silence as good as acceptance in his experience. He'd save the world all right. *His* world, not Major Vormister's.

"One more thing, son. Don't go getting any clever ideas about going AWOL when you land back there in

2020. The waters were well and truly coming up at that point. You'll be landing in a designated military zone. There are only two places you could run to—Hemingway's or the watchtower, or 'storage depot' as it would have been called then. Get within spitting distance of Hemingway's and you'll be a dead man, guaranteed. All intruders were shot at point blank, no exceptions. There was a guy here shot his own mother when she tried to fight her way in. No, your only real chance is the watchtower, but you'll need your wits. Whoever that nutbag inside it is, he ain't likely to be keen on company. We've shown you schematics of the entries and exits. The rest is up to you."

Followed closely by two soldiers, Jade entered the gun chamber. They hadn't told him he'd have to go naked, or how long the trip back would take in his subjective time.

The soldiers stripped off his clothes, sealed him inside the shiny chrome belly of the gun, and fired it.

"I'll be waiting for you, darling," echoed the voice of Contessa Bonnefort.

From that moment, the 'trip' was a blur. All he knew was that it would be safe to open the door when the walls stopped glowing, and if he touched them before then he would die.

When, eventually, the time between a moment and an eternity had passed, Jade felt stubble on his face, smelled the pool of stale urine that had accumulated at the foot of his chair. The walls appeared as cold hard steel, so he pushed the lever and stepped outside onto a carpet of fallen brown leaves - leaves as large as his outstretched hand, leaves which crackled and crushed between his fingers. The soil beneath the leaf litter smelled so rich and full of life that he longed to bend his face down to the earth and gulp great mouthfuls of the stuff.

Jade walked amongst the trees, ran his fingertips across rough bark. The air swirled with rustling and chirping; layers and layers of unfamiliar sounds. He discovered he was on the side of a hill. Upwards would lead to Hemingway's, downwards to the rising oceans. The terrain was completely unfamiliar. He would have to wait till nightfall to find his bearings by the stars and thus locate the watchtower. But here amongst the trees and their fallen leaves he felt a freedom he had never known. Here there was no Hemingway's, no soldiers, no House Orlando, no pontoon wall. Jade halted in a clearing. First he crouched, then he lay amongst the leaves and the moss, closed his eyes and buried his face in the forest floor. He scooped great handfuls of dirt and rubbed them against his skin, through his hair. He rolled in the leaves, making great swimming motions with his outstretched arms. Now all he had to do was wait.

* * * *

Jade awoke with a start at the sound of footsteps crunching. He heard voices too: a man and a woman

arguing. There was no time to find a hiding place, so he lay as still as possible. Half buried in fallen leaves, he might be mistaken for a corpse.

"It's up here somewhere, I'm telling you," said the man. "We just got to keep looking till we find it."

Jade couldn't make out the woman's response. Her voice was softer than the man's, but Jade could hear the worry in it, the fear. He lay still until the couple had passed. He was surprised at himself for falling asleep in such a vulnerable situation, as if he'd forgotten every bit of survival training he'd been taught. His arms and legs felt leaden, the back of his throat parched. There was something else, too: nausea, a side-effect of his journey back through time.

Sudden screams pierced the forest stillness. It turned to shouting and was followed by rapid gunfire. Jade got to his feet, took a couple of steps in the direction of the sounds, then stopped. He needed shelter. He walked around the tree trunks, searching upwards until he found one that looked climbable and large enough to shield him.

In spite of grazed skin from the rough bark, he made it to the safety of the overhead branches. There he waited, watching the ground. Soon he heard another burst of bullets, followed by men's laughter and other, uglier sounds.

Minutes passed, and soldiers walked beneath Jade's tree. He smelt cigarette smoke and kept very still.

He felt the echo of his heartbeat in his ears, and imagined he could hear his blood pulsing through his veins. He wondered if his enemies could hear it too, and smell the terror on his skin. But Jade was good at keeping still and quiet, good at keeping safely out of the path of thugs and killers.

When the soldiers had passed and the forest had grown quiet, Jade jumped down and made his way through the trees to the place where he knew he would find the mutilated bodies of the man and the woman.

He smelled the blood before he saw it.

The murdered couple's possessions had been strewn about the ground, slashed and trampled into the dirt.

For a moment Jade was frightened. What if the murdered man was Old Willie? He picked up a stick, lifted the man's chin with it, relieved to find the corpse's face unfamiliar.

There wasn't much to salvage, but Jade removed the dead man's trousers. Ripped and specked with blood, they were better than nothing. He searched for weapons, navigation instruments or food amongst the crushed leaves, but the only other useful items were the woman's boots, which were a tight fit, but better than bare feet.

The soldiers had gone down the hill, so Jade decided to walk up it in the opposite direction. Would he find Hemingway's at the top? The watchtower? Or something else?

By nightfall he hadn't found anything. No soldiers, no buildings, nothing to tell him where he was or where he should be headed. His nausea worsened, and he was hungry now. As the last rays of daylight filtered down through the trees, he collected a pile of leaves and burrowed deep amongst them. A tree would have been a safer place to sleep, but he had no faith that he could sleep without falling, and weariness was rapidly overtaking him.

* * * *

"Well, lookee what we have here. Another one of them nekked soldier boys from the future. Woods seem to be crawling with 'em lately. You managed to score some pants, I see."

Startled, Jade rolled onto all fours, sat back on his heels, said nothing. The man, dressed in soldier fatigues, aimed a rifle at his head. Jade studied his features carefully in the half light. It was *him*. Definitely him. Younger than Jade remembered, but he was Old Willie, no doubt.

Stillness was the only weapon Jade possessed—calmness, patience and endurance. Make no sudden moves, no challenge to the armed man's authority.

"You're a dead man," said Willie, lowering his rifle. "If you aren't feeling it yet, it'll kick in soon enough." He gestured upwards with the gun. "Better come with me. These woods are full of crazy people."

Jade followed the man through the forest, down a slope and up the other side. His calves ached from the strain of walking.

“Same as the others,” Willie said, looking back over his shoulder and noting Jade’s fatigue. “They tell me you don’t have hills in the future. All the land there’s as flat as a board.”

Jade’s ears pricked as machinegun fire rattled in the distance, followed by single shots echoing through the trees. Willie ignored it, leading him to a cylindrical cement structure in a clearing.

“Is this what y’all keep calling the watchtower?”

Jade nodded.

Willie punched a code into a control panel, unbolted the door, gestured for Jade to enter ahead of him. “Don’t know why I keep bothering to rescue you folks from the forest. Like I said before, you’re already dead.”

Jade climbed down a rung ladder set into the wall. Once Willie had closed the top, they descended in complete darkness and silence, until the rungs ended and the floor began. The man shoved Jade forward, and Jade walked ahead, blind, brushing the tips of his fingers against the walls to keep his bearings. Eventually they walked into a room lit weakly by an electric light bulb dangling from a cord.

“I’m no soldier, although no doubt I look like one. Actually, I’m a librarian. I’m guessing there won’t be much use for my profession in the future you’ve come from. I dress like a soldier when I go outside—otherwise those army psychopaths would plug me full of lead. I was working for them up until last year, if you can believe that. Some fatarsed general told me I’d have to ditch my archives, cos they were taking up valuable space in the hill. So I brought all my files down here—and my books. I guess it doesn’t look like anything much from the outside. Gonna put up some nuclear contamination signs for privacy’s sake. I think they’ve forgotten me—up there’s where all the action is, all those rich movie stars coming and going.”

Willie walked to a stack of boxes placed against the far wall and rummaged amongst them. He pulled out a wrinkled shirt, tossed it at Jade.

“Do you read? I’ve got all the classics, shelves and shelves of adventure, crime, sci-fi. Raymond Chandler. The complete works of Len Deighton, for instance.” He laughed. “Ever read *The Ipcress File* ?”

Jade buttoned the shirt, then took the book that Willie offered. He examined its cover closely in the dim light, front and back, running his fingers over the printed type.

Willie's shoulders sunk as he watched. "You can't read, can you?"

"Pictoglyphs only till I was ten, then someone came along and taught me printed words."

"Well, that was mighty kind of someone," said the librarian.

"It was," said Jade. "That man became a father to me. His name was Willie Deacon."

The librarian froze.

"I don't know how you learned my name, boy, but you've got it all confused. I've never seen you before. It wasn't me who taught you to read."

"No, sir," said Jade, "but you will."

Willie Deacon's eyes narrowed as he studied the boy's handsome face in the half light.

"Look, son. I'm really sorry to have to be the one to tell you, but you're dying from…"

"… accelerated cancer. I know all about it. You warned me about the cancer when I was a child, told me that the trip back-in time would kill me."

Willie Deacon placed his hands firmly on his hips, looked the young man squarely in the eye. "Well, I'll be a monkey's uncle."

* * * *

As dawn washed across the horizon, a party of motorboats set out from the beach at Hemingway's headed for the watchtower. The contessa sat quietly beside Major Vormister in the first boat. She wore a navy blue pantsuit, her long hair coiled into a neat bun, fastened in place with turquoise enamel

butterfly-shaped pins. Her elegantly manicured hands gripped the side of the boat. The vessels behind them were crowded with uniformed military personnel.

Only the contessa was not surprised to see the figure of a man sitting cross-legged atop the cement cylinder, the watchtower's highest point. He was unarmed, and waved a white handkerchief at the approaching posse of boats. There was no beach to speak of, just dark, sodden earth piled high with rotting foliage, plastic containers and other detritus deposited by the tide.

"Beautiful sunrise this morning, wasn't it?" the man called out to the soldiers.

The man was not Jade. This fact became clear even before the boats were close enough to make out the colour of his hair and skin. He was a white man with long thin arms and legs.

"How do you do, Ma'am," he shouted to the contessa as the boat's motors were extinguished one by one.

"Please identify yourself," called back one of the soldiers from the first boat.

The man took a cigar from his shirt pocket and a lighter from his pants. "I was never fully sure that this day was gonna come." He paused to place the cigar between his teeth and light the tip. "But I saved this Havana and marked the date up on my calendar, just in case all of it was true. Can't be too sure about many things when you're living on your own in the middle of the ocean, but I reckon today's the day, all right."

He puffed on the cigar, blew a plume of blue smoke out into the morning sunlight. "My name is Willie Deacon, and the boy you've come looking for is dead. He stepped out of that time capsule of yours twenty years ago, his body riddled with tumours that metastasized faster than the rising tide, same as what happened to those other poor fucks you sent back ahead of him."

Major Vormister signalled to his soldiers, who immediately restarted the motorboats. Soon they had the watchtower surrounded, weapons aimed at Willie Deacon's heart.

Willie puffed on his cigar, unconcerned. "Amazing young fella, that boy Jade. Tough as nuts and bolts, though you'd never have known it to look at him. One of those folks who you might call a natural-born leader of men, given the right kind of guidance. And the opportunity."

Major Vormister had ceased to listen. He pulled a walkie-talkie from his belt and barked instructions into it. “The Gun works, I repeat, the Gun works,” he shouted.

The contessa strained to hear Willie Deacon’s words over the racket. Willie smiled at her. “Jade told me all about you, Ma’am,” he said, winking. He waited until Major Vormister had finished before he continued, all the while smoking his cigar, one eye on the horizon.

“The thing is,” he said, when the major had stopped shouting, “once you fired that gun of yours, there came to be two Jades. One who died in front of me, and the other who was, at that time, about to be born out there on that pontoon slum, not far off, twenty years ago to this day. What do you think might have happened if someone took the dying knowledge of the one, and passed it on to the other—liberated a poor young boy from that floating hellhole to raise him as a leader of men?”

A tiny gasp escaped from the contessa’s lips. She covered her mouth with one hand, pointed at the horizon with the other. Major Vormister and his soldiers looked across to see the horizon darkened, dotted with tiny brown ant-like specks.

Willie Deacon laughed as Major Vormister flicked the safety catch off his handgun and aimed it at Willie’s head.

“Shoot me if it’ll make you feel better,” said Willie. “Only don’t bother searching for him out there amongst that lot. He ain’t there, cos you sent him back already—he came to Hemmingway’s knowing you’d be sending him back to die.”

“Oh my God,” whispered the contessa through her fingers as the specks drew closer, revealing themselves as a jumbled flotilla of watercraft.

“Had to be that way, I’m afraid. It’s the fact of his sacrifice that made him such a hero to those that decided to follow him - and claim Hemingway’s for the people.” He added. The walkie-talkie crackled with static as the motorboats swung round and sped back to the beach of Hemingway’s.

“Bring on the brave new world,” shouted Willie, tossing his cigar into the water, waving a cheery welcome at the horizon.

<<Contents>>

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The Meek

DAMIEN BRODERICK

Damien Broderick has been publishing sf criticism and science-fiction in Australia and overseas for more than 40 years. He received the 2005 Distinguished Scholarship Award from the International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts, and is currently working on the sequel to his new novel *Godplayers*, written with the support of the Literature Board of the Australia Council. He is a senior fellow in the Department of English at Melbourne University, and is commuting at present between Melbourne and San Antonio, Texas.

"The Meek" is a post-nanotechnological fable that reworks (as, in the story, nanotech reworks the very fabric of the world) a post-nuclear piece first published when I was 19, in the Monash University Arts magazine *Ancora*."

* * * *

And seeing the multitudes, Jesus went up into a mountain:

and when he was set, his disciples came unto him:

And he opened his mouth, and taught them, saving,

Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall he comforted.

Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.

The Gospel of St. Matthew, 5:1—5

I

n the childhood of the garden there is much I remember, much I regret. And much has brought me pleasure. I see in memory the great spindles floating effortless as snowflakes, bright against the sky's iron. The rust of time obscures these memories but when I see the cold clear moon I see also the ships of light.

They came once, in an angel's song, in silver fire, and they come again in the garden, the garden of my dreams.

Now bright birds swoop in a spray of tropical hues and the river whispers secrets to the lake. You could say I am happy, though the future is gone and the earth rolls lonely as a child's lost balloon. They are gone and I am glad and I am sad. The garden is a place of peace, but the flame has guttered out.

* * * *

Once I was a man in my middle years and the world was a bowl of molten, reworked slag, a lethal place where the stuff of the soil humped up into delirious fractal corals that glowed blue and crimson in the night. Now fireflies flicker, and warmth rises where it is needed. But no warmth in the soul, no fire, just the moonglow of age and a forsaken dream.

I was young and the earth was a sphere of maddened terror, for we had unleashed a beast so small we could not see it, only its accumulating handiwork, so hungry that it ate up everything except flesh, some privileged flesh. And I was mortally afraid, for I saw my death, and my wife's death. There would be no children to grieve us, no mourning after.

All the earth was blind to the stars, the sky a cloud of dull steel, the nano dust of death in the air. Then we knew fear. And remorse, for in the murder of our world we had killed ourselves.

Our choice had been blind, and at second-hand. But death accepts no excuses.

* * * *

The day the world ended was Wish Jerome's birthday, and at forty-one he was guileless as a child. He possessed that blithe detachment from any sense of danger which is the menace and the joy of innocence. Professor Aloysius Jerome—'Wish' to his wife—was a man of philosophy, a creature of gentle habits and soft words, the wonder of the Faculty. He ate toast for breakfast, dunking it in black coffee.

One eye closed, the other surveying the crumbs on her plate, his wife said: "It certainly seems there'll be a war. They'll kill us all with their damned nano toys."

Wish look sadly out the window, past the ruffled curtains. The morning was bright with the promise of spring.

"'To Carthage I came'," he said, dunking toast, "'where there sang all around my ears a cauldron of unholy hates.'"

"St Augustine of Hippo, slightly trampled," he told his wife's eyebrows a moment later. "I prefer Pelagius. Perhaps a twenty-one gun salute, but hardly an ecophagic war for my birthday, Beth."

