

CONFRONTING THE DARK:  
  
VOLUME 1:  
‘THE ART OF DYING’ (A NOVEL)  
  
AND  
  
VOLUME 2:  
REPRESENTATIONS OF DEATH IN AUSTRALIAN FICTION  
(AN EXEGESIS)

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Thesis submitted for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in Creative Writing  
Discipline of English  
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## TABLE OF CONENTS

ABSTRACT .....	v
DECLARATION .....	vi
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	vii
<b>VOLUME 1: <i>The Art of Dying</i></b> .....	<b>1</b>
Abandonment .....	4
1946.....	4
Uncle Christie .....	8
January 2009.....	8
Life and Death .....	12
1950.....	12
Old and New Ghosts.....	14
February 2009 .....	14
Mongrels and Bastards .....	21
1952.....	21
The Curse of Mad Gerry.....	25
March 2009.....	25
Uncle Jimmy.....	38
1953.....	38
Miracles and Revelations.....	46
April 2009.....	46
Denis and Johnny .....	62
1954.....	62
Past and Present .....	74
May 2009 .....	74
Strikebreaker .....	87
1956.....	87
The Truth .....	97
June 2009.....	97
Grandpa .....	114
1959.....	114
The Art of Dying .....	121
July 2009 .....	121

<b>VOLUME 2: Representations of death in Australian fiction .....</b>	<b>133</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>134</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1 .....</b>	<b>137</b>
Practice-led research and the literature of death.....	137
The Western attitude to death .....	139
Analytic philosophy of death .....	141
Narrative of Death .....	142
Existentialism .....	144
<b>CHAPTER 2 .....</b>	<b>148</b>
Helen Garner: the terror of death and the community of the living in <i>The Spare Room</i> (2008) .....	148
“Exceptional pressure”: death in modernity .....	150
“Being-with”: empathic care of the dying .....	152
<b>CHAPTER 3 .....</b>	<b>155</b>
Patrick White: active nihilism and the event of being in <i>The Vivisector</i> (1970) .....	155
Active nihilism: “a violent force of destruction” .....	156
The event of being: sources of strength .....	158
<b>CHAPTER 4 .....</b>	<b>162</b>
Writing <i>The Art of Dying</i> .....	162
Habitat .....	164
Creative Domain .....	167
Activities .....	170
Artefact.....	175
<b>CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>178</b>
Writing about death: the living of the dying .....	178
<b>WORKS CITED .....</b>	<b>182</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY .....</b>	<b>187</b>
Australian Literature .....	187
Literary Criticism .....	189
Philosophy .....	195
Death and Dying.....	199
Religion and Psychology .....	201
Writing.....	203

## ABSTRACT

“Confronting the Dark” is a creative writing thesis comprised of two interrelated parts: Volume 1: *The Art of Dying*, a novel; and Volume 2: “Representations of death in Australian fiction,” an exegesis.

In the novel, Gerard, the main character, is dying. As a consequence of his imminent death, he begins to focus on both the trauma of his early years and the great love he feels privileged to have experienced.

The exegesis describes how the practice of writing about death led to a critical inquiry into various philosophies of death that have been of interest to writers, as well as the transformation of the Western approach to death over the past few centuries, brought about by modernity. It presents a case study of two Australian novels, Helen Garner’s *The Spare Room* (2008), and Patrick White’s *The Vivisector* (1970). I discuss the writing of my own novel in light of the reflexive agency required for creative writing research and in terms of creative writing habitat, the creative domain, activities of writing, and the artefact. I conclude that writing about death occurs for primarily existential reasons. Writers are asking questions about how human beings feel about their impending death, how they cope with life goals and the possibility of unfinished business, and how the death of the other affects the lives of those who remain.

## **DECLARATION**

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide.

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Karen M. Rees

July 2017

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## **VOLUME 1: *The Art of Dying***

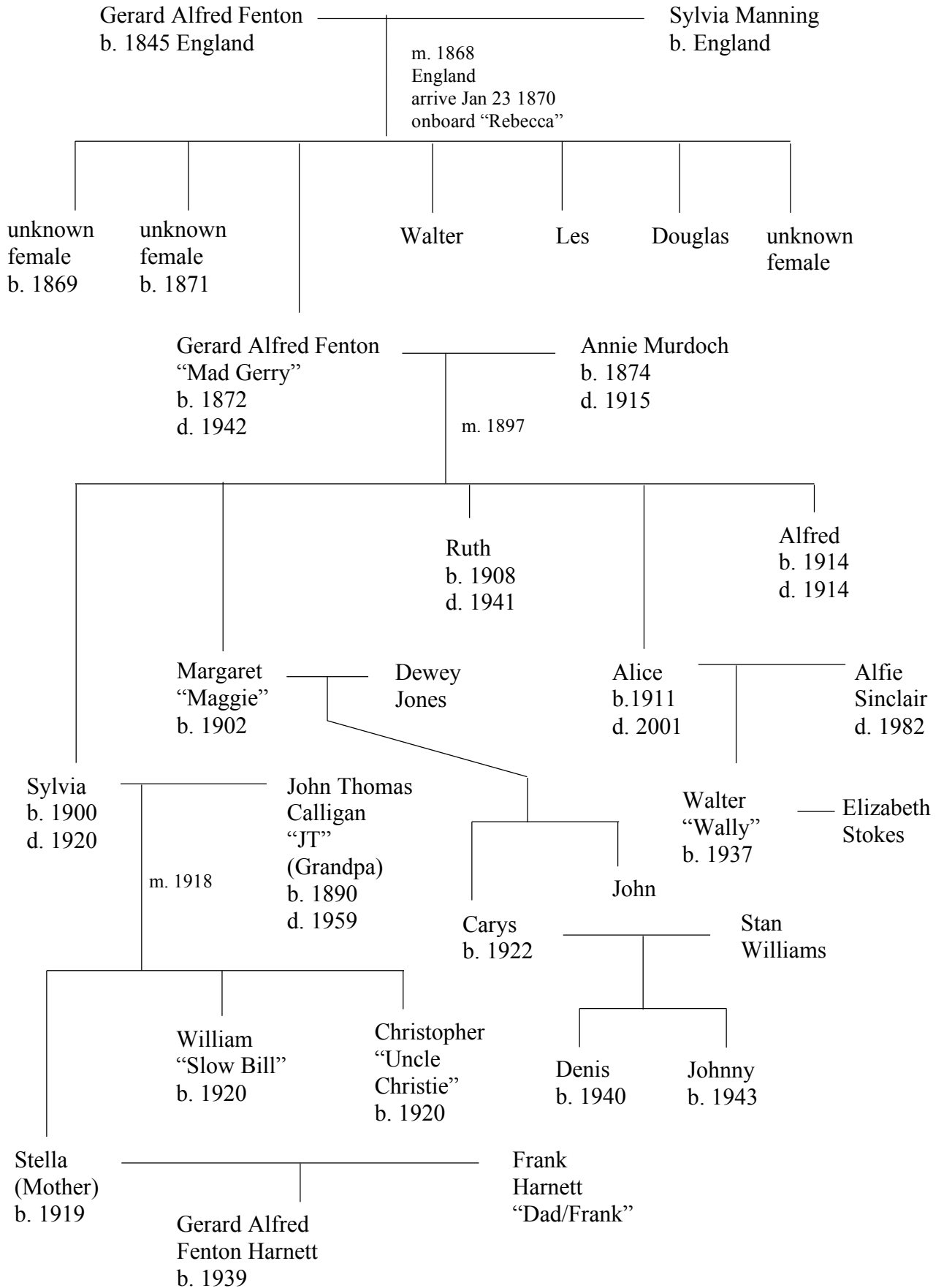
*Time carries everything toward what has been, toward the past.*

*That's where we're headed, to join all who have come before.*

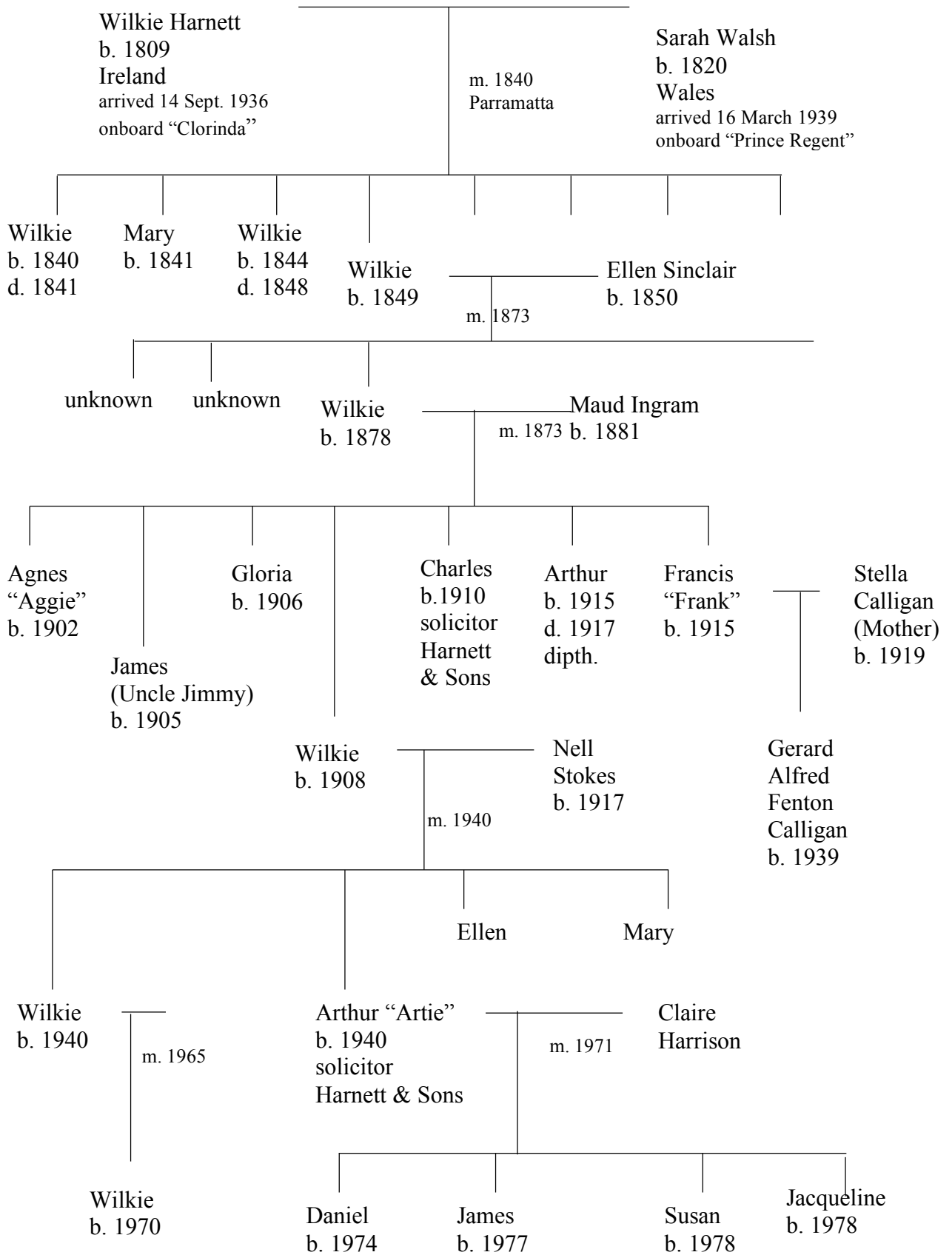
Stephen Jenkinson, *Die Wise*, 2015



# FENTON FAMILY TREE



# HARNETT FAMILY TREE



## Abandonment

1946

The night after Gerard's father Frank had tried to drown his mother Stella in the laundry tub, his mother lifted him out of bed and drove Grandpa's Dodge Sloper from their house in Dover Heights to Uncle Jimmy's place in Glebe. According to his mother, things were either perfect or not-so-perfect. Not-so-perfect happened a lot now that Frank was back from the war. Before that there was always just the two of them and Uncle Jimmy. He looked as old as Grandpa but Mum always said things were perfect when Uncle Jimmy was there.

They stood hand-in-hand on the doorstep waiting for Uncle Jimmy to answer their knock.

'Christ, love!' Uncle Jimmy's eyes scanned his mother fiercely, as if looking for a magic word written on her skin.

Once inside, Gerard stood holding his nose against the pungent smell of unwashed clothes and stale food until a former life began to swirl around inside his head: The Trots at Harold Park, fish and chips at Tamarama, Uncle Jimmy dancing his mother around the room singing 'Swinging on a Star'. All the things that were perfect in his life, it seemed to Gerard, came to him with Uncle Jimmy taking a slow drag on a cigarette, with Uncle Jimmy's open-mouthed laughter, his way of making everything easy. He sat, then, in Uncle Jimmy's chair and began humming to himself.

'You've given up, Jim. You're letting me go,' his mother told Uncle Jimmy, scraping her desperately hoarded notes of money from the kitchen table and back into her purse.

'Would you like to swing on a star, carry moonbeams home in a jar,' sang Gerard quietly, as Jim gave his mother the she'll-be-right-mate shrug that always tickled his shoulder. When things were rough, Jim said, you had to have a philosophy that allowed you to brush off a bad situation and make the best of it. 'Never get steamed up, Gerry,' he'd always told Gerard. 'And never whip the cat. What's the use?'

'I'm not keeping you *or* letting you go, love. You were never mine in the first place. It was borrowed time,' Jim said now.

'You'd be better off than you are. Or would you rather be a mule?' Gerard sang as he

nodded off to sleep. He dreamed of a giraffe, an elephant, a sheep, a pig and a mule in an array of jumbled images, the sheep butting the mule in the side, the pig screaming and shoving food into its mouth, the giraffe and the elephant watching, always just watching and waiting.

As the sun came up, Frank arrived to take them back. Gerard thought he seemed angrier about his mother taking off with the Sloper than anything else.

‘Is the kid mine?’ Frank asked her that night as they ate.

‘A mule is an animal with long funny ears, kicks up at anything he hears,’ sang Gerard.

‘Eat your tea, kid!’

‘Yes Dad . . . Frank.’

‘Even the kid doesn’t know!’

‘He was born in ’39. You were there.’

‘So was Jim. He was the fucking milkman!’ His laugh was not his Sunday Fun Day laugh.

Frank always teased them on Sunday after they’d been to Mass. ‘Was it a fun day on Sunday with Father Munday?’ he’d ask, making them ashamed. He’d take them to Watsons Bay on the tram for an ice cream on Sunday afternoons. Sometimes they went to Camp Cove for a swim. He was always cheerful on Sundays to make up for Friday when he didn’t come home and Saturday when he did.

That night Gerard dreamed that the sheep had a harness over the elephant and was tugging at the reins, but the elephant was resisting, standing its ground. His mother woke him again, lifting him gently out of bed under cover of the early morning darkness, and she tiptoed down the hallway and out of the house. His head fell heavily against the seat of the car when his mother placed him on the front seat and stealthily shut the door. She ran to the driver’s side, gave the accelerator three terrified, panicky pumps and with a slow, prayerful breath out, turned the key in the ignition.

As they backed out, a movement of the bedroom curtains caught Gerard’s eye. All at once he was awake, his beating heart pulsing wildly in his neck.

‘What are we doing, Mum?’

His mother crunched the Sloper into first gear and accelerated quickly down the street as Gerard tried to watch out the tiny back windows for signs of a counter-attack. He turned back to the road, unsure.

‘He’ll just follow,’ he said, trying not to get his hopes up, trying not to think of the thrashing his mother would get when Frank dragged them home.

‘Yes, but it’s such a perfect day to be in the car, Giraffe.’ Her smile was lit with triumph and daring as they turned into New South Head Road.

‘Where are we going?’

‘Casablanca.’

‘Are we giving the Sloper back to Grandpa then?’

‘No. He said I could have it, remember?’

They passed St. Mary Magdalene’s and again he turned to watch out the rear windows as the church disappeared from view, a tiny fragment of the portal framed momentarily. As they left the city, he began to feel more hopeful, despite the heat. Grandpa’s was further away than Uncle Jimmy’s.

They stopped for a spell on the way and the seat burned his legs when he got back in. His mother had bought a packet of cigarettes and he wished Uncle Jimmy were there to flick him the durry instead of stubbing it into the ashtray the way she did. Uncle Jimmy smoked like Gerard ate ice cream, slowly, relishing every lick, as if it was never going to melt. His mother never smoked till Frank came back. Now she sucked on those things the way Frank ate his tea when he first got home, inhaling the whole plate before it had time to disappear.

When they reached the farm, it felt like a hundred and two degrees in the shade.

‘I swear it’s a hundred and two in the shade, Mum!’

They both laughed. It’s what Uncle Jimmy would have said if he were here.

‘Will we ever see Uncle Jimmy again, Mum?’

‘We might.’

His skin was salty with dried sweat. His nose felt dusty, his mouth parched, no spit even to lick his dry lips. Sheep were gathered in the tiny bit of shade offered by the tree they called the North Point Gum. An old dog blinked at them from the homestead veranda and yawned.

‘Here, Tucker! Come on old boy!’ Gerard was calling the old kelpie before the car had come to a stop. He ran up the steps and threw his arms around the dog’s neck and was rewarded with a lick on the ear.

That night, Grandpa cooked steak and eggs for tea and let Gerard take the scraps out to Tucker. He sat on the front step and let bits of the conversation from inside waft over him, Grandpa calm but firm, his mother by turns apologetic and insistent.

‘Looks like a perfect sunset, Tucks,’ he said when Tucker flopped down next to him.

The horizon was a brilliant pink when his mother’s sheepish footsteps came towards him from the house. He listened to the fly screen slowly creak shut and his mother sat down next to him on the step just as the screen banged against the door frame.

‘It’s a perfect sunset, Giraffe.’

‘Yep.’

‘I want you to stay with Grandpa. It’s perfect here.’

Gerard pulled his eyes away from the distant hills as the sun disappeared in a flash of crimson.

‘Okay.’

‘I loved you, Giraffe, from the first moment I saw you.’

He nodded and turned back to the view. The Sloper loomed below them in the gathering darkness like a sleepy elephant. Something began to swell in his chest and throat.

‘Can the Sloper stay here too? It’d be perfect here with the Sloper.’

‘Grandpa’s got his truck.’

He nodded.

‘You love the truck.’

He nodded again.

‘He’ll teach you to drive it soon, I bet.’

‘Yep.’

His mother leaned over and kissed his forehead. She got up, trotted lightly down the steps and got into the car without turning back. Her three pumps on the accelerator were relaxed this time and she turned the key complacently and gave the accelerator another pump, listening to the engine tick over. She smiled and then turned to him.

They contemplated each other for a moment, as if they’d done this a thousand times before, as if she were going to the shops. She blew him a kiss.

The Sloper headed through the House Paddock and over the ramp, the pink sky now fading to grey. Gerard got up, ran down the steps and followed till he reached the ramp. He stood panting as the Sloper was being slowly swallowed by the night. At the main road, the Sloper waited while a shadow that used to be his mother got out to open the gate.

Gerard’s stomach lurched in sympathy with the Sloper as it went through the gate, and while the Sloper waited for the shadow to close the gate, he bent over and heaved his steak and eggs onto the ramp. When he stood up the Sloper was gone.

He never saw it again. It was a not-so-perfect situation but he didn’t get steamed up over it. And he never whipped the cat.

## Uncle Christie

January 2009

Christie was dying, his wife Sal had told Gerard on the phone. All of his organs had finally started to pack it in. He was 89. Gerard had lived with him at the old Casablanca homestead from 1946 until he'd left to go to university in 1957. It had been an all-male household consisting of Gerard, Grandpa, and his mother's twin brothers, Bill and Christie.

'A fair innings,' Christie would say whenever someone got out during the family Boxing Day cricket match, spitting to the side for emphasis. *Yep, a fair innings, old mate*, Gerard thought walking into the hospital foyer at the coast. *Sounds like I won't be far behind you*. He found Christie's room. Sal stood to greet him and then announced she was off for a coffee. He sat down and took in Christie's gaunt appearance as Christie nodded, acknowledging what Gerard was thinking.

'It's the end, Gerry,' Christie whispered. Every cell in his body seemed to be dry and starving, even his voice box. 'We've seen it all before, o' course.' Christie wanted a Hail Mary for old time's sake and Gerard obliged, a shadow of a smile touching Christie's mouth as he heard the words. He gave Gerard a tiny shake of his head.

'You knew what I always thought o' that claptrap, didn't you, Gerry?' Gerard smiled and Christie's eyes shone with his larrikin humour. 'I loved him, you know that? Your Grandpa, me ol' Dad?' Christie said.

'I know.'

'I hope he comes for me when the time comes. Him and Bill. I reckon they'll come.'

Gerard brushed tears from the corners of his eyes and Christie nodded, not minding. Christie indicated that there was something for Gerard in the drawer, reminding Gerard of the time Grandpa had said this very thing. He pulled the drawer open and saw an envelope with his name on it, which contained an old key and a note in Grandpa's handwriting with just one sparse instruction: 'This is the key to the safe in Mad Gerry's shed. Give it to Gerry when he gets a bit older.'

'Sorry, mate,' Christie repeated. 'I've had it for near on 50 years. I met Sal, you remember,

after you'd gone overseas? I sold the ol' place and moved here and bloody went and lost the darn thing. You never came back for over a decade.'

'What's in it?'

'I dunno.' Christie had sold the farm in 1964 but he'd checked with the current owner that the safe was still in the shed.

'Who owns it now?'

'You won't like it...'

Gerard raised an eyebrow.

'Stella Murdoch, the daughter of your ol' mate Keith.'

It was like someone had punched him in the stomach, and actually, Keith Murdoch's mates had done exactly that to Gerard many times during their school years. 'Shit a brick!' he said.

They sat in meditative silence, sharing their disgust, and then Christie revealed that Keith was ten years in the ground. It was a small mercy. 'She sounded like her father.'

'How's that?'

'Just, you know, like her shit don't stink.' When Gerard didn't respond, Christie sat forward in the bed. 'Don't let it worry you, Gerry. You're bloody gonna have to go there anyway. Open the safe. There'll be something in there, you know? There's stuff went on you never knew.'

'Like what?'

The effort had exhausted Christie and he sank back. 'Just stuff.' He nodded once. 'Promise me you'll do it.'

#

Christie died two weeks later, a digitally-managed death in a morphine-induced haze. He would rather have gone like Bill, Gerard knew, alone up on the Ridge at the farm. He hoped, as Christie had wanted, that Grandpa and Bill had come for him. *You never know...*

The morning after the funeral, Gerard woke and realised the dream had returned in a new form. He'd pulled up in the Sloper at the homestead. An old kelpie yawned from the top step. A sheep trotted out of Mad Gerry's shed, followed by a pig and then a mule. They stood still and quiet and this was, in itself, something new. He got out and stood with the Sloper, a giraffe standing with an elephant. The kelpie dragged itself to its feet and lightly padded down the steps to stand next to the giraffe. They faced off, three and three. The other animals had then faded from view and Grandpa appeared in the kelpie's place to open the door of the Sloper. Gerard jumped into the passenger seat and Grandpa walked around to the driver's side and started the engine.

'Where are we going?' Gerard had asked him, looking ahead.

'Time to collect the others.'



Gerard made the trip to the old town that same day, driven as much by the dream as by the fact of the key. There was also the memoir he'd started writing. *1946!* he exclaimed inwardly as he pulled up in the main street. *As if that was the beginning...* He stepped out of the car and looked about him. *Christ! What now?*

The drugged heat was the same. The hot yearnings of his boyhood stirred him and he thought of malted milkshakes and the river. His tongue felt swollen in his mouth. An old bloke was limping up the street towards him and he quickly stepped forward towards a real estate window and began to peruse the listings. He leant his face to the window till his nose almost touched the glass and read the notice in front of him.

'Fenton Heights!' he said aloud in disgust.

'Yes,' replied a woman who'd materialised beside him. 'Do you know it?'

Had he conjured her from thin air? 'Yes, I do. It used to be part of a property called Casablanca.'

'Correct,' she pronounced, and she stabbed the air between them by offering her hand. 'I'm Shanelle,' she smiled. 'Would you like to come in and see what we've got?'

Shanelle was such a comfort, so much a creature of his present life, that he let himself be talked into looking at a property at Fenton Heights, or what was, for him, Grandpa's Top Paddock. They went together in her car, the new smell of the leather seats cushioning him from the shock of the river. It whizzed by, its ghosts flaring for only the briefest of moments before they burnt away. He felt slightly breathless; his vision blurred. He was distracted by Shanelle's commentary, but as they arrived at the entrance to the Fenton Heights estate, tears watered his eyes. *Sentimental old bastard*, he chastised himself, blinking the tears away, and he wondered why he'd never been back here for a look. *Won't hurt to have a look.*

What they'd called the Top Paddock was unrecognisable. The houses were twenty years old, and the trees planted when they were first built gave them an established air that was cool and leafy. Shanelle pulled up and marched efficiently to the front door.

'... and kitchen.' Shanelle had marched on down the hall.

*Bloody hell! Had she been speaking?* 'Yes.'

An oak and laminex kitchen. A doorway opened through to a sunroom and he could see the backyard brilliantly lit across the grass.

'A great lawn at the back. Great for cricket.'

'Yes.'

'Potential, you know? For...an outdoor living space, a veggie garden, BBQ area.'

'Yes.' He nodded, the corner of his mouth twitching. 'A tennis court, swimming pool...or

a statue. Paris and Helen of Troy, perhaps.'

She put her head to one side.

'You like it?' she announced, slightly amazed.

'Yes.' He paused. 'Give me a minute.'

He strode out the back door to the middle of the yard. A wave of nausea rolled over him, and he tried to convince himself it was the chemo. He gulped the air. There was a gap in the back fence large enough for a car to enter from the laneway that ran up the side of the house. The gap felt menacing and he took a step back. *I could build a rock wall there*, he told himself, and he imagined the wall in place, just high enough to sit on. It would be solid and inviting, perfect for sitting down to have a rest on a hot day like this one. *Perfect*. A perch from which to contemplate the gap, that first one that had thrown him into the void, this last one that had now opened up at his feet. The end of life had appeared like a line marked on the ground, beyond which a great chasm lay waiting, beckoning him. It had always been there, vaguely up ahead, and now a doctor had named the unnameable. He would have to negotiate it well.

## **Life and Death**

**1950**

They were dipping sheep. Uncle Christie was at the back of the race with his dog, pushing up; Grandpa drafted the ewes and their lambs so that they entered the trough slowly; Uncle Bill stood by the side of the dip and pushed the neck of each sheep with the dipping stick until its head went under. It was Gerard's job to make sure each one that went in came up the ramp at the other end.

The water in the trough was a cloudy grey and smelt strongly of Cooper's Arsenic Dip, the sulphur hanging in the air and making Gerard's eyes water whenever he knelt down beside the dip to give a lamb a nudge up the ramp. The dip flowed over the side of the trough as the sheep took the plunge, constantly lapping Gerard's boots. Each of the ewes shook themselves as they emerged, showering his head and shoulders with the chemical mix. The ewes were practical about the business, it seemed to Gerard, but the lambs came out as if they'd been to Dante's Seventh Circle of Hell and back, their bleats like the loud laments of the Violent as they boiled in the river.

Gerard didn't have to directly watch Uncle Bill dunking the sheep to be aware of his rhythmic movement. Uncle Bill did everything slowly. That's why Uncle Christie called him Slow. He'd taken a knock to the head training with the Light Horse in '41 and had never made it overseas to fight. Gerard could see Uncle Bill as one of Chiron's centaurs, shooting arrows at the Violent as they tried to raise themselves out of the boiling blood of the river. The dipping stick plunged slowly and plunged again. Down, down and down, down, twice for each sheep. Gerard knelt, the wet ground immediately cooling his knees. His eyes lost focus from the fumes. He was the guardian of the lambs, making sure they weren't smothered or trapped underneath by the ewes swimming over the top.

The face of his father, Frank, appeared in the dip amongst the sheep, bobbing up and down as he tried to raise himself out. The Violent. Uncle Bill's dipping stick shot Frank below the surface. With a massive effort, Frank rose again, grabbed Gerard's mother by the back of the neck and held her under just like he'd done the week they'd left. Gerard had ridden his trike out in the street, as he'd been told. He'd gotten tired. He'd snuck quietly into the backyard but there was still

shouting. His mother suddenly burst out the back door, ran to the outside laundry and tried to slam the door on Frank, who had followed her, but he pushed it in, swooped on her and forced her face into the full tub of water. Frank's head had turned in slow motion to see Gerard watching him and he'd let go and pushed Gerard hard against the wall as he went out. His mother had come up bleating too.

Gerard shook his head. He was sure he'd lost count. There might be a lamb down.

'Hold up!'

The men froze, watching him expectantly.

'I've lost one,' he said in desperation.

In unison, Uncle Bill began using the dipping stick to nudge the sheep up the end ramp, Grandpa shut the drafting gate to stop the flow of sheep, and Uncle Christie moved up next to Gerard, dropped to his knees and immersed an arm up to his shoulder in the dip. Gerard copied him, feeling for a small body.

'Here!' Uncle Christie pulled a lamb out by the hind leg, threw it on the grass and began pumping its side. It coughed up a lungful of trough water and took a deep, spluttering breath. 'Right as rain, Gerry!' Christie pronounced, clapping Gerard cheerfully on the back. He stood, whistled his dog and strode back to recommence.

The others shifted their attention and took up their positions.

Gerard picked up the lamb and carried it to the holding pen. He dropped it gently over the fence. It shook itself and ran away a few paces. He returned to the dip and instructed himself inwardly not to lose concentration again. It was a matter of life and death. He caught Uncle Bill's eye. Bill gave him a slow nod.

## Old and New Ghosts

February 2009

Gerard sat in his office surrounded by half-packed boxes. His son Mark had accused him of being a hoarder. *Since when was that a category of human being?* He picked up a set of white rosary beads from the floor.

‘Holy Mary, Mother of God. Pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen.’

*The hour of our death.*

He got up, crossed the hall and stood at the doorway of the bedroom. The bed was in pieces, with the mattress against the wall. He’d emptied the life out of the room, leaving indents in the carpet and scuff marks here and there on the wall. He could summon a vision at will of his wife Helen as she lay uttering her last words. *Thank you.* She’d smiled as if saying this had set her free. He’d drunk in her living form knowing it would never be enough and he would spend the rest of his life wanting to do this moment again and do it better.

There were other selves in this room, too. For twenty years after Helen’s death he had slept here, knelt, prayed, thrown open the curtains to assess the day’s weather, and nodded off listening to Phillip Adams on *Late Night Live*.

He had gone on.

Gerard nodded in agreement with himself. ‘Thank you and goodbye,’ he told Helen and the other selves of this room. *The hour of our death, Helen,* he thought, *yours and mine.* Though he knew, now, that they would not die together in this room.

#

‘Just going for a smoke, Dad,’ said Mark as he moved towards the back door. Mark and his wife Julie-Ann were helping Gerard move in. Gerard thought of Uncle Christie up here at the Top Paddock in the early fifties checking his rabbit traps. He did everything with a smoke stuck in the side of his mouth. Uncle Christie’s raucous laughter and the smell of eucalyptus and sheep dung swirled in the air as Gerard joined his son Mark at the back door and passively inhaled.

‘I love you, Mark.’

Mark turned away to exhale and gave his usual answer, 'Course you do, old man.'

Gerard opened his mouth again, then shut it. Always the urge to tell Mark he was dying; always the urge to spare him; and then the futility of bothering. He was seventy years old; of course he was going to die.

'We'll miss you at the pub. I hope you'll be alright coming back here and all that. You never made it sound that great, to tell you the truth.'

'Yes, I know.' Gerard looked out at the yard, his little toolshed now forlornly propped in the back corner. 'Unfinished business.'

'It's bloody quiet.'

'I'm going to miss Julie-Ann's cooking,' he smiled.

Mark nodded and laughed.

Julie-Ann poked her head out the back door. 'Right. Lunch is on!'

'Ah! The First Supper!'

Mark tried to appreciate the joke.

#

Dan Harnett had observed Gerard moving into the house next door. In fact, some weeks prior, he'd observed the lovely agent Shanelle place the 'Sold' sticker over the 'For Sale' sign one evening as he'd arrived home from work at Harnett & Sons, Solicitors. He'd invited her in, of course, for a crisp glass of Chardonnay and quickly taken her against the kitchen bench, her glass still in hand. She'd had a sip of her drink afterwards before she'd even adjusted her clothes.

'He's an old Calligan from way back,' she'd said, responding to his probing of a moment before. 'Grew up on the property.'

'Fair dinkum?' Dan zipped himself in. 'Dad probably knows him then.'

'Dinner?'

'Sorry, mate, I can't.'

'You never can, darling.' She'd thrown her head back and finished off the glass.