Domesticity and Wish's peculiarly unassuming goodness had made them a happy marriage. Beth Jerome, fair, fey, fertile of spirit and barren of womb, had founded an empathy between them twenty years before, from the first day they met. Empathy had grown into love, if not passion. The warm sun brought her little of the wash of peace that swept around her husband. On the table at her elbow a conservative daily screamed headlines about military grade nanotechnology.

"I refuse to educate the minds of the young on such a glorious day." Wish finished his toast and stretched luxuriously. "We shall take the car and drive as far from this warren as we can, and we shall eat our food beside an honest-to-goodness fire, and we shall forget the madmen and their war posturing."

Beth rose and put their dishes in the washer. "It is absurd," she said, peeved. "Still they insist on adding foaming agents to these detergents. What fools they must take us for." She shut the door and set the dial. "An excellent suggestion, darling. Better call first and see if Tod or Muriel can take your classes."

She wet a dish-cloth and wiped the crumbs off the table, and Wish leaned back on two legs of his chair and fired up a joint. The sun was a pool of warmth, and he soaked in the contentment of the joy of life.

* * * *

For a million years and more Homo sapiens fought on equal terms with the world, fought the worst the world could throw at the species. Today I lie in the balm of an eternal afternoon, half-asleep, and the world sleeps with me. The flowers bloom and the leaves fall and bud anew, but humanity lies in the calm of Indian summer, and there is no blast of wind. I recall the days when men were violent and men were cruel, yes, and women, too; dimly, but there it is, taunting me. And the ships from the stars, falling from the skies like manna, call to me from the depths of time and their call is lost in the breeze. Too late, too late.

* * * *

The sky was egg-shell blue, fragile, edged with cottonwool clouds. The little valley was a green bowl sweeping up to meet the luminous blue dome halfway between heaven and earth. Why should it be a sartorial disaster to wear blue and green together, Wish Jerome asked himself dreamily, when nature gets away with it to such good effect? He finished chewing a greasy chop, licked his fingers, settled back happily into the grass. Something with many legs examined his bare arm, and sleepily he flicked it off. Beth put the tops back on the jars, folded the picnic cloth and placed it in the basket. She yawned; the day was warm without being hot, weather for wandering hand in hand beside a creek, or whispering, or snoozing. She shook her blond hair in the sun and sat down beside her husband.

Wish put his arm around her. A screen came across the sky, like a filigree of diamonds and sapphires, fell everywhere, drifting on the wind, like glittery snow. A tall old tree on the hill turned brown and sagged, and burst explosively into leaping yellow ribbons of structure. Heat rose from the valley as a trillion small machines opened up molecules, releasing energy, twisting it to their mad purpose. Wish and Beth alike screamed. There was no sound beyond the crackle of crystalline growth. Sixty kilometers away a city melted into shapes from migraine: battlements, turrets, fortifications, the primordial geometries of the unconscious.

They did not see the mushroom of hot white light that tried to burn away the enemy infestation. They were the lucky ones, Beth and Wish, two of the thousand or so who escaped the holocaust of the bomb that wiped away three million human lives. In other cities, other bombs charred flesh, and steel girders twisted into melted toffee; there were the few others who got clear.

The man and the woman lay in each another’s arms while the heat flared and went away, and then they ran for the cave in the hill and huddled in it, and Beth cried and cried and cried like a child, and they lived.

* * * *

They found each other, the survivors, gradually, but they had no comfort to share, no hope. The brave fought, the cowards acquiesced in the diamond and iron cloud; death seeped down on the brave and the cowards through the porous fog. They suffered appallingly, the last straggling men and women, the few bleak children; they grew gaunt and ill, and sores festered in their bodies. And even those who fought knew it was bitter, meaningless, for though they should live a few months more there was no future.

Dispossessed like the rest, Wish and Beth wandered the desolate, remade landscape in the horror humans had unleashed. They ate rubbish and what they could find unmolested in cans, and drank bottled water that the nano weapons whimsically left untouched, and slept when they could between their nightmares, and prayed, and when the day came at last that the fog opened in a drift of silver light and the ships brought their salvation, there was no rejoicing.

Suffering had drained them utterly. The survivors, the quick and the vulgar and the brave, all of them together went to the ships. On the wrecked plain, amid the glassy crevices and turrets that once had been green with living things and busy with people, the spindles stood like awesome mirrors. Their polished hulls gleamed back the diamond speckled sky, and the survivors saw themselves reflected in a leap of light that hid no item of their degradation.

Wish Jerome was the first to laugh.

He stood in front of the sweeping edge of a star spindle and saw himself in the burnished gloss. He looked at the burned eyebrows, the singed patchy hair, the emaciated scarecrow frame under the scraps of clothing.

“The wisdom of the ages,” he said, without animosity. “What a piece of work!” Bitterness was alien to Wish. He viewed the ravaged spectacle of philosophical man with amusement.

Beth crept up beside him, from the crowd of skeletons, like a child to a protecting arm. Their roles were reversed; this was a strangeness only innocence might face with equanimity.

Wish laughed again, and the small crowd shuffled noisily, somehow relieved, and through their muttering a voice spoke to them. Meaning echoed without words in their minds. The people of the ships spoke.

“We heard the cry of death from your world,” the voice told them. “It was a shout of lamentation and grief that crossed the void in the moment your world died. We took it for the cry of one murdered, and find instead that you brought this blight upon yourselves.”

In the silence, in the awful reproach, Wish looked across the land where life had come with expectation four billion years before and had perished in suicide. The fog arched overhead, an iron-grey pall glistening with points of light, a looming covenant of death. The voice spoke only the truth, and it was beyond human power to redeem their crime. He clenched his hands. Beyond the ships, the ground curled and shifted in harsh, sluggish peristalses.

“It is not within our power to remake your Earth. The biosphere is slain by your small stupid machines. We can resurrect only a small part of it. We will exact a payment, but some of your world at least will be now, again, green and fresh.”

The last humans stirred then, mindless life crying for a chance to live again.

“Yes!” cried humanity, cried life. The tattered group passed instantly beyond identity in its paroxysm.

“Yes!”

“We will meet your fee, whatever it is.”

“Only let us live again!”

Silence returned to the plain, save for a whining wind that carried insanely creative dust across the wasteland. A vision came into the minds of the survivors: the sea of darkness, an ocean of blackness blazing with the light of stars. The spindles hung there, another kind of shining dust, life and consciousness, consumed in a battle with those from the shores of the galaxy, or some folded, deeper place.

“They are murderous and beyond our comprehension,” said the voice. “They have come from the places between the islands of stars, come with a blind, unreasoning hatred which cannot be turned aside except by lethal force. We had thought your world a victim of their murder. Instead, we find something worse, a world that has taken its own life. It is too late to offer our aid, but at least we can build you sanctuary, if, in return, some of your number will come with us, to fight.”

“To fight?” A women screamed in rage; her face ran with weeping wounds. “Is all life so stupid? Do you condemn us as murderers of our planet and then ask us to repeat the madness? No, we will not fight. Go away and let us die in our shame and folly.”

“It is for each of you separately to make this choice,” the voice said. “Understand this: they attack without quarter. And they are winning.”

The price of life is death, Beth told herself, pressed against her husband’s arm. Those who went from among this pitiful number surely would not return.

“Only some among you will suit our purpose,” the voice explained. “The predators, the fighters. They must come with us. The others will remain, and we will restore to them a corner of their world. Come, you must decide. The stars are dying in our galaxy.”

It was beyond most of them, this vision of a war between gods. Not gods, though, Wish Jerome told himself. Merely life, exerted in an unconscionable violence to safeguard its own seed.

Fear blew across the group, chilling as the wind, but their decision, too, rose like a wind, beyond fear.

High above them, an opening dilated in the silver hull. The last of humanity went forward for their testing.

* * * *

That was the way of it, sings memory, here in the dusk. They took our soul and gave us the comfort of emortality amid a new-built Xanadu. The stars came clear in the dark of an unclouded sky. We can look into the black night and know that somewhere out there the spindles are warring against an enemy too terrible for understanding or compassion. And our soul is with them, sweating, slaving in the agony of death and victory. We spin on, we and our quiet garden, in an anesthesia of contentment.

I see a hawk soaring on a high wave of song. His cry hangs in the air, and his lofty feathered body. Now he stoops, falls like a projectile, opens his wings, stills magically, climbs the sky again. It is cozy here, in the warmth of the sun. I seem, though, to remember a word from the past, from the repeated past. Why do I feel a stir of horror as I gaze upon my imaging hands? Did my innocence save me then? Perhaps, but I am innocent no longer. Our life will stretch on, for our bargain is sealed, and the sun is warm on our peace.

Still, the horror remains, as the memory remains, that the meek have inherited the earth.

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The Tale of Enis Cash,

Smallgoods Smokehand

BRENDAN DUFFY

Brendan's father started smoking at 15 (cigarettes were issued to sailors in the American navy as part of their rations), and smoked for 55 years, then stopped when he got lung cancer. Brendan smoked for 20 years and tried six times before he finally quit. Smoking has become a right of passage: it excites youth, inspires the muse, nurtures solace, and kills you. Sir Walter *was* such a stupid git. He should have brought back something more interesting, like an amazing New World crème brulee or something that we actually wanted. If smoking is a gentle art then I'm a Dadaist; *Ceci n'est pas une pipe.* Yul Brynner lives.

* * * *

I was an apprentice smallgoods smokehand at a factory in the dozy town of Marlborough. An eight-hour day in the slaughterhouse was tough work for not much money. I hosed the beasts down, stuck meat hooks through their back legs, and winched them up into the air where they hung high over troughs. I bled 'em into barrels by snicking the veins in their necks. Just tiny slits, mind, it was important that the beasts didn't die quickly: the heart had to keep pumping all that blood outta the meat 'till they was emptied.

I'd stand by the winch with my blood-spattered apron and Cuban cigar, watching them gently swing back and forth by the light of a forty watt bulb. Sometimes there'd be a last frantic struggle, a futile burst of desperation before succumbing. But they knew it was inevitable: they'd just give up and hang, life draining into the barrel, until their eyes finally glassied over.

Then I slit their stomachs open and pulled out multicoloured guts. These fell into the troughs and slid down chutes into sorting rooms. We used everything; tongues, brains, kidneys and livers, tripes, the victuals and offal for making haggis and faggots, the intestines for cleaning and stuffing. We also pickled hoofs, snouts, ears and sweetmeats. Then I butchered the beasts. What didn't end up in the butcher's window was preserved in some manner—the meat jerked on racks, pickled in salting vats, hickory sealed in the smokehouse kiln, or canned in the factory. Any remaining meat was minced for sausages, and the gristle, lips and sphincter went into pies. The carcass was boiled, rendered down for stock, the fat floated off for lard, and the bones ground down to meal. Unspeakable leftovers went to the glue factory.

This morning I was in the smokehouse, sweating over huge copper vats of simmering cow's blood, continually stirring to stop the clots forming too soon. When the steaming blood was ready I mixed in shovelfuls of soft intestinal fat and let the clots form. Sleeves rolled up, cigarette hanging out the corner of my mouth, I stared into the bubbling vats as the thick red-black clots rose to the surface.

I cleaned the muck out of lengths of blue-veined gut-tubes, hosed them down, and soaked them in barrels of vinegar, ready for stuffing. I tied one end off then stuffed them with thick bloody clots the size

of your hand. Up to my elbows in entrails, I squeezed each clot down to the end. A few twists and there's a row of tightly packed black puddings for Sunday breakfasts in Marlborough and all throughout county Kent. We shipped our smallgoods everywhere.

I spent all morning making fifty metres of tasty black puddings. My clothes reeked of smoke and my skin shone with a rank oily slick. Everything in the factory stunk of manure and hot, steamy offal. I liked it. When it was time for smoko I hosed down the trowelled concrete walls, swept the mush and intestinal worms along the abattoir floor into the drains, then cleaned out my bucket of butchers' knives. I ripped off my blood-soaked apron, rinsed my face in a trough of cold water, and grabbed my smokes and Texan ten-gallon hat.

The rear door clattered and rumbled along its rollers as I pushed my way out into the clean, clear day. The big sunny sky was just like back home, so I took my break out by the rear stockyard, resting on a trestle table. I had my pouch of chewin' tobaccy and took out a damp gummy wad, delicately laced with ground glass so as to abrade the inner cheek and aid nicotine absorption. I stuck it in back of my cheek, and slowly got to work on it, spitting across the way into the brass spittoon by the fencepost. I was a mean shot, too.

In the stockyard, Bully-boy, my Brobdingnagian bull, was rubbing his wet nose back and forth along the electric fence, like he did when it was itchy. The tobaccy made me a bit dreamy and I must have dozed some in the sun. When I awoke Bully-boy was leaning onto me, almost crushing my chest with his forehead. I pushed him back as hard as I could. He stared at me with his poker face, like he did: you tell him you was holding five aces and he wouldn't bat an eyelid, just slowly lean in on you and crush you to death, while staring impassively through your eyes and into your soul as it expires.

Bully-boy rooted about in my miller shirt with his snorting muzzle, looking for my silver snuffbox. I took it out and gave him a pinch of snuff. He wandered off, stamped the ground, and sneezed.

A year ago, at the end of summer, I'd ridden Bully-boy down outta the boothills, through the burnished fields and into town to the saleyards. I was gonna sell him to the factory to make cans of bullybeef, but the manager said it was too late, he was too old and too much testosterone had coursed through his veins. The vitality of male adulthood had made him too tough.

And it was true, too. Bully-boy was the biggest, toughest, most nonchalant and unperturbed specimen of bull, with the most massive knackers I had ever seen, so I struck a deal with the manager; I'd put Bully-boy to pasture to service the herd of cows, and the manager would take me on as apprentice smallgoods smokehand. I'd learn a city trade!

That year I learned much. Bully-boy sired a whole new generation of gigantic calves, and I made them into all manner of smallgoods. Except now I was getting bored with it.

“Enis! What ye doing lazing about?” said Alph, the manager. “Aye, lud, back to work with ye!” He shoved a broom into my hands. He stood there expectantly in his flatcap and tweed jacket with elbow patches.

When Alph first took me on he told me that he’d started out in this business with nothin’ but a broom, sweeping up hickory shavings and vomit encrusted sawdust, and worked his way up to be head butcher, then manager. It only took him twenty years to sweep his way to the top. I was good with a broom, but buggered if I could wait that long. He could take his broom and shove it up his ass. I’d already learned all I needed. The only thing he had left to teach me was his middle-aged despondency.

I looked way over to the young apprentices, just new to the factory: lackeys jerking meat in the sun. Knuckleheads, that’s all they’d ever amount to, unless they got out quick. The rigid hierarchy of the factory only allowed for one manager. This dead-end job was getting me nowhere. It was time to move on.

I spat out my tobaccy. “I quit!” I said.

“You can’t quit,” said Alph. “After all I’ve taught you!”

I handed him a cigarette, took one for myself, and lit us up.

We sat around, resting with our cigarettes, savouring thick mouthfuls of rich smoke. I let it roll around my tongue: a fragrant blend of smoking tobaccos imported from Virginia, Maryland and Connecticut, from the fertile tobacco fields in the New World Colonies, just like me. I drew the smoke down into my lungs and let it infuse into my veins then out through my body. Alph gazed away to the distant hills, and I saw his body relax.

“Aye, Enis, ye sure have the best cigarettes, lud,” he wheezed. “What are ye gonna do?”

“I’m gonna start my own smokehouse,” I said, blowing smoke rings into the air.

“How?” he scoffed.

Indignant, blue-smoked ridicule billowed from his nostrils until Bully-boy stared him down. I unfolded a poster I'd pocketed from the Baker's window. My ex-Boss sucked down a thick lungful and examined it.

A Dragon had been terrorizing county Kent, destroying hamlets, wasting farms, eating cattle and laying the countryside bare, making all travel upcountry difficult. The Duke of Kent had put a bounty of one hundred pounds in gold bullion on its head.

"Lots of people are flocking upcountry to the boothills, to have a go at killing the Dragon and collecting the reward. I'm gonna go and make my fortune!"

"Heroes and fools, traipsing across the countryside to their deaths," said Alph, and joined me in a few wistful smoke rings. Bully-boy snorted and watched them curl ever upwards.

"We'll see."

"Aye, lud, best of luck then. Mind if I grab one of those Cubans before you go?"

I gave him a fine *Romeo and Juliet* cigar, then grabbed my things.

* * * *

So I took the same road outta Marlborough as what I come in by. And I left town with all I come in with: my bags of tobacco, cigarettes, silver snuffbox, and my humidors packed with cigars. Actually, I'd stole the Boss's broom, too—a memento of all the cleaning up I'd done. I was good with a broom.

I rode Bully-boy back into the boothills, sitting up high on his shoulders, no saddle, just his slow, deliberate gait. I was proud: no castrated oxen or steer for me. This was a bull, with knackers the size of footballs, virile, happy, full of the juices of life. I wore my Texan ten-gallon hat, miller shirt, bluegrass jeans, and chewed a stem of grass.

We rode past the slaughterhouse, through the stockyards and saleyards, past the knackery with its packs of hungry dogs desperately poised to snatch up and scoff down any bush oysters thrown their way. Past the stinking chemical plants, the dyeworks, arsenic and mercury refineries, leeching pits, mills, tin mines and smelters.

The road alongside the weedy shifting yard passed water towers, coal silos, steam engines and rolling stock. Metal screeched on metal as goods carriages and cabooses shunted back and forth. Men shovelled coal; machines hissed steam and belched smoke. At the last set of signals and points we crossed over the steel rails into the beginnings of a country lane.

We wound through valley farmland, golden fields of oats and wheat bordered by forested hills. The sun was high, the air warm, and a few fires burned in fields along the way. I gazed into the yellowing haze to follow smoke trails into the blue sky. It was the end of the season and the harvest was beginning: silos filling up, haystacks climbing higher, paddocks full of cattle. Then I spotted the first castle. This was the glorious countryside of Kent in the summertime. Wheat and cattle; beef pie country. Flavour country! The air smelled grand. I opened a humidor and took out a cigar.

I vee-cut the head with my cigar scissors, just past the shoulder, then toasted the foot with a flaming match. When the wrapper leaf was smoking I carefully drew on the cigar, rolling it to ensure an even burn through the filler tobaccos. Smoking is an art form, and this was a special cigar, a Perfecto with torpedo-shaped ends, a traditional sikar made from rich imported Tobago tobaccos. The seminal cigar. It had such a dreamy aroma, like home, and when I lit it up I let the rich smoke transport me there. It was like smoking the past.

When I was further into the boothills, I looked back over the distant industrial expanse of Marlborough to say my goodbyes. Acres of ugly red brick factories bristled with smoke-belching chimneys. The triangular roofs of galvo against dim skylight were like an endless sea, and in between, my tiny house was a lifeboat slowly sinking beneath those giant rolling waves.

I was so tired of that place.

“And bless Sir Walter Raleigh, he was such a brilliant chap!” I sang, and took another puff as Bully-boy squished a dung beetle under his hoof; I was in England! I rode up into the boothills among billowing clouds of thick smoke.

* * * *

The mornings became crisp and the leaves on the hickory trees had just started to turn. As I travelled further into the boondocks I met up with people on the road, all marching to base camp. It was just as my ex-Boss had said, ‘Heroes and fools’—although I couldn’t tell which was which.

We followed the road deep into the forest, alongside a river, swapping valorous stories of how we would vanquish the Dragon and then spend the money. I'd take a pinch of snuff, then tell them how I'd start my own smokehouse. While riding, I blended various lower grade tobaccos, rolled cigarettes, and introduced many *of* my fellow travellers to the gentle art of smoking.

Base camp was a crowded forest clearing by a river. It comprised eight large marquees, each surrounded by smaller tents, hovels and stables. Standards declared the presence of the great houses of county Kent, their noble coats-of-arms. I rode Bully-boy along a thoroughfare to an open expanse of mud and horseshit, a market square bordered by makeshift shops and stalls; butchers and bakers, bookies and blackguards.

I couldn't believe how many hungry customers there were: crowds of hillbillies and rednecks. Stall holders were charging fairground prices too; having food here was like having a licence to mint money! Dandy nobles, brave knights, loyal lackeys and associated hangers-on also perused this promenade to purchase pork pies and pretty pastries. Bully-boy dozed through the redneck rabble, eyeing geldings with disdain.

A crier announced that the jousting was to begin. Knights were challenging each other for the right to fight the Dragon. A chalkboard listed the day's entertainment; Sir James Courtenay of Gloucester V. Sir Andrew Cromwell of Norfolk; Sir Henri Bourchier of Pleshy V. Sir Simon Talbot of Shrewsbury. Toward the end were the unknighted folk: Clem the farmhand V. Greg the moat keeper; Geoffrey the poet V. Bradley the stablehand. Then came people without a profession: Dave the brawler V. Farting Barry; Ted of Exeter V. John of Kent. There were three Johns of Kent. The last item scheduled was an illegible scrawl; it appeared that the afternoon ended in a free-for-all biff-on with no holds barred, for those too drunk to organize individual events. I think a football was involved.

The morning's competition had already been won by Sir Galahad. This brave knight set forth to do battle with the Dragon on the Field of Honour, so rather than watch the afternoon jousting I followed the crowds into the forest. We came to a large field. The Dragon's lair was just over the next hill. Everyone was talking; the Dragon had been seen just an hour ago, low in the skies, driving a herd of pigs over the hill to its lair. It was building up a larder for winter.

Lackeys fussed about their liege, polishing armour, sharpening weapons and tightening straps. Sir Galahad had the shakes and needed a cigarette to calm down. I offered him a smoke and lit us up. He lifted his visor and took urgent drags.

"Sir, the Dragon is on the field!" announced his pageboy. Sir Galahad was lifted up onto his horse and valiantly rode forth. We watched from the field's edge.

We heard its roaring before we saw it. We felt the ground shake, and passed silent, wide-eyed glances

to each other. Then we saw it in the clearing, taller than a horse and as long as three. Brilliant metallic scales glittered in the sun, every colour of the rainbow like a rooster. Its huge head had nasty, beady eyes and fangs like knives. Wings flapped, cracked in the air like whips, and black smoke curled from its nostrils like a foundry chimney.

Sir Galahad spurred his horse forward and charged. At the last moment he lowered his lance and splintered it on the Dragon's shoulder. The Dragon snarled and snapped, but Galahad was too fast. He raced away and circled for another pass, sword drawn. The Dragon was angry, snorting and panting. When they clashed the Dragon landed a heavy blow on Galahad's shield, but he remained steadfast and struck it a fantastic blow to the same shoulder, the sword slicing between the scales. The Dragon yelped and brayed like a beaten donkey. With a splash of urine it bolted across the field, tail between its legs like a whipped cur.

"Why, he's nothing but a lad!" I said. "He's just a teen, all show and bravado. I can still see the puppy fat!" Everyone cheered and clapped as the Dragon bleated like a lost lamb.

Sir Galahad pressed the advantage, but a great fireball exploded from the Dragon's mouth, knocking him from his horse. The Dragon reared, coughing on something stuck in its throat. Fireballs sailed into the air. Galahad collected his wits, climbed to his feet and moved toward his horse, but the Dragon blew a reddish fireball at it. Fire broke around the animal but it was largely safe, protected in its warming armour. The Dragon puffed a series of fireballs at Galahad. He parried each on his shield, and also remained protected, but every time he approached his horse the Dragon blew fire at it, making it retreat further.

Then the Dragon's chest heaved, lungs pumping like a bellows. Great balls of smoke chuffed from its nostrils. It was hyperventilating. Flames licked between its pointy teeth, at first deep red, but with each bellow they became brighter and hotter. It was stoking the coals. The Dragon drew a huge breath then blew a spout of flame across the field, bright orange to yellow, and with a loud pop it focussed the flame into a small, tight point of brilliant bluish-white light that hurt my eyes. A second set of translucent eyelids slid sideways across the Dragon's eyes—dark nictitating membranes. I noticed that some in the crowd wore helmets equipped with visors of smoked glass that they now lowered into place.

The Dragon reduced the horse to a pile of char and ash. The ash blew away on the wind and the char collapsed in on itself, a pile of black bones and twisted armour. Galahad stopped pursuing his horse and turned to face the Dragon. He drew his mace and charged, protected behind his tower shield. One searing blaze and Galahad discarded the molten, flaming alloy. One more and brave Sir Galahad was a burning heap of leather, armour, and cooked flesh. He had only charged five paces.

"Ooh!" the crowd grimaced and looked away. Money changed hands. Every time I blinked, a silhouette of Galahad's final moments flashed before me. His entourage grumbled and moped, knowing that they were now out of jobs. They wandered off to pack up camp and skulk back to their castle.

“Bugger! Now I’ll have to get a job shovelling shit!” his pageboy groaned.

Bully-boy and I watched the Dragon prancing around the Field of Honour. It strutted, chest puffed out, head held high, lifting its trotting feet into the air like a dancing pony.

“What’s it doing?” I asked the pageboy.

“It always does a lap of honour,” he said. I watched it back up to the smoking pile of Sir Galahad and scratch clumps of turf and dirt over him with its hind feet. Then it went back to prancing around the field. No one would go out there and retrieve the ashes, so I grabbed my broom and a bucket, walked out there and swept him up. I was good with a broom. When I’d finished I leant on the broom and smoked a cigarette, blowing smoke rings into the air. The Dragon approached me, ran its claws through its glittering comb and watched the smoke rings float away.

“Imitation is flattery. You want to be like me!”

“Ha! You colourful dandy! You preening, gaudy cock, strutting about like a prize-winning rooster. You’re just a cantering show-pony, that’s all you are. All show.”

“Well I’ll show you! But who are you?”

“I’m Enis Cash, smallgoods smokehand!”

“Hmm… You must be here to fight!”

I looked at the Dragon: forequarter, hindquarter, rib cuts, hock, sirloin, and a few wing cuts I wasn’t sure what I’d call. I stubbed out my fag and blew smoke in its face. “Not yet.”

“Get off my field then!”

I carried my broom and the still smoking bucket of Sir Galahad from the field.

“I’ll fight you anytime,” it called after me. I turned and watched it prance some more, then trot away into the forest. I followed.

I caught up with it at the river where I hid in the bushes and watched. It waded through the shallows to a deeper pool, the water up to its knees. Tentatively, it tested the water, carefully dipping its torso in, then quickly lifting out as the water hissed. It repeated this hesitant process, oohing and aahing, then finally lowered its whole body under with a big sigh. The water bubbled and boiled violently, and clouds of steam drifted away into the trees. The Dragon put its snout under and let the water circulate down its throat, and with a last aaaah it rolled over onto its back and said, “Oh, that’s good!”

I watched in amazement. Dead fish rose to the surface, then floated away with the current. I snuck back into the bush and ran downstream where I picked them up at a sandbar. I scaled and gutted forty-eight smoked trout. I ate one and it was the finest I had ever tasted, so I strung them by their gills from my broom and took them back to base camp where I sold them to rich punters for their supper. I made myself quite a pretty penny, too, which I stashed away in my bull scrotum clip-lock purse.

“Enis, do you have any barbecued blackbirds?” my customers asked.

“Oh, yes! The very best! Come back and see, tomorrow,” I said.

* * * *

The next morning was more of the same. I watched Sir Perceval get chased all over the Field of Honour. The Dragon finally knocked him off his horse and shot fireballs at his backside.

I’ve never seen someone move so fast in full plate armour. He shuffled all over the field, weaponless, smoke billowing out behind, saying, “Ow, shit, ow, shit, ow, shit,” trying not to touch any of the red-hot armour he was encased in. The bonehead finally whizzed past me and jumped into the river.

Sir Gawain was next. He seemed nervous as he prepared for glory so I lit us up some cigarettes. He greedily sucked smoke down, pacing back and forth as his tactical analyst predicted the Dragon’s battle strategy. I rode Bully-boy out onto the field and strewed handfuls of wheat about.

“Enis Cash! What are you doing on my field?” demanded the Dragon.

“Field maintenance. The turf is wearing thin in these blackened and scuffed up patches, so I’m reseeding the grass.” Blackbirds flocked down from the trees to eat. I smiled and strewed more seed.

“Either fight or get off my field!”

I blew smoke in its face then turned and left the field.

“I’ll fight you anytime!” it called after me.

“The track’s a little soft to the left,” I advised Sir Gawain as we smoked. “When the Dragon blows fireballs and you need to dodge, the best traction is in the dry blackened areas, away from that muddy turf!” He nodded and was lifted onto his horse.

Things didn’t fare too well for Sir Gawain. The Dragon was losing the fight and began getting angry, belching red flame. Sir Gawain dexterously dodged all about the field on his trusty steed, but the Dragon stoked the coals until the flames were white hot. Just before noon Sir Gawain was turned to ash and everyone broke for lunch. I waited until they left, then collected eighty roasted blackbirds. I plucked and dressed them, then sold them to the milling throng at the jousting grounds. Everyone loved them because of the rich smoky flavour, cooked in their own juices. The word was spreading about the quality of my wares. The weight in my purse was building up!

“Enis, do you have any smoked yabbies?” my customers asked.

“Oh, yes! The finest in Kent! Come back tomorrow,” I said.

I spent the afternoon weaving yabby traps from tough reeds and making burley from paraffin, tobacco, and putrid blackbird guts. It stunk good, and the yabbies wouldn’t be able to help their poor little selves! I baited the traps with burley and sunk them around the Dragon’s wading pool, then spread handfuls of burley way upstream. The next day, after the Dragon doused his coals, I checked my traps—I had thirty-two smoked yabbies.

I gutted them, stripped the gills and loosened the meat from the tails, then carefully cracked the claws so they were ready for my hungry punters. My purse was getting fatter and fatter!

The days went like this—more fools jousted each other for the honour of being roasted alive by the Dragon, and I collected more smoked meats and sold them at the market. Trout, blackbirds, yabbies, hares and venison: I made quite a name for myself. Every day I delivered, and my purse became so heavy and gravid I'd soon have a deposit for my own smokehouse!

"Enis, do you have any fine hams and bacons?" my customers asked.

"Yes indeed! The very best in county Kent will be in stock tomorrow!" I said.

But the next morning was different. Just before noon the Dragon stoked the coals and Sir Godfrey was cooked in his tin and carried away. I rode Bully-boy into the forest, following the Dragon back to its lair. Just over the hilltop I spied it among a jumble of rocks. All about were littered bones, armour, weapons, and pieces of horse and knight. The Dragon had Sir Godfrey positioned in its glittering maw.

"You see, son, you bite the heads off, then scoop out the soft insides with your little fingernail. And spit out any bits of shell."

"OK, Dad," said a high-pitched voice. I heard crunching and eating sounds. "Mmm, I love these ones!"

The colourful Dragon handed more bits of poor Sir Godfrey to his son. The young Drakeling was a dull red colour, about the same size as me. I watched them eat lunch and spit bits of armour onto shields they had propped up about the den. They laughed every time they knocked one over.

"My indigestion is playing up," said the Dragon. "I'll be back in a bit."

He left, so I lit a cigarette, a rich and strong Virginian. I blew thick rings into the air for the Drakeling to see.

"Wow! Smoke rings!" he said. I stepped into view. "What are you doing?" he asked.

"Smoking."

"Wow! I wish I could smoke! Dad says I'm not old enough."

I walked to where the Drakeling sat among the rocks, knucklebones and metal. It was a cave entrance. Hoof prints led inside. I could smell livestock, saw the odd pat, and heard squealing. I offered a Virginian.

"Nah, I'd better not. I'm too young to smoke. I haven't hit ignition yet."

"Bulldust! Your comb is starting to turn, it's going kind of purple, and the scales around your gills have a greeny-yellow tinge!"