Shanelle had been a good sport on at least two other occasions and he didn't quite know why he'd never consented to dinner in the past, but he knew why he couldn't now. He'd been screwing Zara, another neighbour, for years behind the back of her prick of a husband and she'd finally just separated from him. He hoped, assumed even, that they would now make a go of it. Ridiculing Dan's women had always been Zara's favourite pastime and she'd never seemed to mind how many of them there were. She derided all his prospects with the greatest relish despite admonishing him every so often to marry a nice girl and have a couple of Harnett kids.

There had been Harnetts in the town since the 1820s when it was still frontier country, the

first of them driving cattle beyond the “Limits” and laying claim to more than 200,000 acres before losing much of it in boundary disputes. The family had managed to settle into grand prosperity, riding solidly on the sheep’s back right through into the new century and onwards to the post-war wool boom. They still carried a semblance of being the landed gentry in a certain manner of speech and dress and only spoke to certain people under very certain circumstances, mostly if acknowledging the presence of the publicly schooled was entirely unavoidable.

The day after Gerard moved in, Dan left his house to walk up the laneway to the shops. He slowed as he crossed Gerard’s driveway. This was where three-year-old Hannah Hoffman had been backed over by her own father a few months ago. Dan couldn’t walk past without thinking of the child slipping away in a blurred montage of horror and panicked shouting.

He’d been mowing his front lawn. He was on the spot after hearing the thud almost as quickly as the nurse from across the road who had begun performing CPR. Dan had called the ambulance. Now he felt like there was a time warp here. He could think through the whole of that Saturday morning, all the hours of it, as he took each step over the spot. He always called it “the spot” in his head. He looked at the spot every time he left the house, every time he returned. Did people stay on the spot where they died, at least for a while? Had Hannah been hovering there watching their anguish? Was she confused? Did she realise she was dying? Was there a tunnel of light? Kerry Packer said there wasn’t but Dan hoped that someone had come to collect her, a grandparent perhaps.

Today, for the first time, he wondered if the dead visited their place of death. This brought him to a sudden halt and he looked at the ground near his feet, studying it intently, for what he didn’t know. Movement, a heavenly sparkle of colour, an apparition? What did he expect?

He swayed on his feet.

*I’m sorry*, he thought, sending an apology to the dead child in case she *was* here, in case she could read his mind. *I wish you’d had the chance to grow up*. He’d thought this a thousand times before but had never spoken directly to Hannah inside his head. Was he losing it altogether? He looked up and down the street, ashamed of his obsession with this ghost of a child, and went on.

As he turned into the laneway, he could see his new neighbour’s car was pulled up next to the gap in his backyard fence with a trailer of rocks attached to it. The old man was nowhere to be seen. Dan went on to the shop, brought bread and milk, and once again entered the lane. There he was, unloading his rocks, as Dan approached.

‘Doesn’t look like much of a dinner,’ Gerard commented as Dan reached him. ‘Tea and toast?’

Dan held up his purchases and grinned. ‘Bachelor staples!’ he declared, shifting them into one hand and holding out his other one to introduce himself. They established their connections, as country people must, Dan admitting he’d already learned Gerard had been a local, Gerard mockingly exasperated that he’d moved in next to a Harnett: Dan’s Uncle Wilkie had, unsurprisingly, been one of the bullies of Gerard’s childhood.

‘His son’s the same,’ said Dan. ‘I was his punching bag as a kid. His name’s Wilkie, too. I reckon the name’s cursed.’

Gerard squinted his eyes up as if something had caught his eye off in the distance. ‘Cursed? Yeah, I couldn’t say if there was a Harnett curse but one could probably argue for it.’

Dan raised his eyebrows.

‘Sorry, don’t mind me,’ said Gerard. ‘I keep wondering what the hell I’m doing here. There are ghosts of the past everywhere.’

Dan made an effort to shake off the dead child. He put his bread and milk on the trailer wheel arch and began helping Gerard unload the rocks. The child persisted, however; Gerard mentioned his plans for the wall and Dan couldn’t help but ask if Gerard knew about the tragedy. The three-year-old Hannah had wandered out the gap here in the fence and run up the lane to the front. Her Dad had backed over her and she’d died before the ambulance arrived. ‘Didn’t Shanelle mention it?’

‘No, but it seems you have a ghost too.’

‘Technically she’s your ghost. She lived here.’

‘You’re the one she’s haunting by the sound of it.’

Dan rolled his eyes at himself. He’d never noticed the kid before she’d died but now found himself apologising to her when he walked across Gerard’s driveway! He knew Hannah’s ghostly presence was not really hanging there in the air listening to his thoughts and yet he found himself addressing her. It was absurd.

‘Maybe,’ Gerard lightly shrugged one of his shoulders. ‘I’ve learnt not to worry about whether it’s real. The memories are always real for me.’

It was an abrupt pronouncement, a dismissal, but Dan persisted.

‘You have to know what you believe in though. I mean, for fuck’s sake, why talk to a ghost when you know death is the end?’

‘Is it the end?’

‘Seriously, who believes in all that religious crap anymore?’

‘What’s religion got to do with it?’

Dan blinked and looked away. Years of indoctrination at Our Lady of Perpetual Help sank



into view and he stepped back, repulsed. God, Heaven, souls, the promise of an afterlife. The fucking pointlessness of even being here, that's what Dan had thought about when the kid died in front of his eyes. His jaw hardened against his own glimpses of an imaginary world. 'Wanting to believe doesn't make it so.'

Gerard punched the air with relish, excited to have a philosopher on his doorstep. 'This cheers me up no end.'

Dan picked up his supplies. His laugh was skeptical. 'Yeah, cheers,' he said, giving up.

#

In the evening, Gerard went for a walk.

'Christie Street!' he exclaimed aloud when he came upon a street bearing his uncle's name. Christie had taken over the farm when Grandpa had his heart attack in '59. Gerard had gone off travelling overseas straight after the funeral and had stayed away for eleven years. By the time he'd returned, Christie had sold up and moved to Batemans Bay. Gerard fought the urge to reach out and touch the street sign to confirm that it was real. It felt like a moment out of one of his animal dreams. Perhaps the street name was a coincidence, without cause, but he would have to walk on to know. He braced himself.

'Lovers Lane!' This time Gerard was disgusted. He felt winded and had to lean against a fence, bend over and catch his breath. And then he was angry. He stood up straight and gave the signpost a stern look, as if Christie was there. Why would Christie have told that to anyone else? Gerard shook his head. *He was a talker. He ended up ruling that fish and chip shop of his like a publican.*

'That's no excuse, Christie!' Two more houses on the left and he could see a vacant block. As he reached it, the sun was setting. And there it was, still, the old Casablanca homestead looking considerably more spick and span, even in the half-light, a fresh coat of paint giving it a cream and grey gleam, the gums placed around it at compass points, still making it the centre of the universe, as he'd always thought. A wave of nausea hit his stomach and he felt dizzy and disorientated. He'd been looking forward to this moment, but all that swam in his head was a great grey elephant chugging slowly away from him, leaving forever, on a night so sleepily normal just like this one. So long ago, that moment had shaped his psyche ever after, the dream a signpost: never again would he be caught so unaware. He started to weep, for those who had peopled his small life, Grandpa, Uncle Bill, Uncle Christie, Frank, Uncle Jimmy, and his mother. But mostly he wept for the Sloper.

#

On Saturday morning, out in the lane again to make a start on building the wall, Gerard's

knowledge of his new neighbourhood expanded beyond Dan Harnett, the solicitor next door, whom all variously described, dismissed, disapproved of, or indeed patronised, as the town's most eligible bachelor. It amused Gerard to be reminded, so soon, of the small-town revelation of gossipy detail that flowed so effortlessly and with such good cheer, as his new neighbours darted back and forth to the corner shop at the end of his lane, stopping to pronounce who they were and to enlighten him, if they could, with something slight but compelling about others.

The romantic entanglements of Dan Harnett remained the most tantalising from Gerard's writerly point of view. Stella Murdoch, the new owner of the Casablanca homestead, had been Dan's girlfriend at school. Dan's other neighbour, Zara, had been Stella's best friend for their entire childhood until Stella took off to university with Zara's boyfriend firmly in tow, a devastating betrayal only a novelist could relish. Stella and her now husband Jeff had returned to town some years later. The two women didn't speak, while Dan, with impressive nonchalance, maintained an easy friendship with Stella, his old flame, a neutral nodding acquaintance with Stella's husband Jeff, and a discreet affair with Zara, the recently single mother of two.

Gerard met Zara in the early morning when she was out walking. She didn't usually talk to people so candidly, she'd apologised, after describing her ex-husband as somewhat abusive.

'What's "somewhat abusive"?' Gerard had inquired of the immaculately sneakered and pony-tailed Zara.

'He was controlling and called me names in front of the kids but he only hit me twice in our whole marriage. I was lucky.'

'How's that?' Gerard was flummoxed.

'I always thought he'd make it hard for me if I left, but he had an affair and left me.' She was guarded and unemotional, her face giving nothing of her prior hardship away. 'It could have been worse.'

This was a cliché straight from his own childhood. He'd felt a paternal gap opening and knew he would try to fill it, and despite his lighthearted musings about his neighbours as he mixed some cement and poured the footings, the tragedy and loneliness of Zara's life hung in the air. She'd struck him as formidably stoic, so magnificently held together that it was tempting to assume that it didn't cost her anything. It was a Stepford quality: one could only surmise that there would not be real blood in her veins. It shamed him now that he'd tried to expose her wiring. He'd agreed that perhaps it could have been worse but that hardly negated the suffering she'd been through and the fact that she probably needed to work through it somehow. He'd wondered who she had supporting her.

'I have Dan,' she'd said. 'We went to school together.'

Gerard had felt shock register on his face at the inadequacy of this. ‘But you have family, surely, or a few girlfriends? You can’t only . . . have Dan?’ It had been like watching a fortress crumble.

Zara had stepped back and turned her face away, the burden of having her isolation pointed out to her was a weight too heavy to bear. ‘I can’t,’ she said, putting up a hand to stop him. ‘Please, don’t.’

He’d despaired that it had suddenly become irrecoverable. Perhaps she’d call in for a cuppa sometime? He’d had violence in his childhood and they could compare scars. Or perhaps Dan knew a counsellor . . .

This had given her time to swallow. ‘No, I can’t talk to a counsellor.’

He’d been heartened that only the unknown counsellor had been rebuffed and he’d nodded at their unspoken agreement. ‘Let’s catch up soon.’ He’d watched her walk away, reassured that she’d not said goodbye.

The news stories coming from Gerard’s radio over the course of the morning had included the aftermath of the Black Saturday bushfires of the previous week and Rudd’s \$42 billion stimulus package in the wake of the Global Financial Crisis. Gerard picked up his radio now and headed inside for lunch, taking with him the drama of the great and the small.

‘What a bloody shit show!’ He wasn’t entirely sure what disgusted him the most.

## Mongrels and Bastards

1952

Gerard and Grandpa had spent the morning putting in new posts along the boundary fences. It was Grandpa's school holiday project, and though they made a good early start each morning, it seemed to Gerard that August was a not-so-perfect time to be digging post-holes. The ground was frozen solid and it took a great beating with the crowbar before it cracked up enough to get the shovel in.

This morning they'd been fogged in a misty, little world all their own. It was ice cold, their breath smoky. Grandpa's was always a companionable silence; he was a quiet, methodical worker and even when Gerard had been too small to shut up, Grandpa had only ever grunted, winked, laughed, nodded or patted him on the back. Today Gerard couldn't even feel his lips. He would have had to talk without their benefit if he'd wanted to, which he didn't.

Not that there wasn't a lot to say. Gerard just never got around to saying it.

*What's the point?* he thought as he threw a leg over his bike after lunch. He was free to ride to town for a few hours each afternoon. If he didn't there'd be other jobs to do, so he usually took off on the bike. Not that he didn't like the farm work, not that he had a great time in town anyway, but . . . *It's nice to hear the sound of your own voice occasionally, nice not to have to bloody keep a conversation going with yourself all bloody day.*

'Ye speak with an ill tongue, friend,' he told himself out loud as the bike rattled over the ramp and he began to peddle furiously as the road inclined towards the main gate. 'Clipsby,' he shouted, quoting again from Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Black Arrow*, which he'd just started reading the night before, 'off to the Moat House, and send all other laggards to the same gate,' and he laughed as got to the gate, threw the bike down and ran to open it.

It was a coast all the way to the bridge and he gradually got his breath back as he admired their new fence posts, feeling satisfied and choosing to forget the strain of lifting the thick, new timber.

The fog had cleared but it was a flat, dull day. After the bridge, he lazily pedalled the four blocks to Parker Street and left his bike outside the milk bar. He bought a Violet Crumble bar and

took a bite as he walked up the street looking for his cousins Denis and Johnny.

There was a scuffle of feet and he was ambushed from behind. After being slammed and pummelled and bulldozed, he found himself face down on the concrete with both arms pulled tight behind his back and one nostril flat to the ground as he watched Keith Murdoch take the second bite from his Violet Crumble and hand it on to one of his mates.

‘You’re growing up, Little Bastard,’ said Keith, swallowing Gerard’s chocolate with infuriating entitlement. ‘It takes two to hold you down now.’ He bent down to speak into Gerard’s other nostril, ‘Might even take three if you’d have a bit of go, mate. You never fight back, LB. It’s getting boring. Don’t it make you mad to have no old man?’

‘You oughta ask someone the facts of life, Murdoch. Don’t you know everyone’s got an old man? Come out to the farm one day and I’ll get one of the bulls to demonstrate how babies are made.’

The grip on his arms tightened and Keith put the toe of his boot down on Gerard’s face, flattening the exposed nostril.

‘Always got a fucking smart mouth, don’t you, Calligan? Hear that? Calligan! That’s your mother’s name innit? Some poor bloke’s sperm got waylaid inside your Mum’s hole, mate, and you’re the poor excuse for a human being that came out nine months later.’ Keith stepped back and smiled with gratification at his mates’ laughter. ‘Ah, it’s great to be back home, innit boys?’

‘Yeah, thought you had the run of the place didn’t you, Little Bastard?’ said the bully sitting on the back of Gerard’s legs. It was Wilkie Harnett.

‘Yep.’ Gerard’s voice sounded strained. It was hard to breathe with the weight of Big Jack Walsh deflating his lungs. ‘Really missed you, Wilkie, nearly two whole weeks without a chicken-hearted gorilla sneaking up on me from behind. No wonder your old man didn’t go to war, mate. You had to fight the Krauts front on, that’d be no good for a Harnett.’

Wilkie pushed Big Walshie off Gerard’s back and attacked, causing immense mirth amongst the others who formed a ring around the two boys throwing kicks and punches on the ground, though their sluggish cheering suggested they’d seen it all before.

Gerard was quick and light on his feet, having had the benefit of some training from Grandpa’s wool presser Tiny Brooks, who’d had his teeth knocked out in ’46 by Dave Sands when Jimmy Sharman came to town for the show. In a matter of seconds, he’d scrambled to his feet and was reaching up to jab Wilkie’s face and then skipping round to make sure Wilkie didn’t land any of his slow punches.

Someone pushed him roughly from behind and he had no choice but to step in and land a punch in Wilkie’s stomach. At the same time Wilkie’s fist connected on the side of his left eye,

but he managed to stay on his feet.

‘For Christ’s sake Wilkie!’ he heard above the other shouts, and at once Wilkie’s twin brother Arthur was between them, pushing Wilkie back, and the ring broke up. Artie was tall like Wilkie but leaner. He had the confident, unruffled authority of the highly intelligent. ‘Leave Gerry alone, you bloody mug!’

Gerard was panting and standing dumbly, his brain fuzzy.

‘Gerry!’ His cousin Denis appeared beside him and, throwing an arm round his shoulder, steered him away from the crowd towards Johnny.

‘Sorry, Gerry.’ Johnny stood astride his bike, his little pointed face strained.

‘What are you apologising for, John Boy?’ said Denis. ‘What do you think you could have done if we’d got here sooner, you little squirt? Gerry held his own, didn’t you, mate?’

Gerard touched the side of his eye gingerly. It was tender and was starting to puff up. ‘They ate my bloody Violet Crumble’.

Denis laughed, as usual, as if everything was a joke. ‘That’s a bit of a blow, mate. Lucky I’ve got a bit of silver. Come on!’ and he picked up his bike from the ground and walked it back towards the milk bar.

Mr. Ingram gave them a free milk shake to share when they bought more chocolate and put a small bit of ice in a rag for Gerard’s eye. ‘Looks like she’ll be black by the time you get home, Gerry,’ he said with a grim smile.

It wasn’t until they got back outside that Gerard realised his bike was gone. He would have hidden it under the apple trees near the river if he’d known Murdoch was back in town.

‘Bloody hell!’ he cursed both himself and the Murdochs of the world, and threw the bit of rag into the bin.

‘I’ll dub you to the flat, Gerry. Come on,’ said Johnny and he picked up his bike and stood over it close to the handle bars so Gerard had room to get on.

‘No, I’ll dub him to the flat, Pip Squeak.’

‘Righto, righto.’ Gerard clutched the back of Denis’s shirt as he climbed onto the seat of Denis’s bike. ‘Did you buy smokes, Den?’

‘What sort of drongo d’ya take me for? Course I bought smokes,’ Denis said as he stood on his peddles and slowly got the bike on its way. ‘Just the thing for a black eye, ay Gerry, a couple of Luckies? You owe me a deener, by the way.’

‘Come off it. Three into two and six ain’t one bob,’ said Gerard, cross at this small injustice.

‘Close enough,’ Denis grinned.

‘His maths is bloody hopeless.’ Johnny shook his head. ‘It’s tenpence, you dill.’ He stood

up and peddled ahead.

‘You little mongrel bastard!’ yelled Denis, and he started pumping his own peddles to catch up.

‘No,’ Johnny turned his head around as he sat back on his seat letting the bike coast, ‘Gerry’s the bastard, remember? I’m just the mongrel.’

Gerard started to laugh. He laughed all the way to the Flat and was still laughing when he took a drag on his first cigarette.

## The Curse of Mad Gerry

March 2009

Gerard stood at his back door, a cup of tea in one hand and his battered transistor radio in the other, and surveyed the yard. It was going to be another scorcher, a voice told him gravely from the radio, and fires still raged in Victoria.

‘Poor bastards.’ Gerard shook his head.

The brick wall he’d built over the past two weekends beckoned from the back corner, raw and ugly. The rocks lying scattered in the backyard were starting to look comfortable, cushioned now in long grass he couldn’t mow. He sighed and looked up into the early morning sun. *Fear no more the heat o’ the sun, Nor the furious winter’s rages; Thou thy worldly task hast done.* The words came to mind as if he’d just stepped off the university stage. It was Shakespeare’s ‘Cymbeline’ and he’d played Guiderius, the disguised son of the king.

‘Always a son in disguise,’ he told the backyard.

He bracketed the appeal of going back to the kitchen table in his mind, placed the radio and his mug on the window ledge behind him and strode purposefully towards the garage. He dug out his camp table and chairs and erected an old green-and-white striped beach gazebo over them on the grass. This had an energising effect and he got to work.

A song on the radio at mid-morning drew him to the table. He thought of a Spanish beach in Estapona he and Helen had camped on for a few days in the sixties. They’d been there for the Virgen del Carmen fiesta, the Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. Along with the locals, they’d followed the statue of the Virgin as she was carried from the church to the sea and watched from the shore as she was floated around the bay on a raft. *Stella Maris, Star of the Sea...* He remembered the statue of the Virgin, her eyes, pure and desperately loving, below her massive crown bursting out into its gold star. She had given him hope. On that day, he’d thought of Stella, his mother. Now there was this new Stella ensconced at Casablanca, a Murdoch, who was quite possibly named after her.

Dan came wandering up from the shops with the paper and a bag of shopping. He entered



the yard as if this was the usual practice and said, 'Croissant?' as he ripped the bag open and threw his newspaper on the table.

Gerard read the front page and then looked up to see Zara in full stride, listening to music with her earphones. She spotted them under the gazebo and she, too, turned in, pulling her earphones out with a tired smile.

After only a couple of weeks of meeting like this, Gerard felt that they'd formed a threesome that was familial, almost wordlessly intimate. He had gleaned certain things. Dan was a closet farmer. His cousin, the son of Gerard's bully Wilkie Harnett, had come into the family property and Dan was bitter about it. Dan knew it was ridiculous that he would desire to scratch around the dry Australian paddocks chasing a few sheep when he now had an education and a career that actually made him a decent living. The truth, however, sat inside him like his mother had just forced him to eat a plate of lamb's fry. His work was a desolation; the idea of being on the land was a hunger he could barely put into words. He wanted the land he'd grown up on and could not have it.

Zara had found the trauma of her childhood beginning to dig itself out of her unconscious now that she had shed the distraction of a bad marriage and its great theatrics. What was she left with? Her mother had fled the family when she was four and her father began raping her at age seven. It kept surprising Gerard that she could be so composed. He'd never known such a wounded human being, so far as he knew. He wondered if he would be here with her when the floodgates burst open. He worried even more that she was capable of keeping it inside her forever. Would there be a cost?

'I've decided to go back to cooking,' Zara announced. 'There's a café downtown for lease.'

Dan's shrug was skeptical. He could not imagine that people had the ability to affect change in their lives.

'Yes, good plan!' said Gerard.

She nodded in acknowledgement of his encouragement, her face blank, and with this, he felt, they made a pact to forge ahead together.

Dan looked from one to the other and tried to sense the paths that now lay open before him. Could he continue this ruse of being part of something with these two or should he go on alone? Was he redundant if Zara didn't want to fuck him anymore, as she'd suddenly proclaimed last week? He was hungover from last night. He'd hooked up with Trisha, a single mum, down at the Crown Hotel and brought her home. She had the greatest tits he'd ever seen. The drunken slamming he'd given her was okay but he would have liked to have had her again this morning. She was dressed and had a taxi at the door before he'd had the chance to properly wake up. She

hadn't been bothered at all when he'd called her Tracey by mistake as she left.

He gulped down the water in front of him and then gazed at the circular pattern at the bottom of the glass. There was an infinity of past moments circling back in time to the moment of his birth, he thought, mostly made up of failures, intentions that had not come to fulfilment, dreams he'd never understood. The next moment came and then the next and each new point held the last one and it had always been this way. Every unique moment retained every other moment, not only of his life but of every life that had ever been lived, like a continuous whole. He breathed in and out. He was part of an infinite series of beings related to each other. He watched this moment occur, and then this one, and this one, each flowing on . . . to what? He was tired of hoping and waiting, sick of trying to make things happen, but each moment came, whether he tried or not. Anything could happen.

He would stick with these two, he decided, unless the ghost of Hannah Hoffman gave him a sign not to.

#

After working on the wall all afternoon, Gerard went for a lap around the paddock, as usual reaching the vacant block in time to see the sun almost setting over the Casablanca homestead. For the first time, he decided to explore further.

He noted a street going off to the right that evoked another ghost: Dewey Street. *Dewey Jones. Denis and Johnny's Granddad.* He knew he'd been ignoring the fact of Denis and Johnny since he'd arrived and would have to deal with them soon. *Not yet though.* At the bottom of the hill an old dirt laneway took off to the left; that would take him from Fenton Heights to Casablanca. He soon entered the scrub below the hill the family had called the Ridge.

'Hmm,' he grunted aloud, absurdly annoyed that the Estate even existed. 'That's what happens when you sell good farming country to a town boy.' The agent, Shanelle, had told him that Dave Smythe, the bloke who'd bought the Top Paddock from Grandpa in '56 along with their horses Bogart and Ingrid, was the person responsible for the Fenton Heights development. Grandpa had never forgiven Bogart for marrying Bacall. It was the only reason he'd been able to sell the horses. Everyone had called Grandpa JT, short for John Thomas. He'd looked like Humphrey Bogart, so everyone had said. JT had made Bogart's fedora his signature look.

Gerard reached a gate saying "Private Property" and leaned against it in the dark.

In their wedding photo, Grandma, Sylvia Fenton, did look a bit like Ingrid Bergman, Gerard had realised as an adult. The Calligans had always lived up river, north of town. They were technically the first settlers in the area, though only by a month or two. Great Grandfather had asked JT to come and work at Fenton Park, as the property was called in those days, hoping he'd

marry Sylvia and take over the farm and that's exactly what had happened.

Gerard remembered Christie's declaration that Great Grandfather was mad. When Gerard was a boy, the entire clan had spoken about him as "Mad Gerry", usually with an affectionate smile or a good-natured wink accompanying an outrageous tale of Mad Gerry being thrown from his horse and having to drag himself home with a broken leg or Mad Gerry ranting in the pub about how Fenton Park was cursed. When Mad Gerry's father came out from the home country his wife had hated the place on sight and died at age thirty-seven. Mad Gerry's three younger brothers were Walter, and the twins Les and Douglas. They all died in the Great War. Then *he* only had daughters and his wife Annie died at forty-one. His eldest daughter, Sylvia, married JT and then died when she was twenty having Uncle Bill and Christie, who were twins. Gerard's mother, Stella, was just a year old when her mother died. Mad Gerry saw the movie *Casablanca* just before he passed away in 1942 and he'd made JT promise to change the name of the property to break the curse.

Gerard nodded to himself, thinking it through. 'Yep. I'll call it *The Curse of Mad Gerry*'

#

On Sunday, Gerard drove out to Hemsdale, the property of his cousin Wally Sinclair. As he approached the bridge to cross the river, three furtive teenagers slouched through the park close to the river. He was gratified to see them smoking and kicking up piles of wood chip as they walked. *Denis and Johnny!* The names came like this, every time he crossed the river. The wretchedness that sank upon him made him ashamed, not to feel, but to have forgotten, for so long, what Denis and Johnny had meant to him.

They'd spent Boxing Day with the Sinclairs every year for about a decade for the family cricket match. Gerard had always been captain of the Fenton/Jones side and his cousin Wal lead the Sinclair team. Uncle Bill was the Fenton/Jones bowler. *For a slow bloke, he's the fastest fast bowler ever*, Gerard remembered Christie saying with pride, spitting to the side.

'Well, I'll be buggered! It's my cousin Gerry again after all these years,' said Wally, white-haired and ruddy-faced, and he limped forward as Gerard entered the room. 'How are you, old mate?'

Gerard's eyes glistened. 'Great to see you, Wal.'

'Yep, it's been a bloody good while but some things are just too much Gerry.'

In this way they agreed not to speak of anything hard.

It was congenial in the way of country gatherings, the women busy with food and children, their exclamations cheerful and accepting, the men standing, feet apart, drinking beer, talking of weather, sheep sales, and horses.

Wally introduced a clean, stripey-shirted son-in-law whose uncle had been Big Jack Walsh,

the one who'd sat on Gerard's back on more than one occasion so that Keith Murdoch could taunt him for the effrontery of his existence. Like Dan, this man didn't resemble Gerard's ghost at all. Gerard had not quite been able to resist his disappointment in the pleasantness of these almost middle-aged relatives of the Murdoch set. Shouldn't they be marked by their heritage? Had all the bullies made amends to such an extent that their descendants were well-adjusted bores? He knew at least this wasn't quite true of Dan, who had sufficiently suffocated his spirit to be of quite substantial interest. He looked deeply into the son-in-law's eyes as he spoke, trying to discern an inherited legacy. Had Big Walshie ever had an epiphany of guilt? He tested the water, bringing up the connection.

Wally assisted by stepping up to bat. He counted them off on his fingers. 'Keith and John Murdoch, Big Jack Walsh, he died in a car accident in '74, Al Sheehan, Harry Peardon, Davey Black known as White Davey, Freddie Chipside, who they called Chipper and we called Nipper 'cos he was always nipping at Keith's heels, and Wilkie Harnett. There were others but that was the main lot. Mostly they existed to use Gerry as a punching bag. But they liked to terrorise the Chinese and the Italians too.'

'Why Gerry?'

Wally planted his feet, folded his arms across his chest. Keith and Wilkie had heard too much rubbish from their parents about Casablanca and Gerry's mother. Keith's father, Les, had proposed to Gerry's mother back in the day but she refused. He called a daughter after her, but no one really knew that. Stella Murdoch. She was Keith's twin sister. She'd drowned in the river when she was about four and that's why Keith called his daughter Stella. The drowning was a big thing in town. They wanted to fence off the main swimming hole near the bridge and stop kids from going there. At this, Wally changed the subject abruptly. He'd read all of Gerard's novels and proceeded to count them off on his fingers. '*Hung Out to Dry, Lost at Watsons Bay, The Mule's Folly* and *Arthur Jones Remembers*. You're a national treasure. About time you come home.'

Despite the number of people, they managed to have a sit-down dinner, and as was traditional at Hemsdale in the summer, they had it along the front veranda. Wal sat at the head with his wife on his right and Gerard on his left. The upset, as usual, came midway through dessert. In the old days, it was because Christie had become drunk and obnoxious and had managed to insult someone in a stinging, new way. Once, it had been a guest of Uncle Alfie's. They'd been Japanese POWs together during the war and Christie had taunted him about not being a "Thirty Niner".

'All right for old Alf to wait for conscription, but what's your excuse, mate? Let's drink to

the good old Sixth Divvy I say.'

'It's a wonder you never took a bullet in that fat gob of yours,' Grandpa had said, saving the day, and everyone had laughed. Gerard had heard later that Uncle Alfie's poor mate came to blows with Christie the next afternoon in the pub.

Today it was a red Falcon Ute from about 1990 coming up the drive. Much conjecture about the owner ensued until one of the teenage granddaughters breezily stood up from the kid's table and made her way to the top of the steps.

'Tyler and I are going to see a movie, Mum. See you later.'

Her mother stood up and marched towards her and a fiercely whispered argument ensued.

Wal gave Gerard a nudge, making light of the intensities of their post-war upbringing, as if the universal issue of teenage love was all that had been the matter. 'Just like the old days, ay Gerry? Always during dessert.'

#

Zara called on Gerard one evening during the week. They'd made tea and were having it in his office, where she'd found him working. He offered to read her a piece and she settled into his little red couch.