"Really?"

"Sure! You're ready!"

He craned his head around and tried to examine his neck scales, then rolled his eyes up into his head, trying to look at his comb. I sat down next to him and popped a pure Virginian cigarette in his mouth.

"Hmm. I dunno… Nah. Better not."

"Just one," I said and lit him up.

"Ohh… All right then!"

We smoked. He had quite an appetite for it too, and smoked his way through all my loose tobacco with gusto. He was a natural and was doing the drawback by his second cigarette. I taught him how to blow smoke rings, and by the time he'd finished the cigarettes he was doing the Chinese drawback—two thick cords of smoke twisted up from his open mouth to be sucked back into his nostrils. I gave him another pack to smoke then went to get some humidors from Bully-boy. When I returned his voice had broke!

"Oh, wow!" he rumbled in his new husky basso when I showed him the cigars. He was really excited and smoked them all: the Cubans were his favourite. While he was smoking I wandered about the forest, looking for something special. I came back with a gigantic cigar I'd made from shaved hickory and applewood, rolled up in Connecticut wrapper leaves. It was two feet long! His eyes lit up, but I could barely see him through the clouds of smoke drifting up into the air.

“Yeah!” he croaked, taking the giant cigar. I pointed up at the clouds of smoke.

“My Dad will see that,” he said, deep and throaty.

“Get out of the wind, down here, and blow the smoke into this hole,” I said. The Drakeling puffed away enthusiastically, blowing it all into the cave. We smoked for about half an hour, chatting about this and that.

“What is it when your Dad stokes the coals like that?”

“It gives him a hot flame, but really bad indigestion. Keeps him awake nights and makes him grumpy unless he goes and puts them out. Then they stay out for a while.”

Bull’s eye!

I traded the Drakeling a humidor of Cuban cigars for five smoked pigs. I butchered them down to shoulder hams, hindquarters, hocks, trotters, the bellies for bacon, and pork chops. I sliced ‘em up real nice and packed the meat into sacks that Bully-boy hauled back to base camp. I lived up to my reputation and sold it all. Everyone loved the delicate flavours of my fine hams and bacons.

“And Enis, what will you have for us tomorrow?” my customers asked.

“A surprise,” I laughed: my bull scrotum clip-lock purse was nigh on burst!

* * * *

The next morning I watched more brave knights incinerated by white-hot flame, then followed the Dragon through the forest to the river. I crept behind some bushes and watched the Dragon lolling about on his back in the deep water, doing rolly-pollies. The coals were well and truly out. Stone cold.

“I’m ready for that fight now,” I said, stepping out from behind the bush, brandishing my broom. I was good with a broom. The Dragon rolled onto his feet and jumped to the bank.

“Enis Cash!” he snarled.

“I’ve been watching you,” I said. “You’re not much of a fighter!” I bashed him on the nose with my broom. He yelped angrily and swiped at me but I was too quick for him. He tried to blow fire at me, but all that came out was a gargling noise, so I whacked him on the nose with the broom again.

He ran, and I chased him through the forest. He kept trying to blow fire, but only made gurgles. He was furious and too crowded in to fight proper. I danced between trunks and tangled branches, easily dodging his toothy snaps and swinging claws that got snagged, then I’d leap out and whack him some more. It made him really mad, and he attacked wildly. I cut him off from the clearing and pounded him good.

By the time he finally fled into the clearing for fighting room I’d beaten him so’s he could hardly fight back! He ran around the clearing, dazed and limping. He’d open his mouth for fire but just blew little bubbles! I whupped his ass all over the Field of Honour, back and forth with my broom, cleaning up, whacking him on his cowering backside till it was red raw.

Everyone saw—they clapped and cheered when I brained him and he gasped and collapsed to the ground.

The crowd roared as I paced around the exhausted Dragon, holding my broom aloft in triumph. For my faena, all I needed to do was snap the broom handle and drive the sharp end into his heart. The crowd cheered and called. Then they pointed. I looked back and realized the Dragon was breathing hard, furiously trying to stoke the coals in a dizzy, hyperventilating frenzy. He finally managed to ignite them, and a red flame oozed outta his mouth, so I struck him really hard on the knackers.

“Oooh!” The crowd flinched as one, and the Dragon went absolutely stark raving mad, spouting rabid flames, frenetically jumping about like a wild hurricane. His gigantic breaths were larger and longer than ever. The coals really heated up and the flames burned to a yellowing white: he was working up the hottest flame ever!

His beady, red-rimmed eyes stared at me like coals. With a growling rumble he gushed out a huge spout of flame. The yellow brilliance curled out over the field away from me, then turned bluish-white with a tight, focussed pop. One more breath and I was toast, we both knew it. Still exhaling flame he smiled and faced me. He was showing me. The braggart was letting me know that the next breath would be the one. He emptied his lungs to inhale, snarling with a glint in his eyes, then readied himself and started on the mighty draw.

A roaring suction formed at the Dragon's nostrils. Screeching whirlwinds sucked the air down those storm drains. I grabbed at my hat and steadied myself as my miller shirt flapped in the gale. I whipped out my silver snuffbox and dumped the entire contents into the twirling twin tornadoes. The snuff raced up his nose. He finished the massive breath, and in the pause at the apex his look of anger changed to surprise, then horror. He stared at me, aghast, twitched, then leapt into the air and exploded.

* * * *

The Duke of Kent happily paid the bounty of one hundred pounds in gold bullion, and I emptied the contents of my bursting purse in one big splurge, all spent on my own small-goods smokehouse. I set up shop in a quiet little corner of county Kent, the back of the boondocks, just upcountry from Marlborough in the sleepy autumnal boothills.

Base camp developed into a permanent village with a penchant for jousting, football, and renowned fine food. Naturally, I supply the fine food. I made a name for myself, and people come from all over to taste my smallgoods, particularly a rare smoked dragonflesh I offer every once in a while. It's exquisite; very expensive.

My smokehouse is up on a hill near a clearing called the Field of Honour, where I run my pigs. It has an underground larder that can keep smallgoods preserved for years.

Of course, I don't do any work in this smokehouse; I'm the manager. I've got someone else to do the smoking. He's still young, but he loves to smoke. Occasionally I do some sweeping, though. I'm good with a broom.

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The Dreaming City

BEN PEEK

Ben Peek is a Sydney-based author. His fiction can currently be found in the anthologies *Forever Shores*, edited by Peter McNamara and Margaret Winch, *Agog! Smashing Stories*, edited by Cat Sparks, and the ezines *Ticonderoga Online* and *Shadowed Realms*. In 2006, a dystopian novel. *Black Sheep*, will be published by Prime. He can be found at his blog:

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'The Dreaming City' is the opening chapter of a novel. *A Walking Tour of the Dreaming City*. It is a mosaic novel organized into fifteen short stories and four novelettes that, when read as a whole, depicts a view of Sydney. It will be completed shortly.

* * * *

1895

In his dreams, he had always been Mark Twain; awake, he had always been Samuel Clemens.

It had been so since the day he had first used the pseudonym. At first, he thought of it as a warning, but the first dreams had been sweet like the Missouri summers of his childhood, before his father's death. There was a rare quality to them, and he awoke refreshed and invigorated and filled with the kind of joy that not even the most vivid memory of his childhood years could supply; of course, as time continued, not all the dreams of Mark Twain had been so pleasant, but even the nightmares provided him with a substance that nothing in the waking world could provide him.

And now, at sixty, asleep in the White Horse Motel in Sydney, the small, grey-haired man no longer felt the slightest sense of warning as he dreamed.

It was natural, normal, as familiar as the shape of his hands. It simply *was*.

Mark Twain dreamed:

He stood on the wooden, creaking docks of Sydney Harbour. It was early evening, and the sky had been splattered with leaking orange paint, while in front of him was an ocean of closely packed, swaying hulks: rotting old troop transports and men-o-war, their masts and rigging stripped away, the remaining wooden shells turned into floating prisons that had, one hundred years ago, marred the Thames in a

cultural plague.

* * * *

1788

The Eora watched the arrival of the First Fleet from the shores of the Harbour, and were told by the Elders that they had nothing to fear from the great ships: they held the spirits of their ancestors, reborn in fragile white skin. In response, the Eora questioned and argued, but the truth, the Elders said, was inescapable.

Look closely, they whispered, *and you will recognize the members of your family*.

But how? the Eora demanded with one voice. *How can this be true*?

The Elders never hesitated with their response: *They have sailed out of the Spirit World itself*. [Noted Aboriginal historian Henry Reynolds documented this vision of the First Fleet's arrival in *The Other Side of the Frontier*.]

* * * *

Introduction to: *A Walking Tour through the Dreaming City*.

The Harbour has never been a welcoming berth for immigrants. Since the day the English landed and changed its name from Cadi to Sydney Harbour, this has been the case. The cultural wars that have been fought along its banks and throughout Sydney's streets for over two hundred years have left their mark on the heart of our great beast, and the signpost for this is the Harbour. Yet strangely, the literary acknowledgement of the Harbour's significance does not begin in the journals of the naval captains who arrived with convicts, or in the diaries of the Irish or Chinese, but in this book you are holding now, Mark Twain's *A Walking Tour Through The Dreaming City*:

Sydney Harbor is shut behind a precipice that extends some miles like a wall, and exhibits no break to the ignorant stranger. It has a break in the middle, but it makes so little show that even Captain Cook sailed by without seeing it. Near by that break is a false break which resembles it, and which used to make trouble for the mariner at night, in the early days before the place was

lighted. Any stranger approaching Sydney is advised to take heed as the entrance is the only warning the city will offer on its nature: that it is filled with false hope and false promise, and that it and its citizens will break anyone dreaming who is not natural to it.

Twain understood Sydney in some ways more clearly than those who have lived in it, while at the same time being incredibly naive about certain aspects of it. However, he understood the importance of the Harbour, and it is from here that he launched his dissection of the city altering it forever. It might appear strange to an Australian that such an important change in Sydney's history would begin in an American's book (and published one hundred years after the first Englishman stepped foot on the soil), but in the years following the work's publication, historians and academics have been forced to recognize Mark Twain's legacy in shaping the city and its political and social climate. The reader only has to walk down George Street and into the floating mass of American culture that is presented in signs tattooing 'McDonalds', 'Nike', 'Subway', 'Taco Bell', 'HMV Music', and 'Borders' onto his or her subconscious to understand the very basics of the argument.

The seeds of this gift (or curse, depending on your stance) have now been passed onto you, dear reader, with this new edition. In these pages, you will find the finest chronicle of English occupied Sydney, which began when the first of our chained ancestors stepped onto our shores, and the start of the new Sydney that was born when the most American of Americans stepped onto the shores, and began his tour.

And yet, still, the meaning of the Harbour and Sydney has not changed in all that time. It is as if it is immune, or purposefully **resistant to anything that arrives. The result of this, is that time has only crystallized the fact that Sydney has never welcomed immigrants, never welcomed the poor, the hungry, or anyone who is in need, and that this mentality spreads throughout the country from here. It is a sad fact in this new millennium that examples are easy to find: Detention Camps that spring up as barbwire islands in the dusty sea of outback New South Wales, fattened with immigrants who have fled less fortunate countries than ours, are just one example. But then perhaps Twain, for all the change he brought, knew that this part of Sydney's nature would not change. After all, it was he who wrote. 'God made the harbour and that's all right; but Satan made Sydney.' It is a sentiment that anyone who has lived in the city will find familiar.**

* * * *

1788

Pemulwy, the scarred, black skinned Eora warrior, climbed into the thick arms of a eucalyptus tree. There, he watched his dead brothers row into the ocean on ugly, unsuitable boats, and fish.

The warrior had never doubted the Elders before, but he did now. He could do nothing but. On the ground, beside the grey eucalyptus, lay his spear, tipped with the spines of the stingray; while out in the

ocean the dead dragged one of the great fishes from the water.

The creature was huge and grey and sacred. It had been—and would ever be—since the Eora and other tribes had begun telling the story of the ancient fisherman Jigalulu. In the story, one of the sacred stingrays gave its life to the fisherman so that he could fashion a spear to kill the great shark Burbangi, who had murdered his father and brothers. [In the story, Jigalulu's spear does not kill the shark. Instead, the shark flees, breaking the spear but leaving the stingray spines embedded, thus forming the fin that warns men of a shark's approach. While this is most certainly an Aboriginal story, the notion that the Eora of Sydney believed the stingray to be a sacred creature is not. The idea can be found in Tim Flannery's *The Birth of Sydney*, where he also informs the reader that the largest of the stingrays taken from the Harbour weighed, when gutted, 200 kilograms.]

Yet, from his perch, Pemulwy watched the dead kill the stingray with a knife, and later, in the evening, watched them cook and eat it.

The Elders told Pemulwy that the dead, being dead, could do as they wished with the fish, but he disagreed. It was not just an insult to the Spirits, but an act of supreme arrogance that told the warrior that the dead did not care at all for their kin.

But it was not a solitary act.

Worse happened during the day, when the dead would take the young Eora, take their food, and take their land, giving them nothing but coloured ribbons and blankets that left them ill in ways that none had ever seen before.

Finally, on the branch of the eucalyptus tree, watching the dead eat the sacred flesh of the stingray, he was forced to answer why they acted this way.

The answer was simple:

They are not my kin.

They are invaders.

* * * *

1895

He followed the long, twisting gangplank that looped around the hulk, showing him the rotting and discoloured frame of the ship. Below him, the water was still and pitch black, and emanated a menace that caused Twain's old legs to tremble whenever the planks he stepped on groaned beneath his weight. Half way around the hulk, Twain knew that he did not want to continue, but his feet would not stop, and he found himself muttering in disgust to them as he made his way onto the deck.

The deck was ragged, empty, and filled with invisible spirits. The till turned left and right, spun by the hands of an unseen and pointless sailor. Above, the remains of the rigging flapped, trailing through the air as decayed streamers and confetti: the cabin door to the captain's quarters was twisted off its frame and hanging on one hinge; the glass window had long ago shattered and the jagged remains pointed into the middle. Twain walked on rotting planks and passed broken railings that were circled with rusted chains.

It was a parade of death, cheering him towards the hulk's rotting belly with relentless determination.

The smell of unwashed bodies, urine and faeces overwhelmed him when he stepped onto the rotten, creaking stairs that lead into the ship's belly. Had he been anywhere else, he was sure he would have fallen, or even vomited, so tangible was the odour; but instead he continued down the stairs, one step at a time.

At the bottom of the stairs the smell grew stronger, and the air had a heavy quality to it, but the belly of the hulk itself was empty. He had expected to see hundreds of men and women, sick, dying, and generally pitiful, huddled together, but instead he found only a thin pool of black sea water and the disintegrating ribs of the ship.

And, in the far corner of the hulk, the shadow of a man.

Twain's feet splashed noiselessly through the black water, and the silence around him grew while the oppressive odour slipped away. He was not sure what was worse, as the silence filled his head like wet cotton and weighed down his senses, until the shadow revealed itself to be a black-skinned man.

He was darker than any black man Twain had seen before; black like the water he stood in. He was naked and across his skin had been painted white bones. Yet, as Twain gazed at the bones, the paint became tangible, turning them solid. In response to his awareness, they began to move, shifting and twitching and cracking slightly while the man's black flesh remained still.

Twain's gaze was pulled away from the bones when a buttery yellow light filled the hull, illuminating a painting on the back wall. It had four rectangle panels, each panel located beneath the proceeding one.

In the first panel were two men and two women, one black and one white in each gender. The two women held babies, and wore white gowns with hoods, while the men wore trousers and shirts and had a dog beside them. The second showed an English naval officer (Twain did not know who) shaking hands with an Aboriginal Elder. The third panel showed an Aboriginal man being hanged for killing a white man, while the fourth panel, identical to the third, showed a white man being hanged for killing an Aboriginal. It was, Twain knew, a message of equality, but it felt cold, and hollow for reasons he was unable to voice.

Finally, turning to the black man—an Aboriginal—he said, "Is this your painting?"

"No," the black man replied, the skull painted across his face moving in response, while his thick lips remained still and pressed tightly together. "It was painted by an Englishman for Englishmen, as you can clearly see."

More confidently than he felt, Twain said, "It doesn't have 'English' in big lights now, does it?"

"Look at their clothes, Mark Twain."

Unnerved by the use of his name, Twain returned his gaze to the painting: in the first panel, as he had noted, all the men and women were dressed identically, while in the third and fourth panel, the dead Aboriginals wore nothing but a loincloth and the painted symbols of their tribes.

"Equality and law rise from the English viewpoint," the bones of the Aboriginal said quietly, the tone laced with anger and resentment.

"That's hardly a unique experience," Twain replied, the confidence he had feigned earlier finding a foothold in his consciousness.

"I am aware of this," he said. "The Oceans of the Earth speak to me, and tell me of the English, and their Empire. And they tell me how it crumbles with revolutions, but that does not happen here, in Sydney. Other things happen here."

Behind the Aboriginal, the painting twisted, and became alive: the white man stepped from his noose, and shook hands with the officers, and they passed him a flask of rum. (Twain did not know how he knew that it was rum, but it was a dream and he knew not to question the logic of a dream.) In the top panel, the black man was beaten by the white man, and attacked by the dogs, while the black baby in the Aboriginal woman's arms disappeared, and was replaced by a baby of mixed colour and heritage that faded until the baby was as white as the baby next to it.

"That's a nice trick." Twain's foothold slipped into a vocal tremor as the scenes played themselves out in an endless loop. He cleared his throat loudly, and asked, "What's your name, then?"

"Once," the Aboriginal's bones replied quietly, "I was called Cadi."

* * * *

1788

Perched once again on a eucalyptus branch, Pemulwy, three weeks later, watched the skyline turn red and grey with flames and smoke. The cries of the dead pierced the night as they rushed from their tents to the wooden dwelling that held their food.

Pemulwy's decision to fight the dead was not popular among the Eora. Elders from other tribes sent messages and warned him that the Spirits would be furious, and many warned that his own spirit, strong now, would not survive.

Last night, an Elder had sat in front of him, and told him that he would die nine years from now if he followed this path, and that he would be struck down by divisions that he, Pemulwy, created in his kin. The words had rung disconcertingly true, as splits throughout the Eora were already beginning to show.

But he had no other choice. He was a warrior, and as such, he would fight the dead like any invader into his land. He would strike their weakest targets: the houses where they kept food, and crops they were trying to grow. He would burn them, and then he would burn the men and women, and, finally, the land itself if required. Whatever the white *beeàna [*The word means 'father' and, in this case, applies to Governor Arthur Phillip. Phillip's title was given because he was missing a front incisor. In one of tribes native to that part Sydney, this tooth would be knocked out of the mouth of boys during the ritual of manhood. Therefore it was assumed that Phillip, who led the returning spirits, was part of the Eora.] decided in response, he would also deal with.

He drew strength from the fact that, stretched throughout the bony trees and in the bush around him, a dozen other warriors also watched the fires. He knew, gazing out at their shadowed outlines, that more would come after the night. Perhaps from the dead themselves.

He did not believe that any of the dead were kin, but around the Harbour there were black-skinned men that he felt a faint kinship for. It was not unreasonable, he believed, to think that they might join him—and it would certainly assuage some of the worries from the Elders if he could bring one back as a friend.

He would have such a chance now:

In front of him a black figure emerged from the fire-lit horizon, the harsh crack of leaves, twigs, and scrubs alerting the warrior to his presence long before he came into sight. With a cautioning wave to his warriors, Pemulwy dropped from his perch, leaving his spear balanced along the branches.

The dead was a huge figure, twice the size of Pemulwy. His face, craggy and scarred, was a pitted black stone, with wet pebbles lodged deep within, that in the dark suggested that the dead had no eyes; but he did, and they blinked rapidly, scanning the trees and path around him, before settling upon the Eora. His clothing, covered in soot, smelt of smoke, and around his wrists was a long chain, attached to the manacle on his right arm.

His teeth, when the dead smiled, were yellow and misshaped. "*Deve ser o bastard que põe o fogo*," he said slowly. "*Agradece*."

Pemulwy had learnt a small amount of the dead's language, but it was difficult to learn without a guide for context and meaning. Yet, knowing as little as he did, he knew that this was not their language.

Come with me, he said, pointing into the dark scrub. *I will offer you shelter*.

Around him, his warriors tightened in a ring above the dead, watching, waiting, protective. Unaware of them, the dead shook his head, and said, "*Eu nao entendo o que você dizem, mas eu nao von em qualquer lugar com você*." Slowly, as if trying to conceal the action, he began wrapping the length of chain around his right fist.

Pemulwy, giving him one more chance before he killed him, tapped his chest silently, and then pointed into the bush again.

"*Tive suficiente com ser cativo. Você e o Inglês*," the dead's gaze swept the surrounding area. "*Sao soniente os mesmo a mim nesta prisao*."

"*Ingles*?" Pemulwy repeated, tasting the familiar word. "English?"

The dead nodded, his yellow teeth splashed against his skin. "English," he agreed, glancing behind him. The message was clear to the Eora: the English were the white men at the fires.

Still glancing behind him, the dead suddenly swung his chain-covered fist at Pemulwy.

The warrior ducked and, darting forward, jammed his foot in the back of the dead's knee, causing him to cry out in pain and slump to the ground. The cry sent a hot flush through Pemulwy, and he bared his teeth in joy. Around the fallen man, the dozen Eora warriors emerged, one of them tossing Pemulwy his spear.

The black man—and he was a man, Pemulwy knew, *just a man*—began to speak, but the spear of the Eora warrior never hesitated.

Leaving his spear in the body, Pemulwy turned to the warriors. None of them had struck the dead, but they knew, by watching him, by hearing the exchange, that it would only be a matter of time until they too killed the invaders.

Running his fiery gaze along the semicircle of men before him, Pemulwy said, *The name of our enemy is the English*.

* * * *

1895

The bones across Cadi's skin snapped together in faint clicks as the Aboriginal walked through the black water of the hulk's belly to stand before Twain.

Twain, despite his wariness, was fascinated by the features behind the white skull. It was the impression of a man sleeping, with the full, closed lips showing no strain, the skin smooth, and his eyes, undeniably, closed. But there was nothing childlike or innocent about the Aboriginal. Scars covered him in slender

lines, as if a series of blades had been run again and again against his skin, and then stitched back together with a care that ultimately could not hide the damage.

"Revolutions." When Cadi's faint, skeleton whisper of a voice reached Twain's ears it was a mixture of raw emotions: sad and violent where it had before sounded like a teacher. "I have tried to organize revolutions."

"That's a mighty large thing to do," Twain replied. "And not always together successful, from my understanding of history."

As he spoke, the ribs of the hulk melted away, and the black water drained from his shoes; but rather than experience a dryness, the fluid was immediately replaced with new water that signaled, before he saw it, a continual silver slant of steady rain that ran over him.

Before him was an inn made from wood, with a wide, tin roofed verandah around it, and hitching posts for horses out the front. It had glass windows and lanterns provided light behind them.

"I have tried to make symbols," Cadi's grating voice whispered to his left. "A revolution must have a symbol."

Twain began to reply, but stopped.

On the verandah, dark shapes slithered into view between the rain. Allowing the Aboriginal to lead him through the mud and grass, Twain approached the figures, and found them to be man-like and, moments later, to be men. They wore armour that covered their torso and head, and which was made from ugly black metal: it was dented, and poorly shaped, and the helmet looked like an up-ended tin, with a slit cut across for the eyes.

The armour was crude and laughable, but Twain could not bring himself to acknowledge the fact. Instead, he watched the figures load their pistols and rifles and step from the porch in heavy, awkward footfalls, the silver rain washing over their dark bodies.

"Symbols," Cadi repeated, and stepped before the figures. They paused, and he ran his bony fingers across the black armour. "A symbol to defy the English, that is what this is."

“There’s certainly something in it,” Twain replied quietly, shivering, but not from the cold.

“It would have been pure in Sydney.” Cadi turned and raised his right arm, pointing behind Twain.

He gazed through the rain, at the graveyard of fallen branches and trees that littered the ground around the inn. At first, Twain could not see anything. But then, like ghosts emerging in the darkness, outlined by the rain, he saw them: police officers. The representation of English authority, scattered throughout the branches and trees, easily fifty in number, each with rifles and pistols aimed at the four men.

“Here, it is an act of stupidity,” Cadi said.

“Stop them!” Twain cried, spinning on him. “This doesn’t need to happen!”

“It already has. All my Irishman had to do was ride into Sydney and walk down the streets, his guns drawn, dressed in this armour, demanding the release of his mother, and the heart of the nation would have gone to him. But he did not understand that, and instead, he took my revolution and wasted it here, where no one would understand.”

Twain curled his hands into fists, and fought back the urge to scream out a warning to the black-armoured men. Instead, trying to hide his distaste in the situation, he said, “And what exactly happened to these youngsters who didn’t go to Sydney?”

The Aboriginal’s voice was faint, and touched with sadness, “Like all Australian folk legends, they died at the hands of authority.”

There was a loud crack from behind him and, with a violent shiver, Twain felt a bullet pass through him. He clutched his chest, horrified, terrified, ready to scream out; but there was no injury, only the disconcerting echo of pain. *It’s a fantasy! Nothing more than a cheap trick*! The thought, rather than calming Twain, made him angry. Around him, more guns fired, the bullets fat silver streaks in the air, and the four black-armoured men raised their arms and returned fire before falling back into the hotel. As they did, the windows shattered and screaming from men and women inside the inn tore out and ignited the night.

“What is the meaning of this?” Twain demanded angrily. “Why show me this tragedy? Let me go—I’ve no interest in this!”

“You must understand the need for revolution,” Cadi replied, the sockets of his skull gazing intently at him. “You must understand why the heart of Sydney needs to be replaced.”

“I don’t care!” Twain hollered. “This isn’t my country, this isn’t government! This isn’t my goddamned concern!”

“No, not now. But it will be.”

Cadi thrust his bony hand into the mud. There was a faint crack, and he straightened, lifting a smooth hatch from the ground. Inside was a tightly wound spiral staircase made from wood and iron railings.

“Come, Mark Twain, and I will show you more.”

“Where’re you taking me?” Twain asked, his feet moving without consent. He struggled against them, but quickly realized the futility.

“Into the Spirit World,” Cadi replied without emotion. “Where one step can he a day or a year or a lifetime. At the end of the stairs, you will understand the importance of this event, and why the death of an Irishman will always be remembered, if not understood.”

Twain gazed at the inn, and watched as one of the black armoured men stepped out of the front door, pistols held in his hands. Alone, a dark, iron-covered beast torn by emotions and a lifetime of injustice, he strode down the stairs, firing into the police.

Unable to watch him fall, Mark Twain accepted his descent.

* * * *

1797

Toongagal [Governor Philip officially named it Toongabbie in 1792, taking the name—and the land—from the Tugal clan living there.] had been turned into a simple sprawl of ugly, poorly built English buildings parted by a muddy stretch of road and surrounded by dirty bushland.

Pemulwy emerged from the muddy scrub, followed by the lean shadows of twenty warriors. Each man was armed only with a knife, but also carried sticks and cloth across their backs; they held nothing that would hinder their speed or their use of the land and the cloudy night sky as cover, for their goal tonight was one that relied upon stealth.

Silently, Pemulwy lead the warriors along the edge of the muddy road, leading them around the town, aiming for the isolated outpost at the opposite end.

In the years of his war, the Eora warrior had become a fearsome figure in the minds of the English and his fellow tribesman, but he was not pleased with the progress he had made. Burning crops, stealing food, killing farmers on the edge of the townships: these were not stopping the arrival of English men and women and their convicts. If anything, it only dug the farmers on the outskirts deeper into the land. And, as each year progressed, Pemulwy became increasingly aware that he was not winning the war.

To complicate matters, he was also coming to the realization that it was not the English and their weapons that he was losing to, but rather their clothing, food, and luxuries such as tobacco pipes.

And rum.

Rum was the enemy that Pemulwy could not fight.

It was the currency of the land, spreading not only through the Eora and tribes inland, but the free farmers and convicts who worked for the English. It was indiscriminate, and endless: a dark, intoxicating river that wove around everyone and flowed out from the hands of the English authorities.

He had learnt of that only recently, when fellow tribesmen moved into the towns, lured by rum and tobacco that they received for erecting buildings, plowing the land, and hunting. Tasks that tribesmen had done for their tribes, but now did for the English Redcoats.

Having followed the wayward Eora to threaten and force them back to the tribes with little success, Pemulwy had suddenly decided that a frontal attack on the English was what was required. The idea had come to him, a gift from the Spirits that was accompanied by the Elder’s warning nine years ago, about his foretold death. Being a warrior, he pushed aside the doubt, and focused on acquiring English weapons. He would need them.

The outpost was a long, squat building that resembled a giant wooden goanna baking in the sun or, in this case, the night. There were no lanterns inside it, but on the verandah, on a wooden chair, slept the white body of an Englishman.

Pemulwy motioned for the warriors behind him to wait, then slipped up to the verandah. The mud around the barracks pushed coolly through his toes and clung to his feet, leaving dirty prints along the railing that he climbed, and the porch he stalked along before his strong fingers clamped over the Englishman's nose and mouth, and his hunting knife sliced into the man's neck.

The muddy prints multiplied as the Eora warriors joined him, and they pushed through the door, into the dark, half empty barracks and circled the beds that held men. There, nothing more than a concentration of mud marked the struggle, and the death, that took place in the beds.

At the back of the outpost, behind a poorly made wooden door, the fading prints ended at the weapons of the English: thirty gunmetal black rifles and fifteen pistols, each with wooden stocks; a dozen sabres; one cat-o-nine-tails; chains and manacles; a dozen daggers; a small cannon on wooden wheels; and bags of powder and bullets and balls for the cannon.

The cloth and sticks were laid out, and rifles and pistols and sabres and knives taken. The cannon and its ammunition proved difficult, but Pemulwy ordered two Eora to carry it, and their feet, free of mud, made an invisible, slow exit from the building.

They were ghosts, unable to be tracked in the bush, the only sign of their passing the dark stains the returning English soldiers experienced with mounting terror two hours later. They knew who it was, in their bones, more spiritual in knowledge than they had ever experienced, as if something in the land was taunting them itself, and they knew what it meant:

Pemulwy was armed for war.

Introduction to: *A Walking Tour through the Dreaming City*.

There is no doubt that the protests and art and stories of the Aboriginal culture influenced Mark Twain during his stay. The reader will note that the retelling of their stories and anecdotes throughout the book are always sympathetic, and that the tales he was told could have filled a dozen books equal to this one's size. Yet as the book continues, the reader will find that he is particularly interested in the story of Pemulwy. (Curiously, the reader will note that Twain spells the name "Pemulwy mirroring his pronunciation of it. The reason for this has never been clearly stated. Academics have argued that it is the author's subtle acknowledgement of his fictional creation, and others a form of respect tor Aboriginal

culture, which does not reference the departed's name for a period of time alter death.) Indeed, his fascination with the warrior was so intense that he took a band of Aboriginal storytellers under his wing, and made sure that the story of the Eora warrior was heard every evening before he performed.

The great Australian poet and author, Henry Lawson. in his private memoirs (collected, finally, in Lauren Barrow's biography. *Lawson, One Life)*, wrote:

Twain's adoption of an Aboriginal storytelling band was nothing short of shocking. Newspapers were flooded with angry letters from readers and blossomed with poisoned columns from writers. All of these complaints could be summarized into the catch phrase of 'How dare people pay their hard earned money to see the history of a savage!' It was quite the scandal at the time. Even I, who had never had a problem with an Aboriginal that was based on the colour of his skin, wondered about the quality of the show now that Twain's ambitions had turned to a local cause.