Gerard pushed some papers around on his desk, picked up a few sheets and read:

*The morning dawned dark and foggy, and when Gerard lifted the bed covers clear of his head his breath came out in icy puffs of smoke.*

*He'd dreamed of being small enough to sit in the curled-up tip of the elephant's trunk. He was safe there, asleep, being rocked lovingly to and fro. His little-boy dream-self had woken on the back seat of the Sloper. His mother and Uncle Jimmy were in the front, laughing and smoking, neither one of them driving. The car seemed to be driving itself, rocking to each side like a train carriage, the lights of Sydney twinkling past in a cheerful flash. The Sloper pulled into a station and his mother and Uncle Jimmy quickly disappeared into the throng of people pushing and shoving wildly on the platform, like Frank when he was drunk. The people turned into jungle animals, and they roared and hissed at each other.*

*As the Sloper pulled out of the platform, he had climbed over into the driver's seat and taken control of the steering wheel. It was daylight and when they pulled up at a milk bar, Uncle Jimmy stuck his head in the window and said, 'I know you'll be fine, Giraffe.'*

*Gerard had woken to the smell of Grandpa's chops and eggs. He dressed and went into the kitchen to join Uncle Bill, who was already eating. Grandpa placed a plate in front of him and he covered his breakfast in salt and pepper.*

*'D'you hear that racket last night in the shed?' Grandpa said, speaking down into the cooking pan as he cracked another couple of eggs into it for himself. 'Wind must've worked a bit of tin loose.'*

*'Yep,' said Gerard.*

*'I reckon the ghost of Mad Gerry's trying to fix his ol' Packard Eight again,' said Uncle Bill to his tea.*

*And that would be the extent of the talk over breakfast, Gerard knew.*

*He took a deep, slow breath, the cold air travelling through his nostrils, cooling the back of his throat and opening his chest. He was feeling reckless. He had a black eye and no bike to ride to school: how much worse could things get?*

*'You know Uncle Bill, whenever you tell stories about Mad Gerry, he doesn't sound all that mad.'*

*Uncle Bill stopped cutting his chop and froze. He put his fork down, then his knife, unravelled a handkerchief from his pocket and brought it up to his mouth. He gave his mouth a single wipe from left to right and stuffed the handkerchief back into his pocket.*

*Grandpa sat down at the table and got in before Uncle Bill had a chance to open his mouth.*

*'He wasn't mad. That's just Christie's bunkum,' said Grandpa to the salt and pepper.*

*Uncle Bill relaxed and picked up his tea and took a sip.*

*'You call him Mad Gerry, Uncle Bill.'*

*The mug was placed deliberately on its coaster and Slow Bill turned his head to Gerard.*

*'Well,' said Slow Bill. 'He did sound a bit cracked when he talked about the Fenton Curse.'*

*'What was the Fenton Curse?'*

*'Eat up, Bill. Your eggs are getting cold,' said Grandpa.*

*'Gerry wants to hear about the Curse.' Uncle Bill took up his knife and then his fork and continued to cut off a piece of meat. He left the meat on the end of his fork and placed the knife and fork down on the plate. 'Mad Gerry had one son and he was born dead. Then his wife died. Her name was Annie. His eldest daughter married Dad,' he pointed to Grandpa. 'She was called Sylvia. Maggie married Dewey. Ruth never married. She shot herself in '41 when her high school beau was killed during the Battle for Tobruk. Alice married Alfie and moved to 'Hemsdale'. Sylvia had your mother Stella and then died a year later having Christie and me. Your mother eloped with Frank and had you, I got run over by a stampede over at Walgrove, and Christie went a bit mad himself during the war and took to the drink.'*

*'But not all of that's bad, Uncle Bill.'*

*Uncle Bill picked up his tea again and took a sip. 'Well,' he nodded once. 'We'll be fine*

*now you're here, Gerry. And we've got Denis and Johnny. One of you'll keep the farm going.'*

*Grandpa grunted.*

*Gerard wasn't sure if Grandpa was unhappy about his chops or if he was going to say something.*

*'Denis and Johnny are town boys, Bill,' Grandpa said at last, as if that explained something.*

*'Christie'll get married soon and have a couple of kids,' said Uncle Bill, not giving up.*

*'Why don't you get married, Uncle Bill? Christie reckons for a slow bloke you're not bad with the women.'*

*Uncle Bill's guffaw was loud and deep. 'Well, Christie would say that, but women these days are impatient. They want you to get your ideas together in a real hurry. Doesn't really suit my style.'*

*Gerard couldn't help it. It slipped out before he could stop it. 'Was my mother impatient? Why did she elope? Why did she bring me back here?'*

*Uncle Bill picked up his knife and fork and looked at Grandpa, waiting for him to speak.*

*Grandpa swallowed and appeared to brace himself.*

*'She eloped because she was pregnant with you and she had to marry someone quickly. She brought you back here because your Dad, Frank, was a violent drunk,' Grandpa looked him square in the eye across the table. 'As you probably remember.'*

*Gerard hardly heard this speech he was so elated from finally asking the question and because Grandpa had, quite unexpectedly, answered. His heartbeat throbbed like a drum in his ear, adrenaline almost causing him to bring up his breakfast.*

*'But what about Uncle Jimmy?' he said.*

*'Jimmy?' Grandpa scowled. He turned to Uncle Bill who shrugged blank-faced, almost imperceptibly. 'Who's Jimmy?'*

*'He lived with us. During the war.'*

*'Your Dad's brother?'*

*'I don't know.'*

*'How was he your uncle?'*

*'I don't know.'*

*'Where did he sleep?'*

*'I don't know.'*

*Uncle Bill lifted his fork to his mouth and started to chew, looking carefully up at the ceiling.*

*Grandpa continued to eat in disgruntled silence. When he finished, he cleared his plate to the sink, already full of soapy water. He ran the hot tap, washed his plate under it, grabbed a tea towel, dried the plate and put it away.*

*'I'll be down the Flat this afternoon. You'll have to walk to there. Bill can take you to town now.'*

*Grandpa was about to walk out and the chance would be lost.*

*'Does she ever write? Where is she?'*

*Grandpa leaned against the kitchen bench and looked at the floor. His tongue worked itself around the inside of his mouth. 'She's in Melbourne. She works in a supermarket in Prahran.' He sucked some invisible food out of his teeth and went on. 'You're a good boy, Gerry. You're smart. I want to send you to the university in Sydney. Just think about that now, would you?'*

*He didn't wait for an answer.*

*When Uncle Bill let him off at school his bike was sitting in the bicycle rack minus the seat. Gerard rode it that way for three weeks until Denis turned up with one he'd stolen from Chipper the Nipper.*

#

Gerard finished reading and looked up.

'It's about you,' said Zara.

'Yes, it is.'

'It's very sad.'

'Well, it was a not-so-perfect situation.' *Not-so-perfect*. There had certainly been some good times. His Uncle Christie was an irreverent, funny bloke who made you feel like you were having the time of your life. Uncle Bill was one of the most insightful, clever men he'd ever known. Grandpa was a gentle, private man but his love ran deep. The whole of Fenton Heights had been part of his Grandpa's farm, and he told Zara the story of the key to the safe. 'Eventually I'll need to visit the homestead. I need to check if Grandpa has left anything in it.'

Zara offered to accompany him and he let the fact of Stella Murdoch, her old nemesis, being the current owner of Casablanca sit unacknowledged between them. 'There's something you could do for me in return,' she said, biting her lip. 'My father's in the nursing home.'

This was a surprise.

'I'm not ready to face him yet either but I want to visit him. Could you come with me?'

'Yes, of course.' There was some triumph in the fact that she'd been able to ask.

She got up to leave, kissing him on the forehead and taking their mugs to the kitchen as she went.



#

Gerard kept writing for a while and then went out to wash up. Through the open side window of the kitchen he heard what sounded like glass smashing next door at Dan's. His heart beating rapidly, he went out his front door and, noticing there were no lights on at the front of Dan's house, he went around to the back. He reached the kitchen window and saw Dan, naked, pull a framed print off the wall and throw it at the kitchen cupboards, where the glass smashed dramatically. Gerard knocked urgently on the window and Dan turned towards him, panting.

They observed each other until Dan's breathing was under control and then Gerard moved towards the door and found it unlocked.

'What happened?' he asked when he got inside.

'Zara came over.' He put a hand to a cut on his cheek. 'We had sex. We always do.'

'Yes. You said,' Gerard reminded him.

Dan went to get dressed and Gerard put the kettle on to make tea.

'Fucking glass everywhere,' said Dan when he returned. He told Gerard that Zara had ended their affair. She wasn't in love with him. 'Seriously, I asked her, "Do you want me to ride in on a fucking white horse?" She said it wouldn't matter if I did. I'm not the one.'

Gerard took a sip of his tea. Dan followed suit and began to speak. They'd ridden the same bus to school. He'd come in from the farm and she'd gotten on at Goats Hollow at the edge of town. One day he'd watched her get off the bus as usual. She always climbed onto a boulder near the bus stop and would stand there staring into the distance till the bus was out of sight.

'My cousin Wilkie sits down next to me and tells me his father, your mate, had sacked her old man cos he was an alco. I didn't even understand what he meant. "He's a stinking pisshead," Wilkie tells me. "A drunk." He nearly dies laughing. I felt like punching his fucking face.'

When Dan got home his father told him they were moving to town. Grandad had died the month before and now Wilkie's Dad had inherited everything.

'I don't know why, but when Zar left tonight it just all came back to me. I just felt so fucking furious. You know, I'm so fucking sick of it all.'

Dan put his head in his hands. He'd just wanted to look after her. Being friends didn't feel like enough. He'd waited for her for so long and now he felt like a fool. Had he expected a reward? Was endurance really enough to guarantee deliverance?

'I've missed the fucking boat again. That's what it feels like.'

'What do you want?'

'What do you mean?'

'From your life?'

He shrugged. 'I s'pose the first thing I have to do is clean up this fucking glass!'

Gerard looked down at the print on the floor nearest to them. It was a vintage ad for Asti Cinzano. 'It's a shame about that one. I quite like it.'

'Yep.' Dan sipped his tea. 'That one I almost regret.'

#

It was another dry March weekend, though at times during the day a breeze had whispered up the lane and around the yard, and Gerard wondered if it might be the harbinger of a windy autumn that would suck all the moisture out of the ground before winter. Not that there was much moisture in anything after such summer heatwaves. *Not-so-perfect*, thought Gerard, as if he were Grandpa and it mattered to him if they didn't get rain at this time of the year, as if he'd just ploughed and put in an oat crop, as if he had empty dams and was having to move all the stock to the river paddocks.

Earlier, Dan had wandered past and suggested he bring over his BBQ and cook dinner in the backyard. He turned up with a woman who was awkwardly hauling an esky.

'It's an invasion,' said the woman. 'Hope you don't mind?'

To Gerard's consternation, Dan introduced her as Stella Murdoch. Her husband Jeff and daughter had gone to visit his family, she told Gerard, and she offered no explanation as to why she hadn't gone with them. She managed to be vibrant and attractive, the person in any room that your eyes would be drawn to, while also being irritatingly complacent. If she were a character he'd created, he could see how perfectly she was set up for a fall and how obvious it would be to take her down. The thought allowed him to resist the impulse to grab her shoulders and give her a shake.

'Looks like you're getting short of rocks. Reckon you'll have enough to finish?' Dan nodded towards the wall.

'Yes.' Gerard nodded noncommittally. 'I'm going to make do.'

After dinner, Stella took a deep breath as if she was bracing herself and asked how Zara was handling her separation.

'Oh, she's fine.' He found himself closed to this woman who seemed to think everything was her business, everyone was on her side.

Stella bit her lip. 'I think Jeff was her handsome prince. I think she thought they'd ride off into the sunset one day and all her dreams would come true.'

'Well, of course, he *did* ride off into the sunset.' This statement of fact was received in shocked silence. 'Zara's got a lot on her mind and none of it's about you and Jeff. There's no need

for you to worry.’

‘But she’s so *angry*, Gerard. I’d like to be friends. *I know what she went through.*’

There was a lecture, inchoate, settling into the muscles in his jaw and he clenched his teeth against the possibility of delivering it.

‘I’ve always felt so bad.’ Stella gripped the table with both hands.

*The sins of the father*, he thought. Guilt was just eating away at her, it seemed. Was he being tested? Was he supposed to help the daughter of Keith Murdoch, the man who had wreaked havoc on his childhood, recover from this generational blight? He felt suddenly tired. *It’s too much to ask. I can’t.*

‘If you’re seeking atonement . . .’ he began.

‘Not really.’ She laughed awkwardly, infuriating him, and, not sensing his antagonism, she began making her case. None of it was really her fault. They’d all been young and shouldn’t hold each other accountable for those times. If they’d known better, they would have done better. But how could you not feel sorry for Zara? It was plain to see that the past was still an issue for her.

‘There’s really nothing she needs from you.’ Gerard caught himself and sat back in his chair. *There’s something I want from you, though*, he thought. *I have a key...* He didn’t say it. He wasn’t ready yet.

#

Stella helped Dan cart the BBQ back to his place. He caught himself glancing at her sideways as they crossed the spot and went around into his backyard. Sure enough, when she put the esky down in the kitchen, she placed her hands on her hips and accosted him.

‘What the hell have you been saying about me?’

‘What? Nothing?’

‘Come off it! He knew all about what happened at school, I could tell. He thinks I’m a complete bitch.’

Dan smiled at her fondly. ‘You are.’

Stella rolled her eyes. ‘Fuck off.’

‘Yeah, I love you too.’ Dan took the lid off the esky and started unpacking.

‘Really?’

Dan froze, half a packet of snags in one hand, a beer in the other. ‘Look, Stell, you’ve never fooled me, mate. Your heart’s in the right place. You just have trouble showing it.’

Stella folded her arms and looked away. She’d wanted Gerard to like her. It was absurd.

Dan put the snags in the fridge, opened the beer and took a sip. He shrugged. ‘What does it matter?’

She moved towards him, took the beer out of his hand and drank from it. 'I s'pose it doesn't.' She passed the beer back.

'How come you didn't go with Jeff to see his grandmother? I thought you said she might die.'

'She's always hated me. I thought I'd let her die in peace rather than inflict my presence on her.'

'That's nice,' Dan smiled again. 'See? You can be nice.'

'You're the only one who thinks so. Maybe I should have married you.'

Dan tipped the bottle up and drank the rest. 'I thought you were going to. It completely fucking threw me when you took off with Jeff.'

Stella stepped towards him so that their bodies were touching and pressed her lips onto his.

'Really?' he said. 'You really want to do this?'

'Don't you?'

'Of course.'

She smiled. 'Have you ever actually turned a woman down?'

'What for?' He ran his hands over her waist, her back, her ass, pushing himself against her.

'Could you be monogamous, do you think?'

'Yes. With the right woman.' He kissed her slowly, running his tongue around the inside of her mouth.

'How will you know she's the one?'

He lifted her and carried her to the lounge. 'I'll know by how good it feels.' He started grinding against her and she moaned softly.

'How will it feel?' she asked as they undressed.

'Like this,' he said, going down on her.

## Uncle Jimmy

1953

The shearing shed was whirring with activity around him but Gerard had his head down, concentrating on finishing his last sheep of the run. When he'd rolled out of bed at six o'clock every one of his muscles had seemed to be in sharp protest at the movement. It was all right for the other blokes, they were shearers all year round, but at fourteen, Gerard only cut school for their own shearing and Uncle Christie's and did the crutching in between. He loved it, but the first day always took its toll.

Gerard made the last blow and moved to lay his handpiece on the board. Slow Bill promptly pulled the cord to turn off the motor above the stand. As Gerard turned the big wether's head to push him down the shoot, Slow Bill kneaded the fleece a bit and then picked it up with two sweeps of his hands while Gerard stood up stiffly with his hands pushing into the small of his back.

The second day was the worst.

He bent again and picked up the handpiece to remove the comb and cutter. Thank God it was smoko!

'Should be another good tally, Gerry!' Old Toothless Jim the rouseabout walked towards him with the broom.

'You been counting for me, Tooth?' Gerard grinned as he moved away from the board so Jim could sweep.

'Not likely! Never been no good at addin' up, Gerry. I jest got a real good feel for it after all these years, you know what I mean?'

'Yep,' he laughed. He caught Uncle Christie's eye and Christie gave him a wink as he skirted the fleece. 'Know exactly what you mean.'

He was hoping old Tooth was right though. Yesterday he'd tallied 18, 25, 19 and 25, a total

of 87, which was not bad for his second turn on the board. It was a five-stand shed but they only used four, and two of the other shearers were guns. Well, Harry Wheeler *was* a gun in the old days. He had to be fifty if he was a day now, but he still managed 121 yesterday, the old bastard.

‘I was pushing 150 a day at your age Gerry,’ said Harry as he flung his towel over his shoulder and headed out to wash up.

‘Yeah, but you were the Southern Snaggler, Wheelsie.’ Christie rolled the fleece and moved aside so that Slow Bill could class it.

‘The Gun from the South!’ Tiny Brooks, the presser, had fewer teeth than Toothless, thanks to his glory days in the boxing ring.

‘Broom, here!’ Wally Sinclair, pulling his own cord, nudged his wether towards the shoot with his knee.

‘Don’t get your knickers in a knot, young Walter,’ lisped Toothless as he duck-footed round the table to pick up. Toothless threw the fleece smoothly in the air above the table. He watched it land in a perfect spread with a look of satisfaction, then picked up his broom.

Gerard headed out to wash up. He stood near the tank and lit a cigarette with Uncle Christie, who liked to suck on one or two before he had his cuppa. They watched in companionable silence as a new light blue Holden FJ ute approached the house, slowed, and then turned its nose up to the shed.

‘Wonder who this bloke is?’ said Christie.

‘Dunno.’

Grandpa and Slow Bill had finished counting out by now and walked around the corner of the shed towards the tank, discussing the tally. Grandpa noticed the car too, and Gerard watched him pull up short as the stranger got out of the car.

Uncle Jimmy!

Gerard sucked in his breath and stood on his cigarette. His heart thumped chaotically in his chest and for some reason he felt wildly happy, as if he’d been waiting for something as momentous as this to happen for years.

As Uncle Jimmy walked toward them, Gerard became aware that Grandpa, Slow Bill and Uncle Christie had squared up towards him with their arms folded. He looked from one to the other, trying to gauge their feelings, but it was hard for him to work out the source of their antagonism. He didn’t think they knew Uncle Jimmy.

‘JT, Christie, Bill.’ Uncle Jimmy nodded stopping a few paces back so that he was out of range of a handshake.

None of them responded, so he turned to Gerard. ‘Not sure that I should call you Giraffe

anymore, son, seems you're just about a grown man.' He offered Gerard a shy smile.

Gerard moved forward, smiling and extending his hand, his words of greeting strangling in his throat.

Christie threw an arm sideways across Gerard's chest, bringing him to a surprised halt.

'Who you calling son?' said Grandpa.

Uncle Jimmy faced Grandpa.

'Look JT, I know you've brought him up as a Calligan, but Gerry's a Harnett and you know it.'

'He knows it too, but *we* chose to keep it quiet, seeing as *his father* chose not to tell any of the Harnetts around here that he existed.' Grandpa's voice was a growling menace and Gerard had a feeling he was just getting started. '*His father* was your brother Frank.' So, they *were* brothers, Gerard thought. 'He's not *your son* and never has been.'

'He's like a son to me. In my mind, he's my kid.'

'Oh, he's *like* a son, is he? In your mind, he's *your* kid.' Grandpa's voice rose, carrying, it seemed, years of pent up fury. 'Well there are one or two things *I'd* like to know, Jim. One. If he's *like* a son to you, where've you been the last eight years? Two. How did this situation come about? That he's *like* a son to you? Where do you come into the picture?'

Uncle Jimmy's forehead knitted together in deep bewilderment. 'But you know...'

'*What* am I supposed to know?'

He shook his head as if things were hazy, even for him. He'd taken a bullet in the hip in Bardia in '41. Stella had left Gerry with an old widow in North Bondi while she worked but he was unhappy. When Jimmy got back, he looked after Gerry instead. 'We thought Frank was dead. He was listed as killed in action. She got a telegram.'

Not one of them seemed to be breathing.

Stella had told Jimmy that JT knew about them and had given his blessing. She'd said that JT wanted them to come and visit the farm together.

'She always had you twisted round her finger,' said Slow Bill in his deep drawl. 'Our Stell.'

'So... you didn't know? 'Bout us?'

'First I've heard of it.' Grandpa paused. 'Christie?'

No answer.

'Bloody hell, Christie!'

Christie had seen them once in Tamarama when he went to town. *That's right*, thought Gerard. *He was in the fish and chip shop that time!* 'Stell and I met up the next day and I warned her to make things right. She told me later everything was sweet.'

Slow Bill snorted. ‘Yep. Always had you in the palm of her hand too!’ Christie responded with a look of disgust.

‘For Christ’s sake, Christie!’ Grandpa swore again, which made it the second time Gerard had ever heard him swear, the first time he’d heard him take the Lord’s name in vain. Grandpa sighed deeply, and then addressed Uncle Jimmy. ‘What happened when Frank showed up?’

‘It was a right bloody ruckus, that’s what. I got out quick as I could and tried to stay out of it, but Frank had been a POW. He drank too much. Got nasty.’

‘That bit we know.’ Slow Bill was much more talkative than Gerard was used to.

Uncle Jimmy’s big shoulders seemed to crumple as he looked at Gerard again at last. ‘I’m sorry, mate. We thought you’d be better off here. You’d started trying to get between them.’ His big mule’s eyes implored Gerard’s for understanding. ‘Jesus, you were only bloody seven years old, Giraffe.’

And for the first time, Gerard had an absurd awareness that for someone who’d been called after the animal with the longest neck in the world, he never seemed to be able to get any decent questions out of his throat. *Giraffe*, he thought, *with a three-foot long throat full of stuck words*.

‘So, she went with you, that’s what you’re trying to say?’ Grandpa at least asked one of his questions for him.

‘Yes. She came back to Sydney for me and we took off to Melbourne.’ They’d tried to make a new start as husband and wife but Stella had left him for the supermarket boss. Jimmy was sick of the lies by then anyway.

No one moved as this sunk in.

Suddenly the shed door opened and Toothless Jim stuck out his head. ‘Shit a brick, fellas, what’s the John Dory?’

‘Comin’, Tooth. Start her up,’ said Christie without looking round. Toothless took in Uncle Jimmy and raised an eyebrow before slamming the door shut.

‘We got work to do,’ said Grandpa. ‘Come and see us after tea.’

‘Righto.’

Gerard made a quick movement forward, still trying to get his mouth to work.

‘You look bloody good, mate,’ Uncle Jimmy said with soft affection. ‘Bloody good to see you.’

‘Yep.’ Gerard nodded towards the shed door. ‘I’m on the board. Better get going.’

‘Yeah, you get going, Giraffe. Shit, yeah.’

#

After tea that night they went out to sit on the veranda, as usual. Tonight, it felt like they were



waiting for Uncle Jimmy to show up; all eyes were on the road, including those of Athol and Tiny Brooks who always stayed over during the shearing.

Gerard lit up a smoke and took a deep drag. The company was unusually silent and it was all Gerard could do to sit still. He stood and paced to the end of the veranda and leant against the rail, squinting into the gathering darkness up toward the gate.

Nothing.

He paced back, sat down on the top step and ran a hand through his hair.

‘Here,’ said Athol. Gerard looked round at him and Athol tossed him a rollie.

‘Cheers,’ said Gerard reaching in his pocket for his matches.

Memories, dreams and half-formed fragments of information had been flowing through his brain since this morning’s smoko. He’d tried to catalogue everything during the afternoon run, going backwards in time, but had found that he couldn’t really be sure what he remembered and what were dreams. Anger had begun to sink into the pit of his stomach that they’d never contacted him. They’d thought he’d be better off here, Uncle Jimmy had said, but surely, they could have taken him to Melbourne too, couldn’t they?

To pass the time he began making a mental list of all his names. Gerry Calligan he was at school, or more formally on things like school report cards, Gerard Calligan. Officially, he was Gerard Alfred Fenton Calligan, because Grandpa said his mother had foolishly wanted him to carry the respected names of his ancestors of ‘Fenton Park’. It was foolish, in Grandpa’s opinion, because the last Gerard Alfred Fenton was Mad Gerry, and what sort of inheritance was that for a kid? Mad Gerry himself had insisted on wiping the name ‘Fenton Park’ off the local history record by changing the name of the place to ‘Casablanca’, a dubious idea considering the movie.

Gerard smoked the rollie down to the tip and threw it forward onto the dirt. He folded his arms on his knees and laid his head on them.

Other than that, there was just his birth certificate. Gerard Alfred Fenton Harnett, it said. He’d taken to sneaking into Grandpa’s office and taking out his birth certificate from the bottom drawer of the roll top desk. For a long while he hadn’t known it was there, but when he’d asked Grandpa about Uncle Jimmy last year after Wilkie Harnett had given him another black eye, Grandpa had gotten it out and shown him.

‘It’s just an extract,’ Grandpa had said as if that would mean something to Gerard. ‘It shows your name and date of birth. But it’s just kept here, like.’ Gerard realised now, thinking about it in a new light, that perhaps Grandpa had been wanting to say something about his name, his absent father and mother who weren’t listed there, or even, perhaps, his Harnett heritage, the connection that Wilkie Harnett clearly didn’t know about. Of course, Grandpa never got around to saying

much. Maybe Grandpa was like him. Maybe things got stuck in his throat too. It sure was a night of new thoughts. He lifted his head and turned to watch Grandpa watching the road. He felt the familiar longing pulling at his chest. The prospect of Uncle Jimmy's imminent arrival was like having a black eye and no bike to get to school; it drew words from Gerard that he'd usually just swallow back down.

'So, Frank and Uncle Jimmy were brothers?' The question hung in the air a minute as it grabbed everyone's attention. 'You knew him? They were both from Mullanbrack Station?'

'That's right.' Grandpa pulled his face away from the road.

'Mum met them here?'

Grandpa considered the question for a moment. Frank had been about four years ahead of Stella at school. He was the youngest of the Harnetts. But Jimmy was ten years older than Frank and the eldest son. He was sent to university in Sydney during the twenties and then travelled north and worked on some of the countries' biggest sheep and cattle stations. He went to England for a bit and studied sheep breeding. When he come home in '36 he was the most talked-about young bloke in the district.

'Bill and I were just about your age then, Gerry. You'd remember him too, Ath?' Christie turned now to Athol and Tiny. He always addressed Athol who always let Tiny do his talking for him. All their folks were doing it pretty tough at the time, according to Tiny. Half the town had been out of work. Then Jimmy had turned up dressed like King George, supposedly ready to take over Mullanbrack Station. He'd been expected to get himself a good wife and settle down at last but he kept taking off to Sydney, going here, there and everywhere, and his brother Wilkie was left with all the work on the property as usual. Charlie was a solicitor already by then and Frank was a shearer.

None of the men responded to this roundup so Gerard prompted them all, 'What happened then?'

Grandpa stood up as a car appeared up at the gate. The sun was setting in earnest now and a thrill of excitement went through Gerard's body. Now at last he'd be told everything.

As the car drove over the ramp into the house paddock Athol and Tiny stood up.

'Ath wants to turn in,' said Tiny.

'Righto,' said Christie, and Athol and Tiny took off down the veranda and disappeared around the side.

Uncle Jimmy's FJ pulled up at the bottom of the steps and Uncle Jimmy got out, letting the door slam shut behind him. When he got to the top of the stairs, he appeared to brace himself and then went towards Grandpa holding out his hand.

‘Jim,’ said Grandpa.

‘JT.’ Uncle Jimmy then went through this ritual with Slow Bill and Uncle Christie. He smiled for the first time when he turned to Gerard. ‘G’day, Gerry.’ They shook hands as Gerard tried to smile back. ‘Much of a tally today?’

‘Oh, I dunno. I think it was . . .’ He looked towards Slow Bill as his voice trailed away.

‘Seventy-nine,’ said Slow Bill. ‘Bit slower than yesterday.’

‘Pull up a chair, Jim.’ Grandpa sat down and Uncle Jimmy took the chair recently vacated by Athol Brooks. Gerard sat next to him in Tiny’s chair.

‘First things first,’ said Grandpa. ‘Where’s Stella now?’

Uncle Jimmy knitted his brows again. He hadn’t realised they weren’t in touch and he shifted uncomfortably in his seat before explaining that Stella was still in Melbourne. She’d been married to the supermarket bloke going on two years. Frank was still in Sydney living in the house in Dover Heights. Jimmy had been to see him last week for the first time since he’d taken off with Stella. ‘He thought Gerry was with his mother. Thought we’d taken him. Him and his missus have got two kids. He works at the Kent Brewery on Broadway.’

Gerard’s face became hot, and his breathing was shallow and rapid. He stood up and stepped towards the veranda rail, clutching it fiercely in both hands.

‘Frank still doesn’t talk to the family?’ asked Grandpa.

‘Nope.’

Gerard felt suddenly reckless. He wanted to know more but he’d heard enough. Why should he care? Why had he yearned for these people who’d dumped him here and just forgotten he’d existed. ‘Fuck the lot of you!’ he shouted towards Uncle Jimmy’s FJ and beyond that to the road that had taken the Sloper away forever. ‘Fuck the fucking lot of you!’

‘I’m sorry Giraffe.’ Uncle Jimmy rose to his feet. ‘I know it must’ve been hard on you, mate.’

‘You don’t know anything the *hell* about me! If you’d *wanted* to know, you would’ve come here years ago.’

‘It’s complicated, mate. It’s always been real complicated. I don’t even think I can explain it to you. Me and Frank, the Harnetts, your Mum . . . It’s all a bloody mess. Your Grandpa’s the only one we knew would do everything right. And you’ve had it good here. You’ve had Bill and Christie . . .’

‘I’ve had it good here, have I?’ Gerard kicked the veranda rail with frustration. ‘I’m a punching bag for every mug in this town. Little Bastard they call me.’

Slow Bill rose from his chair and strode purposefully over to Gerard and placed a big hand

on his shoulder. 'What do you want, Jim?'

'I'm back,' he shrugged. 'I want to clear things up. I want to see Gerry and get to know him again.'

'And what?' Christie was furious. 'You gonna claim him now? The Harnetts finally gonna hear about Frank and Stella, are they?'

'That's up to JT.'

They all turned to Grandpa who looked unexpectedly old and small in his chair. 'I think Gerry and I need to think about it.'

With Slow Bill's big palm still warmly clamped over his shoulder, Uncle Christie's fury on his behalf, and Grandpa's solidarity with him, Gerard's head seemed to clear.

'I don't need to think about it. I'm a Calligan. That's the way it's gonna stay.'

Grandpa seemed to expand to his normal size, sitting up a bit taller in his chair, Christie eyed him fiercely and Slow Bill gave his shoulder a squeeze and then sat back down and picked up his pipe.

'That's fine, Gerry. We can just be mates if you like?' said Uncle Jimmy.

'Yeah, I s'pose.'

## Miracles and Revelations

April 2009

Gerard had finished the wall. He sat at his table in the backyard, mostly reading the papers but occasionally just admiring his work. He could see things in the wall he hadn't known he was creating. There was movement and flow in the shapes and spread of colour. He admired the surface ridge of a large reddish rock. He'd continued the ridge in the mortar line of the layer above it, as if the ridge had been made so that he could draw it into the gap.

*It's in the gap that the most interesting things happen, he thought. The gap between thoughts, the gap between a question and an answer, between the possibilities available to us and the decision to take one of them, between people, between our past and present, our current self and all the other selves we've been through time.*

Some of these other selves had been coming at him forcefully since returning to this place after a gap of fifty years. He'd always considered his early life as a shapeless blank. *Did it really matter anyway? Did it have anything at all to do with me?* This anxiety had always dogged him, that somehow he was on the periphery of things, that he was watching and not participating. He'd never felt truly alive till he'd met his wife, Helen. Even now he marvelled that she'd managed to see anything in him. Writing down the story of Mad Gerry and the Fentons had brought his child-self alive, a self that had been fuzzy and out-of-focus. He'd grown up without an explanation, something others perhaps didn't need, but he'd been a bookish, cerebral kid who could have done with a few words with which to make sense of his young life. He'd needed a story and been given nothing but silence and mystery.

Gerard thought again about those first few times life had appeared to grab him by the scruff of the neck and throw him unceremoniously into the gap. It seemed to him now that he'd never had power to wield, never known the answers or the secrets. *I was furious with them for so long. I let everything be their fault. Until Helen died and I couldn't reasonably blame them for that. That's what finally wiped me clean. It scraped me out from the inside until I had nothing left but bones rattling against skin and a fragile beating heart that didn't want to give up.*

Dan appeared, shaking Gerard from his reverie, and placed two take-away coffees on the table. He supposed they'd be going to Zara's cafe for coffee, once she opened it. 'But who am I to care what Zara does anyway?'

Gerard shook off his younger selves and took in the smiling form in front of him. 'You've moved on,' he pronounced.

'Fuck's sake! I don't know why I told you about my sex life. Seriously, I don't want to go there.'

'Another affair then?'

Dan made a show of taking the lid off his coffee, tearing open a sugar sachet and giving the coffee a slow stir.

'I'll take that as a yes.'

Dan took a sip. 'If you must know, it's Stella.'

'The plot thickens. This is fantastic!' Gerard smiled with relish.

'Don't do that.'

'Do what?'

'Be all jovial, like it means nothing.'

'What does it mean?'

Dan shook his head.

Gerard leant forward in his chair and peered into Dan's face. 'Ah, I see.' He sat back watching Dan soberly sip his coffee.

'Go on then, what do you see?' Dan said at last.

'You're in love with her. You always have been. You've only just realised it.'

The sipping went on. 'Missed the boat again then, haven't I?'

'Depends.'

'On what?'

'On whether you finally decide to fight for what you want.'

#

On Tuesday morning Gerard pulled up in the main street in front of an empty shop with windows covered in butcher's paper. *The Country Kitchen*. *Good Lord!* Gerard had visions of patterned oval crockery and meals served with white bread and butter portions. Zara was in close discussion with Shanelle, the real estate agent. Gerard told her he was there for moral support and Shanelle got down to business. The rent would be \$2400 a month, including the chairs and tables, the coffee machine and the crockery, as well as the kitchen as it was. The former owner would remove the pictures this week and take the freezer now standing just outside the back door. Her daughter had

just been diagnosed with breast cancer so she'd moved to Sydney to help look after her.

'That's very sad. She's been here so long,' said Zara.

'Yes, and you couldn't move in here when there were cattle and sheep sales. Her clientele like things to be nice, the menu straightforward, and the service friendly. Probably what you're aiming for anyway.'

'Well, you've hit the nail on the head as usual, Shanelle,' said Gerard as he headed towards the kitchen, a smile twitching at the corner of his mouth.

Zara wandered in after him. It was quite a good setup, a galley kitchen with a window over the sink facing a small carpark. Zara had decided to call it "North". After her mother had left, she'd asked her father where her mother had gone and he'd said North. 'I always dreamt of going "North" too and that everything would be okay,' she'd told Gerard.

Shanelle promised to have the agreement drawn up soon and they headed outside. Gerard suggested they get a bite to eat at the bakery in celebration and Zara put her arm through Gerard's as if he needed help walking. It was called "Grandma's Secret" and was poorly lit for such a gloomy day with its timber panelling, purple and blue floral tablecloths with matching cushions tied to each chair. They sat at a small round table near the front window and picked up the menus wedged between a square container of sugar sachets and a little white vase of silk lavender flowers.