Unsurprisingly. Twain's first shows with the band were failures, weighed down, no doubt, by an unappreciative audience: but by the third show, the great man himself joined the band on stage, and lent his own considerable skills in telling the tale of Pemulwy. During this first performance, he promised that if the audience was not properly respectful, then they would not be treated to Twain's solo performance later that evening.

The shows were, after that, given a grudging praise, but they earned criticism due to the fact that they were not totally accurate, on a historical level. In response. Twain replied that 'history [has] never been respectful to the needs of narrative'. At the end of his tour, the debate about Pemulwy and his importance to Sydney was such a topical item that many forgot that he did not, as Twain said, 'attack a King'.

The question that has interested historians and academics, however, is why Twain went to such lengths for the Aboriginal people and their culture. The press releases, and Twain's own statements before his arrival in Sydney, gave no hint to this desire. That is not to say that Twain was not sympathetic to native cultures: one can witness in *Following the Equator* his many generous and wonderful insights to the natives of Fiji and New Zealand, among others; but he never gave them as much attention as he did the Aboriginals of Sydney. In response to the question, most researchers have focused upon a particular dream that Twain describes, where 'the visible universe [was] the physical person of God'. Many writers have drawn connecting lines between this and the peculiar belief of a Spirit World that was favoured by Aboriginals.

For my own part, I cannot say. Certainly Twain experienced something, but what it was, and if it was linked to a spirituality, we will never know. It is possible that this 'spirituality' was linked to the grief that be still felt for his recently departed daughter, Susy. Some historians believe that it was this that motivated Twain, but it is too nebulous for me, a reason that is too easily accepted and dismissed under the same reasoning.

For my own part, however, I will agree with noted historian Jason Vella that whatever Twain experienced, it was linked to the Cross.

* * * *

1797

Before dawn, on the same night of the attack on the Toongagal outpost, Pemulwy and his warriors—joined by an additional twenty—swept into Burramatta. [In 1791, Burramatta was renamed Parramatta by Governor Phillip, the name rising from Phillip's spelling and pronunciation of the Aboriginal word.]

The wooden outpost of the English town appeared in the misty morning, looking like an atrophied beast, and Pemulwy slipped up to it silently. With a vaulted leap over the verandah railing, the Eora warrior plunged his spear (brought to him by the additional warriors) into the belly of the lone Englishman on guard. Standing there, he turned to the dark figures of his warriors, white war paint curving like bladed bones across their skin, and motioned for them to sweep into the outpost, where they butchered the ten Englishmen inside.

After the outpost, they continued into the town, breaking open the pens, scattering livestock, and killing the men and women who investigated the chorus of agitated animal noises that swept through the morning sky. It was there, watching the animals, and his men, and the dirty orange sun rising, illuminating the muddy streets and crude houses of the town, that Pemulwy realized how poorly he had planned the attack.

He would die here, on these streets, as the Elder had said.

Shaking his head, pushing the thoughts aside, Pemulwy gripped his spear and walked down the cold, muddy street. Around him, his warriors were firing into the houses, the battle having already broken down into individual conflict, rather than a combined attack. Pemulwy had feared that this would happen—he had stressed that they had to fight as one, that they needed to remain together to take and hold the town, but his words had fled them, lost in the rush of emotions they were experiencing.

To his left, the cannon fired and the sound of splintering wood and a spike of screaming followed.

You will die here.

Shaking away the unsummoned thoughts, Pemulwy advanced on a white man who emerged from his house. Thick set, bearded, barely dressed, the man raised his rifle, but before he could fire, Pemulwy hurled his spear, skewering the man. The Eora stalked up to the body, retrieved his spear and the man's rifle, and turned back to the chaos of the town.

The cannon fired again, and the smell of smoke worked its way to the warrior. Before him, bodies littered the ground. They were white men and women and children and between them, dark slices of the country given form, were his own warriors.

You will die here.

The thought was a cold chill, working up his spine, through his body. But he was a warrior, and he would not leave. Instead, he rushed through the churned mud and into the chaos of the battle, where he plowed his spear into the back of an English woman.

* * * *

When the shape of the battle changed, Pemulwy asked himself if he had seen the English soldiers arrive before the first bullet tore through his shoulder to announce their presence, or if he had not. In the split second the question passed through his mind, he realized that he had been so caught up in the bloodlust, in the killing, that he hadn't.

When the bullet tore through his left shoulder, he fell to his knees, his spear falling into the mud; in his right hand, he still gripped the English rifle. Around him, fire leapt from crude building to building, acting as his warriors had done when they swept into the town, but with a more final devastation.

They had failed.

Pemulwy rose to his feet, clutching the rifle.

Before loosing control of his warriors, he had planned to organize a defensive structure, to take prisoners, to prepare for the wave of red-coated soldiers that swept into the town.

The men that will kill you.

The bullets that sounded around him were organized, and worked in series, punching through the air and into the bodies of his warriors. Across the street, he watched a tall Eora warrior hit by a volley of bullets, his body lifted from the ground. It was the sign, the moment that Pemulwy's attack was truly broken, the moment he should have fled; but instead, he began running across the street to help the fallen, a bullet sinking into the calf of his right leg before he was half way across, and spinning him to the ground, into the mud.

Don't die face down.

Pemulwy pushed himself up, using the rifle for the leverage. The wave of Redcoats had become a flow of individuals, and he was aware, dimly, that some of his warriors had fled. Around him, six others were caught on the same street, firing into the red tide that worked itself to them like the lines of a whirlpool working into the centre. His warriors dropped slowly, as if an invisible finger, a spirit's finger, was reaching out and knocking them down, taking their life away as children did with toys in a game.

A third bullet punched into Pemulwy's chest.

Die fighting!

Roaring, Pemulwy raised the English rifle, leveling it at a red coated figure in front of him. He took no recognition of the figure's details, of who he was, or what made him; he was English and it did not matter; he squeezed the trigger, and the soldier pitched backwards –

Four bullets smashed into Pemulwy in response.

* * * *

The Spirit World

To Mark Twain, the spiraling staircase was endless. The rickety, wooden panels sliced through the inky black world around him, dropping until his perspective refused to believe that he was still seeing a

staircase, and his body trembled from fright.

There was no way to measure time. His body did not grow weak or strong and, more than once, Twain believed that he was repeatedly stepping on the same two steps. When he mentioned this to Cadi, the Aboriginal laughed, a warm, smooth, calming sound.

“Would you believe,” he said, “that I am walking along the beach of my past? The sand is pure white, the water blue, and the horizon beautiful.”

Unhappily, Twain muttered, “So this is for us tourists, huh?”

“In the Spirit World, you see what you expect to see.”

Twain stopped, and turned to face the Aboriginal. The bones that had been so prominent on his skin were now sunken, having turned into a smooth white paste that covered his muscular body. His skin was no longer scarred, and his eyes, once closed, were open.

“What happened to you?” Twain asked, not surprised by the change.

“This is my world,” Cadi replied. “Why would I look dead here?”

Twain began to respond, then shrugged, and said, “I don’t suppose you’ve got a smoke?”

Cadi shook his head. “No. It’s not a habit I’ve ever seen anything good rise from.”

“Right then,” Twain said, and continued his repetitious walk down the spiraling stairs.

Eventually, a light blinked into life in the inky black. Twain wondered, upon seeing it, what Cadi saw, but refrained from asking. He had not liked the Aboriginal’s previous response—it had made him feel young and foolish, that latter an emotion he worked hard to avoid. He continued down the steps, drawing closer to the dot which, in response, grew brighter, turning from yellow to gold.

Finally, Twain reached a position on the case where he could make out the dot's features. It was a small, brown bird, the kind that Twain had seen many times. As he drew closer, he discovered that it was caught in mid-flight, unable to move, to rise or fall.

"I'm not the only one seeing this, right?" he asked, unable to conceal his irritation. "Or is this a private showing?"

"I see it," Cadi responded quietly.

"What is it?"

"A bird."

"Thanks," Twain muttered dryly. "What does it mean?"

Cadi smiled, but it was a small, sad smile. "This is the last Aboriginal myth, which took place before the turn of your century. In it, an Eora warrior, my first revolutionary against the English, is lying in an English hospital, shackled to the bed, dying."

"So the bird is his fantasy?" Twain lifted raised his arm, reaching for the bird. "It's not terribly original."

"You misunderstand. This *is* the Eora warrior. On his seventh day in the hospital, he turns into a bird, and flies out of the window to return to his people."

Twain's fingers touched the bird, and its beak opened, and a small, angry chirp pierced the inky blackness, startling him. With a second chirp the bird bit Twain's finger and, flapping its wings, flew around the spiral staircase and off into the darkness.

"The Aboriginal tribes began to die after this," Cadi continued sadly. "They were always my favourite, but it was a mistake to take one of their men as a champion. I poured into his spirit everything that the Aboriginal culture had, everything that gave them form and purpose, ft was a mistake. There was nothing for the others, and he, alone, could not change the inevitable. He could not defeat the English."

Twain sucked on his finger, and muttered around it, "It doesn't sound like any of your so called

revolutions worked."

"No," Cadi agreed. "Gone are the days when the disenfranchised could change a path. I must rely on a celebrated kind, now."

"And that's me, is it?" Twain asked, shaking his hand.

"You are a celebrity, are you not?" the Aboriginal asked.

Twain shrugged, then nodded. "Yeah, I am. But why bother with me? Just make your own kind and leave me in peace. People react better to their own kind."

"The Eora are Sydney's own," Cadi said softly. "But no Englishman would embrace them, just as no Aboriginal or Irishman would embrace the English. So tell me, whose kind should I make a celebrity out of?"

Twain began to reply, then stopped. He could think of nothing to say in response, and instead said, "Well, if that's the case, why even bother?"

Cadi was silent. Twain watched him look around, wondering what, on his beach, he was gazing at, for nothing was offered to him but the endless black and a spiralling staircase that stretched to the end of his sight and beyond.

"If you could save your daughter, Mark Twain, would you?" Cadi finally asked.

Stiffening, Twain replied hotly, "Of course —"

"What if she was no longer the daughter you remembered? If she did things you didn't agree with, or understand. What if, except in name, and dim memory, the presence of your daughter was a totally alien thing? Would you still offer to save her?"

Swallowing his anger, Twain nodded in wordless response.

“Then we must continue onwards,” Cadi said, pointing to the stairs that he did not see.

* * * *

1802

Pemulwy could not stop the English. They continued to spread, a white herd of disease and invading culture that knew no boundaries.

Once, the Eora warrior had believed that the strength of the English would unite the tribes, would force them all to fight, but it was not the case. Each week, young men and women left the tribes, lured by the items in the towns, and stayed there. Their family and friends would then journey back and forth, visiting, partaking in what was offered. Weekly, the base of the tribes was eroded, worn away not by individuals, but by the inevitable march of time, which Pemulwy, for all his strength, could not stop attacking even himself.

Ten years ago, he could run all day, and rise in the morning, ready to run again. Tracks were sharp, and bright to his eyes. The night wind was soothing, and he would lie naked beneath it, gazing up into the sky until he fell asleep. But not now. Now he took breaks during his running and, after a whole day, he would awake with aches, and the awareness that he slept longer. He needed a blanket at night, and the tracks he had followed so easily were no longer clear, and the horizon, when he gazed out, was now a shifting, blurring thing.

Worse, age arrived with another barb that Pemulwy had not expected: the animosity of the young.

They argued against everything he did. They brought back the trinkets of the English, and when he ordered them put aside, they told him that he did not understand. That he was *old*, that he no longer *understood*, that he was *trapped* in a time no longer important. To make matters worse, he could not pick up his spear and issue a challenge to respond to them directly. To attack the youth was to attack the future of the Eora.

Other problems had also arisen (and which, with the weave of his thoughts flowing from the fire he stared into, joined the procession like smoke) and that was the bushrangers. The escaped convicts, or white men who had taken to the bush who, despite Pemulwy’s instructions, had been shown the land by the young. These men—and they were always men—did not fall into conflict with the Eora warrior and showed to him the flaw in his early logic. The mistakes his hate had created, for the free men and women in the towns favoured the white bushrangers. They looked to them for protection and, in some cases, a future. From the towns, he had seen mugs, plates, and pipes work their way through the tribes, designed

in the faces of the favoured bushrangers. [Historian Robert Hughes, in *The Fatal Shore*, notes a line of clay pipes that were made the week after Bold Jack Donohoe's death at the hands of the authorities. They were modeled after his head, and came complete with a bullet hole in the temple, where he had been shot. They were bought, Hughes noted, by emancipated convicts and free settlers, but not in recognition of the lawfulness of Jack's death. Rather, they were bought as part of the celebrity cult that surrounded the favoured outlaw, and highlighted the local resentment towards the English officers.] No such thing existed for him, nor for any other Eora or tribesman warriors that fought the English. But was it possible, that if he had aligned himself with the free men and women, instead of attacking them, he might have fought a more successful war against the English?

So closely did his thoughts mirror the argument taking place around him, that Pemulwy did not notice it until his name was shouted through the night. That, and only that, drew his attention to the group before him.

They were Eora men and women, but they were not dressed like him. Instead, they wore the clothes of the English: buttoned shirts, pants, boots, dresses, with their beards and hair turned smooth and decorated with reds and blues. At their feet were bundles of their belongings, bulging in various shape and form, leading the aging Eora warrior to surmise that what was contained within would not be welcomed by him.

"He gives us his attention!" cried one of the Eora in English. He did not have a beard, but a mustache, and through his ears were silver rings. "The Great Pemulwy finally looks upon us, his subjects."

The words were not the same, but he knew them. *You're old, you're a relic, you don't understand*, spoken in the English language he despised. Unfolding his body from its position, the Eora, weaponless, lean, a map of scars from English bullets that refused to kill him, stalked over to the younger man, who, to his credit, did not sink into the company of his friends.

Quietly, he said, *Miago, yes*?

"I am called James now," he spat in reply, angrily returning Pemulwy's gaze.

Shaking his head, he said, *It is a great shame –*

"Spare me," James retorted hotly. "Spare all of us your words. We have been perfectly content away from here."

Then leave, Pemulwy replied, his voice cool, controlled, his gaze running over the eight Eora behind James—it was such a fitting, ugly name for him—where he found them unable to meet his gaze.

"We cannot!" James said harshly. "Thanks to you and your ways!"

Pemulwy's eyes flashed with a touch of anger, and the younger Eora faltered for a moment, almost stepping back as Pemulwy spoke: *I have not done anything to you. I have not seen yon since after I escaped the hospital, and your father helped me with my injuries*.

"You should have died!" James cried, and the Eora who understood his words gasped. "That's what the Elders said!"

Rather than being angered, Pemulwy felt a thread of defeat work through him. Ten years ago, he would have struck James, killed him for the words, no matter his age. But now? Had he seen too much death? Was it possible that he was not only losing the war, but the will to wage it? *You would do well to watch your words*, Pemulwy said quietly. *Show respect, for you are the one who came here, not I*.

"King [About the Aboriginals, Governor King wrote, 'I have ever considered them the real Proprietors of the Soil.' Australian history, however, would not remember him, or these words. King would be remembered, instead, as a politically weak man who married his cousin.] has driven us out," James spat venomously in reply. "Because of you! You and only you are to blame for this!"

King? Pemulwy repeated, annoyed, a spark of anger finally igniting in him. *King doesn't run those towns, boy! The soldiers with rum do! He cannot do anything without their approval*.

"Not true!" James turned to the Eora behind him. "Tell him."

"It," said one, a young woman, "it is true. King has driven us out."

"He has done it because of you!" James shouted angrily. "Because of your attacks, your raids, because of everything you have done. King has driven us out!"

And what would you have me do about it? Pemulwy returned hotly. *I'll not bow to the English willfully*!

“We cannot go back until you are dead!”

Then so be it.

Angrily, Pemulwy spun away from the young Eora and stalked over to the fire, grabbing his spear. The sudden movement caused a snap of pain to run along his chest, but it only angered him further. This was his land! Eora land! It was their past and their future and no one, much less King, would dictate how an Eora walked across it.

Gripping the spear tightly, Pemulwy stalked up to James, who, shrinking back, knew that he had pushed the warrior to far. The warrior who, for all his age, for all his failures, had still been struck down in Burramatta by seven bullets, and when he refused to die, chained to a bed in a hospital, had escaped with the Spirits’ aid. The warrior who had fought the English from the day they landed, the warrior whose very name caused fear-in the settlements.

That warrior, Pemulwy, said to James harshly, *Do you wish to fight me*?

The young Eora shook his head.

We cannot fight among ourselves, Pemulwy spat angrily. *That is how the English will defeat us. If we separate, if we betray our heritage, then they have already won*.

Thrusting the young Eora to the side, his companions parting before him, Pemulwy stalked into the darkness of the bush. It welcomed him and his intent with the comfort and support of a mother.

* * * *

The Spirit World

In the middle of the spiral staircase a door appeared. It was a faded red, and had a long, brass handle.

Wooden stairs were behind it, but Twain could not make out a way to reach it, without climbing onto the

edge of the stairwell, and risking the grasp of the inky darkness. He considered it, arguing with his fear as he gazed downwards, but the disorientation and nausea were powerful responses, and Twain was left gripping the railing tightly, unable to climb it and step out.

"Mark Twain," Cadi said after a moment, "we wish to go through the door."

Biting his lip, he said, "Why wait to tell me that?"

"Sometimes, when a man is different, he will go around **it."**

"But not me?" Twain muttered with annoyance, releasing the railing. "I'm just an ordinary man, huh?"

Cadi shrugged. "Does that bother you?"

"I guess not, since I've got no desire to go 'round." Twain grabbed the door handle, and paused. "Still, there must be something about me. Being a celebrity and all, right?"

"No," Cadi replied, shaking his head. "A celebrity is just an ordinary man, or woman, given an extraordinary place. I do not understand why, or how, or what even makes other ordinary men and women so fascinated by them. It is beyond me."

"I think you just lost me," Twain replied, leaning his back against the door. "I was almost starting to come around, too."

"The knowledge is here," the Aboriginal said, touching Twain's chest, at the place where his heart beat. "It's locked away from me."

Twain shivered, and pushed aside the finger. He was aware, more than ever before, of the stretching emptiness on either side of him, of the frail stairwell he stood upon, and of the fact that there was only one other man in the world with him at that moment. "I think I ought to open this door, don't you?" he said.

Cadi smiled, but not with amusement.

The door handle turned smoothly under Twain's grasp and, when he pushed it open, he found that it lead to a set of stairs. But unlike the stairs he left, these were made from dirty grey cement, and lead downwards for five steps, before running into a narrow alley where buildings made from brick and smooth cement loomed over him, and the noises of the world reached into the ally with thin, sticky fingers.

They were familiar noises: the sound of cars, of people, of music, and the things that mixed between, like dogs, birds, and cooking. But there were other sounds, familiar in the cacophony, but yet, at the same time, alien: beeps, strange, tinny musical tunes, sirens that were not quite right, and more, that he could not distinguish fully.

Twain stepped from the alley and stopped. In front of him was a street, similar to the ones he was familiar with, but at the same time totally different. Moving along it like a school of salmon moving through a stream, were automobiles, their bodies smooth and so rounded that they resembled giant bullets. They were an array of colours, from blue, red, green, to grey and white, and even, in one small automobile that looked like a dented bubble, aqua. Inside the vehicles sat men and women, singularly or in groups, just as they walked along the streets, talking into small boxes in their hands, or with wires leading down from their ears and into their strange straight cut jackets or purses or bags. Other men and women did not dress the same, with some wearing simple, dark versions of suits that he was familiar with, and others appearing more casual, in blue and green and orange, among other colours. Sitting on the sidewalk, however, holding bags to them, were the dirty and poorly dressed homeless men and women that Twain knew anywhere, huddled within doorframes or the edges of alleys, and being stepped around by the walking crowd, who talked and beeped in a susurration of sound.

"You bought me all this way to show me another fantasy?" Twain asked, unimpressed. There were smells in the air, a mix of food and fumes and perfumes that irritated his nose, and he reached into the pocket of his jacket. "You've really outdone yourself on the smells."

Next to him, Cadi had resumed his bony shape, with the man's eyes closed, his mouth compressed, and scars mapping his body. Clicking as it moved, the skull said, "This is not a fantasy of mine. None of them have been."

Twain wiped his nose, and gazed outwards: buildings stretched out like a steel valley, running as far as he could see.

It was as he gazed at the building that experienced a flash of recognition.

"This is Sydney?" he asked.

“In the Twenty First Century,” Cadi acknowledged. “We are standing in Kings Cross.”

“I’ve never heard of such a street,” Twain replied, walking down the path, and gazing through a glass window. Inside, rows and rows of brightly coloured plastic items sat, but he could not, for the life of him, understand what they were for.

“It is not a street,” Cadi said from behind him. “It is the heart of Sydney. In your time, it is known as Queens Cross, but it will be changed.”

Twain looked into the reflection of the glass, but neither he nor Cadi was there. Accepting it as he did everything, he said, “They don’t say good things about the Cross in Sydney, which I’m sure you’re aware of.”

“And with good reason.” The Aboriginal began walking down the path, weaving between the people, leaving him to follow. “The Cross, as it is so known, pumps life into Sydney straight from the English authority that founded it. The name tells anyone walking into Sydney this, yet most of its citizens instead choose to accept it, to treat the Cross as a dark novelty that they can enjoy on a weekend basis. But they shouldn’t. It is not an amusement ride for the masses.”

Twain’s gaze ran from man to woman that he passed, each of them unaware of his presence. Listening with half an ear, he said, “We’ve places like this back home, and they never hurt no one.”

Cadi stopped, and gazed intently at him.

Twain shrugged. “It’s true.”

“So naive, Mark Twain.” Cadi swept his hand along the storefronts beside them, and pointed down the street, where buildings ran in an endless line. “Why is it that nobody asks what fuels the city? Where is its heart, and what marked it? In Sydney, Kings Cross feeds off an act of violence that took place in 1788, shortly after the First Fleet arrived. Six convicts raped five Eora women in the swamp that was once here. [This account can be found in *In the Gutter… Looking at the Stars*, edited by Mandy Saver and Louis Nowra.] It was here that what the English delivered in its fleet sank into the ground, into the fabric of the land, and connected with the rotten umbilical cord that wormed out from their mother country. It killed the land. I saw this, and I could do nothing in response to it, until I learnt to…”

He held up his bony hands, and his skull opened in an attempt at an expression; smile or frown, he did not know.

Twain said, “It’s not a good thing, and it shouldn’t happen to anyone, but it doesn’t have to be like this.”

“But it is.”

“Are you —”

Without warning, Twain was thrown to the ground, and a boot cracked into his temple, sending him reeling.

Struggling, Twain felt his feet grabbed, and he was dragged to the side of the street. Legs passed him, people walking, uncaring, while the dark, bony legs of Cadi were just at the edge of his consciousness. He struggled, crying out, and in response, he was slung around, his head smacking loudly into the brick wall.

A rough, white, young face shot into his view, and snarled, “Money!”

Twain shook his head. How to explain that this wasn’t real, that he wasn’t here, that he was *Mark Twain!*

“Fucker!”

Twain’s head exploded in pain, and he felt a second punch plunge wetly into his face. He sagged, and once again the boot caught him in the temple. He should have lost consciousness, should have faded into nothing, or perhaps another scene, but he didn’t; instead he saw the young man furiously search his pockets, ripping the wallet and money out, and then, glancing down at his boots, tore them off too.

Without a backward glance, the boy turned, and ran down the street, the flow of people continuing past the fallen Twain.

“This is real,” Cadi said from above him. “It is happening right now. It happens every day in Sydney. The dark amusement ride that is the beat of the city spreads itself out in acts like daylight robbery, sold drugs

that kill, underage prostitution, and worse. You could not imagine what is worse. And it is kept alive not by the people, but by the scarred heart that beats here, in Kings Cross."

Cadi's bony arms reached down, and helped Twain to his feet. Glancing behind him, he saw a young, dark haired Asian man lying on the ground, blood pouring from his face, his skull split open.

"He will die," Cadi said flatly.

Twain did not respond. He felt sick, and wanted to vomit, but knew that he would not, knew that there was more to be shown to him. In response to his silent acceptance of continuing, Cadi led him to a green door in the side of a building.

* * * *

1802

Pemulwy had begun, after the battle of Burramatta, to think of the land around the Harbour as Sydney Cove.

It pained him to think of the Eora land in such as manner, but as he made his way through the darkness, he realized that it was not incorrect of him to think that way. The land no longer resembled anything from his youth: the stingrays were dwindling, the bush had been cut away, trees were replaced with crude buildings of wood and other, more sturdy buildings made from yellow sandstone. Nothing about the land he made his way through resembled the Eora land, with the exception of the Harbour itself, somehow retaining its purity, its strength that cut a dark mark through the English land.

Pausing at the top of a hill, the Eora warrior dropped into a crouch and gazed at the ragged ugliness of Sydney Cove.

According to the English, it had been named after a man who had never seen it, and who would never do so. One young Eora had told him that Sydney was a genteel man—though he had been unable to explain to him just what made such a man—a friend of the white *beeàna*, but that he was a man who held the land, and everything upon it, in contempt. It was not an uncommon opinion, and after so many years of fighting the English, Pemulwy had grudgingly accepted that the only native-born Englishmen who did not hold the land in contempt were the Rum Corps [In 1808, the Rum Corps would depose King's successor, Governor Bligh, and rule the colony for two years while treating it as their own bank to become rich, landed gentry. When removed from power, none of the Corps would be executed or

severely punished; their leader, John Macarthur, a common-born Englishman, would instead be remembered as the man who laid Australia's financial backbone with the wool industry he founded. History, however, would be much less kind to the genteel-born Bligh who tried to end the Corps's stranglehold on the colony. In his history of Sydney, *Leviathan*, John Birmingham sums up the general consensus about Bligh, describing him as 'a stunted foul-mouthed ogre with axes in his eyes, stalking the quarterdeck of the *Bounty* and being unconscionably rude to Fletcher Christian'.], who he hated with a passion. He had learned, too late, it appeared, that there were divisions as wide as the Harbour between the English here and those in England, and despite his animosity towards them, he believed that if he had known this years before, he would have exploited this.

But of course, he had not.

I have lost my taste for the war, Pemulwy whispered, rising from his crouch, his muscles complaining. *I don't want it anymore. I have watched my tribe die and walk into the towns, yet the English living here no longer appears the crime I once thought it was*.

Time had, he realized, defeated him. And yet, as he gazed down at the town, he knew that he would not be able to turn away from his current actions: he would still kill King. But it was not for hatred that he would do it, he realized, or for the Eora way of life, or even the land. In truth, he did not know why he would do it.

He felt no anger or fear as he made his way quietly down the hill. His hard feet left only the barest hint of a track in their wake, and when he skirted around a pair of Redcoats in the street, he did not attack them. They were young men, and ugly like all the English were to him, but that was not why he stayed his hand. Part of him wanted to believe that he did so because he did not want to alert others to his presence, and in a small way, that was true; but mainly, his refusal to step into the street with his spear was the physical manifestation of his unwillingness to continue the war.

He wondered, briefly, if a new Spirit had settled upon him. When the land had belonged to the Eora, the Elders had told Pemulwy that the Spirit of the land demanded protection, that it was angry if he allowed any tribe to take the land, and it had been this that had fueled him in the first years of his war. But he did not feel it anymore, and indeed, admitted that there was a different feel to the land now. Was it possible that it rose out of the quiet houses of the English that he passed, dark with sleep, and with dogs chained to the back doors for protection? Pemulwy did not know, but it was entirely possible.

King lived in a two-story sandstone building in the middle of Sydney Cove. It was where all the Governors had lived, and was surrounded by large lawns and vegetable gardens that were beginning to show produce. Pemulwy had seen similar gardens around the houses throughout the settlement, but their vegetables had shown sagging green tops, while at King's dwelling, there was more life, the promise of things to come.

Pemulwy slipped over the surrounding fence, and made his way quietly and silently to the back of the sandstone building. Coldness was seeping into his fingers, and he flexed them as he scanned the garden slowly. Once, he had been able to scan the surrounding ground quickly, but now, even with the aid of moonlight, he needed more time. Time to distinguish the shapes, such as the fence palings to the left, and the firewood next to it.

When he was sure that the yard was empty, Pemulwy continued to the back of the house. There were no lights coming from the house, but on the second floor, the Eora could make out the hint of something, either movement or a candle. The windows that the English had placed in the building were too thick for him to see through properly.

His hard feet lead him quietly to the back door, which, when he pushed upon, swung open with a faint creak.

Warmth still had its fading grip on the house, and emanated from the sandstone bricks of the narrow hallway that Pemulwy made his way along. Doors were to his left and right and, when he gazed into them, he found a small kitchen, followed by even smaller rooms that were packed like an overflowing parcel with couches and tables and, in the case of one, a piano.

Pemulwy had seen a piano once, pushed into a ravine and almost on its side, the wood cracked and broken. The dirty keys had still produced a sound when he tapped them, however, and, despite himself, he had straightened the broken instrument, and tapped sounds out of it in the midday sun.

Afterwards, he had been angry with himself for indulging in such an English thing. The Eora had instruments of their own, traditional ones that he enjoyed, and ones that he *should* use. But seeing the piano brought back the memory, and as he made his way quietly up the steps, he felt a faint twinge that he could not go and tap on it to produce sounds again.

On the second floor he was presented with two doors. In the first, he found a large, spacious room with two occupants: a white English baby, lying in its crib, and a large, meaty woman, asleep on the couch that lay next to the crib. Around them were thick curtains, and drawers, and plush toys. Pemulwy, easing the door shut quietly, knew the two to be King's wife and child.

He truly had lost the taste for the war. Years ago, he would have thought nothing of killing the woman and child, just as the English thought nothing of killing Eora women and children. It would not have been difficult to turn around and kill them still, Pemulwy knew, even as he made his way to the second door that emitted a hint of light, but even thinking of the women he had known and who had died at English hands, he could not find the anger or will to do it.

He would kill King, and that was all. After King, he would find a different way to battle the English.

But why not now?

With a faint sigh, Pemulwy realized that he could not return to the tribe and face James, and the other young Eora, without having accomplished what he said he would. Besides, didn't King deserve it? Wouldn't his death be a fine warning for the future governors that they sent in his place?

His fingers tightening against his spear, Pemulwy pushed open the door.

In the room, holding a long muzzled rifle, was King. The aging, tall, grey-haired man regarded Pemulwy with his bright blue eyes, and then said, quietly, "You're a disease upon this land."

Before Pemulwy could react, King fired.

The lead tore into his chest, punching him out of the door, throwing him to the floor. His hands searched for his spear, but he could not find it, and his breath came in harsh gasps. His mind spun and, in the darkness above him, a figure emerged. But it was not King. Instead, it was the young, smooth featured black face of James.

"If only you had learnt to ride a horse," the young Eora said coldly and leveled a pistol at him. "But no, not the great Pemulwy. It was beneath you."

Hatred flared in Pemulwy, and he roared. In response, James's pistol bucked, and the world exploded in blood and pain from which he would not walk away.

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Introduction to: *A Walking Tour through the Dreaming City*

The Cross (once known as Queens Cross and briefly as Kings Cross before common vernacular was made permanent) in Twain's day was no different to the Cross of today. As Vella said in his history, it

was, is, and always will be: ‘a centre-point for low gunmen, violent pimps, prostitution of all kinds, drugs, artists, musicians, crusaders, bent cops, and the best-dressed transvestites the world has ever known.’