'Smells good.' Gerard eyed the menu. 'The competition, ay?' He smiled conspiratorially, pleased that she wouldn't be able to do purple floral for her decor. He smoothed the tablecloth in front of him. A short, stocky woman with a severe bun and an apron around her waist that matched the tablecloths appeared to take their order. *Grandma, the one with the secrets*, thought Gerard. The bell on the door tinkled and Zara's husband Gavin appeared, wearing his police uniform. He ignored them as he ordered two coffees to take away and then approached their table.

He nodded as if on official business and Zara introduced Gerard.

'You're the one in the Hoffman house,' Gavin stated and then he asked Zara if he could have a word.

'Sure.' Zara didn't move.

Gavin looked away, folded his arms across his chest, pushed his tongue around his mouth, then looked back at her.

'I want a divorce.'

'Okay.'

'I'll pay you out of the house. You'll have to move.'

'Fine. Once the divorce goes through, I will.'

He clenched his jaw as if asking for patience and then told Zara she was being a pain in

the ass. They should just get it sorted out now because it'd be better for the kids.

'They've mentioned that you're much nicer now, that you don't yell at Tori the way you always yelled at me. You're not as scary anymore.'

Gavin glanced at Gerard and began moving away. 'I'll drop by and we can have a chat about things.' He picked up his coffee from the counter and left without saying goodbye.

The door slowly tinkled shut and Gerard wondered how Zara felt about Gavin coming to the house. She looked out the window, watching Gavin get into his car. She'd always been afraid of him and afraid of leaving but it changed everything when he'd left her for someone else. 'It feels like a miracle.' She faced Gerard. 'And I can't explain it really but it seems as if I had to stop lying to myself once you showed up.'

He smiled.

She was hoping he'd be different now, for the kids' sake.

'My father was very violent when I was young.' He'd been a POW in Germany during the war. He had a lot of demons and was a heavy drinker. When he married again he'd been good to his second wife, seeming to come to grips with things. 'I don't know if one can hold out for that eventuality though. It's probably not the norm.'

'No. I should be grateful I got out of there alive.'

#

On Wednesday, late in the afternoon, Gerard went for a walk as usual, despite a determined drizzle. He pulled up his hood and proceeded, head down. He glanced at the houses right and left along Christie Street as he made his way along it. Gerard took in a newly painted white picket fence speckled now in spots of dirt and fallen gum leaves from yesterday's heavy rain. Pink and white seaside daisies burst wetly through the gaps and lavender lined the path to the door. It was curiously similar to the weatherboard cottage Christie had lived in at the coast. His wife Sal had mostly planted orange and yellow gazanias and the front yard was blistering with them the first time he'd gone there with Helen in 1970 at the height of the summer. His young cousins were all still under ten; Christie had been over forty when they were born. *Lisa, Judith and Michelle, all good sixties names*, he ticked them off in his head, watching a snail motionless on the fence begin to carefully tentacle the air.

The heavy heat had not dampened Christie's enthusiasm that day, though it seemed to have dried his mouth. Spit gathered at the corners of his lips as he spoke sportively of his life at the Bay, Sal's easy dexterity with the deep-fryer down at their fish and chip shop, Lisa's agility on the tennis court, Judith's head-in-a-book placidity which seemed to astound him, and Little Shelley's proficiency at delivering a good joke. Within the first quarter hour of their hot mid-afternoon visit



he succumbed to his thirst, collapsed in his lounge chair throne and settled in to talk his way through a couple of quiet ones.

Gerard smiled at the snail, deciding to call her Judith, and went on. *Lovers Lane!* he exclaimed inwardly as usual as he took in the street sign. *Bloody hell, Christie!* He stopped, bracing himself for the now familiar view of the homestead. He'd begun to get used to it, though for some reason tonight the sight left him emptier than he'd felt since arriving back. It had fortified him, regardless of the sense of loss, for many weeks now, giving him a solidness in being here that he hadn't expected. There was such a deep familiarity, a feeling of belonging. He had the stories and secrets of this country, the blood and sweat of his forebears was in the dirt, the grass, the dry bark layered under gum trees, the moss that furred the granite. The laughter of the kookaburras was Christie, the wide spread of eucalypt arms was Slow Bill, the companionable whisper across the distant paddocks was Grandpa. He'd been gone a long time, it was true, but he'd carried it with him always, the smell, the sounds, the deep feeling in his bones that he was one with this piece of land, like he was with no other. Any landscape could be loved but only home can be lived inwardly no matter where you are.

And yet he was hollow tonight, insubstantial and flimsy, like the newly arrived boy of long ago who was still only a visitor, not yet a person who belonged and was able to hear the place speak to his heart. He had come full circle and would go, eventually, as a mere visitor once more, with an old key tucked deeply into his trouser pocket. Tonight, he would once again only go as far as the locked gate. His brow furrowed deeply as he imagined driving those intricately loved bends towards the ramp and around the North Point Gum to the house. *A prodigal son returning as a forgotten stranger.* There would be no welcome party, he knew.

He tore his eyes away from the house sitting serenely inside its grand compass point trees and walked weightily, his bones and muscles aching, his face now wet with rain, or was it tears? No doubt it was the prospect of finally going there that had shaken him, leaving him withered. It was tiring, the weight of memory as it was released from such long-held fortresses, the dark burden of the past. He turned onto the old River Track towards Casablanca and the locked gate and walked, blank and heavy, towards the gate, grasping it firmly in both hands, needing its slightly roughened firmness against his palms. It was the same gate that had always been there. He knew its swing intimately and the trick to its wonky ring chain catch. These small things were an affirmation, and he let his small-boy insecurity find assurance in the air, like Judith back at the picket fence. It was the details that loomed large after all these years, and perhaps that was enough, as if the self of times past was left imprinted on these deeply known and fondly remembered objects from another lifetime. And it was true, he'd had so many selves with him lately, all at once,

their joys and longings laid bare, their wounds, their intense losses able to sting again. *And I thought all I had left was the dream!*

He threw his head back and laughed with all the kookaburras there'd ever been, threw his arms wide alongside every tree and lifted his face to every breath of wind. He was fortified once more and ready to go on.

#

It was Good Friday. Gerard sat on the edge of his bed, pulled open a drawer in his bedside table, and picked up a thin rectangular box that had once held a Golden Lister shearer's handpiece. He lifted off the lid, tipped six sets of rosary beads onto the bed and, picking each one up in turn, he laid them out in a line.

*Grandpa's*, he thought, laying out a short, black set with oval beads. The black cross had a wasted, haloed Jesus with his head sinking into one armpit, extremely long limbs and very prominent nails, one at the feet and one at each hand.

His own set was longer and had dark timber beads.

*Slow Bill*, he thought next, placing another short set beside his. If Gerard had to pick a favourite pair it would be this one.

The next set were his mother's. Gerard had carried these around the world for years in a little cloth pouch, until he'd finally seen her again in 1983. He'd offered them to her, not knowing what the gesture meant, but she'd shaken her head incomprehensibly.

'After everything,' she'd said, 'there was no way I could keep going to Mass.'

'Of course,' he'd agreed, grasping at last that the things that had tied him to her hadn't been shared. The dreams, the objects he'd imbued with significance, the memories like sepia snapshots in his mind, were not the ones she'd held onto. He'd thrown the beads into a drawer then and hadn't found them till he'd moved house a few months ago and they still felt newly added to the collection he'd started using again when Helen died. He pulled them out straight and placed them next to Bill's.

*Christie*, and he smiled as he always did at Christie's set with the little, round, unpolished timber beads, and the small silver cross with its dabs of hard, yellow glue. *The Lost Jesus*, he thought running his thumb over the rough surface of the cross.

'It's all a load of crap,' Christie had said when Gerard was about ten. 'Just remember I told you that, dig. You'll thank me one day.'

'Why do you go then?' Gerard had asked him innocently, as if the issue of going to Mass was cut and dried.

'Oh, you know mate, the sheilas think you're fair dinkum if you go. You gotta keep up

appearances, like, you know?’

Sal had given him a Catholic funeral and the church at the coast had been packed with half the town. Gerard had sat in the pew, one hand in his jacket pocket fiddling with Christie’s “Lost Jesus” beads, smiling at the justice of it. The platitudes over beer back at the Club afterwards were unanimous: ‘He was a generous old rogue,’ said one, ‘Yep, a bloody good mate, always there for you,’ and of course, ‘He was fair dinkum.’

The last set were white. The cross was silver, big and very beautiful, with a finely muscled Jesus whose feet were propped up and whose head fell just slightly to one side, not slumped defeatedly like Grandpa’s, but, it seemed to Gerard, as if his physical body was exhausted and he was undergoing great suffering, yet he was prepared, resigned, courageous, and hopeful. It was this Jesus that he loved.

Grandpa had given them to him two days before he died in 1959. ‘They’re your grandmother’s,’ he’d said. ‘Not Sylvia’s. Your father’s mother, Maud Harnett. We grew up together. She was Maud Ingram. Her people had Roth’s Hill.’ He’d always thought more about Grandpa’s death when he held these than their former owner, his paternal grandmother, Maud, whom he’d never met.

Gerard knelt now beside his bed and started in a fast, half-mumbled whisper. Clutching the cross, he touched it to his forehead, chest and shoulders in turn, saying, ‘In the name of the father and of the son and of the holy spirit amen...’ *Maud Ingram of Roth’s Hill. Maud Harnett, mother of Uncle Jimmy and Frank.*

His hands shuffled unconsciously to the first large bead. ‘Our father who art in heaven hallowed be thy name...’ *There was a photo of her somewhere. Long black dress to the ankles, very fitted at the waist, and long sleeves tight at the wrists. Ruffles down the front with a watch pinned to the breast and a high neck. A magnificent hairstyle all swept up with a parting in the middle.*

First small bead. ‘Hail mary full of grace...’ *Faith...to believe and not to believe because, really, there probably isn’t an entity.* Second bead. *Hope. The light can never be destroyed.* ‘...Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death amen.’ Third bead. ‘Hail mary full of grace...’ *Perfect. Not-so-perfect. Faith, hope, love, and the greatest of these is love.*

Chain before the large bead. ‘Glory be to the father and to the son...’  
*Sorrowful mystery the agony in the garden.*

Large bead. ‘Our father...’ *She drove to Glebe first that day! To see Uncle Jimmy. How could I have forgotten? I’d fallen asleep sometime after passing St. Mary Magdalene’s I s’pose.* ‘...and lead us not into temptation...’ *‘Don’t tempt me Stell,’ Uncle Jimmy said as she got back in*

and he shut the door for her. 'Come on! It'll be perfect,' she laughed and leant out the window to catch his hand.

First decade. 'Hail mary full of grace the lord is with thee...' I finally asked her at Liverpool. 'Where are we going with Uncle Jimmy, Mum?' She had one last pull on her cigarette and stuffed it into the ashtray. 'Nowhere, darling,' she said lightly. 'But you said "Come with me." You asked him to come.' She turned up the radio. 'Shh.' '...Blessed art thou amongst women...' 2UE. One of Jack Davey's quiz shows was starting. 'Hi-ho everybody, this is Jack Davey...' I waited till nearly Picton to try again. 'Mum?' Jack went on and on but surely, they'd heard this quiz before? 'Name a suit that can't be worn?' 'Lawsuit.' They said it together at the same time as the contestant. 'Mum? Did you want Uncle Jimmy to come to Grandpa's?' '...a table from which you can't eat. A turn-table.' 'No, darling, I don't think Grandpa would want to see Uncle Jimmy. Best if you don't mention him to Grandpa, all right?' '...and blessed is the fruit of thy womb...' She bought me a Violet Crumble when we stopped. They're still my favourite. We finally got to town and I asked her again as we crossed the Bradley River. 'Mum? Is Uncle Jimmy coming with us somewhere?' She picked the cigarette packet up off the seat and lit up another one. Her cheeks sucked right in when she took a drag. 'Giraffe, I'm sorry. I know you love Uncle Jimmy but you probably won't see him again for a while. Dad . . . Frank's been, you know, angry about the war and it's just better if we get away from him for a bit.' '...Pray for us sinners...' 'Will Dad...will Frank be cross that we left?' 'He's always cross, Giraffe.' Why did she smile? 'Don't tell Grandpa about Uncle Jimmy, remember I said?' 'Yep. Why?' 'He'd think it's funny that I have a friend like that.' 'Why would he think it's funny?' 'He doesn't understand about the war, how it changed everything.' 'How did it change everything?' She laughed. 'Shush, we're nearly there.'

Chain after the first decade. 'Glory be to the father and to the son...' Father and son. 'Is the kid mine?' 'He was born in '39. You were there.' Frank Harnett. Youngest son of Wilkie Harnett the third and Maud Ingram. '...save us from the fires of hell...'

Sorrowful mystery the scourging at the pillar.

Large bead. 'Our father...' My father. Dad/Frank. Francis Harnett. Youngest son after Aggie, Uncle Jimmy, Gloria, Wilkie (the fourth), Charlie, and Frank's twin Arthur who died at age two of diphtheria during World War One.

Second decade. 'Hail mary full of grace...' Maud Ingram's beads. Grandpa and Maud Ingram's beads. She died in '57. The year I left home. Why did she give Grandpa her beads to give to me?

Chain after the second decade. 'Glory be...' Glory. Life is one long celebration of the glory and splendour of life. "We are not there until we can say 'yea' to it all."

*Sorrowful mystery the crowning with thorns.*

Large bead. 'Our father who art in heaven hallowed be thy name thy kingdom come...'  
*"Yes, I am a king, I was born for this." The world is an illusion, a collective, empirical idea. "Mine is not a kingdom of this world." There is another world.*

Third decade. 'Hail...'  
*The self is a delusion. Constantly in flux. '...Mother of god pray for us...' Little Bastard. The world's contempt. Bad things should only happen to other people. '...the lord is with thee...' Bless me with courage in the face of the challenges still awaiting me. What am I asking for? Who am I speaking to? '...now and at the hour of our death amen.'*

Chain after the third decade. 'Glory be to the father and to the son and to the holy spirit...'  
*The Holy Spirit. Bringer of truth. Unconcealment. What had been hidden?*

*Sorrowful mystery the carrying of the cross.*

Large bead. 'Our father who art in heaven hallowed be thy name...'  
*Thy name. Dad/Frank. I was fifteen when I saw you again and I said to you, 'I remember you said, "Is the kid mine?"' 'You shrugged. You were sad. 'She taught you to call me Frank. You always said, "Hi Dad... Frank," as if you didn't think calling me Dad was okay.' "I am in the Father and the Father is in me."*

Fourth decade. 'Hail mary full of grace the lord is with thee blessed art thou...'  
*"They then took charge of Jesus and carrying his own cross he went out of the city to the place of the skull." 'Pray for us sinners...' Pray. "Anything you ask from the Father he will grant in my name." Suffering is necessary until you realise it is no longer necessary.*

Chain after the fourth decade. 'Glory be to the father and to the son...'  
*Life requires that you take charge of the journey. No one can do this for you. What is...at the centre? Just what is.*

*Sorrowful mystery the crucifixion.*

Large bead. 'Our father who art in heaven...'  
*Heaven sits about me now. It's here waiting for me. Every day, I feel it more. It is, that's all.*

Fifth decade. 'Hail...'  
*'Honour your father and mother. '...blessed art thou...' "Woman, this is your son." 'Pray for us sinners...' "This is your mother." Clear up your unfinished business. '...now and at the hour of our death.' "He gave up his spirit." At the hour of death. Living and dying. Being towards death. What am I worrying about? There's still one thing left to do. The living of dying.*

Silver medallion of Mary's head. 'Glory be...'  
*Even then, the journey goes on. It feels much the same. I hadn't realised I really had always been doing this. The unconcealment of death. It was always there in the background. 'Hail holy queen mother of mercy our life our sweetness and our hope to thee do we cry...' At the hour of our death. No, my death. It's going to be mine*

*this time.* ‘In the name of the father and of the son and of the holy spirit amen.’

*Amen.* Gerard knelt there at the bed, breathing in and out, and his mind stopped talking to him and was quiet for the first time since he’d begun. It was always like this, as if that small boy rebellion against Grandpa’s strict prayers every single night of their lives was still with him; his mouth would say the words if it made Grandpa happy, but his mind belonged to him and he could at least think what he liked without any interference from anyone.

For twenty years, he had been kneeling again every night, repeating the old prayers without questioning the practice. Back then, when he was small, he’d considered himself alone. This made him laugh now. His life with Grandpa, Christie and Bill had been rich and busy. When Helen died, that was when his aloneness became absolute. Just him and his dry, dusty life. For the first time ever, he shared his house with no one and had no witnesses to his existence. He got up, he wrote, he said his prayers, he went to bed. Then Mark had come to live nearby, buying the pub and starting a family. That had given him a social life of sorts. He’d go each day between writing and saying his rosary, and have a beer in the public bar, after first going upstairs to visit Julie-Ann and the kids.

And now he suddenly found himself here in Wheeler Street, back at Casablanca once more, still kneeling each night beside his bed, but involved with people. How had this happened? People wanted him, sought his company, asked his advice. He did nothing at all but respond whenever he was called.

*Amen.* He breathed in. He breathed out. His mind was empty, his body weightless; his fingers, clasped loosely now, the beads falling slackly from the small gap between his thumbs and fingers, seemed to merge together so that he couldn’t feel where one finger ended and another began. *Come,* his soul said to him, and he imagined taking the hand held out to him and floating out through the window into the still, dark night.

Hand in hand, they floated along in silence. Nothing happened. There was just the night, a cool breeze hitting his face softly as they floated easily along, rising slowly away and above the earth. He became aware that his soul and him had become one, the voice of his conscience, the one he spoke to and questioned, that happier, lighter, freer self that he’d always wished he could be. It was always a relief when this happened, and he smiled, feeling both more peaceful and yet grateful, because it couldn’t be taken for granted. Helen appeared suddenly, laughing, and they embraced. His heart swelled with love for her and he shed a tear, feeling it creep down his face. Grandpa was there too, smiling, Christie, winking, and Bill, too, who felt quicker, cleverer than ever. He floated on.

A long time passed and he travelled a great distance but it felt like no time at all and no

expanse of space. He was one with everything and the time, the distance, were nothing and yet everything. He became aware of a presence like an immense breath. He was awed, and felt more unworthy than he'd ever felt in his life but was also filled with gratitude, and his tears fell wretchedly now for he was ashamed, humbled by the light, the love, which he knew he would never deserve.

All at once he saw himself as a small rag doll, held by the hand of God, and being shaken forcefully until he saw that his fears were flung out of him, and he saw them drop away.

*But really, was it all necessary?*

'Of course.'

*But just to get to here?*

'You wouldn't have given your gifts to the world.'

He was sceptical but hopeful too. Perhaps there was still time.

#

The next morning, Gerard answered a knock on his front door and found a nervous Stella brandishing take-away coffee. She apologised. Dan's family were celebrating Easter today and he'd asked Stella to bring Gerard's coffee. 'I hope you don't mind.'

'Not at all. That's very kind of you.'

'Dan told me you're *the* Gerry Calligan. You know I've read all your books. I'm one of your biggest fans.'

'That's great!' Gerard punched the air in front of him in a small gesture of triumph. He led her into the kitchen and invited her to sit. It was awkwardly silent and they focused on their coffee.

Stella cleared her throat. 'Dan also told me you grew up here. Perhaps you knew my father.'

Gerard began telling her the story about their families. Her great grandfather's sister, Annie Murdoch, was his great grandmother. She married Gerard Fenton, his Great Grandpa, otherwise known as Mad Gerry of Fenton Park.

'We're related?'

'Yes, we're third cousins.'

'Wait!' Stella thought for a moment. 'Where's Fenton Park?'

'Right here. They changed the name to Casablanca during the war.'

Stella didn't remember the name Fenton, despite the profusion of cousins in the area.

'That's because Mad Gerry and Annie Murdoch had daughters so the name died out.'

'Why Mad Gerry?'

'Well, they reckon he was mad. My mother was Stella Calligan, ever heard of her?'

'Stella! Like me?'

‘Yes. Technically you’re named after her.’ The convoluted story continued. Her grandfather Leslie, the owner of the original Murdochs Store, was in love with Gerard’s mother and asked her to marry him but she refused. Les went on to marry someone else and then named his first daughter Stella. She was Keith’s twin. She drowned in the river in 1939. Les called his next and last daughter Estelle but she died of polio as an infant. Keith had then called his daughter Stella after both of them.

Stella sat biting her lip. ‘I have photos of them. It always seemed so morbid, being named after two little dead girls. I never knew what Dad expected me to do about it.’

‘Oh, he probably just wanted you to have a nice long, happy life.’

She snorted. ‘No, you didn’t know my father. He always had plans for everybody.’

‘Actually, I did know him. We weren’t friends, though. He was a few years older than me and he had a very particular group of mates.’

Stella named the usual suspects: Wilkie Harnett, Dan’s uncle who had died two years ago, Dave Black, Harry Peadon who’d spoken at her father’s funeral, and Al Sheehan.

‘What about Chipper?’

‘Oh, you mean Freddie Chipside?’

‘Yes, Chipper the Nipper.’

She laughed. ‘Why do you call him Chipper the Nipper?’

‘Cos he was always nipping at your Dad’s heels. He was like a shadow.’

Stella had found Freddy Chipside a bit weird. He’d constantly turn up wanting money and, as a kid, she knew her mother really hated it. ‘But Dad always insisted. I don’t know why.’ Her father had died ten years ago from a heart attack. Grief had swallowed her for years. She’d been very close to her father but still found her mother a drag.

‘What’s your mother’s name?’

‘Jane. She was an Edwards.’

‘Jane Edwards! The Edwards’ lived down the other side of Harry Wheeler.’ Gerard remembered the night she was born. He’d been ten. They were haymaking down the Flat and Tommy Edwards screamed past in his old Bedford truck and yelled out for him to go over and mind the kids till he got home because his missus was having the baby. There’d been two boys and a girl already, all under five.

Stella’s eyes were wide. ‘Yes, Uncle Stephen, Uncle Roy and Auntie Maria.’

Gerard remembered he had to sleep the night and make porridge in the morning. Tommy still wasn’t home by the time he had to get ready for school so his Auntie Alice came. ‘I saw your mother all the time. Janey, everyone called her. She was this little blonde, barefoot ray of



sunshine.'

'Barefoot? My mother would never go barefoot!'

Gerard caught her scandalous tone. 'I don't think it was by choice, I mean the Edwards didn't have much,' he said gently.

'You mean... ' she trailed away, at a loss.

Gerard shifted in his seat.

Stella had always thought her parents didn't seem to have much in common. Her mother was fourteen years younger. Stella had assumed her father had swept her mother off her feet. Now Gerard was telling her there was probably gratitude on both sides.

'I'm sure that marrying Keith Murdoch was a really good match for your mother. It would have given her the financial security she'd never had. But I think he must have gained a lot out of it too.' A stable marriage. Respectability. It would have been like a great big sigh of relief for everybody when Keith settled down.

'I don't know what you mean. If the Edwards were poor...'

'Dirt poor.'

'Her Dad was a farmer.'

'He was a farm labourer. They didn't own their land. They didn't even have linen on their beds.'

Stella's mouth fell open and Gerard had to wonder how it was that she didn't know anything about her own parents' story.

'Stephen worked in the store. Roy worked for Harry Peardon at Bradley River Rural. Auntie Maria's married to Al Sheehan. He's my Uncle Al. They were just all one big group of friends.' And, really, Stella had to point out, Gerard hadn't even been in town at the time.

'No, I wasn't here. It's true I may have the picture all wrong.'

Stella thought it through. Her grandfather had been the mayor. Her father had just taken over the store and, surely, he could have married anybody.

'Perhaps you should ask your mother,' he was almost whispering. Gerard pushed his chair back and sat on the edge of it, leaning forwards and placing his hands on his knees. He contemplated the floor. 'What year did they marry?' he asked.

'A year before Bruce was born, so . . . 1967.'

'Right. So. That's the year after he got out of jail.'

Stella stood up so quickly her chair fell back and hit the floor. She tried to step out of its way and tripped on a chair leg. Gerard stood too and caught her arm, which she pulled sharply away. She stumbled again before finding her feet and backing towards the door. Gerard finally

managed to pull the chair upright and out of the way.

‘What for? What the hell for?’ She was shouting at him now.

He hung his head and a familiar dizziness hit him, the damp smell of the river filling his nostrils. His body felt slumped and slack. Everything inside him was sucked away like there was just a hollow tube of empty space running through his body and he had to fight to keep his body frame upright around this nothingness. ‘In 1954, when I was fifteen, he threw a boy into the river during a flood. The boy drowned.’

Stella turned on her heel and walked from the room.

#

That evening Gerard was half an hour later than usual starting out on the walk. He could tell he’d miss the sun setting over Casablanca as he set off in the gathering dark. The encounter with Stella had left him numb. He’d grown accustomed to memories here but they’d come upon him till now with such gentleness, such kindness. He walked the streets of the estate tonight as if emerging from a long illness, bruised and battered. Memories had been extracted, it seemed, from his bone marrow like fiercely embedded thorns. There seemed to be no substance left for any thoughts or feelings, nothing at all to cling to. It occurred to him that one’s skeleton was merely a tree from which memories and emotions were hung throughout one’s life and these ones had grown into him like some kind of interior parasitic plant that had suckered to him. Would he be free now?

He stood still at this momentous idea and laughed out loud, not letting it matter. *What difference would it make? Happiness, unhappiness; freedom, restriction; empowerment, disempowerment. The trick is to know what’s permanent.*

Bogarts Way, Christie Street, Lovers Lane, and then he stopped at the vacant block, though Casablanca was nothing but a great grey blob off in the distance. Gerard nodded. *It’s almost time.*

He thought of his mother and father meeting here in secret. Perhaps they walked hand-in-hand through the natural lane of wattle trees that used to be here, perhaps they lay sometimes on the ground and listened to the galahs, as he’d done as a boy. He might have been conceived on the very ground upon which he now stood. He tried to imagine Frank before the war and hoped he was perfect, for Stella’s sake. What had happened when Uncle Christie had come across them here? What was the shame in it really? Two young people in love, that’s all they’d been. It was a story as old as humankind. *Lovers Lane, Christie! Why’d you make such a big deal of it? They stayed together, didn’t they?* He shook his head at Christie, as he did every time.

‘You old bastard! It’s not like you had a real clean slate yourself.’ And so saying he turned back as if he’d finally put Christie in his place.

#

Easter Sunday. Dan, Zara and her kids had come for one last BBQ in the yard before it got too cold. He felt comforted by their arrival as if the day had been hinging on them being there, which was somehow absurd. *It's perfect now*, he caught himself thinking with a deep breath out. It was overcast but a weak sun filtered through, intermittently warming the side of his face, and occasionally a soft breeze lifted his hair. The pleasantness of the gathering began to permeate his skin and he felt his muscles loosen and the tightness in his heart eased.

Zara sat down next to him and she leant down and kissed the side of his forehead.

He smiled. 'How you doing?'

'Good. Lucky with the weather, aren't we?' She moved away again.

He thought about Stella and wondered how she was going. He thought, too, about that last Easter he'd had with Denis and Johnny. Grandma Jones had cooked at Casa as usual. Roast lamb as usual. Rice pudding and custard as usual. Uncle Christie and Denis and Johnny's dad Stan got rolling drunk as usual. Everything had been just as it always was.

Dan laughed raucously at something Zara's son Spencer had said and Gerard looked up and had a quiet chuckle in sympathy. If Denis were here now, he'd laugh just like that, just like Uncle Christie in fact. Johnny was harder to imagine as an adult. He was a mathematical genius, and there'd never been one in the family before, although, for a slow bloke, Uncle Bill had the quickest mind for figures, according to Christie. Perhaps they would have gone to university together if Johnny had lived. Perhaps he'd be able to remember more about the end of the fifties if Denis and Johnny had been there. It all seemed so hazy, life after they'd gone.

After lunch, he went inside to get the ice-cream. Zara followed him inside.

'I got a packet of Violet Crumbles to go with it,' he told her. 'It's the best way to have it.'

'Is it?' she said, her eyes twinkling.

They smiled at each other across the kitchen bench.

Gerard grabbed a carving knife and sliced the top off the Family Pack of mini Violet Crumble bars. He dropped the knife, surprised, and blood spouted from his index finger.

'Look at that!' he said, disgusted, his good sense offended by this ridiculous outcome. 'You wouldn't read about it!'

Zara made a grab for the tea towel on the oven door and wrapped up Gerard's finger. 'I'll get Dan to take you to Emergency. It might need some stitches.'

Dan watched while Gerard was treated.

'Is this your son?' the doctor asked Gerard as she perused the admittance form he'd filled out.

'No. This is Dan, my neighbour.'

She smiled at Dan. 'It's great you acted so quickly. Some leukaemia patients can't stop bleeding.'

'Leukaemia!' said Dan.

The doctor looked at Gerard in surprise.

'It's a chronic form. I'm in no immediate danger.'

The doctor looked between them and then back at the form. She sighed. 'Come and see me at any time, Gerard.'

'Thank you.'

## **Denis and Johnny**

**1954**

Christie had started letting Gerard drive his new Ford Zephyr Six into town for school. Grandpa was disgusted by this extravagance but Christie had gone ahead with the scheme for the car anyway. Now he insisted that Gerard take it whenever it was going to be parked at the homestead all day. Gerard was happy to oblige; it had been raining every day for the past week. He didn't have his license yet, but it was just a matter of catching up with Sergeant Woollacott. "Old Woollie" was a mate of Grandpa's. He was bound to bump into him sooner or later.

Turning into the school car park was the best bit and today the rain had finally abated enough for him to enjoy it. Gerard wound the window down, leant his elbow on the door and gripped the gutter. It meant turning off the road one-handed but he could tell he made a good impression as he pulled in. How could anyone miss seeing the Zephyr? Durham Beige with Rialto Red below the chrome side strip; Christie paid Gerard to keep it gleaming. Keith Murdoch watched, arms folded as he leant against his Austin A30, menacing hatred in the glint of his black eyes and the twitching muscle of his jaw. Keith had been driving the Austin for two years now and everyone was sick of hearing about it. It was a 2-door coupe, Canterbury Green and lucky to do 60mph. The Zephyr, however, was a six cylinder and had just won the Monte Carlo Rally from 404 rival entries "effortlessly", according to the Wheels Road Test. It could go uphill in top gear and at 60mph was just cruising.

Gerard could care less these days about Keith.

It had started drizzling again but he could still glimpse the Zephyr from the classroom window, a little patch of its beige roof and a flash of red amongst a rainbow of others in the distant car park glistening in the rain, their colours a bright contrast to the dull, wet landscape. It was new to him, being the driver of a car, and he was different because of it. He walked into school, sauntered almost the way Uncle Christie did when he left the house to go to the pub on Friday afternoon, like something special was about to happen and he was primed and ready for it. Even sitting here in geography he could feel it, the newness of himself, a power he'd never had before

infusing his limbs. There was nothing he couldn't do.

It had happened almost the moment they'd picked up the Zephyr in Sydney, Christie's boisterous excitement rousing Gerard out of his usual constraint. He thought of that day now as Sir droned on about the synoptic scale. They'd arranged to pick up the car at ten in the morning and drive home, but Christie had insisted on them going back into the city to get a celebratory drink at The Royal George Hotel. Once Christie had a few under his belt he decided they'd stay another night in Sydney and Gerard had gone off for a wander with a promise to meet Christie later for tea.

That's how Gerard had found himself outside the Kent Brewery on Broadway in the early afternoon. He wasn't going to go in. He was just going to have a bit of a look, take in the sweet, malty aroma, watch the trucks come and go, see the KB ironwork and the Kent Invicta. But suddenly a friendly young bloke passed him wearing his dark shirt casually rolled up at the sleeves and slouching along slowly with his hands in his pockets. He stopped and spoke.

'Hoping for a few shifts?' He indicated the old building with a nod of his head.

'No! Just looking about, like.'

'I can take you in, mate, introduce you to the foreman.'

'What's his name?'

'The foreman?'

'Yeah.'

'Frank Harnett.'

Gerard couldn't believe this turn up of events. He folded his arms. 'What's he like?'

'Frank? He's alright,' the young bloke nodded back, obviously in no rush to get back on the floor and do whatever you did in a brewery. Gerard quizzed the bloke on the job. It seemed to him that he'd merely wandered into view and a meeting with his father was being delivered. An image of Christie's gleaming Zephyr flashed in his head and when it dropped away he gave a casual nod and slouched after his new mate.

Gerard was shown into a cramped, untidy office and told to wait. Strong light from the tiny window filtered through a cloud of dust thrown up in the air by the opening of the door, creating a fog that blinded him momentarily. It was a utilitarian space, he saw, with a desk and one chair, piles of papers that looked like they should have been filed years ago, poster boards stacked against the wall, boxes on high shelves, empty beer bottles, overflowing ashtrays, and, of all things, a child's tricycle parked in the corner. Gerard was drawn to it. He gave one of the handles a half-reluctant tug and its wheels turned over with a resistant squeak. It was dark red with a white seat and handles, gone off in colour from a layer of grime. A memory of riding it up and down the

street one Saturday morning flooded him with nausea. Frank had yelled at him to piss off. He'd been hungry. He'd not even been able to sing. People had come and gone from their houses and sometimes they'd been able to hear Frank yelling and smashing things and they'd avoided his gaze.

He turned around quickly at a noise at the door.

Frank took him in with a raised eyebrow threatening to break into a proper scowl, Gerard's old trike filling the space between them.

'Arnie said you want work?'

Had he not been recognised then? It was hard to tell but he was here now and it only took him a second to decide.

'No,' he said and paused, watching the eyebrow, watching the fist. 'I'm Gerry Calligan.'

The foreman's taut alertness dropped immediately and Frank dropped his head, placed his hands on his hips and smiled at the trike as if they'd just been sharing bitter reminiscences.

'No, mate,' he said looking Gerard now in the eye. 'If there's one thing I'm sure of about you, Giraffe, it's that you're a fucking Harnett.' He spread his hands. 'For what it's worth.'

'It's not worth anything. No one knows. They all think I'm a bastard.'

Frank stepped into the office and let the door swing shut releasing another cloud of dust. He moved in behind the office, sat down and pulled a packet of cigarettes out of the drawer.

'Smoke?' he offered, throwing the packet across the desk after he took one out.

Gerard helped himself and then leant forward towards the proffered match, inhaling to light up.

'Ah well,' said Frank letting smoke escape through his words as he spoke, 'you're a chip off the old block anyway.'

'Not really.' Gerard had never been so tough in his life. 'I only hit people in self-defence.' He took a deep drag and sank against a filing cabinet.

Frank laughed. 'You're a little smartarse!' He leant back in the chair and crossed his feet out in front of him under the desk. 'Actually, I only ever hit people in self-defence too.'

'How d'you figure that out?' Gerard surprised himself with his bold scepticism.

'You wouldn't understand.' Frank spoke letting the smoke make its escape from his lungs again as he mouthed the words.

'Yeah, that's what they all say.'

Frank appraised him and then sat forward pulling his feet back under him. 'You know I thought about you and your mother every day of that fucking war. Every fucking day! Then I got back and found her shackled up with my brother.' He hung his head again. 'I thought we were

going to have more kids. Get married . . . ?

‘Get married?’

‘Yeah, didn’t you know that one either, Gerry?’ Stella had been pregnant, Frank said, so they ran off to elope and then she refused to go through with it. He joined up and told her he wasn’t going to lie to the old man that he was married if he wasn’t. ‘I reckon it was Jimmy she was after all along. I was a mug, that’s what.’ He stood up abruptly, stubbed out his cigarette and continued. ‘I never knew you were with JT, I fucking swear. If you want to come live here, mate, job’s right, you just say the word.’

Gerard tried not to be too ungrateful as he refused this generous offer.

‘She had a smart mouth, you know that? She just fucking always had something smart to say. I felt like I was drowning. It drove me fucking spare, mate, every time you called me Frank. *She* did that. She brought you up to be confused about who I was. When I got home she says to you, “This is Frank,” and I smacked her clean across the fucking room. I’m not proud of it. I’m not fucking proud of it. I don’t hit my new missus, mate. You should know that.’ He laughed. His new wife was a nurse and wouldn’t stand for any bad behaviour from her husband. ‘She knows what’s what, my fucking old girl.’ He came around the desk and took in the old trike once again. ‘How’s this old thing, ay?’

‘Yeah.’ Gerard nodded and took one last puff. He stepped towards the desk to stub out his cigarette too, putting a bit of space between them.

‘Yeah. Oh well. Shit happens, mate. Here,’ he slipped a hand into his pocket and drew out a few bills.

Gerard pocketed the money.

‘You turned out alright I reckon, Gerry,’ and Frank patted him once on the shoulder and turned to the door.

Gerard smiled now as he looked out the classroom window, remembering his parting words to Frank. ‘It’s been true all along then, hasn’t it? I am a bastard, even if I *am* a Harnett on my birth certificate.’

Frank shrugged it off. ‘Wasn’t my doing, mate. I didn’t want to have a bar of it. And anyway, she’s done you a favour, I reckon. You wouldn’t have wanted to be part of my family. Bunch of fucking pricks, I’m telling you.’

‘Yeah, that I’ve worked out.’

‘That’s good then.’ Frank seemed to have found something in him. ‘Glad you know what’s what. It always helps.’

And that’d been it. The cosmic joke of it all had amused Gerard ever since. The truth of it



filled him, not with despair as he might have expected, but with relief. Frank had at least given him that. There was something practical about the attitude of Frank, it seemed to Gerard; there was strength in this kind of pragmatism. “Shit happens, mate,” had kept echoing in his head since the meeting. Frank’s shrug was different to Uncle Jimmy’s, whose indifference to things had more of the victim in it. Frank’s was, Gerard decided, more hard-edged. This was life, it said, and you could only respond in whichever way seemed right to you. Rage and violence was one way. Frank had tried that at one time but had now moved on. It was a mundane, business as usual shrug now. He could be like that too with the new-found sense of himself in the world as a bloke who could drive a car to school, who could let Keith Murdoch seethe without feeling the constant, niggling anxiety that had plagued his child self. He was new.

He smiled again and someone rang a bell from outside the office, signalling that classes were now over for the day.

The rain had picked up and he waited for Denis and Johnny in the car. They headed down to Ingram’s milk bar and as he pulled the Zephyr up beside the curb, Old Woollie arrived behind him in his police car, a light grey Holden FX. The Sarge praised his parking, pulled out a notepad and wrote out a ticket so that Gerard could get a license issued at the station.

‘Best get home soon, son. The river’s threatening to top the bridge. It’s come up another foot and a half since this morning.’

‘Really?’ Gerard threw Denis a glance that suggested they give up the milk bar for today. ‘Yeah, we’ll take off then.’

Old Woollie turned with a satisfied nod and they all got back into the car, their school shirts now thoroughly drenched. They headed to Denis and Johnny’s, a house in town this side of the river, parked, and ran quickly to the river bank nearby for a look. There was a crowd from school gathered in the picnic area, some trying to keep dry in clumps under trees, but others, not bothering about the rain, standing as close to the water as they could.

Gerard steered Denis and Johnny to the bank, realising too late that the group near the water was Keith and his mates. They turned in unison to move further upstream, but Big Jack Walsh had spotted them and there was a yell from that direction that Gerard couldn’t make out over the roar of the river in flood.

They grouped themselves together against a poplar tree that offered scant protection and became mesmerised by the speed of the water’s flow, by the rush of sound, and by watching the debris bobbing and bouncing its way past them, bits of timber and offcuts of wood, old tyres, a piece of corrugated iron, even a mailbox. Suddenly a whole log, its branches still intact, appeared, carried with a slower grace by the foaming charge. It rolled in slow motion and then a branch

snagged under water so that its back end was swung sideways to the front to tug it clear, whereupon it rolled again.

As the log made its way past Keith Murdoch, he picked up a stick at the water's edge and threw it furiously in the air. It hit the log and rebounded swiftly into the torrent and Keith's mates gave a surprised cheer that he'd achieved such a casual direct hit.

'They think he's Joe DiMaggio.' Denis rolled his eyes.

'Who's Joe DiMaggio?' asked Johnny.

'That baseball mug that just married Marilyn Monroe.' Denis picked up a rock and pitched it baseball style across the river as if it was possible to skim it over the rolling surface.

'The French are glad to die for love,' Gerard sang. He picked up a stick, placed the other hand behind his back and thrust the stick forward like a sword. 'They delight in fighting duels.'

Johnny laughed but Denis pointed over Gerard's shoulder, pulling a wry face. Gerard knew what this meant and he threw the stick to the ground and turned to face Keith Murdoch with his arms folded over his chest.

'Piss off,' he shouted at the bedraggled group over the din.

'Since when do you tell me what to fucking do?' Keith moved closer and stopped with his face inches from Gerard's.

'Since today. I'm not putting up with your shit anymore. You don't own the river. Get lost!' They were eye to eye and Gerard realised he had finally caught up to Keith in height. It didn't surprise him; he found he expected them, now, to be equals.

'I could punch your teeth right out of your face, Calligan!' Keith spat as he said it.

Gerard cocked his head, nodded and drew his eyes together as if thinking hard. 'You know, I think that would be a first. You've never actually hit anyone. You always let the boys do it for you.'

Keith pushed him hard in the chest and made to turn away, but sprang jerkily at Johnny and grabbed him with both arms around the waist.

'Hey!' Johnny yelled, taken aback.

Denis and Gerard leapt forward but were tackled to the ground by Big Jack Walsh and Wilkie Harnett. They watched in horror, struggling, as Keith dragged Johnny close to the river edge. Chipper the Nipper grabbed Johnny's feet and together Keith and Chipper threw him in. The rest of Keith's mates froze in astonishment, no one cheering this time.

Denis was up first. He started running along the bank shouting Johnny's name and Gerard jumped up and growled at Al Sheehan as he bolted past him, 'Get the Sarge!'

Johnny was trying to swim to shore but was being quickly swept downstream. He found

his footing momentarily and used it to lunge to the side but was rolled under the water. This was too much for Denis who took a running dive in after him.

‘Denis!’ screamed Gerard. ‘Fuck!’ He was sprinting now, yelling all the while, just managing to keep up with the boys. ‘Get him, Denis, for fuck’s sake!’ and ‘Johnny, hold on!’ as the two managed to cling together.

Time seemed to slacken its grip on Gerard and in slow motion he noticed the crowd up at the bridge rouse themselves, pointing, shouting, and starting to panic.

‘Watch the bridge!’ he instructed, his lungs burning, his arms pumping. He tripped and stumbled, righted himself and paused briefly to watch Denis as he looked for something on the bridge to grasp hold of. Denis reached a hand up to clutch uselessly at nothing. He was swirled under the bridge, his head just inches under the beams, and Johnny was sucked under.

‘Hold him, Denis!’ It was almost a prayer. He ran towards the bridge, up and over the road. A hazy group of drenched people yelled and waved at him madly trying to tell him something. He pushed past, needing to see Denis and Johnny come out the other side. It took him a thousand years to get through the raincoats, the umbrellas, hair plastered to desperate faces with messages he didn’t want to hear, and now Old Woollie’s Q-Siren.

And there was Denis ahead of him in the water yelling what Gerard couldn’t hear but knew was Johnny’s name, violently, terror-stricken, over and over, and Gerard turned back to the bridge to find Johnny if he was still there and he wasn’t there. No Johnny, and he turned back to follow Denis knowing Johnny had to have been dragged that way too and as he ran he saw Denis lose hope, ‘No Denis!’ let his arms fall, ‘No Denis!’ let his lungs deflate, ‘No Denis!’ let the river take him.

#

Silence. Wet earth sucked against his nose and mouth with each breath.

He knew this smell, the dampness of the river, leaf mould, the brightness of the grass against the clean, loamy soil, so different to that of the paddocks or the yards overlaid with decades of sheep and cow manure. There was the feeling of home in animal-composted soil, but this soil was holiday soil. Lying on the banks in the sun wet from a swim; sitting under the trees in the wind having a smoke; tackled to the ground in a game of footy; always Denis on one side, Johnny on the other.

Denis and Johnny!

Noise blasted into his ears. Sirens, shouts, cries, quick swirls of people, the rain more determined than ever, the dark closing in, the relentless flow of the river.

Pulling himself onto all fours against the deep exhaustion of his muscles, he wailed and

groaned like the animal he'd always been, in horror, with immense fear, as inarticulate as ever, as ineffectual as he would ever be in his life.

He was pulled to his feet, scooped up into the smell of Slow Bill and the sense of himself in all its totality was lost as his mind shut down again and engulfed him with blackness.

#

The dust of the woollen blanket around him, the hardness of the chair in which he both tried to slump and tried to hold himself upright, Slow Bill, Christie, and (thank God!) Grandpa. Uncle Stan now here, now gone, raging, frantic, his physical presence like a tiger about to explode into action. Aunt Carys from somewhere else in the police station howling, from inside his head whimpering, from beside Grandpa in urgent discussion, from between one side of his heart and the other silent, desperate, desolate.

Would he have Aunt Carys here forever in the gap in his broken heart?

#

'You need to tell us, lad.' The Constable's tone implied it would be best for everyone concerned.

Saliva flooded his mouth and he was panting, pictures of the moment by the river flickering across his mind. He swallowed.

'Keith threw him in.'

'Denis?'

'Johnny.'

'Keith Murdoch threw Johnny into the river?'

'Chipper grabbed his legs.'

'The Chipside boy?'

'Yes.'

'Tried to pull him to the bank by the legs?'

'No.'

'No?'

'They threw him in together.'

'Oh, I see.' Pause. 'And Denis?'

He bent over his stomach. If he could cut his stomach right out of his body, he could continue to live. 'Den dove in when Johnny went under. He had him. Till the bridge. He had him.'

'And at the bridge?'

'He lost him.'

'On the other side of the bridge only Denis was seen.'

'Then he gave up.'

‘What makes you think he gave up? He was probably pulled under by the current.’

‘No.’

‘Why do you think that?’

‘He lost him.’

‘He could hardly have helped it.’

‘No.’

Pause again. Take another tack. ‘Why do you think Murdoch threw Johnny into the river?’

Breathe out. Breathe out. Breathe out. He could hear himself saying, ‘Ha, ha, ha,’ softly each time his breath released.

Shift in the chair. ‘What prompted Keith Murdoch and the Chipside boy to pick up Johnny and throw him into the water?’

‘Don’t you always try to get your enemies where it’ll hurt the most?’

‘Keith and Denis were enemies?’

‘No. Me.’

‘You and Keith Murdoch were enemies?’

‘Yes.’

‘Keith threw Johnny into the river because that would hurt you the most?’

‘Yes.’

Put down the pen, rub the face, pick up the pen. ‘What did you do take make an enemy of Keith Murdoch.’

‘I’m a bastard.’

Pause. ‘You mean, you were born out of wedlock?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why did that make you and Keith enemies?’

He lifted his eyes to the Constable who became, for the first time since entering the room, not a representative but a singular human being. He tried to find an answer behind the Constable’s eyes, knowing the answer was held there as it was held inside every person who knew that the strong attack the weak in order to stay that way. ‘It made him feel invincible.’

#

His eyes fluttered in the dark bedroom. Things were being smashed. Figures rushed down the hallway to contain Christie, home from the pub, trying to regain a measure of his own invincibility and failing.

Gerard dragged himself towards the light. The kitchen table had been righted. Slow Bill sat now with Christie as Grandpa placed a mug of tea in front of each of them. Debris littered the

floor as if a hurricane had been through and he was struck by how efficiently Christie had made the outside world fit with the turmoil inside. Is that what Frank had been doing? He was able to enter the scene without hesitation now that it was reconciled with his battered muscles and the hopelessness of his chest where the gap was now sepulchral with the cries of Aunt Carys reverberating around the empty cavity.

He stopped behind a chair, grabbed its back and said to the devastated kitchen, 'I'm sorry.'

For just a second the crushed silence became stunned as his elders absorbed what the words meant.

'No!' Christie slammed his fist onto the table, upending the mugs of tea. He stood to give his words the emphasis and clarity he intended. 'You will not take the blame for this. You won't blame yourself!'

Slow Bill stood quickly to steer Gerard into his chair. Grandpa filled the kettle again and placed it on the stove. They sat inside a flimsy bubble of reassurance that was Grandpa shuffling sedately around them making the tea, wiping the table, placing the mugs again. Then Grandpa sat, they sipped, they gazed in silence at their mugs.

#

He sat in the church in the second pew directly behind Aunt Carys who had the aisle seat. She was small, crumpled and thin and was still both there in front of him and inside the hollow ache in his chest. The organ sounded its introduction and the congregation gathered itself and stood for the start. 'O Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder, consider all the works thy hands have made,' they sang heavily.

*They think he's Joe DiMaggio.*

He'd never actually sat in church without Denis and Johnny. The two coffins sat side by side in front of him, a blur of dark wood and white flowers as he kept his eyes firmly fixed on the bare feet of the Blessed Mother. The congregation hit the swell of the chorus, 'Then sings my soul, my saviour God to thee.'

*I could punch the teeth right out of your face, Calligan.*

'How great thou art, how great thou art.'

*Who's Joe DiMaggio?*

'And when I think that God, his son not sparing, sent him to die, I scarce can take it in.'

*The French are glad to die for love.*

'That on the cross my burden gladly bearing, he bled and died to take away my sin.'

*They delight in fighting duels.*

'Then sings my soul...'

*Since when do you tell me what to fucking do!*  
‘How great thou art...’  
*I’m not putting up with your shit anymore.*  
‘When Christ shall come with shout of acclamation.’  
*No! You will not take the blame for this.*  
‘And take me home, what joy shall fill my heart.’  
*Hold him, Denis! Denis! No Denis! No Denis!*

#

People filed past him shaking hands, kissing his cheek.

‘Gave the boys a good send off.’  
‘Hold your head up. That’s the main thing.’  
‘...honour the boys, have courage.’  
‘...proper thing to do, that’s the way.’  
‘Boys would be pleased. Was a good service.’  
‘How they would have wanted it.’

#

Grandpa was skinning a kangaroo. Usually he helped, but he sat against a tree close by and watched Grandpa follow his own methodical procedure. Watching, each movement traced with his eyes in all its minute detail, this was all he did now. Each day he sat, he watched. Grandpa had a steadfast way of going on, slowly but mindfully, present to each small task, giving it his fullest attention. He plodded, not a shred of impatience in his muscles. Acceptance, endurance, nothing stopped his progress, not the smallest irritation, nor the deadliest of life’s interruptions.

Occasionally, Grandpa opened his mouth with a visible sound, a sucking of his tongue against the roof of his mouth that he usually made before making an important verbal point. Yet today he had nothing to say. He was just always about to, constantly on the verge of something, and then didn’t bother. Gerard didn’t mind. His own thought processes were like this too lately. He’d be about to grasp something momentous about things and then realise it was pointless even to try. Nothing mattered. Nothing would change things.

Gradually the animal was exposed, the once-powerful muscles absurdly shrunken without their casing. Gerard had always been surprised that a skinned animal was so small without that thin barrier between it and the world. But not today. Would anything surprise him again? Surprise was for people who had expectation. He was bereft.

The kangaroo reminded him of Keith Murdoch in the dock, shrivelled and raw, urging one of two things. You wanted to cover it, protect it from the harsh shocks that would inevitably come

to one so vulnerable. At the same time, there was an urge to cut the flesh up quickly, turn it into pieces of dog meat, take away its form as a whole entity, a pathetic being that required your consideration. Either make it more, restore it with relief to what it was, or make it less, so that you could forget your guilt that it was there.

Grandpa had open-skinned the animal, laid the skin on the table and scraped the inside of the skin with a blunt stone. He was pressing it into a salt pack as Uncle Christie and Slow Bill drove towards them in the truck. They pulled up and got out in unison, walked a few paces and stood, nodding at Grandpa.

‘Done like a dinner!’ Christie folded his arms across his chest. ‘Done like a fucking dinner!’

Grandpa made the sound again, opening his mouth to speak. He nodded, closed his mouth, and continued with his job.

‘He’ll serve time. Maybe ten years.’ Christie shrugged. ‘Chipside got off.’

‘How’s that?’ asked Grandpa.

‘Murdoch said Chipside couldn’t have known his intentions. Murdoch made sure they didn’t lock up Chipside too.’ He shrugged again.

‘Ah well,’ said Grandpa, meaning it was a good result, all things considered.

‘Yep,’ said Slow Bill, meaning it could have gone either way and it was fairly satisfactory. All things considered.



## Past and Present

May 2009

Gerard had insisted on driving, sensing a fragility about Zara today that was understandable given their mission. She hadn't seen her father since her wedding. Her entire childhood was something that was always there in the background, but she didn't think about it. Sometimes it was almost like it had never happened, as if it was another lifetime.

Once through the airlock, there was a blast of hot air and a penetrating smell. *The smell of death?* Gerard wondered.

They approached a counter and a woman with very thin hair smiled at them and pointed at her throat.

'Sorry,' she whispered, 'I've lost my voice.'

'What a blow!' Gerard said with a smile.

'Roger Tivey,' Zara said.

'Oh!' the woman nodded. 'Are you a relative?'

'Yes. I'm his daughter.'

The woman nodded again at Zara and gave Gerard a regretful smile. 'Come this way,' she stood up. They followed her into the office behind the desk and she shut the door behind them and motioned to the chairs. She explained to them, putting a touch of voice into her whisper, that Roger had Wernicke-Korsakoff Syndrome. Even with treatment and no alcohol since he'd arrived, his symptoms had continued to deteriorate. Wernicke-Korsakoff Syndrome was like dementia. Roger became easily confused, had poor short term memory and some periods of amnesia. 'By that I mean, there seems to be some periods of his life he doesn't remember.'

'That's convenient for him.'

'Yes, I suppose it will seem like that. He's on medication for anxiety but it means he will seem unresponsive. He's fairly wobbly on his feet now and we generally put him in a wheelchair to get him around. He may also make things up if you ask him things he can't answer. Any questions?'

‘No.’

‘Right. Well, he’s in Room 27 down the left corridor. Good luck.’

‘Thanks very much,’ said Gerard.

As they approached Room 27 the smell worsened. Zara entered first and took in the four beds, only two of which were presently occupied. The first man looked extremely old and frail and didn’t appear to see them. The second, a grey-haired skeleton, looked towards them as they approached the bed. He showed no signs of recognising his daughter.

‘Hi, Dad,’ Zara said, stopping at the foot of the bed. The muscles around Roger’s eyes started to twitch. ‘It’s Zara.’

He looked from Zara to Gerard and back again. ‘I’m staying here.’ His speech was slurred. Did he think she was a nurse? She introduced Gerard and Roger looked suspiciously at Gerard and then said to Zara, ‘Aren’t you going to sit down?’

‘Okay. How are things?’

‘Good!’ He was suddenly earnest.

‘Do you like it here?’

‘Oh, it’s alright, most of the time.’

Zara nodded. ‘Do you remember our house, Dad?’

‘Out at The Goat? Course I do.’

‘Did you sell all our furniture, do you remember?’

‘I gave it all to Esteban. His house burnt down and he lost everything. I gave the whole house to him.’

‘Didn’t you sell it?’

‘I *gave* it to him!’

‘Okay. What about Mum? Do you know where she went?’

‘Mum died in ’74,’ he said aggrieved. ‘She had throat cancer.’

‘Yes, I know. That was Gran. What about your wife? Felicity? Do you know where she went?’

‘I don’t bloody know!’ He was defensive. ‘She’s in Poland with her mother.’

‘How do you know?’

‘That’s where she went. Her mother was dying in Poland, she had to go.’

‘Why didn’t she come back?’

‘She came back!’ He was exasperated. ‘She wanted to take you!’

Zara gasped and Gerard reached for her hand. They locked eyes and Gerard gave her a nod.

‘You never told me she came back for me.’

‘Of course, I told you! You didn’t want to go!’

‘That’s not true.’

‘It bloody is true.’

‘It isn’t. You never said.’

‘She’s dead anyway.’

‘Who?’

‘Your mother. She got hit in the eye by the puck at an ice hockey game over there.’

‘What? That’s absurd.’

‘That’s what bloody happened!’

Gerard squeezed her hand and Zara took a deep breath. She let her child self rise up before her. She’d started sitting next to Stella in class the year she was seven. The morning sunlight was dappled across the students’ backs but, often, she’d glance sideways at Stella and a ray of light would be streaming in, hitting Stella’s hair in a glowing halo. At least, that’s the way Zara remembered it. They’d hold hands and skip around the playground and Stella would buy mixed lollies from the tuckshop and share them with Zara under the birch tree outside their classroom window.

Zara got off the bus with the Goats Hollow kids after school and as each one peeled off into their homes Zara’s gait slowed until she was the last child left to dawdle on alone. The house was empty now, stripped. There would be no plum cake, fresh from the oven, no mother rolling golabki for dinner. The afternoon was solitary, a limp push of her doll on the swing, a Sao biscuit with butter and vegemite, a dull flip though *We Love You, Snoopy*. Night fell and Zara ate peanut butter on toast and watched *Doctor Who*. She cleaned her teeth, as her mother had always insisted, and went to bed.

Car lights flashed around Zara’s bedroom, waking her, and she listened as her father yelled a drunken goodnight to his friends. A car door slammed, the lights receded as the car drove away, and Zara dozed off again to the sound of rumbling in the fridge.

She started awake. Her father was lifting her bed covers and pushing her over to make room. The familiar smell of cigarettes and beer assaulted her and her father’s stubbled chin scraped her face as he kissed her neck. A hand pulled her pyjama pants off her in one motion and she suffocated as her father’s entire form flattened her into the mattress. It was a jumble of rocking movement and stabs of pain, her father’s grunting pushing back at the thoughts that tried but failed to form in her head. She would only understand it later, with repetition.

‘Why did you start having sex with me when Mum left?’ Roger turned away and looked

out the window. His eyelids fluttered and twitched rapidly, but he appeared to have forgotten they were there. 'Dad?'

He slowly turned his head back again and squinted. 'Zara?'

'Yes.'

'What's for tea?'

'I don't know.'

'Cook something for your old Dad, will you love?'

'No, Dad. I'm grown up now. I don't live here.'

Roger's head slipped slowly sideways and he nodded off.

Zara was incensed. 'He's gone to sleep!' She leant over the bed and gave her father a shake.

'Dad! Wake up!'

His eyes resumed their fluttering. 'I'm staying here,' Roger said, cranky again.

'Dad, it's Zara. I'm your daughter.'

'I know who you bloody well are!'

'I want to know why you were such a bastard to me when I was a kid.'

'I was the one who took care of you, for Christ's sake! I did everything, cooked, cleaned, went to the school and listened to those bloody teachers accuse me left, right and centre! I even plaited your bloody hair! And then you pissed off and never came home. Well, don't come looking for a bloody handout now! I gave everything to Adriana.'

'You said you gave the house to Esteban.'

'Who's Esteban?'

'I don't know. You said you gave him the house.'

'I *gave* it to Adriana.'

'Whatever.' Zara slumped back in the chair. 'What does it matter?' She contemplated him for a minute. 'What happened to your wife?'

'She left.'

'Where did she go?'

'She went to Poland.'

'Did she come back?'

'No. Good bloody riddance too.'

'She never came back?'

'She wrote all those letters.'

'What letters?'

'To Zara.'

‘She wrote letters?’

‘Full of bullshit.’

‘You never gave Zara the letters! Where are they?’

‘Zara never wanted to see them.’

‘Yes, she did! Where are they?’

‘They’re here in the drawer.’

Zara jumped up and went around the bed to the bedside cabinet. She hesitated, wide-eyed, and then pulled it open. There, in the drawer, was a bundle of letters and a pile of birthday cards she’d made for Roger as a kid. ‘You kept the cards,’ she said, retrieving everything.

‘Zara made them.’

A folded piece of paper on the top had a childish drawing of a vintage car. “This is Chitty Chitty Bang Bang” it said on the front. Zara clutched the pile to her chest and ran for the bathroom. She vomited into the toilet bowl and then faced herself in the mirror. There’d been two fathers. One had cut her lunch and brushed her hair in the morning. He smelled of Brylcreem and Brut Cologne. She ironed his shirts and learned not to overcook his chops. The other only happened to her in the dark. There were no words for this one, no way of articulating the events of the night. It had to be kept in a box, hidden deep so that no one would ever know that with the other father there also existed the other daughter. If the other daughter didn’t think, it all went away.

Zara took a step away from the mirror as her next thought materialised in the space between her two selves. Gavin had found the box where the other daughter lived. He’d opened the box and found the lost child. That’s why she was here. She’d realised the other daughter existed because Gavin’s yelling and beating had forced the lost child, that battered creature, to show herself in the daylight.

As Zara made her way back to her father’s bed, she heard Gerard asking Roger once again about the house.

‘Have you kept anything for your daughter? Have you made a will?’

‘It’s all in the bank, the money from the house. It all goes to Zar.’

‘How much?’

‘About eight grand. Not much. I had the house too but I had to give it to Vic to pay him back.’

‘Pay him back for what?’

‘I put too much on the dogs. Vic paid all me debts off ‘cos they were gonna take Zara. I got on the straight and narrow after that.’ Roger closed his eyes again. ‘She turned out alright,’ he said with a last flutter of his eyes. ‘Married a copper, can you believe it? Married a bloody copper!’

#

Dan sat in his car in the dark waiting for Stella. He hadn't seen her for nearly two weeks since he'd told her he was in love with her and couldn't bear just having a fling. He felt like getting high or drunk. Headlights appeared and he got an erection on cue.

'They'll be no relief for you tonight, big fella.' He shifted in his seat.

Stella opened the passenger door, slipped in and leant over to kiss him.

'Don't babe,' Dan said, putting up a hand. 'I didn't invite you here for that.'

Stella reached up and put on an interior light. 'You can't do this to me. I've been looking forward to this all day.'

'When you leave Jeff, then we can be together.'

'You're such a fucking prick!'

'I knew you'd be mad.'

She rubbed her eyes. 'What then? Why am I here?'

'Come with me and talk to Gerard about your Dad.'

'Seriously! I thought we were going to fuck and you want me to go and talk to someone about how my Dad was actually a murderer? Are you for fucking real?'

'You need to, Stell.'

'No, I don't. I talked to Mum about it.'

'You fought with your Mum about it, you mean. As usual.'

Stella rested her head on the back of the seat and took a deep breath. She looked tired. 'My life's falling apart.'

'That's why you need to talk to Gerard.'

'No. I mean, everything is falling apart.' She closed her eyes. 'Everything is a lie. I'm going broke, my husband hasn't wanted to have sex with me in over a year, my daughter hates me, and my mother thinks I'm a complete bitch.'

'Your daughter doesn't hate you.' Dan watched as tears squeezed out of the corners of her eyes.

'If I leave, she'll want to stay with Jeff.'

He was at a loss. He knew nothing about kids. He started the car. 'This is the only thing I can think of that might help.' He started backing out and she didn't protest.

#

Gerard looked across his kitchen table at Dan and then at Stella.

'Well,' he said. 'Here we are.'

Stella looked obstinately at the table and Dan shrugged an apology.

‘Right then,’ said Gerard. He proceeded to tell Stella the story of the river, of Denis and Johnny, of her father, Keith Murdoch. He wove the strands together, wanting her to see that they’d all been conditioned to respond to each other by events that had occurred before they’d been born. There had seemed to be no other way of being towards each other. He knew they’d been wrong about that, but perception is reality and they’d let the things that had appeared to be the truth to shape their experiences.

‘So anyway,’ he said, arriving at the crucial moment, ‘Keith and his mates approached us and we had the usual altercation and he and Freddie Chipside grabbed Johnny and threw him in. Denis jumped in to try and save him and they both drowned.’

It was an abrupt ending but he felt unable to draw out the implications for her further. He turned his face away from them and wiped away a single tear at the corner of his eye. They sat on in silence and Gerard found himself imagining Denis and Johnny standing behind him, Keith Murdoch and Wilkie Harnett behind Stella and Dan. What did it mean now? He looked again at the two people across from him.

‘I’m sorry,’ he offered, to whom he wasn’t sure.

Stella slowly raised her head and they pondered one another. ‘My father killed someone.’

‘Yes.’ He felt appalled anew that this could possibly have happened between the group assembled at the table. For the first time, he felt involved, culpable even.

Drops of water began to fall from her eyes and splash all over her shirt. Gerard reached for her hand and she clasped it tight. *The sins of the father*, he thought as he’d done once before in the presence of these two. Was their joining of hands redemption enough?

#

Two weeks later, Zara opened her new cafe, North. It had been in the local paper the week before by way of advertising and at seven-thirty that morning she lifted the two cafe barriers she’d been given by the coffee company out onto the street with the help of her waitress Kristen. Then they placed two aluminium cafe tables, each with two chairs, against the barriers.

Gerard arrived for breakfast five minutes later with Zara’s children, Spencer and Alice, and they sat at a table against the window so they could be seen from the street. A couple wandered in, placed themselves in a corner and ordered coffee. Gerard dropped the kids to school, returned at ten thirty to meet Dan for coffee and cake, and was pleasantly surprised to see a few other tables occupied.

‘It’s going alright,’ said Dan looking around as he pulled out a chair. ‘At least Zara’s got some paying customers, not just us.’

‘True. It’s a good sign.’

After Kristen took their order, Dan leant in and spoke softly, 'How's Kristen going?'

'Fine,' said Gerard. 'She's extremely efficient.'

'You know I think she might be gay.'

'Oh yes, she's definitely gay. She was up front about it. Actually, they get on extremely well.'

Dan raised his eyebrows at him. 'What's that supposed to mean.'

'It's not supposed to mean anything.'

'Zara's never shown a sign of being gay so if you're insinuating that they get along because Zar has some kind of hidden gay tendency then I think you'll be disappointed.'

'Won't bother me either way,' said Gerard.

Kristen took their order. She returned with their coffees and put them down without saying a word.

'Thank you.' Gerard pointedly looking at Dan.

'Thanks,' said Dan with emphasis and Kristen walked away. 'What?'

'There's no need to stare and be rude,' Gerard accused.

'Come on, seriously? You can't honestly think Zar would be interested in being with a woman.'

'You're really very conservative for someone of your generation. Don't you have any gay friends?'

'No.'

Gerard sniffed and sipped his coffee. 'Have you seen Stella lately?'

'Don't change the subject.'

'There's nothing else to say. Have you?'

Dan scowled. 'Yes. She's fine. Jeff's grandmother died. The shop was busy for Mother's Day. You know, usual crap.'

'Have you been seeing her?'

'Having sex with her you mean? No.' Dan paused while Kristen bought their cake over. 'I asked Dad about your cousins.'

'Yes, he'd certainly remember it all.'

'Yeah, he said the whole town was in shock. He said it felt like years before people recovered from it.' Dan watched Gerard cut off a bite of cake with his fork. 'I asked him why no one ever brought it up when we were kids. You know, why no one ever mentioned that Keith had been in jail.'

'What did he say?' said Gerard with the piece of cake on his fork poised in mid-air.



‘He said that Keith’s mother had nearly died taking an overdose of pills.’

‘I didn’t know that.’

‘Yeah, and Les stopped working in the store. The staff kept things going for months on their own when Keith first went to jail. So, he got out eventually and he kept really quiet at first and people just felt like they wanted to give him a chance.’

‘Hmm,’ Gerard put the fork to his mouth, swallowed the mouthful of cake and put his fork down.

‘Dad said the whole lot of them changed, all of them who were at the river that day, except Uncle Wilkie who became a bigger prick than ever. He reckons it was like waiting for an accident to happen. Uncle Wilkie started going to the pub and getting into fights. That went on for years.’

‘What happened?’

Dan picked up his own fork and started on his cake. ‘Nothing really happened by the sound of it. It just went on and on, even after Uncle Wilkie married Auntie Fay. That’s why Mum and Dad decided to live in the cottage. Uncle Wilkie was just such a complete train wreck that Dad thought he’d better hang around.’

‘Well, they were twins, I suppose.’

‘Yeah.’

‘When did Wilkie die?’

‘He was 57. They said it was cancer but...I overheard Mum and Dad talking about it the night it happened. Dad thought Fay had poisoned him.’

‘I’ll be blowed!’ Gerard was shocked.

Dan nodded.

‘Maybe there was a Harnett curse after all,’ Gerard muttered.

‘I was joking when I said that, mate.’

‘How does the son go on the farm?’

‘My cousin Wilkie, you mean?’

‘Yes.’

‘Lives there alone with his mother. Dad and I joke about entering him into that TV show, *Farmer Wants a Wife*.’

‘Don’t do it. Best if the name Wilkie Harnett dies out forever.’

#

Later that week, Gerard found himself at the cemetery. Grandpa, Bill, Dennis and Johnny were all buried here. They were together in a clump, two in front, facing the river, and two behind. Bill’s he’d never seen.

He stood at Johnny's feet, his eyes downcast, taking in the gap between his cousins' graves. He felt nothing and too much all at once. He couldn't believe he'd left them here all that time ago, that he'd gone on so long, that they'd stopped *being* way back then. All the things he'd been since, without them, washed over him and he felt that it was completely wondrous that they hadn't existed for all that time, all those long years. How had he gone on? *They'd gone on too*, he thought in protest. *They were with me*. He lifted his eyes, reading one headstone then the other: "Denis Stanley Williams, b. 1940, age 14 years, Greater love has no man than this," and "John Dewey Williams, b. 1943, age 12 years, Thou knowest that I love thee." *No, you fool! None of us have gone on. We were here, always. We three. We three! Here we are, three boys, still*. And he felt that he hadn't changed a bit. None of it mattered. All the things he'd done, the people he'd known, all of it was nothing. There was only this something that was still that boy, the essence of himself, the essence of Denis, the essence of Johnny, each as they were and promised to be, still existing as they always had. No amount of time passing had changed that. The memories he'd held, the futures they'd planned which hadn't come to be, all existed now. *Here. Now*.

Gerard grasped the headstone behind him. He knew, without looking, that he was leaning on Bill. *Slow Bill. Uncle Bill. Thank you*. And Gerard turned from the boys and put both hands on Bill's headstone, the way he might have grasped one of Bill's big hands in both his had he been there with Bill as he took his last breath. *I'm sorry I wasn't there. I was always sorry not to have seen you again*. He let go and walked to the foot of Bill's grave to read the headstone: "William Alfred Calligan, b. 1920, age 43 years, My soul doth magnify the Lord."

'Strike a light, only 43!' Gerard shook his head in disgust as if he'd never known Bill had died so young. *Only five years after Grandpa!* He was dumbfounded that he'd never been struck by this before. Bill had suffered a heart attack in the rough country out beyond the Ridge Paddock doing some work on the boundary fence. Christie had found him, his kelpie Maria lying next to him licking his hand, too late. *You were the biggest-hearted bloke I've ever known*. Gerard wondered at the acceptance they'd had, him and Christie, about Bill's death, as if it wasn't the anomaly it seemed to be to him now. They'd blamed the knock to the head for his early death as they'd blamed it for everything about Bill that was different. *But really? So young, Bill! What was going on?* He felt ashamed and guilty. *I was a fool, Bill, strutting around in London thinking I'd made it. But who cared?* He knew the answer to this too. Bill had cared. He'd received letters from Bill, speaking his life through the pages in that patient drawl, slow letters that snaked their way to him by ship from across the globe. How he'd missed them when they'd stopped. How they'd spoken to him of his own importance in the world; he'd mattered to this generous man with his elegant soul.

Gerard bent his head to press his eyes into the thumb and index finger of his right hand. His heart beat wildly, in sympathy with Bill's heart as it must have beaten up there on the Ridge that last day. *May you be resting in peace, Bill, and may your words be easy and your song glorious.*

And at last he'd come to Grandpa. He stepped around Bill's grave to the edge of Grandpa's and sat down at Grandpa's feet. "John Thomas Calligan, born 1890, age 69 years, God is light and in him there is no darkness."

Gerard slumped to sit on Grandpa's feet, letting his hands fall heavily between his knees. His bones felt empty, his skin grey, his eyes old and weary. He may not have ever learnt to open his heart the way Bill had, but from Grandpa he knew this wisdom: one has to keep going. And he'd done it, he'd walked through everything he'd been given. This was something at least. *God is light and in him there is no darkness.* Was it merely a matter of walking through the darkness until the light comes? Was that faith, knowing the light will come as the sun rises? Is it a matter of finding God, the one who holds up the lamp, or is God always there but we are blinded and cannot see? Is God nothing, no thing, except the light? Because this is one thing he now knew: out beyond everything and deep inside everything, there is only light, the light that speaks the word. *The Word. In the beginning was the Word. A light that shines in the dark. How long did you know? You sent me on a wild goose chase that's lasted a lifetime, chasing words. And there's only one and I never knew the sound of it until now when the time's up. It feels like I've wasted everything.*

He let himself fall forward onto his knees, the damp earth wetting through his trousers, and he grasped forward onto the cold slab of granite with his arms spread wide as if to hug the old man. His cheek landed on the grave, shocking him awake, and he lay there, gulping the air. *I'm old now too,* and his breathing steadied as a smile broke over his face. *I am you!*

'Are you alright?' An urgent shout broke the windy silence and Gerard sat up too quickly and had to shut his eyes till his vision cleared.

Good God, it was the priest! At least he hadn't been shouting out loud to Grandpa; the man would be worrying about his health but not his sanity as well.

'Fine, thank you.' Gerard tried to muster his energy to be as reassuring as possible. He got up and brushed his wet knees down. 'I'm Gerard.' He presented his hand.

'Father Pete,' the priest responded, shaking his hand. 'I'm sorry, I was worried something was wrong.'

'Nope. Just, you know, being sad.'

'I see.' The priest turned to squint down at Grandpa's headstone. 'John Thomas Calligan?'

'Yes, my Grandpa. These are all my relatives, actually.' He waved his hand at the clump

of four.

‘This is the Catholic section but I haven’t seen you at Mass.’

‘No, but, um, I do live here. Not a churchgoer, anymore.’

‘Why, do you mind me asking?’

‘Well, don’t you think that the older and wiser you become, the more it all just seems to be between you and God? Being amongst people seems less important.’ The priest blinked at him so he pressed on. ‘You know, all the ritual and the trappings become irrelevant.’

‘Do they? I hadn’t noticed.’

Gerard could see there was no point. He was bored already.

As if reading his mind, the priest tried again. ‘I mean, I know religious observance becomes irrelevant for modern agnostics but surely for the believer there *is* a point.’

‘Well, what’s the point then?’

‘To partake of the Eucharist, communion with the Christ.’

‘Hmm,’ Gerard said, trying to stop himself. ‘It’s possible for the most unlikely to be saved, you mean.’ He was quoting Patrick White’s *The Tree of Man*.

‘Yes, but I wasn’t suggesting you seemed an unlikely candidate. I don’t have those kind of prejudices.’

‘Good to hear,’ and he clapped the priest cheerfully on the back and made to move away.

‘It’s never too late.’ The priest smiled with irritating complacency. ‘It’s yours for the asking.’

Gerard was astounded at this, as if he’d invoked Stan Parker’s evangelist. He couldn’t help it, then, and had to utter Stan’s thoughts. ‘If you can understand, at your age, what I’ve been struggling with all my life, then it’s a miracle.’

The priest looked slightly askance, glancing over his shoulder, perhaps hoping for backup. ‘Are you suggesting I’m too young to be close to our Heavenly Father? Truly, if I told you of all the times I’ve been fortunate enough to have Our Lord grace my life...’ He trailed off. ‘Perhaps I could give you something to read,’ he added, as if to save himself.

Gerard looked around at his feet for a leaf, wondering if he was really going to be able to go so far. There was a small branch of gum leaves a few paces away from him and he began to laugh. ‘Ask and ye shall receive!’ He brandished it triumphantly in front of the priest’s face.

The priest took a step backward.

‘I believe in this leaf!’ he grinned. ‘This is God.’

‘I invite you to come to Mass, sir. Please,’ he nodded, ‘I really think you’d enjoy coming to Mass.’ The priest bowed, absurdly, as if Gerard had a knighthood and strode away.

Gerard was energised. It was the best he'd felt in weeks.

## Strikebreaker

1956

Austin Price was three years older than Gerard. He had a 1954 Ford Customline Tudor Sedan.

‘You know Tudor means 2-door,’ he told Gerard from behind the driver’s wheel. ‘The 4-door is spelled f-o-r-d-o-r.’

‘Yep.’ Gerard was only half listening. He was trying to retune the radio. They’d stayed the night in the shearers’ quarters after cutout, gone through Cunnamulla at 4am and were travelling north on the Mitchell Highway to Charleville, hoping the flooding of the Warrego wasn’t going to hold them up. After that it was Blackall, Barcaldine and then Aramac. They’d drive straight through if they could. The Barcoo was in flood too and Austin had never driven that far north so he wasn’t sure what to expect.

‘Yeah, they reckon Henry Ford was almost illiterate, that’s why.’

‘Go on! What made you buy the Customline, Aussie?’

‘I was following Tom Farrell in the Tele, you know, the journo that drove the Redex for *Modern Motor* that year?’

‘Yep.’

‘Seventh overall, third in the big class. I saw them go through Adaminaby. It was all mud between there and Tumut.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Yeah, and they still averaged 33 miles per hour from Melbourne to Sydney. We’d do that easy today if it wasn’t so bloody wet!’

Gerard was finally happy with the station he’d found and relaxed back into the Vynex seat.

‘Anyway, I got a good deal on mine. Bloke in Cooma had just brought it and blow me down if he didn’t go and have a bloody stroke! He’d only just retired, poor bastard. He worked for Balmain Brothers, you know, mechanics in Cooma, took bus trips up to the snow?’

‘Never been there.’

‘They only just closed up shop. Anyway, old Fred died in the car!’

‘What, driving?’

‘Well, he pulled over, like, to the side of the road.’

‘You wouldn’t read about it.’

‘No, you would not! His wife wanted to get rid of the car straight up. Sold it for a steal. And the new model is 500 quid more. It’s over 1900, I think.’

Gerard had never had to sit in a car for so long and he knew they’d have plenty of time to cover all of Aussie Price’s favourite topics during their 420 miles to Aramac: cars, movies, music, hi-fi equipment, cameras, the shearing industry, unions and the strike, all thrown in with a few good jokes.

‘One day I’ll buy a Studebaker,’ said Aussie, ‘and a Cadillac.’

‘You’ll have to *own* UNGRA to do that, not just work for them.’

Aussie laughed. ‘You can’t own UNGRA, you mug, it’s a co-op.’

‘Dalgety & Co. then.’

‘Yeah, that’d do the trick. It’s likely I’ll have time to plan my takeover between here and Aramac.’

Gerard smiled. ‘Bet you two bob we won’t get through Charleville with this flood.’ The other shearers had told him they wouldn’t.

‘Lay down 5 quid, Gerry, and you’re on.’ Aussie wound down his window and rested his elbow on the door.

‘Can’t afford it, shearing at the new rate.’

‘They’ll concede, don’t worry. Schmidt is pretty desperate to get the wool off. They reckon there’s no way they’d have started shearing non-union round Longreach if it hadn’t been for the floods. UNGRA have got Charleville going too. They’re all getting on to three months overdue.’

‘Obviously they’re desperate where we’re going or they wouldn’t have hired you, mate.’

Aussie laughed uproariously this time.

Gerard lit up a smoke. ‘Did you ever think you’d be a strikebreaker?’

‘Hardly, but like you said, you can’t turn down an offer of your first shed when you’re as green as me. I’m still collecting my references.’

‘Yeah, but you qualified as the best wool classer in the state last year. You were always going to be put on somewhere.’

‘Ah well, you’ve got to stick it to the commos a bit. The whole industry’ll be Red if we don’t have a bit of give and take. I don’t reckon it’ll be the AWU that sorts this one out, no matter what they’ll say later to take all the credit. It’ll be the contractors, and that’s a fact. They’re the only ones who know how to negotiate, I mean, shearers near go on strike if the cook doesn’t make

enough jelly and the graziers would have you hanging round in the shed in the wet voting every half an hour. It's never the unions that work things out on the ground, is it? And you know what? They're always keen to distance themselves from the militants when they're just flat out breaking the law, but they'll just as soon as give them a free run if it suits their purpose.'

'Someone had to stick up for the shearers when they took away the bonus.' Gerard liked to push Aussie a bit; he liked it when Aussie got his stride on.

'It's been ten years since the start of the wool boom. It wasn't going to last forever and the wool price has fallen for two years. Where I come from, farmers have been hard up since '52. And besides, you mostly get paid above the award. You're NSW non-union, anyway, so you're still under *their* award, which is pretty much the old rate. It's over 7 quid per hundred. They'll have to concede that now you can back it in. Would've got that for you at Bendee if we'd known the High Court were going to overrule the Commissioner that day. I mean, how was our luck? *That* bloody day. I was sure they were going to throw us all under the federal award. I mean, think about it, if you're shearing union, you're supposed to work for *less* than if you're not. No wonder they're striking. They'll *all* join the commos if this keeps up. It's a shambles, if you ask me.'

'My Grandpa's not telling anyone I'm a scab.'

'No, I won't be letting on either. Something to tell the grandkids, I s'pose . . . or maybe not even them. Won't matter for you if you're going to university.'

'Maybe not.'

#

They stopped for a bite at Charleville to find the river had receded two days before. Gerard was glad he hadn't put five quid on it, but mostly he was glad he didn't have to drive through another town cut by flood which only made him think of Denis and Johnny. They were probably, however, the reason he was here. As soon as he'd cottoned onto the forecast for weeks of heavy rain, Grandpa had started working on getting Gerard out of town, not wanting him to see the river top the bridge again so soon. He'd asked Uncle Jimmy to get onto a mate from the war whose son, they'd heard, was heading north to work in the sheds, despite, or more likely because of, the shearers' strike. The combination of floods in Queensland as well, and months of striking by shearers against the decision of the Arbitration Court to cut the prosperity bonus that had linked shearing rates to the wool price, meant that a bit of work had suddenly become available to NSW shearers prepared to work at the new rate. So here Gerard found himself, sitting in Charleville, between his first job as a "scab" and the one that would be his last. A couple of months was all it would amount to, but nonetheless, he knew he would never, for the rest of his life, mention that he'd been a strikebreaker in '56.



The trick was, according to Aussie, to dress like a travelling salesman, so they were both decked out in shirt and tie, sleeves rolled to the elbow as they reclined in the upstairs lounge of Corones Hotel. Any striking shearers would, of course, be drinking in the public bar. Aussie decided to go for a scout around and Gerard lit up a smoke and strode out onto the verandah to lean against the railing. He would have liked to stop here for the night and wander around a bit, but while they actually had a few days up their sleeves, Aussie had decided to drive straight up so that they wouldn't get caught up in what he called "hijinks".

Wills Street stretched peacefully in both directions, no hijinks of any kind on the damp horizon. He ignored the fact of the river up the street to his right and looked south. A woman in a light blue dress and matching coat the same colour as Aussie's Customline appeared across the wide street, pushing a pram in his direction, and he watched her progress past the pub and up the street. *Towards the river*, he thought. She had a white hat and shoes and looked ready for an afternoon out. He could see a lock of her brown hair curled against her cheek and he imagined being down on the street, stopping her and tucking the lock tenderly back behind her ear. Inexplicably, an image of Nancy Thomason from school pushing a pram along the street popped into his head. Seeing as every bloke in school was keen on her, it was a fair bet she'd be married with a kid on the way before he'd even started his degree next year. *If* he went. Sometimes he thought he'd quite like to stay on the farm. *He* could be the one to marry Nancy. He could tuck that stray curl behind her ear, kneel and say, 'Marry me, Nancy. How 'bout it?' He knew if he could tell Denis about this crazy plan, Den would tell him Nan Thomason was not the kind of girl for him. *Not the marrying kind*, Gerry, he could hear Den saying. But maybe that was the kind he wanted, just for a while.

There was a shout below and suddenly the street was full of blokes streaming out of the pub and racing down the street, some throwing themselves madly into cars, which screamed away, others running in the same direction, arms pumping hard.

Aussie appeared from behind him, breathless from bolting up the stairs.

'We're out, Gerry,' he puffed, indicating the stairs behind him with his head. 'There's a train pulling in, they reckon. Shearers from down south. Best push on, ay?'

#

They filled up the car in Blackall and drove slowly into the outskirts of Barcaldine just on dusk. Gerard had driven this last leg, and Aussie tried to make him pull over before town to swap back again but Gerard fobbed him off.

'We'll be right. We'll pull up in town.'

'This is Barcaldine, Gerry. *Bar-cal-dine*.'

‘Barcaldine. Got it.’ He nodded, ignoring the implication.

He wanted to stop at the Tree of Knowledge and knew Aussie would whisk them straight past it if he was in charge. There seemed to be pubs everywhere you looked. Daringly, he parked the car just past the mythical ghost gum itself, next to the railway station. There were three pubs across the road: The Railway, The Artesian, and then The Shakespeare.

‘Have I told you, you’ve got a screw loose? Blimey, you don’t pull up in Barcaldine under the Tree of Knowledge when the pubs are full if you’re a scab!’ said Aussie in earnest as he began to slide across the bench seat towards the driver’s side. ‘Quick! Jump out and run around.’

Gerard got out as instructed but strode casually over to the tree and stood, hands on hips, as he read the plaque: “Meeting place for shearers during the shearers’ strike of 1891. When strike defeated, unionists met here and endorsed shearer Tommy Ryan as the first Labor Party candidate.” He looked up at the pub across the road. There was a bloke casually leaning in the door frame, sipping his beer. They locked eyes.

‘Gerry!’ Aussie revved the engine behind him.

He saw the fellow at the door of the pub say something over his shoulder and Gerard felt rather than saw a group gathering inside, taking him in.

‘You little mongrel bastard! Get in here, now!’

It was as if Denis was suddenly with him again, swearing at Johnny who was like a ghost standing beside him. *Gerry’s the bastard, remember? I’m just the mongrel.* He smiled across at the crowd of men spilling in slow-motion out of the public bar and they seemed to take in a collective breath as they sized him up.

He turned abruptly and bolted for the passenger door at the same moment the group decided as one to give chase. Aussie put the pedal to the metal before he’d even slammed the door, and Gerard was thrown hard against the vinyl.

‘Yee-haa!’ he yelled as if he was John Wayne in *Red River* as Aussie fishtailed out of town.

‘Barking mad!’ Aussie laughed.

‘Another one for the grandkids, Aussie.’ Gerard cuffed Aussie over the back of the head.

They smiled at each other and looked ahead.

‘Or maybe not even them,’ they said in unison.

#

Gerard’s “hijinks” in Barcaldine served to put the strikers on notice and the rest of the team had to be transported in three days later in a convoy of lorries under police escort. Earlier that day, Aussie had helped Schmidt, the station manager, tripwire the shed while Gerard sat on the step of the shearers’ quarters and watched the team arrive. Aussie was asked to sleep up in the shed and

he took it for granted that Gerard would keep him company.

‘Don’t worry, he’s paranoid, Gerry.’ Aussie rolled up his jumper to use as a pillow. ‘Won’t be any trouble.’

‘You reckon?’

‘Yep.’

‘Lee Pugsford says there’s been a dozen sheds burnt down since April.’

‘Yeah, well they don’t call him Lie Pugsford for nothing. I’ve heard there was one.’

‘Fair dinkum?’ Gerard lay back and squirmed around trying to get comfortable on the old straw mattress Schmidt had hauled into the shed for him.

‘Yeah, didn’t burn it to the ground though.’

‘What’s the tripwire hooked up to? An alarm?’

‘Nup. Just the light switch. You know the cord near the main door?’

‘Oh yeah.’

‘Give us enough light to see how many we’re dealing with, take them by surprise, like.’

‘What if we’re outnumbered?’

‘I’ll let a few shots off and the boys’ll back us up. But, like I said, it won’t happen.’

Gerard was sceptical. He’d noticed Aussie was an optimist.

‘The water burner isn’t bad?’ Aussie was commenting on the cook.

*Case in point*, thought Gerard. ‘Yeah, long as we don’t get curried rice with every meal.’

‘I’ll speak to him in the morning. Anyway, he makes a good junket.’

Gerard smiled in the darkness. ‘D’you ever think badly of anyone, Aussie?’

Aussie laughed. ‘Course I do. To tell the truth, the cuckoo reeked of rum, did you notice?’

‘No. Really?’

‘Blimey, Gerry, you’re greener than me! It’s alright, I’ll get him dried out. Couple of days, he’ll be right as rain.’

‘Did you see Al Garner’s Packard?’

‘Yeah, turns out he bought it the same time I got the Customline. He only ever had Austins before that.’

‘I s’pose you were named after the Austin’

‘Nope. St. Augustine.’

‘Catholic?’

‘Yeah, you?’

‘Family name, but yeah, Saint Gerard originally.’

‘Which one?’

‘How many are there?’

‘Ah, there’d be half a dozen.’

‘I don’t know, then.’

‘One of them said: Who but God can give you peace?’

‘You’ll give me a bit of peace, Aussie, if you can stop talking for once.’

‘Fair enough.’

After a couple of minutes of silence Gerard added, ‘Christ, I hope you can’t quote all the saints, Aussie!’

Aussie laughed and rolled onto his side, facing away from Gerard. ‘Not quite *all* of them.’

#

Suddenly, during the night, there was a loud bang as someone hit the board, and when the light clicked on Aussie and Gerard sat up in their beds, Aussie putting his shotgun to his shoulder and aiming it at the intruders.

‘Alright, boys, no harm done.’ Aussie got to his feet, as if these were old mates playing a practical joke on him. ‘File outside in an orderly fashion and we’ll talk about what’s going to happen next.’

Gerard stumbled around, freeing himself from the blanket twisted around his legs and wondered at Aussie’s composure; he was as cool as a cucumber.

There were four of them. The youngest, sent in first, had taken a knock to the head against the table when the tripwire had sent him flying. He seemed as much offended as hurt, standing back behind the others rubbing his head while they faced up to Aussie and his gun. Gerard picked the dark-haired bloke in the middle as “the Boss”. While the men on either side of this one were trying to hide their tins of kerosene behind them, shamefaced, the Boss appeared to be carrying nothing and crossed his arms over his chest, a sneer playing around his mouth momentarily before he decided to speak.

‘Who d’ya think you are, scab?’

‘I’m the overseer classer.’ Aussie lowered the shotgun, placed the muzzle on the floor next to his foot, and leaned casually on the stock as if it was a walking stick. ‘This is my shed, fellas. We’re here to shear and I’ve negotiated with the station manager for the old rate.’

One of the fire-starters let his kerosene tin fall limply to his side as he shook his head in disgust and disbelief. The Boss looked at his angry mate sideways and nodded. ‘That’s a load of downright sheep manure. We know Schmidt. There’s no way he’d be paying union. You’re on the damn new rate and that makes the lot of you a bunch of scabs.’

‘This is a twenty-eight-stand shed, I’ve got 35,000 sheep and eight shearers. Happy to take

you on, boys.'

"Angry" pointed his kerosene tin at Aussie. 'Yeah, and we're happy to take you on!'

The Boss threw his arm across Angry's chest while the other fire-starter laughed.

'How 'bout this?' said the Boss. 'We'll bring the union in and talk your shearers down. If that don't work, we'll come back here every night till we find you napping and we'll roast you in your sleep.'

'Well.' Aussie appeared to think. 'How 'bout this then?' He lifted his gun back to his shoulder and aimed it carefully at one of the steel beams supporting the arched roof. 'Dorman Long Steel,' said Aussie, reading the brand on the roof frame, and he fired two careful shots at the words, hitting first the 'D' and then the 'L'.

'Good shot!' Gerard said before he could stop himself.

The strikers had covered their heads against a ricochet and "Happy" yelled at Aussie accusingly, 'What kind of bloody joker d'ya think you are?'

'Oh, that wasn't a joke, mate,' said Aussie. 'If you wanted a joke, you should've said.' Aussie paused. 'How many shearers does it take to change a light bulb? Forget about it, you'll be waiting eight months while they negotiate their rate of pay.'

Happy smiled. 'Yeah, it'll be nine or ten and we'll be giving in and taking what we can bloody get.'

Angry was incensed. 'Shit a brick, Laurie! We've held out this long, we'll be staying out till we get the old rate back.'

There was a commotion outside the door and then it burst open, the whole team arriving en masse. With the tripwire still intact, half of them landed at the foot of the alarmed strikers who backed themselves up behind the table, and the other half stumbled over the top, righted themselves and shaped up across the table.

'Well?' said Al Garner, skipping around daintily on his feet as if he was a light heavyweight. 'What's the plan of attack, Aussie?'

'Come behind, Al. We're letting the boys go.'

Al deflated. 'What the bloody hell did we get out of bloody bed for?'

'Oh, just to give these poor bastards a bit of a cheery welcome, like,' said Aussie.

Lie Pugsford was obviously alarmed at Aussie's lack of gravity and chimed in, 'You blokes oughta watch yourselves. The overseer's a champion shooter. He's going to the Olympics in Melbourne for 50 metre rifle.' Then he added hastily, 'Three positions,' as if this made it both more real and more menacing.

Gerard raised his eyebrows at this complete fiction and Aussie nodded at him.

‘See? Told you,’ said Aussie under his breath. ‘Good on you, Pugsie,’ he told Lie and made a show of leaning on the gun again as his team came around behind, followed by a light-footed kelpie belonging to picker-up Jackie Faulkner. ‘I tell you what, fellas,’ Aussie addressed the strikers, ‘how ‘bout we have a beer together right now and you can give the boys your spiel.’

‘Fuck’s sake!’ said Jackie, his kelpie skipping nervously from one front foot to the other, ‘Now?’

‘No swearing on the board! said Aussie. ‘I bloody well told you that at tea.’

‘We’ll come back tomorrow, then,’ said The Boss, seeing that things didn’t bode well for the spiel tonight.

‘Righto then,’ said Aussie. ‘The bait layer makes a good junket. I’ll get him to make an extra round for you blokes.’

‘Fucking junket!’ said Jackie. ‘Sorry, I mean bloody junket. I flaming hate it.’

The team laughed as the strikers communicated with each other with eyebrow raises and shrugs of the shoulder and then began to slink out.

#

Aussie, Gerard later learnt, had been nervous about the prospect of defending the shed against strikers wanting to burn it down.

‘Couldn’t tell,’ said Gerard lighting up a smoke the next day as he watched Aussie write the results of the lunchtime count out into his notebook. ‘It seemed like you’d planned it all out.’

‘Nup.’ Aussie hung his clipboard back on a nail on the shed wall. ‘Just took it as it came. It’s my motto, see?’

‘How’s that?’

‘St. Augustine.’ Aussie grinned.

Gerard groaned. ‘Alright then, give us it.’

‘Nothing can be seen except what is present.’

‘So? I don’t follow.’

‘The past and the future exist or we wouldn’t be able to talk about them. But where are they? Wherever they are, they don’t exist except when we think about them now, in the present. So, I could think about those blokes from Barcaldine and worry about what they were going to do. But where’s the memory of Barcaldine? Where’s the worry about what they might do? Now.’

‘Yeah...’ Gerard was sceptical.

‘Last night we were tucking ourselves in and I could’ve thought about the strikers as much as I liked, but they weren’t there. Anything could’ve been about to happen. Why stay awake half the night getting jittery about it? Would it’ve done any good, do you reckon? I would’ve just been

a nervous bloody wreck when that light went on. Might have shot one of the bastards.'

Gerard sucked deeply on his cigarette.

'It helps see? You just concentrate on whatever you've actually got in front of you right now. You make pictures in your mind about the future. That's what old Austin says. You expect things to happen. They don't exist, Gerry! So why worry?'

'Yeah, I s'pose.' Gerard watched Aussie shrug and walk into the experts' room. He took his last puff, stubbed the cigarette out against the door frame and flicked it at a kerosene tin that had had the top half cut off for this purpose.

*Why worry?* he thought. *Shit happens.* Frank had said he could stay with them if he went to Sydney. He leant against the door frame and looked across the dusty yards. He would do it, he decided. *Shit probably will happen.* All the things he worried about happening to Grandpa if he left the farm were going to happen one day, could be happening today when he wasn't there. What could he do? *Why worry?* Actually, he didn't know why he worried; it was just what he did all the time. He thought of people, he worried. Maybe he wouldn't anymore.

## The Truth

June 2009

*He thought of people, he worried.* Gerard leant back in his office chair, swung it around and put his feet up on the tub chair nearby. He hadn't really stopped worrying at that point in his life, though he'd trained himself, from that point on, to roll along with things a bit. He'd always worried about people, however, which was why he'd been so cynical about world events, governments, big business. When Helen died, his mind had gone blank and the events of the world, the way people suffered too much, had stopped worrying him.

Gerard kicked the tub chair away from him a little, leant forward with his hands on his knees for support. He was tired. Not in his muscles or behind his eyes from too much thinking, but deep in his bones where his bone marrow had been wiped clean by the chemo and had stopped making his blood cells. Tomorrow Zara would drive him the half-hour to hospital and he'd have a blood transfusion.

He closed his eyes and let a deep breath lift his chest. His head swam briefly, pleasantly, as if he'd slipped away into a meditative state that usually only came to him after he'd said the rosary. Since Good Friday he'd never said the rosary again. He'd knelt by the bed each night, taken a deep breath, and just drifted away. Perhaps he would start doing it any old time of the day. He thought of the Joseph Campbell quote he'd written down on the back of a business card many years ago and kept in his top pocket ever since: 'Participate joyfully in the sorrows of the world.' *Aussie would be proud*, he thought, and this made him smile. He was aware of a gathering around him, as if each self he'd been at every stage of his life was there with him. His smile enfolded him, greeting these other selves, and he saw that, for his entire life, they'd been a loving, ghostly audience like a warm rug placed over his shoulders.

And he was amazed, suddenly, at this life he'd been living, the pain his friends carried with them each day, and the joys. And it was how things were and how they'd always been. *It's a mess!* He recalled Campbell again: *We are not going to change it. It's always been a mess. And it's perfect. Perfect!* And he swayed slightly in his seat, thinking of the losses, the deaths, the



heartaches, the successes, the laughter, the not-so-perfect, the perfect. And finally, he had a realisation and he acknowledged it out loud. 'I'm ready to go back.'

Later that afternoon, he dropped in to Zara's cafe for a hot chocolate. She came out from the kitchen and sat with him.

'I'll bring you home something to eat for dinner.'

'Sure.'

Kristen placed a mug in front of him and they fell into silence as she watched him spoon the marshmallows into the mug.

'Stella came in this morning.'

'Oh yes.'

Zara frowned. 'To apologise.'

Gerard sat expectantly waiting for more.

'Honestly!' Zara shook her head.

'What?' Gerard prompted.

'I mean, now?' she raised her eyebrows at him. 'It doesn't matter anymore.'

'Doesn't it?'

'No! Bloody hell...'

'Well, I suppose it makes her feel better.'

Zara sat back and raised her eyebrows. 'Who gives a shit?'

'I do,' he said.

'You would.'

'It makes you mad, I can tell.'

She sat up and eyed him fiercely. 'Why would it?'

'Because you don't want to like her. You want to go on hating her. If she's not your enemy, you have to put your anger where it belongs and that scares you.'

'I've put my anger where it belongs!'

'Have you?'

'Yes.'

'She's not your mother. She's just the *other* woman who abandoned you. A far lesser hurt, all things considered.'

'Why do you have to do this all the time?' Zara whispered.

'Just keeping it real.'

'It annoys me!'

'Yes, I can see that.' He picked up his mug and took a sip.

‘And while I’m telling you what’s annoying me, there’s something else I have to say.’ Her tone had changed and he looked her in the eye.

‘You have to tell your son you have cancer.’

‘Look, darling, I’ve told you. CLL is a chronic disease. People live with it for years. I don’t need to worry him yet.’

‘He’d want to know.’

‘I don’t want people asking how I am all the time. It’d make everything about me. I’ve told you that.’

‘I can’t believe you’re doing this to him.’

He took in a deep breath. ‘But . . .’

‘What?’

‘His pain will be the hardest to bear. I love him so much. More than anyone.’

Zara picked up his hand in both of hers. ‘Then that’s why you have to do it.’

They sat frozen in that position as a few seconds ticked by.

‘Alright.’

Zara nodded. ‘Good.’

#

He rang Mark the next morning, at the time they always spoke. After the usual small talk, Gerard broke it to him. ‘I’m off to the hospital today for a blood transfusion. I have cancer.’

‘Bloody hell, Dad!’ He wanted to know everything.

‘It’s CLL/SLL, which stands for chronic lymphocytic leukaemia/small cell lymphocytic lymphoma,’ he explained. ‘They’re both B-cell lymphomas which means the white blood cells called lymphocytes are multiplying uncontrollably. In CLL the cancer cells are in the bloodstream and the bone marrow and in SLL they’re in the lymph nodes and spleen. I have both. It’s a slow-growing disease and for a few years I was asymptomatic. I started getting symptoms two years ago and had chemo for six months, just in tablet form. At the end of last year, it became quite aggressive and I got various swellings in the lymph areas but I felt pretty good still. Earlier this year I had another round of chemo but still managed to go along fine. It’s supposed to cut the lymphocytes back and they came down from 195 to about 120 but they’re supposed to be between one and four. Since Easter I’ve lost eight kilos. I’ve got low platelets and low haemoglobin which makes me tired but once I’ve had blood I’m usually right as rain.’

This speech was greeted with silence.

‘You there?’ Gerard had to say.

‘Yes, old mate, I’m here, but fuck! Seriously Dad, I can’t believe it. You’ve always been

strong as an ox. You just built your bloody wall.'

Mark didn't ask why he'd kept it quiet. He told Gerard he wanted to see him and promised to be there in a few days.

'Told you so,' said Zara when he told her.

Kristen was going to do the cooking today at North and they had a few other casual waitresses now so Zara felt like she was having a holiday. They waited quite cheerfully at the hospital for two hours, only to be finally told that crossmatching had been unsuccessful as Gerard had an antibody to just about everyone's red cells. He would have to be taken on to Canberra, another hour's drive. When they got there Gerard was admitted to oncology and ended up staying for eight days so that his specialist could stabilise his blood and give him more chemo.

Gerard was sharing a room with another man. His wife and daughter sat by his bed from morning till night with the curtain pulled closed. Clearly he would die any day. Gerard didn't really mind, but he was uncomfortable about having silent witnesses on the other side of the curtain the day Mark was coming. He was lying back with his eyes shut when he heard tentative steps at the door.

'Dad?' Mark whispered.

Gerard opened one eye. 'Oh, g'day!' He suddenly felt immensely happy.

'Didn't want to wake you... ' Mark said, sitting on the edge of the chair.

'No, no, I wasn't asleep. How was the drive?'

'Yeah, good.' Mark nodded. He swallowed then held up a plastic bag. 'Julie-Ann sent these PJs for you and the kids made you a couple of cards. I got you this book.' He spread everything out on the bed.

It was a book called *A Demon of Our Own Design*, about hedge funds and financial markets. It had so clearly been picked because Mark knew of his interest in the financial crisis of the past couple of years. They'd talked about it in every phone conversation they'd had, especially since Rudd had announced the second stimulus package in February.

'It looks good.' He turned it over. 'Enough to make your mouth water!' He read the cards and pulled everything into a pile in front of him. 'That's lovely.' He was momentarily at a loss.

'You should have just told us, Dad.'

He shrugged. 'Didn't want you to worry,' he said, his eyes glistening.

'Yeah, I know.' Mark paused. 'Julie-Ann kept saying that. She's like, "You'd be the bloody same! You wouldn't want no one to know".'

They both laughed then Mark became serious again.

'How bad?'

‘Well, it’s a chronic disease, see? People live with it for years. I just thought I’d wait and tell you when things got bad.’

‘And? Are they bad yet?’

Gerard considered. ‘Hard to say. Worse than they were.’

They smiled as if they were in on a conspiracy together.

#

Later in the week, after doing a bone marrow biopsy and a CT scan, the doctor reinforced the seriousness of the cancer infiltration into his bone marrow and Gerard agreed to trial the drug Rituximab. He was given the first course the day before he was due to go home. The drip had to be slowed down when his blood pressure dropped and he began to shake quite badly.

Mark came down again and drove Gerard home. Gerard was to have weekly blood tests and go to Canberra for Rituximab every 28 days. Mark’s plan was to come down once a week and stay overnight. Gerard walked him out to his car as he left the next morning.

‘Well, we’ve covered a few good topics, I suppose.’ Gerard marked them off on his hands. ‘Swine flu, the pension age, whether the ETS will get through the Senate, whether the strong economy is thanks to Rudd’s handling of the GFC or a leftover of the Howard years, the money they’re giving to car dealers, and the Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission.’ He gave Mark a satisfied smile.

‘Just the usual caper then,’ said Mark. ‘You should have been a journo.’

‘It’s a mug’s game.’

‘Being a publican’s not far behind it.’

‘Rubbish! You love that pub.’

‘Yeah, it passes the time. We miss seeing you.’

‘I wasn’t trying to get away. I had a few things to sort out.’

‘About your Mum and all that?’

‘When I started writing it all down, there just seemed to be something missing. I thought I needed to be here for a bit.’

‘Nearly finished?’

‘Yes. Just about.’

‘Alright. Come back when it’s all done. We’ll take care of you at home.’

‘Yep. I will. It’ll be good.’ *Perfect*, he thought.

They hugged and he was gone.

#

Shortly before sunset that evening Gerard went for a walk. He catalogued the dead as he went from

street to street. Wheeler Street, Harry Wheeler, otherwise known as Wheelsie, the Southern Snaggler or the Gun from the South; Bogarts Way: Bogart, the horse Grandpa sold to the Smythes before Gerard went to university; Christie Street: Uncle Christie, World War II veteran, POW, sheep grazier, fish shop proprietor and the greatest larrikin Gerard had ever known; and Lovers Lane: his mother Stella and father Frank who Christie had once discovered here together causing them to take off to Sydney supposedly to elope.

When Gerard reached the vacant block, he sat down on the ground and watched the light change on the homestead as the sun went down.

‘I’ll call Stella tonight,’ Gerard said aloud. ‘See if I can pop round tomorrow.’

He sat on till the street lights came on. He had no expectations, not really, but he knew it was part of the reason he’d come back. The journey home, the return. He rolled onto his hands and knees and struggled to his feet. He breathed deeply, thinking that the air contained fragrant molecules from the trees and the land that he had breathed up here as a kid riding Grandpa’s horse Ingrid. It was the same air he’d shared with Grandpa as they dug post holes up here one winter, that Slow Bill had taken into his lungs when he took his last breath up there on the Ridge. *And Denis and Johnny down the river.* The four of them together in the town graveyard had all taken their last breath close to this spot, Grandpa and Bill to the East, Denis and Johnny to the West. And one day he would do the same and be laid to rest beside them.

#

He drove up the road to Casablanca the next day. Really, the most momentous trip he’d ever made here was in 1946 when his mother had brought him here in the Sloper. They’d listened to Jack Davey’s quiz show on the radio and Jack’s ‘Hi-ho everybody’ had dropped into his dreams ever since, as if the Sloper itself used it as a greeting. He was seven years old again as he turned in at the main ramp to the homestead. He drove slowly, turning to glance at the passenger seat and almost expected his child self to be sitting there looking ahead for old Tucker, Grandpa’s dog, who had sat that day at the top of the steps in the shade of the veranda.

There were no sheep in the house paddock these days, but he’d known that for months from his sunset walks. He circled around the North Point Gum and pulled up at the bottom of the steps. Stella would be at work, she’d told him over the phone; no one would be home.

He walked unsteadily towards the entrance to the shed. His head swum as his eyes adjusted to the gloom. Dust sat in the air in the stream of early morning sun coming in behind him. Mad Gerry’s rusted Packard Eight still took up most of the space. Mad Gerry had died in 1942 and Gerard couldn’t ever remember seeing the Packard Eight on the road. *Car was only about ten years old when he died and no one ever drove it again,* Gerard thought. *Just let it sit here and rust!*

It seemed absurd to him now, even knowing how spooked he'd been as a kid if he'd been asked to come in here and get something. He'd always edged in round the car as if Mad Gerry himself was going to spring out and curse him at any time. *They all thought it was too late to be cursed*, he realised now. *They thought I was born with it.*

Gerard took a step forward out of the sun and felt the temperature drop a few degrees. He shivered and had to put his hand out to the car to steady himself on the front wheel hub. It was the kind of grand old sedan vintage car lovers restore. He edged forward, grasped a door handle and tried it. It swung lightly open. The velvet upholstery was largely eaten away and the rat-dropping dust made him sneeze. He closed the door and, perhaps for the first time, was able to turn his back on the car. He moved into the shadows at the back of the shed and found the safe in the same back corner.

'Here goes nothing,' he said to the Packard behind him.

Christie's key went straight into the lock and, like the car door, the handle turned easily and he pulled the heavy door towards him. Getting in between the door and the car was awkward and he knelt down on the uneven dirt floor and fished a little torch out of his coat pocket. There were three bundles of letters; that was all.

He pulled the bundles out, swung the door shut, left the key in the lock, and thus giving up ownership of the safe, the car and the shed, too, he stepped carefully out into the sun. Finding the idea of the homestead veranda appealing, he approached the back of the house so as to avoid the effort of the front steps. He made his way around to the the front, sat in a wicker chair and placed the bundles at his feet. He sat, breathed, took in the view. His old bedroom window was at his back so this view, most particularly, belonged to him, in every light, under every moon. Here, he realised, was where he had to begin on the letters. He bent forward to peruse the bundles. They'd sat on the top shelf of the safe with the largest on the left.

'You're first then, I suppose,' he told it and he began:

*17 February 1914*

*Mullanbrack Estate*

*My Darling Maud,*

*Dreadfully sorry about this morning. I had to turn away abruptly or I would have given us away. To hear After the Ball on the wireless when I had only sung it to you yesterday! I longed to grab your hand and sweep you across the floor. I will not allow Wilkie to schedule these infernal meetings when you are entertaining your ladies again but I must say it is lucky for both of us that*

*your husband is such a plodding slowpoke or he would have discovered us by now.*

*I'm sorry, too, for this sorry mess, my Dearest. How you must long for me to leave you in peace with your children. If I thought this would make either of us happy, I would most certainly arrange it today. What is to become of us?*

*Your Most Loving Sincere Friend,  
John Thomas Calligan*

Gerard read it through again, his heart racing. A love letter from Grandpa to his father's mother Maud Harnett who was quite obviously already married with children. He knew they'd grown up together. She was Maud Ingram, then. So, JT had worked there before the war? His mind had to search back for dates, calculate the years. He read the next one, written on the station letterhead in another hand:

*28 February 1914*

*Darling John,*

*He goes tomorrow. He is to take my poor little Jimmy away to school. Only nine years, I know, but it is a Harnett tradition, of course, and the boys must all go there. Aggie is in an agony about it – how well she is named. She is a mother to them all and only twelve. We had portraits taken yesterday, I suppose you've heard, but our little Charlie made such a fuss and wouldn't sit still because the shirt itched his arms and finally we had to be content with the girls and James. He sat in the middle with Agnes on the left and Gloria on the right. They all looked very fierce and I ached for them and for myself. You are my consolation . . .*

He broke off, shaking his head as if this would bring facts into consciousness, something to cling to. JT had enlisted as soon as the call went out. What month had that been? He shuffled through the pile and grabbed a later one:

*31 July 1914*

*No, John, you must not do this, I beg you. Please wait and see. I cannot stay on here, cannot live without you. Wait, my Darling. All this talk may come to nothing. War has not been declared yet. I don't believe Britain will move against Germany unless there is proper cause. Please say you will wait.*

This was the crucial time. Gerard opened the next one:

*5 August 1914*

*Mullanbrack Estate*

*Darling Maud,*

*Well, it is done, my Dearest, and I shall go. My next letter will come to you from elsewhere; it is over for us, and I will henceforth have to write to both of you together. I fear the Post cannot deliver to "our" mailbox. Truly my Dear, this war mirrors the struggle in my own heart, the destruction I am the cause of here, and I know this must surely be for the best. I can only wish to always deserve your love and that you will not, one day, look upon me as the most dreadful scoundrel you had the misfortune to have been tempted by. I hope, as you have always been kind enough to say, that I have made your life better and not worse, that I have brought you more joy than pain, and that you will always regard me with the same affection I have been, by the happiest chance, the subject of. I will take your portrait with me to the battlefields abroad and carry you in my heart so long as I shall live.*

*Always Your Loving, Faithful Friend,*

*John Thomas Calligan*

Gerard sat back, his eyes coming to rest on the North Point Gum, the tree that had given him his bearings for a decade of his young life. It was like finding out this was south, after all. North Point faced the ramp at the main road, East Point, the shearing shed and the Ridge beyond it, South Point faced Christie's country, and West Point, the Top Paddock, the River Flats and the town. And beyond all that, the world sat where it always had.

Until now.

What if the Antarctica was out beyond the North Point Gum? Then Argentina would be out beyond town, the Northern Hemisphere behind him, and out to his right would be Western Australia. This was absurd!

#

Gerard had bundled the letters back up after that and headed home. He sat, now, in his office chair and stared blank faced at his Chagall print on the wall, *I and the Village*. The circular, jumbled dreaminess of it calmed him and he swivelled his chair towards his desk and the letters.

He began to read through them systematically, leaving them straightened out in



chronological order. The first bundle also contained the more formal letters during the war from JT to Maud and her husband, followed by an exchange between the lovers upon JT's return in 1917. Together these revealed that seven months after JT enlisted, Maud had given birth to the twins Arthur and Frank. Arthur contracted diphtheria in 1917 and died, aged two. JT took the job with Mad Gerry upon his return and, to Maud's extreme heartbreak, married Mad Gerry's daughter Sylvia almost immediately in 1918. Sylvia gave birth to Gerard's mother, Stella, the following year but when she has the twins, Bill and Christie, in 1920, it is clear that both JT and Maud take this as proof that her twins Arthur and Frank must also be his. Sylvia dies eight days after the birth of the twins and in the months following her death JT and Maud discuss the possibility of Maud leaving her husband Wilkie. She threatens Wilkie with this plan, as the marriage is violent. Wilkie beats her and threatens to commit her to an asylum, even signing the papers in front of her and locking them in his desk drawer in case he needs them. The lovers decide they cannot go through with their plan and they cease all communication.

The second bundle contained letters exchanged between 1938 and 1940. Christie has teased Stella in JT's hearing about discovering her with Frank Harnett up at the Top Paddock, calling it "Lovers' Lane". The letters are frantic:

*My Dear John,*

*After all these years, we are still to be haunted and tortured by our love and what we have done! You must make sure from your end that they cannot meet again. They might be brother and sister! I have warned Frank that he must end it now. He well knows Bill's opposition to your family though of course he cannot know why. I have impressed upon him the urgency of cutting things off and said that his father will never agree to welcome your poor Stella into the Harnett family. He is belligerent as always. Perhaps there will be another war to separate the lovers once again, my love.*

*Ever,*

*Maud*

Brother and sister! Was it possible? Images of Frank and Stella, his parents, flickered in and out of his mind. They'd looked nothing alike. How they'd seemed to both hate and yet love each other. He was struck forcefully by the irony of the title he'd given to the memoirs he'd been trying to finish: *The Curse of Mad Gerry*. Little had he known. He felt tainted anew, as if there was now yet another reason something had always been deeply wrong with him. *Not another reason. This is the reason.* And Uncle Jimmy? In fact, Jimmy was in the clear. He was a Harnett

through and through.

*Maud,*

*I'm sorry, my love, more bad news. Stella has left a note and gone. She is pregnant and is to marry Frank in Sydney. We are too late.*

*JT*

And after his birth the following year:

*31 August 1939*

*Casablanca*

*My Dear Maud,*

*It's a healthy boy and we can only be grateful for that. The silly girl has named him Gerard Alfred Fenton Harnett which is hardly likely to please Wilkie when he finds out. I've tried to ask why they haven't announced their marriage to the family but she fobs me off as usual. Perhaps I shall have to make the trip to Sydney to find out. You are right about one thing -Frank plans to enlist if things progress as they look like they must. God be with him. God be with us all*

*Your Friend as Always,*

*John Thomas Calligan*

He was healthy. Was this some kind of sign to them that things were okay? There had never, in fact, been a thing wrong with his health until now. Perhaps, after all, Frank had been a Harnett and not the son of JT. Was he clutching at straws? Frank's twin Arthur had died in infancy so there *was* something wrong with him. *Every second kid died of diphtheria in those years*, he reasoned with himself. He sighed. *Nothing about me has changed*. This was true. If his parents had been related, well, then they always had been and nothing had changed just because he'd come across the knowledge.

*8 January 1940*

*Glebe*

*Dearest Maud,*

*Yes, I was there on Thursday for the march of the 6th Division of the Second AIF through*

*the streets of Sydney – hoorah! Stella and I managed to glimpse all three of the boys. Christie and Jim are with 16th Brigade, different battalions, and Frank's with the ASC. It was as magnificent as the papers reported, with people cheering and waving their flags. The troops embark tomorrow and they say there are more than ten thousand of them. Lord knows if we'll manage to say goodbye, but we'll certainly see them leave the outer harbour from Watsons Bay in the afternoon. The boy is the spitting image of Christie and Bill when they were born. Dear little chap!*

*Always*

*JT*

All three were 6th Divvy and they embarked together! This was news to Gerard, too, although not completely surprising, he realised now. Uncle Jimmy saw action for a mere three weeks in the Western Desert before being injured in January '41. He was back living with them at Dover Heights by early '42. Frank was captured in Greece and spent four years in a German POW camp, finally reaching the UK in May '45. By then he was a WO. And Christie had stayed with the 2/4th till the end of the war where they fought in New Guinea, returning for discharge at the end of '45. Christie had always seemed to know more about his mother and Uncle Jimmy than anyone and perhaps the war explained this if they'd all spent time together in the Middle East.

The third bundle, the smallest, was all that was left.

Gerard sat back and perused his piles of letters and the heap of empty envelopes on the desk. Would there be confirmation? Could he face it?

He began.

*16 December 1946*

*Casablanca*

*Dearest Maud,*

*I'm not sure how much you know, my Darling, but Stella came yesterday to leave the boy here with me. On Saturday, Frank came home in the morning after being out on the town. He pushed Stella's head into the wash tub full of water and held her there till she almost passed out. After the broken arm in June and the hearing loss, she says she can't take any more and I can hardly argue with that. I did argue about the boy. I think he'd be better off with her but I can see that she's worn out. I'm sure she'll be back for him soon. Thankfully he was playing out in the street during this last attack and knows nothing about it. He's a good little kid.*

*Always,*

*JT*

Then there was a gap until Uncle Jimmy turned up in 1953.

*Maud, my Darling, I hadn't heard Jim was back and got the shock of my life yesterday when he turned up at the shearing. Jim said some very odd things and I noticed Christie was not at all surprised. I had it out with him last night and it seems that he'd also discovered Stella with Jim up at "Lovers Lane" as he's always called the Top Paddock. This was months before the episode with Frank. Then Jim came back in '42 and apparently lived with Stella and Gerry! Is this news to you too? He told me yesterday Gerry is like a son to him. That's what he said, like a son. Perhaps you can get to the bottom of it.*

*Always,*

*JT*

Gerard let out a deep breath he hadn't realised he'd been holding. Stella and Frank weren't the only lovers!

*Yes, John you are right! Goodness gracious me, I thought I was having a heart attack when I received your note. Jim and Stella met regularly up the top at your place. For months apparently. Then Jim asked his father for permission to ask for her hand. He refused of course without letting on to me at all. Jim took off in a rage and had set himself up in Sydney and was planning to come back for her. In the mean time, she had realised she was carrying a child. She had no way of contacting Jim – this is heartbreaking my love – and lured Frank to a meeting so that she could convince him the child was his. Frank was young and stupid and chased after any bit of skirt back then, so Jim says, and the plan worked. When they got to Sydney, Stella refused to marry Frank and Frank refused forevermore to make any announcement to the family about the baby.*

*Oh! It's a mess, my Dear. I hardly know what to think, except that I am glad for Gerry and sad, so sad, for Jim. He seems to love her still.*

*And Frank! All these years we have treated him like he didn't belong to any of us. If you were here now I would wet your shoulder completely like I did on that other occasion when all we could do was cry together. Dear, dear John. Will there ever be peace?*

Uncle Jimmy was his father.

Gerard stood abruptly, walked into his bedroom and sat on the bed. He pulled open the

drawer in his bedside table and removed the Golden Lister box that contained all of his rosary beads. He tipped them onto the bed and, leaving the rest in a pile, he picked up first Grandpa's and then Maud's and placed them alongside each other, Grandpa's on the left and Maud's on the right. It struck him that, the way he'd happened to lay them out, the heads of the Jesus on the two crosses leant towards each other, Grandpa's reaching with longing and desperation, Maud's, as he'd always thought, with dignity and courage despite great suffering. How he loved this Jesus. *They're your grandmother's. Not Sylvia's. Your father's mother, Maud Harnett. We were friends. She was Maud Ingram. Her people had Roth's Hill.*

He bowed his head. His mother had refused to marry Frank because she was in love with Uncle Jimmy and Jimmy was his father.

*It's all a load of crap,* he heard Christie say.

Gerard smiled. 'It could've been worse,' he said to the assembled ghosts that had been with him since he'd opened Mad Gerry's safe. 'Shit happens, you know.' He nodded consolingly. 'It's a good result, all things considered.'

#

Zara came in the morning to take him to North for breakfast.

'Any news?' he said in the car.

'Stella comes in everyday for coffee. It's like she apologised because she had an inkling that we had the best coffee in town and she wanted to be able to get it.'

'You're being cynical.'

'Tell me your news.'

'There were letters in the safe. I have a new father. Uncle Jimmy.'

'Is that good or bad?'

'Good, as it turns out.'

'Will you put it in your book?'

'Yes. If I get the chance.'

She pulled up in the carpark behind the cafe but didn't move. 'I don't think I can bear it.'

'No, but you will. Just like you've managed to bear everything else. Let people help you. Like you've let me.'

'But nobody else is you.' She turned to face him. 'I don't know what I did to deserve you, to be honest, but I'm glad you turned up when you did.'

He smiled. 'I always wanted a daughter, you know.'

Dan joined them as Zara finished her breakfast and she headed into the kitchen, leaving them to it.

‘I suppose you know what’s going on with Stella and Zara,’ Gerard asked him.

Dan rolled his eyes. ‘Stella’s become some kind of martyr all of a sudden.’ He shrugged.

‘Yeah, something’s going on.’

Gerard smiled. ‘And you’ve no idea what?’

‘Well, I know that you going to hospital put everyone on edge.’

‘Is that right?’

‘Yep.’

‘What about you?’

‘What about me?’

‘I know you have a thing about death and dying since the child was run over.’

Dan scowled. ‘Fuck’s sake, Gerard, you’ve got cancer. Doesn’t mean you’re going to die.’

‘Great!’ Gerard responded with exuberance. ‘Thank God for that!’

Dan sat back and crossed his arms across his chest. The cafe door opened and Stella came in and joined them.

‘What’s going on?’ she said looking from one to the other as she sat down.

‘Dan was just telling me I’m not going to die,’ said Gerard.

Stella looked at Dan.

‘What?’ said Dan, defensively.

‘We’re all gonna die,’ she began.

‘Fuck me! I can’t take this,’ and he pushed back his chair and left.

Kristen emerged from the kitchen with a plate for Dan.

‘I’ll have what he’s having,’ said Stella, pointing towards the door.

‘Cool,’ said Kristen. ‘Here you are, then,’ and she placed Dan’s bacon and eggs in front of her. ‘Do you want his coffee too?’

‘Yes, okay.’ She tucked into Dan’s breakfast immediately. ‘Great service here,’ she told Gerard as she chewed. ‘Super fast.’

‘How’s your mother?’ asked Gerard.

‘She’s good. She’s picking Cynthia up from school this afternoon for me.’

Gerard leant in. ‘Are you getting along, though?’

‘Other than the fact that she told me I’m a lousy mother, yeah, we’re getting on like a house on fire.’

‘Why would she say that?’

‘Because it’s true.’ She put her knife and fork down. ‘I found it hard being a Mum. I had post-natal depression and just never really liked her. Most people don’t admit to it but my doctor

told me it's really common and it helped me just to be honest with myself. I've gotten better as she's gotten older. I'm starting to enjoy doing things with her.'

'Well, I'm glad things are on the up.'

'Things have been different since you told me about Dad. Thank you, Gerard. I needed to know the truth.'

'I can't argue with that.'

#

Gerard managed to spend a few hours writing the next day, sitting on the little couch in his office with his laptop on his knee. In the afternoon, he was surprised when Stella turned up to see him again, looking distraught.

'What's happened?' he said as they sat down at the kitchen table.

'I'm sorry, I know you're sick but I can't face telling Mum first. Jeff's leaving me for someone else.'

Gerard was completely thrown by this. 'But... ' He shook his head. 'What on earth...?'

Stella slumped.

'It's not what I was expecting.'

'Me neither.'

'When did he tell you?'

'Last night. *She* came to the house after Cynthia's bedtime. They told me together, like they're... together.'

'And? What now?'

She put an elbow on the table and rested her forehead on her hand, covering her eyes. 'They work together. He wants custody. He says he's closer to Cynthia, that she'll be happier with him.' She lifted her chin to her hand. 'He went as far as to say that I'm such a bad mother, I won't even notice she's gone.'

'That's just cruel.'

Her eyes glazed over.

'What are you going to do?' he asked.

'We're telling her this afternoon. He wants to take her then but I said it would be better for her not to have to leave her home and go to live with a complete stranger. I'd like to give her the choice. Is that too much for someone so little?'

Gerard smiled. 'Oh, look, see, you have good mothering instincts after all.'

She crumpled and, putting her face in her hands, began to sob loudly.

He pulled his chair closer and proceeded to rub her on the back. 'For someone who

supposedly never cries you really do spend a lot of time at my kitchen table crying.’

She laughed through her tears. ‘The same thing happened to Zara. It’s as if we’re cursed.’

Gerard laughed too. ‘Oh, yes. The curse of Mad Gerry, haven’t I told you?’

‘No. You mean Mad Gerry, the one who married my grandfather’s auntie or something?’

He nodded and she wiped her eyes. ‘My Uncle Bill said he haunted the old shed. Mad Gerry changed the name of the property to Casablanca because he thought the property was blighted. A lot of young women in the family died in childbirth and many children died in infancy, that sort of thing.’

‘But wasn’t that normal in those days?’

‘Yes, but isn’t divorce normal now? Yet we still think we’re unlucky if it happens to us. It’s not fair, or something. It’s supposed to happen to other people.’

She raised an eyebrow. ‘Sometimes you really are so flippant, you know.’

‘Right! Let’s forget about silly curses and make a plan? Now that you’re in this bloody mess, what do you want to happen next?’

‘I think I’d like to take care of Cynthia. I don’t want us to end up like me and Mum have been. I want us to be friends when she grows up.’

‘When will you tell your Mum?’

‘I’ve asked her to pick up Cynthia from school again and be with us this afternoon. It’s funny, but Cynthia and Mum get on really well.’

‘Doesn’t sound funny to me at all.’



## Grandpa

1959

Inexplicably, Gerard got up and walked out of his first Professor Mackie lecture at the University of Sydney. He felt the other students' eyes on his back as he exited the theatre. 'See ya, Catholic,' Roy Cavendish had muttered from behind as he rose from his seat. *Bloody hell*, he thought, *We're all Andersonians!* It was an injustice. Why would anyone assume he'd been bothered by Mackie's argument for atheism? In truth, he thought the three propositions Mackie had brought together were genius.

He went straight from the lecture theatre to the house at Dover Heights, which after two and a half years he still couldn't call 'home.' Frank drove past in his 1957 FE Holden Special as Gerard turned into their street from Military Road. The car was Sarasota White.

When Gerard had first moved to Sydney in 1957, Frank had bought a television. With Gerard's twin half-brothers Rock and Hudson pushing each other out of the way trying to get pole position, the family gathered round, turned it on, and stared open-mouthed as a new FE made its way uphill and the Holden Road Test began.

'Sold!' said Frank when the ad finished. 'I'll buy one tomorrow.' His wife Dorcas shushed him. She was hooked on the telly from then on. True to his word, Frank had taken Gerard with him the next day and laid down the money for a new Holden Special. He'd let Gerard pick the colour.

A sense of urgency at seeing Frank arriving home early made him start running towards the house.

'Gerry!' Frank yelled after pulling into their driveway, yanking on the hand brake and jumping out of the car. 'I got a call at work, mate. JT's had a heart attack.'

Gerard stood dumbly on the bindi-eyed patch of grass in front of the mail box, panting.

'D'ya hear me, mate? You need to get the Daylight out of here first thing tomorrow. Christie'll drive to Goulburn and pick you up, rightio?'

When he didn't answer, Frank put a hand on his back and guided him towards the front

door. ‘How come you’re home so early anyway? Shouldn’t you still have a few lectures?’

‘Yeah,’ he finally found something to say. ‘Dunno. Just left.’

‘Oh yeah. Like your mother, I s’pose. She was always saying, “I got a feeling about something,” you know?’ Frank said, pushing him through the house. ‘Dor!’ he’d yelled for his wife. Dorcas had been kneeling on the kitchen floor, cleaning a cupboard, and she knocked her head on it when she heard her name.

‘Oh, for crying out loud!’ she said.

‘Yeah, yeah, mate, she’s right. JT’s had his ticker blow out. Get Gerry a cuppa, will you love?’ Frank pushed him into a chair and Gerard was washed by the flood of activity that ensued over the course of the evening, as Frank got him on the phone to Slow Bill for a report, as Dorcas sat him on his bed while she talked about nothing and packed his things in his suitcase, as Rock and Hudson tried to distract him with castles they’d made for him out of blocks with complex roads and bridges for their Matchbox cars.

The next morning, he slumped into his seat on the Sydney to Melbourne Daylight Express and watched the Petersham terraces flash past in the early morning gloom. The rain had set in. He reached forward and pulled his diary and a pencil from the satchel at his feet. Opening the diary to the week beginning Monday 28 December, pages he wouldn’t need, he began to make notes from memory about what Mackie had said.

‘The problem is this,’ he wrote. ‘God is omnipotent; God is wholly good; and yet evil exists. There is a contradiction between these three propositions: if any two of them were true then the third would be false. The believer must adhere to all three but cannot consistently do so.’

He sat back, twirling the pencil, as the train pulled into Strathfield Station, where it would sit for five minutes. An elderly man was perched on a bench seat on the platform clutching a bunch of orange and yellow dahlias wrapped in newspaper. He was tiny, the size Gerard had been when he was about eleven, and he blinked constantly, first looking one way down the platform and then the other. He reminded Gerard of Harry Wheeler’s old kelpie, Blinder.

Gerard found his own anxiety stirred by the old bloke’s fidgety watchfulness. *Grandpa!* he thought with a pang.

The train began pulling out of Strathfield and Gerard leant forward to watch old Blinder with his dahlias, hoping the old bloke would finally spot someone. He was sure that Blinder stood just as he disappeared from view and he sat back, leaning his head against the back of his seat, and closed his eyes.

‘The theologian can only maintain his belief by a supreme rejection of reason,’ thought Gerard. ‘He *must* believe what can be *disproved* by other beliefs that he holds.’ He was soothed

by this mental act and he proceeded to argue the case out. ‘Good is opposed to evil and eliminates it as much as possible; there are no limits to what an omnipotent thing can do; therefore, a good omnipotent thing eliminates evil completely; if God exists he is perfectly good and omnipotent; but evil exists; therefore, God does not exist.’

He bent over his notebook once again and scribbled all this down, turning back a page to December 21. At the top of the page he titled his notes ‘The Problem of Evil.’ He decided he’d ask Grandpa about it and proceeded to write notes all the way to Goulburn on what Mackie had called fallacious solutions to the problem of evil, backwards in his diary through the rest of December.

#

Christie talked non-stop during the drive home and Gerard wished more than once that Slow Bill had been the one to come for him.

‘How long are you going to stop?’ Christie asked him as they finally crossed the river after driving through town.

‘Dunno.’ Gerard was distracted by the ghosts of Denis and Johnny sitting on the bank under the apple trees having a smoke. Perhaps it was an illusion, but it seemed to Gerard that the rain came on stronger and louder, and he thought of how the three of them had huddled that day against the poplars. They drove up to the gate in silence and a wave of nausea washed over Gerard as they turned towards the homestead. ‘Why’d they let him out?’ he thought to ask, suddenly wondering why Grandpa wasn’t in hospital.

‘He wants to be at home, like, you know?’ Christie brought the car to a halt at the bottom of the stairs.

‘But...’ Gerard searched his mind for what was wrong with this. ‘What if he has another one? He should be in hospital so he can get better.’

‘Come on.’ Christie got out of the car. ‘He wants to see you.’ He slammed the door.

Gerard sat and watched a watery image of Christie climb the front steps. Christie opened the flyscreen and turned back to see that Gerard hadn’t followed him. ‘Come on, Gerry!’ he yelled urgently and Gerard pulled the door handle and swung his legs out. He felt like he’d run forty miles instead of merely sitting on the Daylight for a couple of hours, and despite the heaviness of the rain he walked slowly through it. The familiar smell of the house brought tears to his eyes and he wiped them away impatiently as he headed into the hallway.

Christie had gone ahead and made his presence known, and when he entered Grandpa’s bedroom Slow Bill stood up to shake his hand and then he moved back to make way. Grandpa was paler than his faded yellow chenille bedspread. His eyes followed Gerard as he made his way

round the bed and sat down in the chair. As Slow Bill and Christie left the room, Grandpa let his palm fall open on the bed so Gerard could place his over the top and pretend it was a handshake.

‘Sorry I wasn’t here,’ was all Gerard could think of to say.

Grandpa slowly closed then opened his eyes. ‘In the drawer,’ he whispered, indicating his bed-side table with his eyes.

Gerard pulled the drawer open and looked at Grandpa, who nodded. He picked up two sets of rosary beads, Grandpa’s black ones and a white pair he hadn’t seen before.

‘They’re your grandmother’s. Not Sylvia’s. Your father’s mother, Maud Harnett. We were friends. She was Maud Ingram. Her people had Roth’s Hill.’ He nodded as if this would mean something to Gerard.

‘Didn’t she want Uncle Jimmy or Wilkie Harnett to have them? Or Dad . . . Frank?’ he asked stupidly.

Grandpa closed his eyes again and gave one small shake of his head. ‘They’re for you, Giraffe.’ He opened his eyes and looked at the two sets of beads as Gerard turned them over in his hands. ‘I want you to have mine, too.’ He lifted his eyes to meet Gerard’s. ‘Keep them together.’ It was the loudest, firmest thing he’d said and Gerard couldn’t see how this could possibly be the most important thing to say at this moment.

*What about the problem of evil? He wanted to ask. How do you explain it to yourself?* Instead he lifted both sets of beads over his head and tucked them under his shirt. He looked to Grandpa for a response to this gesture. Grandpa smiled at him and Gerard felt relieved.

He swallowed, feeling the familiar restriction in his throat, of words wanting to be spoken. He didn’t know what the words were and he let out a slow breath and put one hand over the two crosses underneath his shirt.

‘I love you.’ He was looking down at his knees. Again, he looked up for a response and again Grandpa slowly closed his eyes and opened them, his fierce gaze holding Gerard’s, his brow deeply creased, until Gerard felt the heat of the gaze embracing him and Gerard knew, though he didn’t say it, that Grandpa loved him too.

#

Slow Bill cooked their tea and then they gathered in Grandpa’s room to say the rosary, Gerard and Christie knelt on either side of the bed, and Slow Bill, having come in reluctantly at the last minute, knelt at the foot; it was the Sorrowful Mysteries. It felt to Gerard as if Grandpa’s head was the West Point Gum and Gerard was the North Point. Christie and Slow Bill were South and East. Grandpa’s heart was at the centre, the place where the four points met in the middle forming a cross. If Grandpa was their compass, what would happen now?

Grandpa appeared to sleep through their recitation and Gerard couldn't help glancing at his face from time to time. They'd never said the rosary without him, Gerard realised. That was the problem. The whole thing had a different sound to it and a different feeling. Slow Bill was reciting the Sorrowful Mysteries; this was also out of the ordinary, and Christie sounded alert for once. Gerard couldn't shake a feeling of urgency and he could sense something similar in his uncles. They were on a threshold and it seemed to Gerard that, while Grandpa lay peacefully dozing, the three of them were bracing themselves for something new.

They finally came to the end and as their last words drifted into silence they knelt on, listening to Grandpa's breathing, as if they were hoping for a directive or a summing up from Grandpa that would allow them to rise. No such thing was offered to them, however, and eventually they pushed themselves up off the floor and gathered near the door, each of them glancing back at Grandpa in case he'd opened an eye, and then one at a time they stepped out of the room, Slow Bill, Christie, and then Gerard, who felt confused at the anti-climax as he crossed into the hallway and followed the others into the kitchen. Slow Bill made them a cup of tea and they discussed a roster to sit with Grandpa through the night.

#

Grandpa never spoke again. He lost consciousness the following morning and the three of them sat with him for two hours until the doctor came and told them this might go on for days. Did they want him taken to hospital? Both Christie and Slow Bill refused, and the doctor organised for a nurse to come to talk to them about home visits and explain what they needed to be doing. They went back to their roster.

People started dropping off food so they didn't have to cook. When they weren't sitting with Grandpa they were making tea for visitors. They had cakes and slices, that their neighbours had delivered, piled up all over the kitchen benches. Uncle Stan began coordinating their sheep work with Uncle Alfie Sinclair and Wally, and Aunt Carys came twice a day to wash up and give the kitchen one of her once-overs. According to Christie, she'd never really bounced back from the loss of Denis and Johnny, and Gerard could see what he meant. It had something to do with the dryness of her lips, he thought, the fragility of her papery skin, the weakness of her upper body, and the way she slouched into her hips, her shoulders collapsing in around her heart. Sometimes when he wiped the dishes for her, he had to open his mouth wide and take in a quick breath to make himself feel alive. He had avoided her, he knew now, all these years, and here they were approaching another death, one of a different kind.

'Do you ever dream of them?' she asked one night, catching him off guard.

'Yes,' he said after a pause, 'I do.'

She nodded. 'Good. That's good.'

It desolated him that she didn't ask about the dreams. 'Is it?' he asked her.

'Of course it is,' she whispered. 'It means they're still with us.'

He examined his absurd animal dreams in this light and shook his head, but she'd turned back to the sink and didn't notice his scepticism. *They're only in the dream because they're not here*, he thought. He knew this was true because the mule had disappeared from his dreams when Uncle Jimmy had turned up and when he moved in with Frank there'd been no more pig. He spread his tea towel over the back of a chair and was out of the kitchen in three strides. He burst out the front door and ran down the steps, past the North Point Gum and out to the ramp. For the second time in his life, he threw up on this exact spot.

#

That night he dreamt that the Sloper pulled up at the bottom of the front steps. The door swung open and an old kelpie jumped in. The dog sat quietly without once looking back as the car floated slowly away. He began to give chase, running blindly in the dark.

He woke and sat up abruptly in bed, listening for a sign that something was happening, but the house was quiet. He threw back the covers and made his way to Grandpa's room. Both Christie and Slow Bill were there. They looked up at Gerard in the doorway and he turned slowly towards Grandpa, trying to make an assessment in the dim lamplight.

'He's gone,' said Christie.

Slow Bill moved towards Gerard and briefly put a hand on his shoulder. 'I'll put the kettle on,' he said, and he stepped past Gerard into the hallway.

Gerard took Slow Bill's seat and leant forward to peer into Grandpa's face, wanting to be sure. Christie sat opposite him in a daze. Gerard reached a hand out and clasped Grandpa's upper arm. There was still warmth in under the armpit and he let his head fall forward onto Grandpa's shoulder. After a while he heard Christie get up and leave the room, but he sat on till Grandpa's arm went cold.

#

The funeral took place three days later. This time he sat in the front row, flanked by Christie and Slow Bill. The priest gave the homily on the love and mercy of God and Gerard tried and failed to find comfort in it. He was hoping for more than this, proof perhaps.

At the end of the service, he joined Christie, Slow Bill, Uncle Stan, Alfie Sinclair and Wally as a pall-bearer and they heaved the coffin to their shoulders and proceeded down the aisle. Uncle Jimmy caught his eye and gave him a nod as he went past. When they deposited the coffin in the hearse, he turned around to find people streaming out behind him and he was engulfed by

the crowd and their platitudes.

He'd done all this before.

He stood at the graveside with his head down as the priest droned away again, doing the Committal.

'Receive his soul and present him to God the Most High,' he chanted along with everybody else when they neared the end. He watched intently as the coffin was lowered into the grave and he felt himself sway on his feet. He was already longing to see Grandpa again. Just once more so he could tell him everything, but what was everything? *We never addressed the problem of evil.*

He remained standing as the crowd pulled apart when it was over. Suddenly, Frank and Dorcas were there beside him. Dorcas pulled him into a hug and apologised and he wondered momentarily what she thought she'd done before realising she was talking about Grandpa's death. Nodding at her in response, he thought of his mother, and he began looking around. He spotted Uncle Jimmy standing with a few of the Harnetts.

'Bloody hell!' he said, turning to Frank. 'You're here.'

'Of course he's here, love,' said Dorcas.

Frank raised an eyebrow and looked over at the Harnetts. 'Shit on them!' He clapped Gerard on the back.

'Did Mum...?' he tried to ask about her.

'No, mate,' said Frank. 'She's not here.'

'Oh well,' said Gerard. 'Shit happens.'

Frank smiled.

Gerard spent the next thirty years thinking that the problem of evil was reason enough not to believe in God. After that, he couldn't say.

## The Art of Dying

July 2009

*The Curse of Mad Gerry* was finished. It was half past two in the morning. He'd woken after midnight and written the death of Grandpa: *Gerard spent the next thirty years thinking that the problem of evil was reason enough not to believe in God. After that, he couldn't say. After that, well, he'd starting writing his novels and they had everything else in them...didn't they?* He pushed his chair back a bit, put his feet up on the side of the desk and stared at the words on the screen. After that was the beginning, in a way, the start of his life without Helen. Certainly, at the time, it hadn't felt like the start, but her death hadn't felt like the end either. It was a void, his sojourn in the desert. Like the Jews who'd wandered around lost for forty years thinking they'd been abandoned by God, it was the most arid experience of his life, as if he'd been abandoned by a God he hadn't believed in since the moment he'd put Maud and Grandpa's rosary beads over his head and hidden them beneath his shirt. The years in between the loss of Grandpa and the loss of Helen had been filled with a life.

Perhaps he was just too tired to go on.

He put his head back against the top of the chair to examine the books lining the top shelf of the bookcase and wondered if the placement signified a deeper order or progression. Hume, Kant, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Jung... the death of natural religion, the death of external moral law, the death of socially imposed identity, the death of God, the death of metaphysics and then Jung... Could he allow that evil was relative, *a prejudice, a frame of mind conditioned by time and place?* He regretted that he wouldn't live to see *The Red Book* published.

Perhaps he would have written more of the story if he hadn't run out of time; perhaps others would write the end for him based on the known facts of his career; perhaps the death of Grandpa was the end of the curse and the rest didn't belong.

*The letters are the end.*

He swung his legs off the desk and braced himself for the action this thought required; he would retrieve the letters he'd catalogued in a series of three display folders and file them with his



printout of the manuscript, like a lazy postscript. ‘Here,’ this would say to the reader, ‘this is how it ended.’

Would this be true? It raised a further question or two: what is “truth” and what does “the end” mean? Were both concepts arbitrary? Or unambiguous?

He stood and was now slightly out of the halo of light from his laptop and desk lamp.

*The letters are from long ago.* He couldn’t deny it. If they were an ending, they were placed temporally before the death of Grandpa and were not a postscript emanating from any present moment except the one he’d experienced a few weeks ago when he’d finally opened the safe. If they were tacked on for the reader, as they had been for him in the living of the story, then the curse had lasted till now. Rather than ending the story in 1959, the letters created a gap of exactly fifty years in which he’d lived a life he hadn’t addressed in the writing of it.

He sat back down.

‘I don’t believe in the curse,’ he said. ‘That’s not why I came back here.’ But he knew it had never been a matter of belief, and he quoted Jung to himself, ‘Its realm of experience is a self-contained world, having its own reality, of which we can only say that it affects us as we affect it.’ The curse was a relic of a bygone age and couldn’t possibly have defined him. So *why write about it now?*

‘How it affects us, how we affect it,’ he repeated. It wasn’t about truth, but his experience of living in the fifty-year gap. The letters weren’t an end but one side of the gap that, together with the death of Grandpa, had bookended his adult life. It was the closing of a circle.

#

Gerard woke in the light of the morning sitting up on his couch, with the manuscript and the letters on his knee tied up with a piece of string. People were talking in the kitchen, and he tried to remember who he was expecting. He couldn’t find the energy to get up. He looked down at the bundle and grasped it more firmly, wondering whether he should set it alight and remove it from his hard drive or pass it onto his publisher.

Who was it for?

‘Dad?’ he heard Mark say from his bedroom.

He cleared his throat. ‘In here.’

His son’s head appeared in the doorway. ‘Oh,’ he said. ‘Did you sleep here?’

He nodded and Mark came in and sat in his tub chair. ‘You must have had an early start. When did you arrive?’ he asked.

‘Just then.’ He indicated the bundle in Gerard’s hands. ‘Finished, I see?’

‘Yes.’ He slowly looked down at the manuscript and nodded. He looked up at Mark. ‘It’s

for you.'

'You mean...'

'Yes. I wrote it for you.'

Mark started to bite his lip. 'You don't want it published, or...?'

'Well, it's yours so that's up to you.' Gerard held it out.

As Mark reached for it he clenched his jaw against the tears. He sat holding it on his knee the way Gerard had a moment before. He swallowed. 'I haven't done enough for you,' he offered.

'It always feels like that. That feeling will get worse once I'm gone. That's the hardest part. But I want you to know that you *have been* enough. Of course the things we do for each other are important. That's how we live together and witness each other's lives. But what you *are*, is the thing that's made my life worthwhile. The fact that you exist, that you're my son, that you fought me to become yourself, that you *are* the person you are... That's enough.'

Mark raised a hand to his eyes and sobbed silently for just a moment.

'Thank you, Mark,' Gerard whispered.

#

The evening after Mark arrived to stay indefinitely, Dan and Stella turned up to visit at the same time. Stella's daughter Cynthia had decided to live with Stella, to everyone's surprise, most of all Stella's. Dan found Stella's presence unbearable, worse even than watching Gerard trying to swallow his tinned peaches, which were suddenly all he could eat since developing a throat condition a few days earlier. Dan joined Mark in the kitchen, leaving Stella with Gerard, and they had a beer and discussed the trip to Canberra tomorrow for Gerard's scheduled treatment.

'He's so weak,' said Mark. 'It's happened so fast.'

'He'll bounce back,' said Dan. 'Bound to be a few ups and downs.'

Mark shook his head. 'He thinks this is the end.'

Dan felt suffocated. He shook Mark's hand and got out of there, promising to come in for a beer again tomorrow. When he got to the spot, he stopped and looked down at the grass in the dark. *Maybe it's the house, Hannah*, he said inwardly to the dead child, before whispering in exasperation. 'Gerard and his fucking curses!' He marched towards his front door.

Once inside, he contemplated his bare walls. He'd never replaced the prints he'd smashed the night Zara ended their affair. He wished he had more pictures to smash. It was the weird sense of history repeating itself. He'd been waiting for Zara to leave Gavin so they could be together, but Gavin had left her and then she'd ended it. Gerard had thought he'd made their affair into something it wasn't. But this was different. He'd started an affair with Stella and realised immediately he was in love with her. *She's the one!* He'd made a stand but nothing had happened

until Jeff had suddenly left her. He paced from his front door to the kitchen like a caged animal. It was going to happen again and he couldn't bear it. He'd have to leave town. He'd go away and start again. Or maybe he'd end it. He stopped pacing and faced his reflection in the screen door.

'Dan?' The screen door rolled back and Stella stood there, unsure. 'You didn't say goodbye and I thought...are you okay about Gerard?'

He fell to his knees and she ran forward, dropped to the floor and grabbed his face.

'It'll be alright,' she said.

'No, it won't. I just can't.'

'You can.'

'No.'

'Yes.'

'I can't live without you. I don't want to.'

Stella froze. 'What?'

'It's over. I can't do this anymore.'

'What are you talking about?'

'I've had enough, Stella. I've had enough.'

She stroked his face and then kissed him tenderly. 'I told you, it'll be alright.'

'You were talking about Gerard,' he choked on the words, not believing in the kiss.

'I meant everything. I meant Gerard's death, our lives, you and me.'

'There's no you and me.' He felt belligerent. He had to get her to see what was happening. 'You didn't choose me.'

'I couldn't choose. I was afraid. I couldn't lose my daughter. I had to wait and see.' She fell sideways onto the floor and pulled him with her, enclosing him with her arms so that his head rested on her heart. She stroked his head. 'I do choose you. I will. I am.'

Dan closed his eyes. His head rose and fell with her breath. Had a future appeared? Hope fluttered in his chest.

#

Mark drove Gerard to Canberra the next morning but they refused to give him Rituximab until he insisted that this had been the arrangement. He showed them his appointment card as proof and his specialist sent word to go ahead with it. When the specialist came in during the afternoon he shrugged, saying, 'You know we're just doing what we can,' as if it didn't matter either way.

'Why'd you insist?' Mark asked him in the car going home.

'That's what I came for.'

'Hmm.'

‘You can’t just do nothing.’ Gerard said simply.

The following day Gerard couldn’t get out of bed and Mark phoned his doctor, who said he’d arrange for Mark to pick up an oxygen concentrator from the hospital to help Gerard breathe when he was lying down. Mark became agitated on the phone about Gerard’s throat. He couldn’t swallow and had eaten almost nothing but tinned peaches since Mark had arrived.

‘At this rate, he’s going to starve to bloody death before the cancer has a chance to kill him!’ Mark yelled accusingly at the doctor as he paced back and forth across the kitchen floor. He listened to the answer and then stopped pacing to hang up. ‘Fuck’s sake!’ he said in exasperation.

‘What’d he say?’ asked Gerard.

‘He said to get a gargle from the chemist.’

‘Call Zara to pick one up on her way home,’ Gerard instructed.

Zara sat on the edge of his bed that evening and told him he needed palliative care.

‘No, I don’t want them coming.’

‘It’s not for your sake, it’s for Mark. He can’t do this alone.’

‘He has you.’

‘Don’t be so stubborn.’

They contemplated each other patiently. ‘It’s not going to be long, darling.’

She reached for his hand. ‘Even so,’ she said.

‘You’ll be right as rain now.’

She smiled. ‘Yes. No need to worry about me.’

The smile filled a gap he’d been conscious of since the day they’d met.

#

The next day, Mark drove Gerard back to hospital for a blood transfusion. He sat quietly the whole way under a blanket that Mark had tucked in around him, dozing on and off. When they were admitted to the oncology day unit, Gerard was relieved to be looked after by Ajit, an Indian male nurse he’d had before.

‘How are you?’ Ajit asked him.

‘Well, I’m better than Michael Jackson,’ he said as a momentary cheeky gleam flashed in his eyes. ‘He’d dead, you know.’

‘Yes, that’s right,’ said Ajit, pretending to be grim about it. ‘And still not buried.’ He turned Gerard’s hand over and swabbed his forearm for the insertion of the cannula. He worked slowly, not only to be gentle but because he seemed to relish Gerard’s company.

‘He’s from Varanasi,’ Gerard told Mark, as if this was a massive achievement.

‘Oh yeah,’ Mark smiled. ‘How do you find it here?’

‘Okay.’ He gave nothing away. ‘Soon I will move you to a bed, Mr. Calligan,’ Ajit explained to Gerard. ‘I think you will get tired in the chair.’

‘I might. The chair’s a bit hard, I find.’

‘Yes.’ Ajit seemed efficiently pleased that he’d anticipated this.

Half an hour before they were due to be finished in the afternoon, the registrar came in.

‘Mr. Calligan, you can stay in if you want to.’ She nodded at him meaningfully. ‘We can admit you to the ward.’

‘No,’ Gerard said. ‘I’ll go home.’

‘You know, Dad,’ said Mark, ‘she’s saying you can stay in hospital, if you want to be looked after here?’

‘I know.’ Gerard was unshakeable. ‘I’ll go.’

#

Dan visited in the evening and found Gerard in bed with the oxygen tube fitted to his nose and tucked around his ears and chin.

‘Mark said you had a transfusion today?’ He sat down.

‘Yep.’

‘Feeling alright?’

‘Yep,’ Gerard said again and paused before going on. ‘I have a job for you.’

‘Oh yeah?’

‘I have to explain first. There’s a link between our families I haven’t told you about.’

‘Really?’

Gerard could sense that Dan was pleased.

‘Your grandfather’s name was Wilkie Harnett.’

‘Yes.’

‘There was a Wilkie Harnett in every generation of the family, as you know.’

‘That’s right,’ said Dan, as if he were being cross-examined.

‘Your grandfather had three brothers. One was Charlie, who started your Dad’s office, Harnett & Sons.’

‘Correct.’

‘What do you know about the others?’

Dan had been leaning forward, keen to hear the story, but he sat back now and gave Gerard the following sketch: ‘There was Jimmy who never married or had kids, and the twins Arthur and Frank. Arthur died young and Frank fell out with the family. He lived in Sydney, married, had a couple of kids...I actually remember Dad going to his funeral when I was about ten.’

Gerard nodded. 'Yes, I was there.'

'For real?'

'Yep. See, I grew up thinking Frank Harnett was my father.'

'No way?'

'Yes. The truth is, though, that Jimmy was actually my father all along.'

'Holy crap!' Dan leant forward again. 'Nobody knew Jimmy had a kid.'

'Well, it appears that my grandfather did know, and so did Jimmy and Frank's mother, Maud.'

'Grandad's Mum,' Dan said, trying to follow.

'Yes.'

'But Grandad never knew?'

'I don't think so, but I can't really be sure.'

'So . . .'

'So, your father and I are first cousins.'

Dan's face broke into a grin. 'That's fucking unreal!'

Gerard chuckled. 'Well, I'm glad you think so.'

Dan's mind seemed to run away with the details. 'So that means Mark and I are second cousins.'

'Yes, I suppose it does.'

'Right,' said Dan. 'Suddenly the family looks a whole lot more interesting.' He noticed Gerard blinking his eyes sleepily. 'What do you want me to do, then?'

'Frank had twins too, Rock and Hudson.'

Dan laughed. 'Oh yeah, that's right. They all say the joke was on Frank when poor old Rock Hudson died of AIDS.'

'Frank never found out. He died first.'

'Oh, right,' said Dan. 'What did the boys think, do you know? I've always wondered.'

'Rock changed his name to Robert and became a Catholic priest. Ironically, he died of AIDS himself in the 90s.'

'Holy fuck!'

'Well, yes, that's one way of describing it,' said Gerard, with a grin threatening the corners of his mouth.

Dan was open-mouthed.

'It's actually quite common. They say in the United States that Catholic priests die of AIDS at a rate four times that of the general population. Of course, the Vatican says homosexuality is

“intrinsically disordered” and that all contraceptive devices are “intrinsically evil” so either way the poor old gay priest doesn’t have much hope of salvation.’

‘*Religion* is intrinsically evil,’ Dan said pointedly.

‘Ah, you’ve definitely turned into a philosopher. This is a proud day for me.’

‘What was he like?’ Dan ploughed on.

‘Rock Harnett? Oh, he was the nicest bloke you’d ever meet. Highly intelligent, deeply religious...it’s almost hard to explain where he came from actually, if you knew his father. He was incredibly hardworking though, like both his parents, and completely down to earth like them as well.’

‘And the other one?’

‘Well, here’s where you come in. Hudson Harnett will come to my funeral.’

On hearing this, Dan let his face fall immediately towards the floor.

Gerard went on as if breaking some bad news. ‘I want you to give him something from me.’

Dan didn’t move. ‘Why me?’ he said eventually.

‘I don’t know, but it has to be you. You’re a Harnett and you and Hudson are actually very similar. I think you’ll like Hudson. He’s a solicitor out at Young. He’s got 300 acres and runs a few sheep. He was a bit of a rogue when he was young and I just reckon he’ll take to you, like, you know?’

‘Yeah, sounds like we have a bit in common, bar the 300 acres.’

‘Ah, not to worry. Your 300 acres will come.’

Dan shrugged. ‘What am I giving my mate Hudson?’

‘So, you’ll do it then?’

‘Yes.’

‘Good. Here you are then.’ Gerard pulled open the top door of his bedside table and pulled out two sets of rosary beads.

Dan raised an eyebrow. ‘That’s it?’

‘Yes. This black set belonged to my Grandpa, JT Calligan, and this white set belonged to your Grandad’s Mum, Maud Harnett. It was their wish that the two sets always be kept together, and Hudson is the one to do it. If anyone wants to know more, Mark has the story. Right?’

Dan nodded emphatically, making a show of compliance. ‘Got it.’

‘Good.’ He smiled. ‘I think JT and Maud will be pleased they went to Frank’s son.’

#

Gerard woke and was briefly conscious of the room and where he was. *The Top Paddock*. He

laughed inwardly at the synchronicity of it. *This is where I was conceived.* Somewhere close to the very spot he now lay, he felt the presence of Uncle Jimmy and his mother, their young selves lying together, she sparkling with awareness of her own beauty and wit, and he suave and relaxed like he was the rightful winner of a cosmic prize. In some grand scheme, the world for them was just as it should be at that (*this!*) very moment. *It was perfect. Oh! I'd always hoped it was perfect.*

Momentarily he felt that he was the one sitting in the chair and it was his mother lying in the bed.

'I kept these for you,' he heard himself tell her and he held out her rosary beads, the shiny gold Jesus looking ahead, holding his head strong and straight.

She frowned at the beads as if she'd never seen them before and then looked over his head, seeing something, perhaps the past and all that it had been. 'After everything,' she pursed her lips, 'there was no way I could keep going to Mass.'

He wished he had the energy, now, to check if his mother's beads were still in his pocket.

'I missed you, Giraffe,' he heard her watery voice, like it had been that day. 'I always wanted to see you again.'

'I'm here now, Mum.'

'Yes. But I've missed you. I missed everything.'

He couldn't tell if the tears were being shed now or then. It was like the distance between the two events had closed.

'Maria!' he heard someone yell. It was Slow Bill, of course, and Gerard took a deep breath. There was more wattle up here on the Ridge than down below. The kelpie, Maria, had run over at the call and was prodding Bill's arm with his nose. She whined and lay close to her master on the ground with her head on his chest.

'But I wasn't here, Uncle Bill,' Gerard whispered as Bill's eyes tightened against the pain in his chest.

'You're here now, Giraffe,' said Slow Bill, in his slow way. They were in the kitchen at the homestead and Slow Bill's big hand clutched his shoulder. 'That's all that matters. Come on, we'll check on him again.' Gerard followed him down the hall and into Grandpa's room. They watched the old man's chest rise and fall.

'Do you think he has any regrets?' Gerard said.

'Yes,' said Slow Bill with a conviction that took Gerard by surprise. 'I saw him gather a pile of letters together last week. He put them in Mad Gerry's safe.' Slow Bill folded his arms over his chest. 'I reckon all his regrets'll be in there.'

'Bill!' Grandpa yelled, taking Gerard by surprise, 'over there!'



Gerard's face was in the mud and he could hear the river rumbling on relentlessly. Slow Bill rolled him over and scooped him up. Grandpa was on the spot immediately and began checking Gerard's neck for a pulse.

'He's alright.' Grandpa collapsed onto Gerard and Bill, enclosing them in his grateful embrace. It was the most emotion Gerard had ever seen him show.

'My fags are bloody wet,' Denis said, in the front seat of the Zephyr. He managed to light one as Gerard did a u-turn and headed back towards Denis and Johnny's place.

'Let's have a look,' said Johnny. 'We can go over to the park and see from there.'

They all stood for a moment under the poplar tree, watching the river: Gerard, Denis, Johnny, Grandpa and Slow Bill.

'Nothin' to see here.' Denis turned his back on the river. He smiled. 'Come on, Gerry!'

They all laughed as they stood around sharing a joke no one had uttered. The rain had stopped and Gerard felt warmer, lighter. The air began to fill with a brilliant blend of white and yellow light with flashes of gold.

'Can you hear that?' Gerard said to the others.

'What is it?' said Johnny.

'Violins...or bells,' said Gerard, trying to describe the music he could hear.

'Really?' said Denis. 'I never got no bells.'

They all laughed again.

'I only heard the dog whining,' said Bill, and he looked down as Maria appeared to lick his hand. He bent down and gently patted her head before she disappeared again.

'I had Grandma Jones singing me *White Cliffs of Dover*,' said Johnny, in earnest. 'What about you, JT?'

'The sound of a car pulling up, I think,' he said, looking curiously at Gerard.

'The Sloper!' Gerard looked around hopefully.

And there it was, after all these years. He felt absurdly happy and another round of laughter echoed lovingly around him. He thought about the unconscious again: *its realm of experience is a self-contained world, having its own reality, of which we can only say that it affects us as we affect it*, and he understood the Sloper as being as much a part of this as the curse. It had circled around him, with its crowd of animals, over the course of his life like a Jungian mandala. And here they all stood at the centre.

'Come on,' Denis said again, throwing down his cigarette and stepping on it, and he turned into a dark valley Gerard hadn't noticed was there.

'Yeah,' said Johnny, looking at his watch.

Slow Bill gave his shoulder a squeeze and whistled his dog. There was just himself and Grandpa left. He looked quizzically at Grandpa for instructions. Grandpa opened his mouth to say something and then closed it again. He opened the door of the Sloper and gestured for Gerard to hop in.

Gerard was both his seventy-year-old self as he shook Grandpa's hand and his seven-year-old self as he jumped into the Sloper with the greatest pleasure. Grandpa slammed the door and gave him a nod.

Gerard smiled. *It had all been so perfect.*

#

Following Gerard's written instructions, Mark arranged a private burial for Gerard, and he was interred in a plot beside his grandfather, JT Calligan. Disregarding the rest of Gerard's wishes, Mark then held a wake in Gerard's backyard.

Dan and Zara sat on Gerard's wall, watching Stella, Mark's wife Julie-Ann, and Zara's waitress Kristen serve food to the guests.

'Mark said he's left you this house,' said Dan.

'Yes.' She smiled. 'I feel like a daughter.'

'Is Kristen going to move in too?'

Zara laughed. 'How did you know?'

'I didn't. Gerard tried to break it to me once.'

'You know, we never even discussed it.'

Dan nodded. He felt as if Gerard was beside him giving him a nudge. 'When I marry Stella, will you be my best man?'

'Of course,' she said. 'That'd be perfect.'

**THE END**