Twain’s theory was that the Cross was undeniably linked to the English authority that landed in Sydney. ‘It does not matter who you are,’ he said in one lecture, ‘but no one in the streets of [the] Cross is an Australian. Instead, you are nothing more than the pawns of a decaying Empire.’ It was a harsh statement, and as Vella explains, untrue, especially in the light of the fact that the Cross has not changed one iota since Twain made that proclamation.

But there is no denying the influence Twain’s words had. It can be linked directly to the rise of the Democratic Party and Arthur Butler, and, from them, the Republic that we live in now. Through Twain’s words. Butler took control of the voting power of the blue collar working man and organized rallies, demonstrations, and, in the historical protest of 1901, a strike that shut down Sydney entirely.

Of course, Twain couldn’t have known that Butler would make the same mistakes America did in search of the national identity to go along with the new Republic. (At any rate, Twain was busy with other political concerns. Having returned to America, he was accused of lacking patriotism as he publicly questioned the American policy regarding the Philippines.) In his search, Butler and the Republic of Australia were responsible for evil acts, many of which ignored what Twain spoke out oil. It is therefore nothing short of a tragedy that we witnessed the Australian Government steal an entire generation of Aboriginal children from their parents, and give them to white ‘Australian’ families to raise; we witnessed Asian immigration made illegal, and a mob mentality encouraged that saw established Asian families beaten and driven out of Sydney: and, perhaps most pedantically xenophobic, we saw schools begin teaching the ‘Australian’ language.

The result led to decades of confused culture, where men and women who did not fit into Butlers description of an Australian (‘standing by your mates, working a hard day, enjoying a cold beer, and a swim in the ocean’) were culturally shunned and often targeted by hard-line ‘patriots’. All of this began to change around the sixties, with the influence of American drug culture that was brought into prominence by American cinema, but it left its scars deeply within the nation, and especially, Sydney.

To walk down Sydney today is to walk in the shadows of the political past (it is in the buildings, the street signs, and the statues that link our cultural understanding together) and to watch a Government whose history is responsible for the near genocide of the Aboriginal race and culture, refuse to make amends. It cannot but force one to question what Mark Twain brought to Sydney. A few have labelled him the man who broke Sydney, but I think that is an ignorant suggestion. Twain is not responsible for the actions of our politicians, just as the transported English before him were not. Rather, he was responsible for bringing to our attention the idea that we were in control of what we made of our city, and indeed, our country.

‘Sydney is the heart of Australia, and it is from here that everything flows,’ Mark Twain said in his final

performance, and he was correct. It is a heart we control, that we, with our presence, force the beat of, and which, like a mirror, reveals the best and worse that we, as Australians, bring.

Darrell Barton

Kings Cross,

Sydney

* * * *

1803

Beyond the green door was a cool, dark room. As Twain's eyes grew accustomed to the dimness, he was able to make out the shapes of shelves filled with books, and a large oak desk, with a high-hacked chair behind it. In the middle of the table, in a large glass jar, was the head of an Aboriginal, his mouth and eyes stitched shut, his head floating gently in light brown alcohol.

"The poor devil," Twain said quietly, approaching the desk. "What'd he do to deserve this?"

"This is my first revolutionary," Cadi whispered from the darkness around him. "The Eora warrior you saw earlier."

"Where are you?" Twain said, scanning the room.

"I am here." Cadi stood behind the desk, the darkness making his bones more prominent, as if there was no skin at all behind them. With his bony hands, the Aboriginal stroked the glass jar of the head, as if it were a child that he could pick up and hold close to his chest. "After he had been killed, King had his head removed, to make sure that he would not rise again. He did it that very night, in his backyard."

Twain shuddered. "Where are we?"

"We are in London, in Joseph Banks' study. King had the head sent here afterwards, to study, to learn what it was that made him hate them so much. In doing so, he took everything I had given the warrior, and isolated it from the Aboriginal people, destroying the last remains of his power."

“Surely something could have been done?” Twain asked, approaching the desk.

“No,” Cadi replied coldly. “The warrior himself was the symbol. I realized the mistake afterwards, and rectified it with my Irishman, but in this case, the Eora’s skin, his entire body, was the symbol that could unite them.”

Twain stared at the floating head. After everything he had seen, everything he had been forced through, he wanted the head to leave an impression on him; to suggest to him the quality of the Aboriginal people who lived in Sydney and the white men and women who lived in the city too. But mostly, he wanted it to explain the figure that had taken him along this journey with intensity that bordered on fanaticism. But the longer he stared, the more it resembled that of a simple head.

“Do you understand why Sydney needs a new heart?” Cadi asked, passing through the table to stand before him. The head of the Eora warrior appeared to float in his stomach, part of the spirit.

“Yeah,” Twain said uncomfortably, wanting to step back, but unable to. “I understand why you want one, but maybe you’ve looked at it wrong. Maybe things aren’t as bad as you say. At any rate, there’s nothing I can do about that.”

“That’s untrue,” the other replied quietly, an underlying menace in his voice. “You bring with you a culture that can be embraced. A symbol for a revolution that can wash away the old hatred, and bring a new beat to the city.”

“But—”

Cadi’s bony hand plunged into Twain’s chest before he could finish. The pain was immense: it spread through every fibre of his body, terrible, and inescapable. It was death. He knew that. He would never see his wife or daughters again, never write another word; it was all over… and then, through the pain, he felt the beat of his heart fill his body like the sound of a drum, beating the tempo of his life…

It stopped.

Cadi pulled his bony arm out of Twain’s chest, the flesh and bone parting until it released the still beating heart of Mark Twain.

Seeing it, Twain's consciousness failed, his legs went weak, and he began to fall.

"I will not let the English win," said Cadi without remorse, his voice reaching through the pain and shock.

The ground rushed at Twain. Black and solid, he could not avoid it, he could not escape it, and he did not want to escape. Let it be over, let it finish, let him go. He could still feel his heart beating, but it was no longer his own: it was stolen, ripped from him to be placed into a city he barely knew. It would do no good. The spirit was wrong: revolutions were not done with symbols and stolen cultures, they were seeded from within, grown from what was the land and people created anew. Change would only rise in Sydney when the city was its own creature, when the people in it embraced it, when they understood all that had happened. Change could not be forced; to do so would result only in a cosmetic, shallow, tainted beast, the exact kind Cadi fought against. Realizing this, Twain wanted to cry it out, to tell Cadi that it was futile, that he was *wrong*, that he had to acknowledge the past, that he had to accept it and resolve the issues that arose from it; that only by doing this could he destroy the rotten hands that held Sydney in its stranglehold; but he could not cry out.

The black slab of the ground raced up.

Mark Twain dreamt no more.

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Recommended Reading: 2004

We recommend the following stories to interested readers:

Athanasopoulos, Mina, 'Father of Democracy', *ORB* 6, June 2004.

Barnes, Chris, 'The Glass Flower', *Encounters*.

Battersby, Lee, 'Vortle', *Encounters*.

---------- 'Tales of Nireym', *ORB* 6, June 2004.

Bedford, K.A., 'Time Story', *Chronopolis Convention Handbook*, Mar 2004.

Biancotti, Deborah, 'Cinnamon Gate', ORB 6, June 2004.

Bishop, *K*. J., 'We the Enclosed', *Leviathan 4: Cities*, Dec 2004.

Blackford, Russell, 'Idol', *Oceans of the Mind*, issue 13, June 2004.

Broderick, Damien, 'Yggdrasil', *Synergy*.

Brown, Simon, 'Water Babies', *Agog! Smashing Stories*.

Cain, James, 'Dark Eyes', *The Horror Express #1*, Feb 2004.

Carlon, Lee, 'Skin Deep', *Antipodean 78*, Nov 2004.

Carroll, Monica, 'The Teller', *Encounters*.

Caselberg, Jay, 'Iridescence', *The Third Alternative #37*, Mar 2004.

---------- 'End in Light', *Underworlds 2*, Apr 2004.

---------- 'Herd Mentality', *ReVISIONS*.

Congreve, Bill, 'The Shooter at Heartrock Waterhole', *Faery Reel*.

Cummings, Shane Jiraiya, 'Countdown Macabre', *Antipodean 76*, Sep 2004.

Dann, Jack, 'Good Deeds', *Conqueror Fantastic*.

---------- 'Bugs', *Postscripts 2*, Summer, 2004.

Dartnall, Terry, 'I am Dan's Brain: The Memoires of a Much Travelled Mind',

Philosophy Now; issue 48, Oct/Nov 2004.

Dedman, Stephen, 'Desiree', *Oceans of the Mind*, Dec 2003.

Duffy, Brendan, 'Lamb', *Aurealis 32*, Apr 2004.

---------- 'Come to Daddy', *Agog! Smashing Stories*.

Eltham, Kate, 'Davey's Gift', *Encounters*.

Flinthart, Dirk, 'Gaslight a Go Go', *Agog! Smashing Stories*.

---------- 'The Flatmate From Hell', *Encounters*.

Friend, Peter, 'The Christmas Tree', *Asimov's*, Dec 2004.

Goossens, Darren, 'Telecide', *ORB* 6, June 2004.

Gottberg, Crissy, 'Dark Fae', *Visions*, Aug 2004.

Guerin, Greg, 'Annals of Doubt', *Geocities*, Oct 2004.

Haines, Paul, 'The Last Days of Kali Yuga', *NFG Vol 2*, No 2, 2004.

---------- 'This is the End, Harry, Goodnight', *NFG Vol 2, No 2*, 2004.

Haines, Paul, & McKenna, Claire 'Warchalking', *Agog! Smashing Stories*.

Hannigan, Karin, 'Get Real Princess', *Visions*, June 2004.

Harland, Richard, 'The Souvenir', *Encounters*.

---------- 'New Talk', *Oceans of the Mind*, issue 10. Dec 2003.

---------- 'Catabolic Magic', *Aurealis 32*, Apr 2004.

Hood, Robert, 'Regolith', *Agog! Smashing Stories*.

Isle, Sue, 'Dog Years', *Aurealis 32*, Apr 2004.

Kemble, Gary, 'Ad Infinitum', *Shadowed Realms 1*, Sep 2004.

Lanagan, Margo, 'Red Nose Day', *Black Juice*.

---------- 'Yowlinin', *ibid*.

---------- 'Rite of Spring', *ibid*.

---------- 'House of the Many', *ibid*.

---------- 'Sweet Pippit', *ibid*.

---------- 'Perpetual Light', *ibid*.

---------- 'My Lord's Man', *ibid*.

---------- 'Earthly Uses', *ibid*.

Larbalestier, Justine, 'Where did you Sleep Last Night?', *Agog! Smashing Stories*.

Learner, Tobsha, 'Virgin', *Tremble*.

---------- 'The Root', *ibid*.

---------- 'Custodian', *ibid*.

---------- 'Bat', *ibid*.

Livings, Martin J., 'Wood Whispers', *Fables and Reflections* 6, Apr 2004.

---------- 'Art of Suffering', *Ticonderoga Online*, Mar 2004.

---------- 'Armageddon For Dummies', *Antipodean 75*, Aug 2004.

Love, Rosaleen, 'Essence of Ismay', *Best Stories Under the Sun*.

Luckett, Dave, 'Making a Difference', *Oceans of the Mind*, issue 10, Dec 2003.

Lyall, Andrew, 'After the Beautiful War', *Antipodean SF 71*, Apr 2004.

Maclean, Kevin, 'When Dragons Dream', *Summoned to Destiny*.

Macrae, Andrew, 'The Superb Grace of the Steel Beam, The Delicacy of Reinforced

Concrete', ORB 6, June 2004.

McHugh, Ian, 'The Alchemical Automaton Blues', *AS1M 15*, Nov 2004.

McKenna, Claire, 'Unreal City', *Borderlands 3*, Mar 2004.

McKenna, Claire & Haines, Paul, 'Warchalking', *Agog! Smashing Stories*. McKenzie, Chuck, 'Retail Therapy', ORB 6, June 2004.

Nix, Garth, 'Endings', *Gothic*.

Payne, Ben, 'Boys', *Encounters*.

Read, Nigel, 'The Tenth Tower', *Visions*, June 2004.

---------- 'Overnight Rental', *Visions*, June 2004.

Thornton, Alinta, 'The Healing Soup of Cho-Chou Village', *ORB* 6, June

---------- 'Terraforming Lily', *The Between Space*.

Warren, Kaaron, 'Al's Iso Bar', *Alsiso Project*.

---------- 'Guarding the Mound', *Encounters*.

Webb, Janeen, 'Red City', *Synergy*.

---------- 'A Faust Films Production', *Little Red Riding Hood*.

Westwood, Kim, 'Stella's Transformation', *Encounters*.

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Appendix

Publications which actively publish original Australian science fiction, fantasy, horror and weird fiction are listed below. Check the websites or ask your local library for the books and magazines.

Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine. A bi-monthly magazine of local and international speculative fiction. ISSN 1446781X. Subscriptions from Andromeda Spaceways Publishing Co-Op Ltd, PO Box 495, Bentley WA 6982. http://www.andromedaspaceways.com

Antipodean SF: A monthly ezine, featuring ten new flash fictions every issue. www.antisf.com, or email the editor at: editor@antisf.com. *Antipodean SF* is archived in the National Library at the following address: purl.nla.gov.au/NET/antisf/

Aurealis: Australia's longest running speculative fiction magazine. ISSN 1035 1205, ISBN 09585941SX. Can be ordered direct, or through your local bookshop. Subscriptions available from Chimaera Publications, PO Box 2164, Mt Waverley, Victoria 3149. http://www.aurealis.sf.org.au

Australian SF Forum: A periodic ezine of new science fiction stories and articles, http://www.ozscififoruni.com/

Borderlands: New SF magazine from Western Australia. ISSN 1448224X. Subscriptions available from subscriptions@borderlands.com.au. http://www.borderlands.com.au.

Dark Animus: Irregular horror magazine. ISSN 14473747. Subscriptions available from PO Box 750, Katoomba NSW 2780. http://www.darkanimus.com

Fables & Reflections: Irregular magazine, fiction and some articles on the fantastic. ISSN 14461900. Subscriptions and sample copies from PO Box 979, Woden ACT 2606. http://www.Fables-and-Reflections.net

Orb: Speculative Fiction. An annual magazine/anthology series. Probably the best (and best looking) of the local SF magazines. ISSN 14425580. Subscriptions available from Orb Publications, PO Box 1621, South Preston, Victoria 3072. home.vicnet.net.au/~Orb.

Shadowed Realms: A quarterly ezine dedicated to short horror fiction. http://www.shadowedrealms.com.au/

Specusphere: A new website dedicated to exploring all aspects of speculative fiction in Australia. Publishes short fiction and articles. http://www.specusphere.com/

Ticonderoga Online: An irregular ezine dedicated to original science fiction, fantasy and horror, http://www.ticonderogaonline.org/

Visions: Website and occasional ezine, supported by Fantastic Queensland Inc.

http://www.fantasticciueensland.com, and http://www.visionwriters.org.

A useful site for writers is: http://www.inkspillers.com/

These anthologies and collections were published in 2004. (Addresses are given for independent presses.)

Cat Sparks (editor), *Agog! Smashing Stories*, Agog! press, ISBN: 0958056730. Third in an annual anthology series. Agog! Press, PO Box U302, University of Wollongong, NSW 2522.

Donna Marie Hanson, & Maxine McArthur (editors). *Encounters*, CSFG, ISBN: 0958139024. The third anthology form the Canberra Speculative Fiction Guild. CSFG Publishing, PO Box 89, Latham ACT 2615.

Margo Lanagan, *Black juice*, Allen & Unwin, ISBN:

Robert Stephenson, *We Would be Heroes*, Altair Australia Books, ISBN: 0975609629. Magellan Books, PO Box 475, Blackwood SA 5051.

Tobsha Leaner, *Tremble*, HarperCollins, ISBN: