Chapter 1

The magnetic calendar on our fridge has a stark, texta-red X through every third Saturday.

He's expecting us.

Tom and Silv and me know that Vic will have been waiting since Thursday. Good t'see ya boys, he'll approach, rubbing his palms and hunching his shoulders as though he's about to sell us something we don't need.

Sometimes we take it in turns being 'too sick' or 'too busy' to go. But, we have a sort of allegiance to Vic; visiting him together every third Saturday.

It's not that we're bent towards him as a relo might be. We're insuring against our future isolation by visiting mates who are doing their time, cos we'll probably scream-in a bluestone season or two.
Shit, sometimes the spell you're tick-tocking away isn't the one you deserve. Ending up in the Pen; paying back for someone else. It's just the way it goes. Yelling out... oh, almost... anything on the 'big' day in court, except how it can be proven you're innocent. And that's it really, understanding that nobody's innocent and doing the debt thing because at least you can. It's expensive investing time like this, especially when heaps of the cells are filled with people we've kicked a footy with, drunk some beers with.

Now being selective, that's the key.

The ones who earn murder carve out their own space, turning grey and dry in it, so you'll forget each other and hardly hold a grudge; nobody else'll be visiting them either. Some grudges are bitter, slow release vitamins keeping you primed on the inside, but too much spite makes you choleric; electrifying your guts into an overcharged, acid-spitting battery.

My mates visit the fleshers they know just once.

To try and deliver to them fresh left/right-hook acts, before being peeled off, yelling animal (or something) back over their shoulders. As if the screws care. One visit is all a chicken-fucker's worth.

It's not because Jonni Telfi raped my brother or anything like that.

Nobody cops those scaly-handed, stinky-cock bastards too well.
The day Dave Keiffer got released after (only) seven years for rape, he had the face to waltz into the Olympic Hotel like some returned hero hungry for the backslaps; to shout some 'mates' from before his spell. He spotted two amigos, but get this, they left Dave with three cold beers and their backs as a view. Keiffer just standing there with a wounded smile, followed by a muffled: it's me boys, Keiffer, Davey Keiffer? And they must've remembered something as they turned around towards him, cos they kept on talking about footy and the beers in Dave's hands were all the 'welcome back' he got. How the fuck he could've gone in there still gets to me, Silv tells us.

Silv soaks up other people's disasters. He's our own version of a trashy magazine reporter, and none of us want to squeeze this annoyance out of him. At a balding, six feet seven inches, with a twelve o'clock shadow by ten in the morning, few argue with him. He's a phobia most people don't know they have until they meet him. Who are we to change him anyway? You're a pack of hoods! some of the Thorncote High teachers fired at us when they'd completely lost control. I guess we got to like the teacher-speak titles after a while. A deficient teacher's a shit teacher and a hood's a hood. That's the way it goes, I guess.

Even at thirty seven, I like stealing cars. I might be a touch on the hefty side of life, but shit, do I know how to sprint away!
There's always a quick, few thousand bucks to be made; more sometimes (especially for the rush jobs). Off some divorced panel beater from Reservoir, or somewhere out there, who wants to bleed easy dollars out of an insurance company. Cars with Disabled Driver stickers are a bonus. Those stickers bring in good side dollars. Like the teachers said, I guess I'm no good.

There's a heap of badness around and it's not one color; more like a rainbow, but nobody bothers to look too hard cos the dazzle could blind. Steering wheel locks and car alarms aren't fitted just to get a discount on insurance premiums. They're like little phantasmagories from the 'good folk' who've perved and been dazzled by that rainbow of badness.

Tom and Silv don't usually do cars. They're into the old credit card scam.

They force their girlfriends to ease wallets off older blokes from pubs on the other side of town; around Albert Park, Elwood and Elsternwick way. The old bastards get a whiff of lerve for the night but later find Tom and Silv waiting for them in the carpark. Acting pissed off: What're y'doin' with m'woman? they might ask, then beating the living shit out of beer-softened bodies.

With the credit cards and cash in hand, the four of them buy heaps of cheap items under the checkable limit and live the free and easy card life. I haven't coughed-up for juice in fuckin ages! Silv keeps bragging. No shit Tone, the last time I paid for petrol was about, oh, three to four years ago. They do okay I reckon,
earning and living like blubber-faced corporate stooges. They've always got just enough of everything.

Dress sharp when you use the cards! They'll hardly check on someone who suits-up like they earn their dollar; why should they? Chances are they're not paying full tax on what they sell. I reckon it balances out, smirks Tom.

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Tom arrives.

His old Merc has got one of those piercing, efficient horns which gets its message across like theme music to impending doom. He usually lets it rip before he's in view; from the other side of our block. The Jag he had before the Merc had a poncy, royal feel; running when it wanted to. In the end, Tom asked me to do an 'in your own way' insurance job on it because, he reckoned, nobody wants to fork out hard currency for slack engineering. The fuckin' piece of British shit... only if you wanna understand 'em can they be worth anything, Tom explained. I never got his flow on that, but I think he meant you have to love them to believe in them.

I flick the verandah light on and off a couple of times, to let Tom know that I'll be with him in a minute or two. If I don't
jiggle the light switch within a few seconds of his arrival, he'll fuck off without me. I'm sick of arguing with him about his expediency.

I grab my mobile phone and kiss Sue: seeya soon hun, and I'm in Tom's Mere as quick as it takes to hotwire a pre1985 Jap car. I want today's as concerned as I can look and sound in twenty minutes visit to appear like a convincing display of sincerity.

We're glad that Vic's gonna feel for twenty minutes.

The bastard hardly dishes-up any excited emotion though. It's as if we're interrupting his space (when he eventually sees us)- all part of the audacious game. Like getting stabbed in a fight; everybody shuffling closer the longer you stay down, but sneering up at 'em for the inconvenience.

Tom slaps-on his newest Led Zeppelin CD: *Remasters*.

The first time I heard *Black Dog*, Tone, we were doin' burnouts in that new GT in front of George's Milkbar. I look out of the passengers' window, rolling my eyes, my chest heaving. Tom, I sigh, every fuckin' time this song comes on you have t'bring that up. You're spoiling it for me! Tom's mouth is half open, as if he's only half way through the memory; what's left of it, or what's become of it anyway. You're gonna end up killing the whole thing mate! I hate the way he tries roping it in as his
memory. He doesn't talk about the rockin' sound anymore, instead just listens to it and utters: geeeessss that was a long time ago! Followed by: fuck we've matured, eh? and all that's left to say is a yeah or hmmm or nothing at all.

He's wearing that shiny green, parachute material tracksuit and the white runners, again.

Fuck, Tom! Did you have to wear it? I ask him, annoyed. You know we all agreed to dress-up when we go visiting. Yeah, look, I was running late, he responds in a soft, guilty voice. You're always fuckin' late, Tom. We drive on saying nothing for a while. He hasn't even shaved, the lazy arsehole.

Out of one side of his mouth, what a shit day, eh Tone? he asks, sort of brooding, and the drizzle makes a reply pretty obvious so I just nod yeah, even though Tom's looking straight ahead. Thornbury's streets are looking pretty dead this afternoon. Tom offers me two Peter Jacksons. I light up, pig-sucking them, then pass one back to him.

How's Sue goin'? he asks me, is she still hassling you for a kid or what? What do you reckon? Yeah, Sue wants to start a family more than me, I tell him. He glances at me through the haze of cigarette smoke without moving his head; a smart arse smile sprouting across his face. What's wrong Tone, y'firing blanks? he sniggers, leaning across the centre console with an outstretched arm. Don't worry about it mate, he laughs, his hand
a fidgety octopus on my shoulder. I'm fuckin' not, I bellow out, shrugging off his hand. I pull out before I let go! Tom's laughing quietly to himself. I'm not in the mood for cootchies cooes; not yet anyway. He shakes his head, agreeing with me, but he's still laughing.

Yeah, but y'better get ready soon, or Sue'll walk, mate. What's the hassle? Just give her a good one, wait nine months, hang 'round a bit and she'll never bother you again. I have to remember that it's Tom telling me this. He'd given his last partner three 'good ones' and she got so busy she told him: I don't want to make any more space for you, Tom. The bastard left the whole set-up and moved in with his girlfriend, Voula. He would've made a great insurance assessor.

I hope Silv's ready today; he takes bloody ages, doesn't he? I don't know, does he? I answer Tom. Yeah, fuckin' oath he does! Maybe we should get him to pick us up? Tom always suggests this when we turn into Barrow Street, just a couple of minutes from the Pen. It would be ridiculous for someone living the closest to the place to pick up the ones furthest from it. But really, we're all within its easy reach. Tom's bitter about picking up everybody else. He volunteered years ago and we've stuck him to his offer with a dose of the: it was your fuckin' suggestion Tom! whenever he whinges about the arrangement.
We stop and park the Merc, then amble up to knock on Silv's door. Mary lets us in. Her hair's teased and gelled into a dome-like style. It looks good on her.

Ehh! Howareyuz boyz? she greets us in her sweet, Macedonian pitch, looking Tom up and down. Not bad Mezza, not bad at all. Mary points us towards their laminexed kitchen, as we stop to talk in the mirror lined hallway. Silv'z in the kitchen making sandwiches for youz. They should be ready by now... Silv are y' finished yet, or what? Mary yells out. Yeah yeah, fuckin' hang-on will ya, Silv answers.

Their fluffy, blue carpet smells like wet dog. Bambi stinks, but Silv reckons that Mary won't wash her because poodles aren't supposed to smell like other dogs: they've got hair like you and me, not fur like other fuckin' mongrels! Yeah, sure Mezza, but it still sweats and oozes. When are you gonna get rid of the thing? Tom asks, as he nudges me in the ribs because we know that first she'll frown and then tell us about how different her dog is. Yeah Mezz, but the little fuck still smells like munger. What's he gonna do anyway? If some big bastard breaks in, what's he gonna do; stink 'em out of the place? and even Silv laughs at this from the kitchen.

Naaa, Mary replies, that's what Silv's here for. And the three of us laugh. Shut the fuck up will y'Mary! Silv screams back, just bring the boys in here will ya! Eh boys, the sangers are ready; come on we gotta go soon. C'mon Mezz, don't be such a
peasant, get the boys some drinks. Tony, Tom whatcha having? I know; Mezz, get some nice coldies from the garage fr ridge will ya! Awereight, aweright take it easy Silv, Mary yells back at him, as she scoots out of the house and towards the garage. Silv's eyes hard set on Mary's back, following her with an: I'll get you later stare. Tom tapping my left leg with his right fist. Last night Silv, eh? Tom asks.

We did okay last night, eh Tom? Did he tell you about it Tone? Tell me what? I ask. This old, rich bastard; you know what his address was? Silv smiles: Lansell Road, Too-rak. No shit! He was loaded; gold Amex and all. Mezza and me've been busy shopping all morning. Eh Tom, did you go sick with your plastic?

With a sandwich filled and open mouth, Tom tells us: we started at six this morning (he takes another mouthful...) you know... we filled-up the cars, did the grocery thing, then wenta Northland and finished off up at that new wholesale liquor joint near the Preston Markets. Boys, he didn't check a fuckin' thing, and we all laugh like winners at the casino.

Tone, Silv, continues Tom in an exaggerated, emphatic voice, we got just under eight hundred bucks worth; just off the spirits shelf! Told him we were having a name day party for our kid. He believed us, and being a good greek, even offered me and Voula some ouzo; to our kid's health and future, and that type of shit. Voula said, No thankyou! as she's supposed to, tugging at my
daks to get the fuck out of there. I thought, I'll play out the script and have a couple a shots with him. He slid that Amex so fast through the machine; thinks he's got us for the next time, the old dumb cunt! ha ha ha ha...

The rain's setting in.

The arse-end of Tom's Merc won't grip the road. Shit, Tom, what's up with your fritzy? It's hanging-out all over the place. Trying to kill us mate? Tom frowns, yeah, it needs new tyres, that's all, relax will ya.

Bell street is chunked-up with northern suburbs travellers.

Tone, can you get me some tyres next time you're on the job? Tom asks. Some nice, wide Michellins would do. I tilt my head back so I'm looking at the roof lining and ask him: what have you got to offer me? Don't be so tight, he replies. I don't answer him. 

...I'm gonna make you sweat, I'm gonna make you groove, Robert Plant's screeching through the speakers. Come on mate, Tom pleads, the Merc needs good rubber... I don't take orders for tyres Tom, but I tell you what, get me a nice litre of Jack Daniels or an ounce of good skunk and I'll see what I can do, okay? Done Tone, he answers quickly. We shake hands (as we always do when a deal's made) across the front seat, and that's that.

It's not as if we don't trust each other, it's just that a handshake's remembered like a punch to the back of the head. A
mark you can refer to, feeling your way through the flesh to the memory.

Tom steers the Merc into the Pen's carpark; the visitors' carpark.

Tightening our looks; we adjust our clothes and saunter towards the visitors' reception area.
A Scottish screw winces at us, so Tom and me smile back menacingly (Silv's looking away from the whole face-off), reassuring him that, yeah mate, we are the dickheads you want us to be. Sign the visitors' register and weet behind the scrin, he demands without looking at us. I'm wondering, how many has this bastard hoofed into?

Vic's told us about some of the screws, how they just glide into and out of your counting, your lamenting, your planning. Whacks stray from their truncheons like a reflex is out of control. Then strolling away in their invisible (but not impenetrable) armour of confident, government-guaranteed cool. They don't need to look back at you on the floor. If they do look, they might whisper: that's where you belong, scum. And there's only more of the stick if you try balancing the ugly red of debt.

Victor De Bortollo's visitors, the screw announces, looking over at us. Room seven, the screw nods. We walk towards the visiting area. Twenty minutes, orkay? the screw warns us. Lucky seven, he adds, chuckling, but looking away from us, missing Silv's ready to dismember you stance. I grab for Silv's left wrist.
You don't want to warm Vic's bed tonight, do you Silv? Tom asks him. But Silv's hardly moved by Tom's friendly warning. Fuckin' arsehole, Tom mutters with a smile in the screw's direction. The screw looks over, but he's too far away to make out what Tom's saying, so I smile at the screw as well. Come on, forget him, I advise Silv. I hope I see him around, Silv murmurs to nobody in particular. We walk on.

We wait.

The visiting area; tenacious and scarred with half-arsed repairs.

Fake indoor plants, hardy carpet, flat durable furniture that hasn't been replaced since the 1970s. A real downer, but you have to deal with it, as you do with screws whose faces would be better renovated. But we aren't here for the decor, just the conversation, which after a few years of visits starts to wear like the room.

Vic's in a hurry, leaning forward through his walk as he approaches the glass-walled visiting area.

He floats in. Good t' see ya boys; whatcha bin up to? he asks us, with more regard in his voice than we're used to.

Oh you know, I start off, bit of work, bit of fun. You haven't missed much mate. How's it goin' anyway, Vic? He looks at us with a sly smile. Yeah sure boys, haven't missed much, eh? He didn't believe a word, knowing we've been doing all the scamming he's been thinking about. But we can't just overwhelm him with it all or what'll he have to think about? Anyway, we're
probably being tapped. Bored screws: watching, listening, waiting for one of us to say the sort of stuff that'll give them an excuse to come and cart us all away, and into their cages. They can't have us roaming and shitting in their own backyard.

Had a visit from the soliss today boys, Vic boasts. What, Tom interrupts, on a Saturday morning? Fu-ck, business must be slow for him, eh? Vic turns away from Tom and looks down at the top of his right hand which is speckled with tattoos of red and blue drops, saying nothing, slowly shaking his head. There's somebody crying in one of the other visiting rooms. Silv turns his head towards the wailing.

What did he want? I ask, pulling my neck back, looking at Vic from one side of my face. Well boys, he reckons that if I lodge an appeal, I can be out in eighteen months. Silence.

We've heard a version of this before. Bullshit, Vic. He's shitting you. Dollar, mate! He's after some of your arse-sweat. Tom jumps in again. But, Vic interrupts, he knows I haven't got any. Anyway, it's worth a stab.

No way! Silv yells. He'd been quiet so far, but he couldn't just let that one float by like some of the other crap we talk about. How much is it gonna cost if everything goes aweright? asks Silv. Oh, 'bout nine and a half, say ten grand to round it off, Vic estimates.
Silv goes on, so to do two maybe three months less, it's gonna cost, what ten to fifteen grand, yeah? Yeah, and? Vic asks. How long will it take to make that when you get out? It's simple maths Vic, no offence, mate. Vic, with a wave, urging Silv to continue.

And? I ask Silv.

No ands, Silv answers, if you can make that sort of dollar in the time you'll be saving, I reckon go for it. Or else, just hang in there and let the government pay you that tight cons' pension, Silv finishes off, swiping a hand across his chest; suggesting his solution is as simple as the gesture.

Silv, snarls Vic, it's so fucking easy, eh? I'm the one counting cockroaches, not you, mate. Two, three months; freedom... you can't put a price on it. The soliss knows that, that's why he's bothering at all. I don't have a problem about him trying. He's doin' what everyone does... he's making some sort of livin'. I can't hold that against him.

Vic's getting sympathetic with the soliss. But, he's the one feeling it in here.

The visiting room's quiet. A screw on the other side of the door gently taps his truncheon in rhythm against something metallic. Fuck off will ya! Vic screams out. The rest of us throw each other quick, concerned glances. The tapping doesn't stop, and Vic flares his nostrils.

For a couple of Vic's precious minutes, none of us say anything.
Hang on Vic, I start off asking, how are you gonna pay the soliss if you've got no dollar? No problems there, Vic reassures us, he'll bill me and get the money out of the system. Maybe he thinks a relo might chip in and do the right thing. Vic breaks off wondering which relo he'll ask for help (again)... anyway boys, he's not doing it for nothing that's for sure... and neither am I. He's investing in possibilities. I reckon forget the shifty bastard Vic, Tom interrupts.

Yeah, yeah, always the fuckin' optimist aren't ya Tom? and Tom looks at his fingernails. Vic's pissed off, big time, but keeps his tone in control this time or the screws'll end the visit.

Tom, me, none of us want Vic to give away more than he has.

Vic's soliss is a bit bent. He won't bend so far as to come to one of our barbeques, but at least he doesn't pretend to like cooking his meat as we do. Working a system over as we all do; for himself. Interests, power and connections different to ours doesn't change the meaning of a haul. It's whether you're caught or not, but that's obvious. If you practice (whatever your game) for long enough, its rewards can become as permanent as Vic's tatts. Getting sprung just slows you down for a while. Skills can't be rubbed out like a pencil drawing. I remember telling Vic to plan things out a little better and to adjust along the way.

Vic better be learning something.
They've got their eye on him because of his last day outside. His outburst, the whole courtroom thing:

... you have pleaded guilty to assault using a deadly weapon. The State appreciates your guilty plea, Mr De Bortolo; for saving its time and resources. You claim to have been provoked. Yes, I agree with the provocation as a defence, but, your actions were malicious and life-threatening. You exercised minimal self-control. I have little choice but to sentence you to four years and seven months imprisonment; without parole. This rehabilitation period will enable you to contemplate self-control...

Just like that the magistrate said it to Vic, before Vic was bundled out. It was all over for him. No more scams for near on five years.

Into another system that's dripping with temptation. And Vic's voice dimming after the tenth: You fuckin' arsehole!

The magistrate ignoring him while shuffling paper work. Looking forward to the tea in his chamber. The yelling didn't look good for Vic; everything jotted down, used against him later if an excuse is needed to justify the interest tacked onto Vic's account. A sort of administrative revenge, not all that different to any other sort of payback.

Come on boys, it's time to go. Let Vic think about his options. I stand up, but Vic's got me quick, oh come on Tone, there's still about five minutes to go, he pleads. I'm a bastard doing it to Vic
like this, just getting up and pissing off, but, sorry Vic, I tell him, I don't like the vibes in here today. Anyway, I'm supposed to be somewhere else. Wasn't going to come at all you know, but... well... gotta go, that's all. Look, I start, Tom and Silv can stay, but I've really gotta be off. I rub my fingers in midair, indicating money and Vic waves me off, regretfully, but nodding his head: if you gotta go, go Tone. He's sulking and nothing will slap him out of it. He offers a little goodbye by opening and closing both hands, then Tom and Silv get up and follow me out.

It's just the way it works out sometimes. You walk into the place with a pre-cooked laugh in your heart, ready to serve it up, but then everything gets complicated and legal... and then... it's just time to go. There won't be vengeful feelings about me leaving early. I hope not, anyway.
I've an appointment at Murphinos Panels with Michael Murphy and Alex Stavrinos.

Mick and Al hang around each other like a bad smell. They're copies of each other, even though Mick's a good foot shorter than Al. It's not their differences you notice, but the way they manoeuvre around each other like a synchronised swimming duo. They're an enterprising union.

An accomplished swindling act, getting into the panel beating game because they heard about the fortunes that could be 'made' from beating cars back to shape, or close enough back to shape anyway. At school they offered cheap bike parts to anyone.

Come on, how'd we know you painted your bike? The day they offered Frank Lavitis his 'missing' ten speed gears. We thought... oh, why not? You knocked the bike off anyway Frank... don't get too
pissed-off'. Frank just picked up his gears without looking at or asking anyone and walked away. How easy, to want parts that belong to someone you know.

'Poofters, Poofters!' some chanted at Mick and Al. Around teenage comfort, the two of them stood too close to each other. But almost all the boys called each other poofis, and the name-calling evolved into incantations that wedged a cool, lonely gap between chums- so that their friendships could be considered 'normal'. This kind of taunting didn't work on Mick and Al, or on anyone else with tattoos. The ones with tatts did most of the chanting anyway; teenage shaman warding off affection looking for a free ride.

Women were hard to come together with. Most yelling out 'Poofer! Poofer!' knew that sometimes you had to dangle off each other because the women hardly wanted anything to do with juicy, loud-mouthed dorks scrambling to dump their loads like a matter of heroic course.

After leaving the Pen, I amble along Bell Street and try waving down a cab. It's only a ten minute walk to the panel shop, but I can't be f**ked getting wet, feeling invaded.

A cab cruises by, its NOT FOR HIRE sign making the drive-by pretty obvious. Mum never talked about anything sad, except for Melbourne's weather. She was from a town where rain's a rare visit from the Pope. I wave to the next cab. It swerves a bit, the brake lights
flashing as bright as puppies' eyes. Like Tom's Merc, it needs new tyres.

I run over and flop into the passengers' seat.

Sorry 'bout your seat mate, I apologise, but I couldn't help getting wet. The cab's interior is a jungle of body odour. Ahh, don't worry about it, the driver booms, the boss owns three of these slave boxes... I couldn't give a fuck if you gave birth in the back seat. A confident speedy glaze encrusting his eyes; this guy's been driving too long.

Settlement Road, Coburg thanks. No worries, he winks, then reflex like, had a good day? he asks, cos mine's been a real dog! Been driving this cage since nine last night. Fu-uck, aren't y'tired driver? Oh I was, he starts, but a few coffees here and a can of Coke there helps you push this cart along. I'm glad it's only a short trip. This guy'll need new panels soon.

Listen mate, in case you ever need panel work, I whip out a Murphrinos Panels business card and place it on the dash, just give them a call. They fixed my whole front for heaps less than any other beater. I don't know how they do it, I lie, but they're fuckin' cheap. The driver paws the card off the dash; yeah thanks mate. The boss'll suck me off for this! reading the card for too long, Oh shit, he whispers, correcting his steering; shaving a parked Moreland City Council truck. Ooohie, nearly! he cries out, leaning forward and scratching on the carpeted dashboard with his left-hand. I twitch in my
seat, staring at him. His blood went to sleep hours ago. Just here'll do, thanks.

Veering into a stop, his tyres kissing the gutter. I shake my head in relief. You'll need new tyres too driver; you're gonna end-up someone's arse in this sort of rain. Ahhh well, he slurs, it wouldn't be too bad a place to be, eh? Don't worry, he assures me, the insurance can lash out.

He switches the meter off, ahh, that'll be four bucks-twenty. I hand him five bucks: keep the change-- yeah thanks, he interrupts-- the river plunged into his shirt pocket before I have a chance to finish off my sentence. I glare at him, smiling gently and asking: rude bastard aren't ya driver? Na, he smiles back, just efficient.

I manoeuvre my body out of the cab, eyeing-off the driver's insomniac grin, then slam the door. He needs to visit some clinic where eyelids are stitched shut for a couple of weeks.

Murphrinos Panels never closes. That's the way it seems, anyway.

I saunter into the workshop and quickly lose my bearings amongst the reverberations of metal-banging, the body-filler dust billowing in the shafts of rare light. Panel Beaters have the shortest life expectancy of any tradesperson.

Dull undercoat tones, bright flecks of paint on just about everything. All... Mick! I scream out as I always do when I come here.
They won't hear a thing. They're in full swing. I wander around, looking for either of the auto maestros. They fuse so easily into their space, that it's only their movement which separates them from the fixtures.

Al's welding in a wreck he's piecing back to insurance standard. I shake him by a leg and he mazes his way out. Tone, how are ya? Bloody work, never ends... you start on one thing and there's still heaps more waiting for ya. It never stops... like the other Tuesday... and he waffles on for a full two minutes. I hear little of what he's saying, instead scan his face, hair, overalls; all dusted with a fine polymer icing.

No safety masks hanging off anything, but he'll probably die with an oxygen mask strapped to his face watching a *Midday Movie*. I'm waiting for Al to finish his spiel.

There's Mick, his limbs contorted under another wreck, angling his body for the perfect position. He sees me, nods and smiles then makes his way across the workshop.

Al, I interrupt him, I don't wanna be a pain in the arse, but I'm in a sort of hurry. Oh, sorry Tone... didn't mean to bore ya. Na, it's not that mate, I lie, I've got some stuff to pick up soon. I just wanted to know if the dollars are ready... for that Volvo we found for you. Yeah, it's all here Tone, patting his breast pocket, had it with me a few days. How are ya Tone, anyway? asks Mick, strolling towards us while spitting out blue phlegm. Not bad Mick, I greet him, then I turn back to Al. You should give me a ring when the dollars are ready, Al. No big
deal or anything, it's just that the other boys want to be paid straight after a pickup, and..., ah, you know the story, they want their dollars at the end. Sorry Tone, Mick and Al apologise in unison, their dirty eyes regretting any hassle. Na, don't worry about it too much. I just wanted to explain my side of it boys, that's all.

Al whips out a scroll of fresh one hundreds. I don't know how the money stays so clean in his pocket. But the money, the work and the workshop aren't clothes out of the same laundry basket, it's always the clean stuff I want. Al fumbles the scroll but eventually peels off the two and a half grand he owes me. There y'are, all nice'n fresh, Al bites the wad as he hands it over. None of it's fresh Al, Mick adds, looking at me vacantly before ha ha ha-ing in my face. I join in the laughing, slipping the cash into a pocket.

When we've worn the joke away: How's Vic doin'? Mick asks. Oh,... well, put it this way, what do you reckon? Yeah, sorry Tone, we know we know, he's feeling it. But is he upta anything? I don't reply because I don't know the answer. Tell him there could be something happening. Look, we'll go and see him, eh? Yeah, I answer Mick, he wouldn't mind some fresh visitors. I back towards the rollerdoor. Anyway boys, I've gotta... do you need anything else?

Oh, yeah I was gonna ask. Um, can ya manage an Alfa, latest two door? Any color, but red if you can get it. I'm looking at the ground as they walk towards me. Oh, maybe; give me a couple of days, unless something happens, you know? Yeah, we know Tone, we
know, they smile at each other, jiggling their heads. Okay then, see you
soon boys. We shake hands and I take off.

Sue'd be at her folk's place by now.

I need Sue. Not like an opiate or anything like that. It's
eathartening sharing time and space with someone who doesn't make a
big deal about mess when I'm assembling my flimsy fragments and
possibilities.

Not having anyone shoot me down just after I've taken off.

Don't get me wrong. Too much confusion is like being
disoriented in a mist of gray spray paint, but a bit of active crap all
over the place gives a house a productive feel about it. Not like some
homes I've been in, where the 'arrangements' are perfected, down to
the doilies centred on sofa armrests; and dust is a psychotic intruder
who's come to rip the guts out of tenterhook lives. What's wrong with
a bit of spillage? At least something's happened, something to gaze at in
the breathing clarity of morning.

Sue's getting good pay these days and with the overtime, well, it comes
in handy for her and she keeps saying: one day it costs this much to live
and before you get used to it, along comes a big expense. Not in the
form of a baby is it, this big expense that crawls in from dreamland?
Sorry darlin', I usually tell her, but I can't get into the cootchy sort
of life. And I almost look serious. Yeah, Sue breaks in, you've told me
more times than I've thought about it. Come on Sue, I was just tryin' to be a bit subtle. About as subtle, Sue smirks, as a baby crying in the night. We laugh. Whata payback!

We reward each other on good jokes; nobody else will. I'm thirty four Tony, Sue keeps reminding me, I want kids while I can still have my own. Yeah, I know, I know... and that's about as far as it ever gets with us whether we laugh, joke or cry about it. I can't explain what it is, it just is, I tell Tom and Silv and anybody else who hassles me about the empty cot thing. That's fuckin' huge of y'Tone.

Oh piss-off Tom. Just let me tell you!

Aweright, aweright Daddy, ha ha ha ha... Tom can be an obnoxious son of a fuck. Anyway Tom, I've gotta admit, when I see kids hanging around the park or the streets, I get to thinking, it'd be great to have a play with them. It's just that I never get the urge to take one home, to have one hanging around the place, you know? Maybe when I do I'll be ready like Sue is. You can't be ready about everything at the same time, Tone, Tom tries explaining, you don't plan it like a tupperware party. Let it happen. The whole thing just takes off like some wild cyclone and you just go along for the ride. It's not so bad when the bub pops out and you know, it's y'own... of y'own kind. It's not a bad hit that. Tom's recital over.

What's that mean? I ask. Tom stares at me, smiling stupidly and replies, I don't fuckin' know!

It all sounds fine, I tell him. But I'm thinking, I've no intention of limpeting myself to a twenty year haul. Shit, I don't know if I'm
gonna be around this time next year, then what'll Sue do, eh Tom?
What do y'mean 'What'll Sue do?' Tone, she's doing aweright now.

Anyway y'can't think like that, Silv chips-in, as if he's a
concerned, ancient father of all the earth's children.

The world's such a 'beautiful' place to shake a kid into, eh Sue?
I've mentioned to her as some lame excuse I overheard someone else
use... We'll see what happens if Sue's belly starts.

Some of the people I knew at school went on to have kids
before they were out of their teens, and well, they haven't done much
since. They've stayed as put as a turd on a soft green lawn. Fading
away from their dreams, hopes and that sort of happy futures stuff.
Living out a sentence in their mum's bungalow or in a tidy Commission
box. Like they're doing time.

It scares me so bad that I hardly think about the kid thing: where
I'm teaching little Johnny or Joanna about what's supposed to be good,
bad or regrettable. Then again, I see how soothing kids can be for mean
fucks who never thought about the consequences of armed robbery or
shoot-outs with the cops. How they've been tamed by the whole nine
month deal. Like a good dose of disease, the curable type that doesn't
need a prescription, just an off chance in their fucked up fiascos. I
don't want to tumble into any of that. I'm enjoying the moment as
much as a kid at a carnival. I can take the rides, as many as I fuckin'
want, and never pay. I get paid. If you know how to read the gusts
blowing at you from the sides, it's not a bad life.
I should get those tyres for Tom. I need his hooch for my mate, my youngest mate, Painter.

It's almost seven. There was a big racing carnival at Caulfield today. Tom and the others will be working-over possibilities by now. The pubs full of oldies who've won and lost at the track. Their plastic will be finding new homes tonight.
None of the women come to the Pen with us. They reckon we'll be visited there soon enough, discounting the idea they'll ever do any time. I don't understand it.

Most of the guys in the Pen don't know our women anyway, so it'd mean fuck-all if they visited our mates with us.

I wouldn't want to see any women if I was doing time; no fuckin' way. Imagine all the pudd-pulling for the next month! I mean, I feel a better you in there than me kind of sorrow for Vic and some of the others, but I don't want them drooling and wanking with Sue in their heads. I might sound selfish, sure, but there's a limit to what you can share.

Silv doesn't get into many conversations about Mezza, and reckons, I love her okay? Yeah sure Silv, sure, Tom answers him. Arguing with your partner, a pretty normal pastime when light-footing around affection. But it's the hitting thing...
You shouldn't hit women mate. Why the fuck do ya smack Mezza around? Oh piss off Tom, Silv snaps back, it's not as if I plan to let the backhanders fly. My old man used to hit mum more than I've ever hit Mezza. Dad used to say *if ya got no more arguing to do but ya still pissed off with the woman, a good slap or two shows em!* Shows them what Silv? asks Tom. Silv squares his shoulders, clenching and releasing clenching and releasing his left fist. Tom leaves the question at that cos Silv's pretty likely to start brawling at the pitch of a word he doesn't like. An attentive apprentice to his old man's craft.

Silv, fuckin relax will ya! We're just talkin a bit of shit. Don't get all mental on us. My voice sounds so deep and serious saying this, that I must look like a mean, ready to jump in son of a fuck. Silv slumps his whole body in one lugubrious droop, the loose change in his pockets chinging against keys and other tools for his day.

Silv surrenders a, Yeah, awright awright! Tom looks at me as Silv tilts his head towards High Street's manic corridor of traffic. We unwrap, then chomp on our hamburgers and avoid eye contact. Get outta my fuckin' way, loser! yells out one of the kids playing the *Daytona 500* video game in the fish and chip shop, whose wall we're leaning against. You get outta the fuckin' way, Bro! the other one answers back. They're in baggy sports clothes and they both want to win.

Let's go, eh? Silv grunts. He casually lobs most of his burger into the path of uneasy peak-hour vehicles. Anonymous four wheeled chambers
that're carting their fair share of paedophiles, pederasts and spouse-beaters to other parts of the city.

Peak-hour traffic reveals sex lives subliminally. The speedsters; cutting along, pillaging lane-space and motorists' rhythm- trying to play catch-ups with a moment of release that's passed. And they might slide out of control into something along the way maybe; the crowd'll fester around the wreck, diffusing a self-interested pity: oh, I hope they're okay, or a, I wonder how it happened? Never a: didn't get any last night, eh?

Listen, I'm gonna walk it home- don't worry about a lift, I tell Silv. My car's at Tone's, I'll walk with him, Tom chips in. Silv shrugs his shoulders without turning and walks ahead, Tom pulling back with me as Silv dissolves into High Street's effervescent current. SEEYA SILV! Tom yells, and Silv waves to us without turning around.

We walk along in silence for a while, taking the odd drag on our Peter Jacksons.

A car that's out of view does a burnout that seems to go on for so long, we look at each other and then turn towards the sound of the angry, rubber spitter. Tone, I hope Mezza's not home when Silv gets there? I look at Tom and raise an eyebrow, suggesting: she won't always be there.

Tom puts his cigarette to his mouth and takes a long, eye wincing drag. Yeah I know, I know, I'm just glad one of us said it.
Chapter 4

Everybody calls him Painter. Always flicking his long, oil-black hair out of his eyes. He does it so often, it's as if a nervous disorder is responsible. I don't know his christian name.

He's twenty and commands the room's attention like a fervid toddler wanting recognition for discovering the secret to opening a jar for the first time. Nobody minds giving him this regard. He loves sharing these moments: oh, you really should run your finger over the threading... here have a go. And he'll pass you the jar, staring at and waiting for faces to smile at his find. When stoned, he sees things that aren't there but others in the room swear they can feel and smell, so I guess they exist.

Tony, the green's making me feel... like... I can paint forever and nobody will be able to stop me. Painter, don't let anybody stop you; you're a freak!

His ability to make others taste food that hasn't been cooked yet. It's true. Once somebody said gees... I'd love a Big Mac, and Painter
sketched it up, coloring it in so the only thing missing was the wrapper. The hungry mouth just stopped complaining and let his eyes do the eating; we were pretty wrecked, but still...?

I can't believe the State Government is closing down the Northern railway line. How can they get away with that Tony, how? It's not in one of their seats, that's how. This is a workers' seat they'll never win, so they do what they fuckin want. Yeah, I know the political reasons Tony, but how can they do it as human beings, to other humans? If humanity had anything to do with politics Painter, they'd all resign tomorrow. It's not good enough Tony, there must be some common thread that weaves them with us, that they can separate from the machinations of politics. You've got a beautiful mouth, Painter! His sincerity can flow as cleanly as the Yarra River used to.

Most of my mates, hardly talk to them about anything but the obvious: how much is it worth? did you make enough on it? you leave a good gap between you and the porkies? Painter, you come with all the frills; I love you! I thank him. He's heard this heaps of times, nonchalantly waving the compliment away.

So you've known Christine for how long, Tony? I look at him with a creased brow: About... oh... fifteen years.

Tony, weren't you two lovers for a while? There you go again, softly, such a delicate delivery of a word: lovers!... Ah, yeah we were into each other, Painter. Long enough to know it was just a curiosity
thing. We met at uni. She got her degree and I got kicked out in first year. I couldn't get into that rich-kid world, Painter. At Thornbury High the teachers kept telling us how proud everybody would be if we got to uni, cos hardly any of us got within smelling distance; how our life chances would I-M-P-R-O-V-E, meaning otherwise, we had no hope. It sounded so good. An education, a bit of respect from your community, some important job at the end. Important to everybody but me. Uni's for rich kids Painter. They say it's for everybody, but rich kids make up the majority. If you look/sound different, they don't even bother to get to know your name. Singling you out in group discussions; gnawing on your exotic bones. Some lecturers are well divided too; dishing out patronising civility, or no attention at all. Anyway, Christine was the only decent person I met there. We're still friends, I guess; means a lot to me.

Wow Tony, I'll have to paint a scene of you vomiting all over a group of smug, middle class kids. Na, forget it Painter, it's my history, my fragments. But Tony, they're everybody's fragments, you're a manifestation of a particular episode. Wrong Painter. There are lots more like me; you just happen to know me. And with that, Painter springs up from his cushion yelling: EXACTLY!

Painter's bungalow is brown on the inside. It has a feel about it like a sombre moment in life when you can't distract yourself with beauty. I leave beauty for the paintings, he'll inform when asked about his interior decorating. From this murky looking room, I want to generate
colorful tangibles, Tony. I nod in agreement, announcing: you're on a winner.

There's determined color in the pieces he assembles; an enthusiasm I've only seen at Murphinos Panels. He ignores you completely and just goes for his... whatever it is that a painter sees which the rest of us have to wait for.

Painter's medium is different to the Murphinos boys', sure, but his energy when he gets into a canvas is almost as scary as Mick and Al working an all-nighter. If the painting mania goes on for too long, that's when it's time to offer him a joint. Half the time he nods no thanks and forces me to be seduced by the whole three-paper construction. Go on Tony, go there by yourself, he might say. But sometimes he'll dive onto his Bedouin cushions, asking in midflight-can't you roll it any faster? I've been hanging out. He needs green spans to align with, in moments where there's no leeway given to the hows or whys or whens.

How's Christine, Painter? I ask, and he looks at his giant-sized poster of a parking officer being offered a piece of rope by a monk. She's doing allright Tony; still on medication, but at least she's off the Haych. That's something, he ponders, tapping on his front teeth with the wooden end of a paint brush. I nod in agreement, handing him the green ounce he's ordered and he hands me a small plastic bag full of coins and notes.
Chapter 5

From some rises in the northern suburbs there's a million dollar view of Melbourne. With a setting sun letting go, its jagged flatness reflects light evenly. I've got to splash it on to a canvas sometime, from the Coburg drive-in maybe. From there I can see right over Brunswick, almost into the city-centre itself.

Only so much can be envisaged from my Glenroy bungalow. I've got to do something en plein air. Get out of this box for a while. Tony, can I come and stay with you and Sue for a couple of weeks, or months, if that's what it takes? Takes for what Painter? For me to paint a picture of Melbourne from your south of the north. Tony shakes his head in amused disbelief. Yeah, sure, for as long as you want, but you've gotta do me; my portrait. Deal? he asks me. Why not. I stretch across my knee-high coffee table, and meet Tony's hand halfway. We lock hands, shaking them vigorously. His palm is cold steel.
Look, I'm not home that much, Tony starts telling me with his head cocked towards the ground, so I can't, you know, hang 'round to, er...
I get called out a lot Painter. Tony, I've got plenty to keep me going, I promise him. Anyway, I continue, you won't have to come out so far to deliver the green. I'll be right under your nose.

Oh, I'm like a relative you'll never have, that's all, Tony advises me out of the blue.

You're doing okay, I thank him, you're doing fine. They're the first words that dribble out of me. Tony smiles at them, so I assume they're the right words. When complimented, he usually responds with a laugh, a nodding agreement, or hardly at all. He's a difficult subject to study. I'll have to paint Tony without a smile, but, it'll depend on my affection for him at the time.

Gee, doesn't this beast cost a fortune to feed?

It runs on LPG. Do you know what that means, Painter? It means I save loads on petrol. His 1968 Monaro easies out of the driveway with my easels and palettes and all sorts of art gear oozing out of it. The car looks like a mobile sculpture and I hadn't even intended it to be anything more than a makeshift trailer pulling me out of the Glenroy marshlands.

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Painter's staying for a while Sue, Tony announces abruptly, not even bothering to look at her face. She faces me, Hi Painter, how are you darling? Everybody is a darling to Sue King, everybody but Tony. He's just plain old Tone, as regular as a factory wall clock. Hello Sue, I reply, smiling then hugging her, because Tony's done it again; walked in and all over the space. She's such a beautiful person. I don't know; so easy to mould with. I wish that he knew she was there. Look, I'm not imposing, am I?

Painter, Tony interrupts her, I said for as long as it takes and he pats me on the back, reassuringly. Tony- and I drop my friendly face-did you hear Sue's having a baby? Tony squints, rigid-like at Sue and she at him, and then they relax knowing they've been had. So we all laugh: first I burst in and then Sue glances at Tony, motioning her hips into a cadence of pelvic thrusts. Yeah and the Pope's the father! adds Tony, his laugh the loudest. I wink at Sue and she nods her head at me.

Look, when you're not... painting, if you need some... um, extra dollar... you know, let me know. Come on Tony, I start, don't do it to me like that. I don't want charity. He pulls his neck back and widens his eyes while turning to Sue. For fuck's sake Painter, I don't print the stuff. There's some work if you need it, that's all. We need more eyes. Dropping my tone and screwing-up my face, I ask him, What's that? He closes his eyes, leans his head across my shoulder, turning towards Sue and then quickly back to my face with his eyes wide open. Well, Painter, we get eyes to park close to a police station in the suburb
where we take a car, for... a new life. All eyes have to do is phone us on the mobile, let us know how many cop cars leave the station every hour. That's all.

We'll see how it goes Tony. I can afford to live on what I have, for the moment, I answer him. I can make some cash from this stuff, pointing to my green. That's not money Painter, more of a pastime, he gently challenges me. But, I don't have big expenses Tony. Yeah, I know Painter, but don't you want some? I answer quickly, reminding him: what's your car run on Tony? He points a wiggling finger at me, telling me, again: you're beautiful. Got me on that, eh? Got me good. Well, the money's there if you want some: Come and get it!

Leave 'im alone Tone, he's got things to do. Tony releases a bag and stands upright, staring at Sue saying nothing with his mouth, then he bends over and continues moving my stuff. His glare transforming into a sun in-the-eyes squint. Who wants a nice green one? I quickly offer, eclipsing Tony's sun. Yep, count me in, he answers, dropping my easel where he stands. Sue ambles away to a soothing part of the house. I'm a big supporter of her gracefulness. Hmm. I'm hoping the painting of the flatlands view doesn't take too long.

From some crevice in the house, Tony's mobile phone starts ringing. He hunts it down, yeahllo! he answers, his face distorted with relief. Yeah, eah, he replies to some question, I'm the Driver. Anytime, yep... yep... no worries... okay, and he hangs-up/pressing END. Hmm, another little spinner. Sue strolls back in... asking, what are you
driving this time, Tone? I didn't know you were a driver, I interrupt; you're a bit of the old mystery man. You're gonna find out a lot about me Painter. And he walks off laughing, slotting the phone into a bumbocket. Tony!, I yell out after him, you must have it all flowing your way these days. He cruises back down the hallway. Like I said, he answers me, "Come and get it if you're low".

What are you driving this time, Tone? Sue-ue, you know the story. I can't tell about shit like that. The cops get a clue and if you know, and they know you know, they'll win it out of you. Oh, fuck-off Tone, give me some credit! Come on Sue, he approaches her, delicately placing a hand on her shoulder, well... it's fast, Italian and red. Sounds like a wishful cock Tone, and they laugh and laugh so I join in.

What do you get for driving a piece like that, I ask? Too many questions... too many questions... and he waves us off with a loud: adios baby! Gotta get some info. Back soon people. He's off to do some driving.

I didn't see him for two days after that. Sue must've got used to him.

She's close to her family, I've heard, and visits them when Tony's somewhere else. The whole house to myself; more than any person should ever have of a huge four bedroom Australian dream. I wanted to paint from the drive-in, but this is going to be more entertaining.
Painter, are you sure you'll be okay up there? Yeah, I'm as fine as I can be, I tell Sue, but really, I'd like her to be up here with me... just so we can say things to each other when the clouds obscure the view. Look, if the wind picks up, you might have to come down. I don't want to see you hurt yourself. You're too young to... fall off a roof. I look at Sue, at the spot between her eyes and emit as youthful a stare as my features allow: lots of white teeth, and a smile I've been told can dissolve the green stuff on old coins. Painter, I don't know if the insurance covers people falling from the roof. But, I won't fall. I've got to paint from up here! It's a view that can't be made up. You have to see it to actualise it on the canvas, I smile again. Sue reflecting my smile and shaking that golden topped head, with her hands on her hips. Okay Painter, okay, but please, be careful. I will Sue. I've got things I want to do yet. I'm not going to die off a Thornbury roof.
My easel rocks in the wind. The north-westerly picking up and swaying me. A typical northern suburbs force, a simultaneous mass of hot angry breath released by thousands of mouths. Tony keeps saying it's the gusts in these suburbs that spoil spray-painting jobs; dumping dust and oxides from factory stacks. The sheen on repaired cars in the north-west have a tarnished glaze about them. He says you can tell if a car's from this side of town or from the shinier suburbs. But never buy a car from the other sides. They're all show and fuck-all go. A facade of good ownership. Vehicles that've been maintained by rip-off mechanics who know how to fleece the flocks.

In the north-west, a lot of people repair their own cars because they have to. I'd have to agree with Tony because it's what he knows. He's like a medical consultant of the car world, but he doesn't have an office in Collins Street and charge a hundred dollars a visit. He gives advice away like an elder of some community who doesn't want to see their brood ripped-off, unless he's commissioned to thieve off them; then he'll lift anything off almost anybody.

I want to paint a perspective of the highrise cityscape and integrate it with the flatland appeal of Melbourne. But now that I'm on the roof, the city's buildings remind me of some medieval scene: the castles and their white-collared kings are encased, safe from the confusion of the villages around it. I feel like a peasant looking upon the unreachable gods of order in the distance. I haven't been to the city centre for a very
long time. There really isn't much there but a taxes-makes-em-tall stealth, gaudy glam and a simulation of a type of humanity.

The backyards around here are an amazing ramshackle statement: dismembered cars' corpses in every third yard. I hope this fallowed junk comes back to some sort of life.

There's a rusty icing on most of the car bodies. Some are enticing, wired together sheets of lacy, cris-crossing spider webs. A Goth could be lured, then slink into any one and never emerge again.

I have to get it all down, cos the dying browns, reds and yellows are glowing brighter than the glass of the buildings in the far off city centre. At least there's promise in decay. The city looks self-assured and fixed, just like its postcode, 3000.

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An almost complete picture is leaning up against the tv with a hand scrawled note under it:

Dear Tony and Sue,

if it's okay, please don't move this painting. I want it to absorb radiation from the television. Radiation enhances the metal based paint, like airborne particles charged by the sun.

love

Painter
I stand back and look at the picture. He's filled his canvas like a con constructing a phantasm of freedom; all the features in the vision strategically placed. The city in the background like a solitary piece of metallic granite suspended above a colorful confusion of wooden and brick suburban edifices. Savage green and stark grey strokes representing the pavements and parks; his borders of order, features of a city which regardless of development remain the arteries delivering us in and out of the suburban body. The city: a big, fixed, organic machine suggesting potential prowess in its inert appearance - like an idling car; power enough to move as fast as a driver wants it to.

I'm not much of a driver Tony, Painter's told me, but I appreciate the look and feel of machines. He's not like a kid gawking at an old train in a park, but like a sculptor who walks through a factory and gnaws at the hum and buzz of machines that others operate.

Sometimes he likes fondling the bits under a bonnet, just to reassure himself they're solid; over-awed that they've done things we can't actually see. It's just like imagination or electricity, Tony!

Give me the keys to your car, or the car you're driving, Tony, asks Painter. Yeah, sure. Just don't rev it out too hard, the timing's out a bit and... I don't want to drive Tony, I just want to caress the distributor, the deliverer of life to the engine. But the driver's the deliverer of life to cars Painter. Ohh, they're not Tony, they're not. Anybody can drive a car and it'll move along, but take its distributor out and all you'll have is a corpse! No ebbing or flowing, just a hunk with rubber shoes.
Okay Painter, okay. I toss him the keys and everybody tags along as he weaves his way to the street. We watch him; some smirking, some whispering. Don't get too fuckin' friendly, mate, you might mount the thing, quips some hanger-on-er friend of nobody's. Fuck off, I reply in an unstoned tone. Leave 'im alone; he can fuck it if he wants. But make sure you use a franger! I add. Everybody bursts out laughing; nervously, pathetically. What the fuck's he doing? Are you all there, or what? Silv asks, a limp joint dangling from his mouth.

Who's the nutcase? asks some friend of Silv's. Painter ignoring us, caressing the engine bits like a blind person might. I didn't ask you out here, Painter replies. Ah, you've been smoking too much green-shit, Silv reckons. A smudge of a smile spreads across Painter's dial and nobody laughs much after this.

Silv heads back to the house, mumbling: fuckin' freak! The rest of us stand around for another minute or two, then we file back into my house and leave Painter under the incandescent lights, savouring his way through a Thornbury night.
Chapter 7

As we approach the trail which is supposed to lead to the river, Silv mentions how useless the fishing is around here. With all the cars down there the little fishies are probably hiding in 'em, eh Tone?

Don't know Silv- I eat 'em, that's it for me and fish. Anyway, how do you know about fishing all of a sudden?

The priest from St Johns, Father whatsisflicken-name, used to bring us down near here. Mate, there used to be heaps of the little fuckers. Oh well, Silv decides, they're not here now... I wouldn't eat 'em anyway. Probably full of crap from all the factories up the river. He finishes his cigarette and flicks the butt into the river.

Yeah, maybe, I murmur, thinking about plastic upholstery and rubber components that'll change color at the bottom of the river, their stamped serial numbers cutting out any archaeologists' homework. A collection of ritualistic offerings to some river god during the big days of auto worshipping, that's how it could be interpreted; *The Submerged Automotive Pyramid Period*. 
The embankment looks thrashed, like some unstoppable force has beaten it down, piece by piece. Each time we sink a car into this part I wonder about the last one we pushed in. Is it rusting well? How many more can we hide in this, the most private part?

Come on Silv. Let's get it out the way.

Yeah, aweright. I don't wanna be here too much longer or I'll feel like I've missed something that won't be the same again. Maybe I'm feeling it already, Tone? I look across at Silv, hmm, I mutter and start walking towards my car. I have no idea what he's talking about, but that's okay and I let him know it. It's a bit like that, eh Silv?

Yeah, he answers.

Silv backs the trailer to the edge of the river and I release the winch, slowly. The car easing coffin-like into its watery grave. It takes twenty seconds for the car to be swallowed by the thick liquid. Bubbles in the eye of the submerged mass escaping from hidden crevices in the car's design.

Whatja do with the engine and trans, Tone? he asks as we watch the 1989 Nissan coupe drown. Oh, I sold em. No use wasting them. Na, Silv starts off, what for eh?

For losing a car its owner wants me to lose I get fifteen percent of the insurance payout, plus anything I make from salvaged parts. Not bad for a quick drive up the Hume Highway. About four hours work in all.
The trick is to invest time in finding a good cemetery. I found mine years ago and not one car has been exhumed from it. It's on private property owned by some tax evading multinational. No company official has visited the place in years. I even bought shares in the company, EKE Industries, cos if they can afford to unload money on a property like my graveyard, well they must know what they're doing. The shares are doing well too. Pays the occasional dividend; I'm really scooping-up the big time cream!

EKE Industries probably owns all the factories up the river. Buying the available land down river; an investment for their future-making sure no whingeing farmer complains about the density of the water. Not that there're many farmers left, but anyway... when it comes to private land you should be allowed to do whatever you want. If you want your water to be yellow, red or any other color, it's up to the landowner. They don't grow crops on any of the spreads around here. It's not worth farming them anymore. Too salty or something. So you might as well decorate, and make water as beautiful as technology can help you make it. We might as well make the rivers and the seas as we want them. It's our water and we're the new rainbow makers. Just like turbulent torrents of multicolored soft drinks meandering along desiccated shores, desiccated beds.

I wonder if Painter could get into my rainbow visuals? He'd be the one to ask about the most appropriate colors. Whatever end of the spectrum you like, he'll say. And I suppose it's about personal taste. I'd go for pink; it's relaxing or something like that, and I want as much
rest as I can wedge into the motion of my life, or the life I'm living. Blue's too violent and muscly when in full flow. Yeah, it's a taste thing.
Chapter 8

If ever I have to write Sue a see ya letter, this'll be the one I'll copy in my chunky, circled-i handwriting; the personal touch. A typed letter hasn't got that in front of fire with crossed legs certainty.

It could be easier to tell you in person. But, I'm a coward needing the buffer of distance and the impersonal.

When we hung-out (together, in the beginning) it was new, refreshing and exciting. Most of that still stands about you, and us together. But, I'm no damn good for anybody when it comes to long term affiliation. Never have been; my history, and not the interpretation of any friction between us. Darling, you're a beautiful person who's too good for me. I have a schismatic temperament: from the blissful to the depressive in a couple of breaths. You may say it's for you to decide what's appropriate, sure, I can understand that, and I don't mean to undermine your decisions. However, I've decided to call it a
day. Not because I feel different/indifferent about you, but... well, I can't stay in the present form of our relationship.

Oh, whoever wrote it did a fucken good job. The confidence in the expression must've been eating the writer away. Three years ago I 'found' that note; a solid, leafy-green suburbs distance between emotions. Must've found it in a Saab or Volvo.

It’s not an anti-Swedish thing, Scandinavian cars just happen to attract paranoid drivers who believe in their right to survive road disasters better than those they nonchalantly run in to.

It's as if they've been spooked into these Scandinavian safety capsules by an extraordinary fear of death. This anxiousness soothed by a string of reassuring advertising copy and images.

Like a hood being called a hood, some people align themselves with words they've never heard or seen, cos their faith in them was there all along. When seeing or hearing the words they’ll sit down smiling or lean against a wall and believe: oh yeah, that fits. But other people handle the same words like a string of white-hot worry beads.

Volvos and Saabs are teachers' cars; especially the older ones. I've heard heaps of auto repairers utter this in a steady-eyed, payback sort of tone. As if in the middle of the proclamation, there are flashbacks to classroom castigation: where's your homework?, dumbo, or no future! -knocking at the fore of their brains. And now, massaging
the blows with a dose of shonky, half-arsed repairs on these longboats
of the teaching admiralty.

Letting go of their beads.
Move your arse.

Yeah, that's it, rust away you little piece of scrap. And it's that same echo slapping me around when one show on tele oozes (conveniently) into another.

Pop's coming towards me; his familiar open palm, complete with a brow you could mistake for a mountain range as you fly over it. Bastardino; another one landing between the nape and the shoulder blades. Don't call y'mum, she's sick of you too. How do y' do it? all day just waitin' for something ta happen. Get off y' arse! I said. I stand, imagining how pathetic I must've looked crouching on all fours, avoiding Pop's eyes.

I can't talk. Any word is a defence in a lost battle. But he waits for me to utter; another excuse to bring down his paws, to paddle me about like a ball on a string.

Whatla y' want me to do? Whatta y' want from me? I dribble out.
He scans my body; and I'm shaking. Then he unfolds to an upright stance and takes a huge breath, timing his rage, cooling his urge. Ah, so y' can do somethin' when y' want to eh? Y' know how to talk, uh? He smiles. I'm wary.

He quickly wipes his palms on his buttocks, looking to settle next to me on the floor, then puts an open hand on my shoulder. I wince. Pop pats me gently; his reassurance, his guarantee that what just happened had to happen. I was overdue. Now the debt's been settled. I hear the kids next door play-fighting with their dad. Pop's grip tightening, urging me to look his way.

Don't y' ever read books? Whatta 'bout y' homework; do y' get any? Are y' just a lazy little bastard? Mustta bin born like it uh? We can fix that, he mumbles, his eyes aligned with mine.

The next day I felt I had to use the school library. I wanna see books in the house! Pop shouted. I picked the first five I saw on a shelf, borrowed them and hauled the unfamiliar load home. My mum smiled when I pulled them out of my bag. I put two in the lounge room, one next to my bed and the other two in the toilet; the first place Pop settled into when he got home. He didn't say a thing, he'd forgotten all about the whipping from the night before.

I read all the books. The only line I remember from any of them, some proverb:

Too much rest is rust.
I copied it onto a bit of cardboard and have carried it around like some warning against intellectual corrosion. I can't remember the name of that book, but I remember Pop's backhanders. Don't know which made me pursue reading. The rust sets in unhindered, like on Italian cars, but it'll never oxidise my intentions, as incidental as they are sometimes.

That's the story I tell people when they zone in on that little piece of cardboard next to my desk. The reliable feel-good, bad growing-up experience. People love it, looking at me with bloodhound eyes. When I tell some the truth, that I found it on the floor of an abandoned panelbeater's workshop, they narrow their eyes, pretending to pick a stubborn chunk of food from their teeth, mumbling a copper's hmmm.

They have a right to be pissed off (in a very polite, head shaking kind of way) as the piss has been wrung out of them. But they just don't get it. I don't want them to get it, it's all mine. I can hardly communicate with them after they've taken me so seriously.

What's with the bullshit story, Tone? You fuckin' freak! they might say. When I answer that: I'm as lazy as a Russian car, they make some excuse to leave. I do nothing in particular after that. Reread the words on the cardboard maybe, reflect about some of the people I've told only the crap story to. The ones who avoid me.
Chapter 10

And if a plan goes well it's hardly remembered. Just something to glorify when everybody that was involved gets out-of-it together years after the fact. Like returned soldiers who keep revisiting their sites of immortality.

That's not the way we'll be revisiting the stuff-up that cost Tony money and a chip off his reputation. You'll be perfect for the job, he told me, the cops don't know your face!

Tone, Sue butted in shaking her head and looking away from him, I didn't feel comfortable about the whole thing. Oh, fuck-off Sue. You're always the cheerful one, aren't you? Come on, I interfered, don't get angry with Sue. He swivelled his head around at me forming pursed lips. Holding back something vile, possibly revealing. Painter... just, you know, don't! Okay, okay Tony, I surrendered. Our first disagreement! I felt like I'd discovered the first speck of rust on an aging hulk. Tony's eyes weren't looking at me. If I had've continued to
stand-up for Sue it would've seemed irrational, like I was protesting about more than Tony's outburst.

Sue left the room. Tony and I suspended in a waiting room silence, hearing her car start up and vroom away. He turned towards the sound of the car, rubbing the balls of his palms across his thighs, saying nothing. I looked at him but he gave me nothing, so I announced that: I'll be going back to Glenroy soon. He didn't answer me straight off.

As long as it takes, I told you that. But if it's getting too stuffy here Painter, ... well it's up to you. Thanks Tony, I answered him, relieved.

I told him I wasn't any good at doing his job. It's your trade Tony; I'd just be a hindrance. Eh Painter, nobody taught me. You don't have to be a genius, but money's money and we all need some of that; makes you learn pretty fast.

I was low on money because I'd bought more paint and canvass than I thought I'd need, so I said yeah, why not Tony. He loaned me his mobile phone and his car, or somebody's car. I waited near the Brunswick police station and was supposed to phone him when seeing cop cars leave. A divvy van left; I phoned the number Tony forced me to memorise, but there was no ringing, no nothing. His mobile phone; I didn't know how to send a call through. Tony just assumed I'd know. After the third cop car left the station... well I drove around looking for Tony because I had no idea where he was lurking. So it all went the
way it's not supposed to go. He thinks I'm unreliable, so I've taught myself how to use a mobile phone.

Now Sue's angry with Tony, Tony's disillusioned with me and I've become proficient with a pocket telephone. It's all beautifully balanced somewhere between a breakdown in communications and the wonder of technology. It's too bad none of these can be fused together with a hip-hip hooray and happy tv commercial smiles on the banks of some remote river eating fish with near-extinct peoples. Tony as the father, Sue as the mother and me as a knee-high socks and sandals kid; waving, using a mobile phone in a wide angled camera shot showing-off the awe of technology and its power to reconcile with the past, the future and the joke that it all really is. Not that I know what anything like time is. And it's because of fuel.

Without fuel, there's little chance of me or Tony or Sue eating fish in remote parts of the world. Without fuel there's little chance of phone calls from an indigenous person's backyard. Without fuel Tony would be stealing horses and buggies and I wouldn't have known how to use a mirror outside a police station, flashing to Tony that a mounted cop has left the stables. Sue would've protested, but maybe with a bonnet on her head. The door would've sounded the same when she slammed it. It's a site none of us want to revisit, unless we end up in the same retirement village recounting moments that melded us with an increment on the wide face of time. Then we'd be lapping-up the incidental history like water deprived explorers in the middle of our desert of memory. Our kids will place a plaque at that spot in our desert
and it'd become folklore within our families, who'll feel honoured to be from a genetic strain permeated with collusion 'a la Ned Kelly. It's about historical delusion gaining a right through exaggeration and its smoke screen of add-on facts. Facts which spawn double-jointed appendages and eventually taper off with a tail from the end of which you can no longer see the head of the beast of our truth. But, if you could see the head, it'd be obvious that it's no beast at all; more of a lame duck, a duck blasted out of the water and ending up as feathers for a doona keeping the bullshit warm and cosy. Maybe Tony wouldn't agree because he likes a bit of a story. But that's okay too.
Chapter 11

I told him to wear red clothes. Not the color of blood after it congeals, but a vicious, bright, glad-to-be-breathing red.

Pants and top or just the top, Tony? he asked me. Whatever quantity you're in the mood for, so long as I can see you. And wear sunglasses to reduce the glare off the windscreen. Yes... good idea, but what about doing it all by night? Look, I don't mind if it's by sun or moon... you're paying, it's up to you, I'm just your driver. Timothy Clinton likes it by night and only if the moon's out of view. I don't know Andrew, it's your choice. Yes Tony, I know, but it's so hard to decide. Andrew Dover paused for a long time.

Are you still there, hello? Yes Tony, look sorry I'm deciding... let's do it by night then huh? You're the boss Andrew. Yes definitely by night. I want a full dark chase-NO QUICKIES, Tony! I want to be nudged as you turn the car away from me. Run me down, reverse over me and spin the wheels along my spine if I'm not evasive enough. Hang on, that's going to cost you extra. I don't do death unless you
sign a suicide note first- and have it witnessed! But the police won't believe such a note Tony. Andrew, if it's a suicide note explaining all the details, they'll put it under the heap of unexplained and mysterious deaths. Like people who are found hanging with porno mags strewn around them.

Sure, I'll sign, but you won't get a chance to run me down. Use my car Tony, let it get some organic revenge. You can keep the car if its wheels caress me. Okay then Andrew, mark it in for a Tuesday at 10.00pm- sharp. We'll meet at the paddock, and oh, don't forget to smother yourself with lard; it'll stop you from getting snagged. Ha, ha, ha, ha... you're kidding me aren't you Tony? Nah, but, it's up to you, I answered him. He let off a series of tongue clicking sounds, followed by a, sure Tony, see you there.

I forgot to unbolt the bulls' horns the last time I chased another member of Andrew's 'club'. Some arsehole helped themselves, and now I've got to locate another set. They aren't that common in second hand shops, and abattoirs only sell bulls' horns by the dozen.

So I cruise down along Sydney Road, and hope to locate another set in some cheap just-hanging-in-there bric-a-brac store run by old people or a retrenched government employee who's striving for a chance to earn their own in a low labour business where the boss is an alarm clock, the profits all disguised, and so, running at a loss. I've only been to a couple of these type of high-junk stores.
The stores that aren't dank and sort of mothballed you walk out of. They move stock and make an effort to keep their places 'clean'. Clean for customers, so they don't expect you to haggle about their prices.

They're business ghouls who make their fortunes out of deceased estates and other property; waiting in line, peering over undertakers' shoulders. I can't get into that kind of business mentality: efficient, get in while the family's crazy with grief. Well, there're dollars to be made from that flavour of misery, but it'd fuck me up when stumbling across a photo of a tepid body that I've legally ransacked.

Looking for anything in particular or are you just gonna break my balls? I look up. A chubby, bearded, middle aged bloke is standing over me as I'm crouching and rifling through a box of animal decorations and ornaments. If you've got a set of bulls' horns, I'll buy them on the spot. He smiles, walking away without saying a thing.

I continue browsing.

About five minutes later he finds me again, asks the same question. The bulls' horns I asked you about... he smiles, saunters away and doesn't come back.

I look for him, yelling out: Eh, where are you? No reply. I keep asking after him but he doesn't respond, or come out of the space he's in. I leave the shop and have no idea about anything for two minutes. Freakers like him can hurl you from certainty into complete bewilderment and they never have to explain a thing. I'll probably go back there if I need something else that's uncommon or industrially
extinct. He's one of the last of the traders in factory fossils and it's a
good thing that his customer service is out of whack with the hypnotic
assistance that overwhelsms you in department stores.

In newer stores, most of the time you don't know what you
want, but help is offered so you can leave with something, feeling
satisfied that time hasn't been wasted, but invested. A souvenir of the
outing; trinkets amassing in cupboards like snowdomes on toilets'
window-ledge.

I've got to find those horns. That's the main condition of the chase job.
Without the horns, it'll just be another car trying to mow down a
pedestrian as they attempt baulking the efficient design fusion of speed,
steel, plastic and a manufacturers' guarantee.

I'll ask Painter.

If he doesn't know where to find a set I'll have to take Tom along
and find some farm with bulls. I was lucky to find a set of horns the
last time; a prized bull on its way to the Royal Melbourne Agricultural
Show. Tom was after the truck for something. The bull, its payload,
became beef-on-a-spit at Tom's barbecue. Hey Tom, I asked him, can I
have the horns? Machete came thudding down a few times, somebody
vomited chunks, we winced looking down at the undigested stud meat,
tomato sauce and white-trash bread. I used Tom's tool kit to scrape off
the gnarly horn-flesh then fixed the set to my bonnet, and someone
yelled out "The Thornbury Rolls!"

Maybe Tom's got a stud farm's address?
Chapter 12

Of course I don't mind, Sue. But what about Tony?

She nods her head halfway through my question, like she's considered any possible objections. Look Painter, it's up to me. It's my body. She takes a long, slow breath and closes her hands together as if she's about to start praying. Anyway, Sue continues, it's something he can't do, and she looks through my bedroom window, towards the drive-way. Oh, I didn't know, I tell her. Well, hardly anyone knows, Sue informs me. I stare at her and smile. She gets up off her chair, walks towards me and caresses my forehead with one of her cheeks; I lean into her and am surprised by the heat generated by a few square centimetres of flesh. Tony's parked in the driveway. We hear him slam the driver's door. He's singing My Pal, that song by God... and you don't even like me, he repeats a few times.

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Painter's been in his room a lot. Thinking. Contemplating the piece he's working on. I consider knocking on his door, to say hello, but I walk past on my heels and hear whispers. I scan the lounge room looking for Sue.

Sue, Sue-ue! but there's no reply. Must be out visiting. There're paintings all over the lounge room now. Most leaning against the walls. I wanna help-out Painter and consider leaving the tv on all the time so his paintings get maximum exposure. I ooze into the couch and turn on the tv.

It's all ads and game shows and news. I rub denim, where my cock's head is and pinch it like a pimple. The tv blondes touting prosperous sheen. I squeeze my cock again—nothing doing! Everything's blonde— the man, woman, children, dog, their wooden furniture. I think it's a Swedish lifestyle ad. Vegemite and cornflakes on their breakfast nook. They're Aussies, but I don't know families like that. They exist; entwined amongst and travelling through conductor wires, bouncing off satellite dishes and seeping through tv antennas like an anaesthetic slime bleaching adrenalin, blurring vision and making me feel blonde. I wave the remote control, to stop this obstruction of my view. The tv's off.

My cock's starting to swell. It's angry, but pathetic and limited: soft or hard. And it reminds me of Silv's temper; hard and invasive, or in the background like an inflatable ornament avoiding sharp edges. The everyday, mock tv blondes in their smart new cars are stranded in the middle of the soft and hard like flaccid cocks at an orgy.
I'll ask Painter about locating those horns.

Painter! Paaain-ter! No response. So, how are you doing Tony? I ask myself and find it hard to answer. Not bad, not bad. It's a standard reply and am happy to avoid giving-in to detail. I hate dabbling with my own convictions cos they're a bit like the old jugglers' balls and I don't wanna drop any for fear of bending over and being so close to the comfortable ground. Let the fallen stay on the ground, some Roman general ordered. I reckon it was good advice.

Tony? Who are you talking to? It's Painter and Sue, asking me as if they never talk to themselves. The ghost of Bon Scott! I wince, feeling it's a geeky expression as soon as I've followed it through. Fuckin no-one. Just muttering thoughts aloud. They look at each other and aren't convinced. Who wants a joint? I ask. Yeah sure. Sue joins me while Painter heads towards the kitchen. He's still not full. Eating all day and he still wants more?

Mix the skunk, roll the papers, ignite, inhale deeply then pass it on to Sue. She nods a thanks and stares straight at me releasing a slow sigh: what do you think about Painter fucking me, for us- for a kid? The mull kicks in almost immediately. Going from straight to where ever and confusing words so they mean how I feel, the glorious selfishness of mull reshaping them before my brain has a dib. Tone, I know it's a full-on question, but he'd be a great donor? I heard Sue right the first time. Five rounds on the joint- need more!, I yell. Ahh, I keep inhaling, trying to smoke-out all that's entered me in the last few
minutes. Sue turns towards the sound of footsteps. I think he's in shock, Painter.

Yeah, Painter mumbles back as he enters the lounge room, he's gone pretty gray. Maybe it's the dope too? I get off the sofa, trying to steady my balance and pinball down the hallway towards the front door, outta there and into a consigned Alfa Romeo. They don't follow me.

Stomping on the accelerator, ripping through the gears.

I'm swallowed-up by the torrential traffic and power along like an angered bee looking through twenty sets of eyes for a wholesome ass. I avoid side-swiping the Alfa. I think about children and white-knuckle grip the steering wheel as if pursued, nudged along the final section of a straight, flat road about to reveal its hairpin bends, dips and low-lying fog. Faster, faster. Maximum isn't reached until waking-up in hospital with a crusty-eyed smile and a nurse patting a hand saying it's okay, you're doing fine. Faster, faster, faster. The gear-stick a big spoon in a tub of melting ice cream. I ignore traffic signals, motorist's frenzied hand gestures and the chance of spinning out of control through the barrier on the bridge over the Merri Creek. Sue's belly as a mound I'm not equipped to scale. Pink terri-towelling, blue terri-towelling babies' jumpsuits hovering in front of my windscreen. I blast the screen with a jet from the washer bottle and the wipers quickly dissolve the jumpsuits as they do insects smudging clear vision. The stereo's hypnotising me with Ozzie Osborne's demonic squeals. I pump it up until the speakers rattle and visualise an infant on some cults' altar with its chest knifed
open to the belly button and a tiny heart pumping, squirting into the hands of a tv blonde and the blonde showing it off to the camera which is me. I'm overtaking a tram on the wrong side of the road. An elderly man wearing a baseball cap doesn't see me approaching. I bash on the horn, flash my headlights and Ozzie's really peaking now. The old man's open mouth reveals a gold colored molar. The Alfa's bonnet shovels him into the air and away like an obstruction in my path of speed. I refuse to look back and disappear into Clifton Hill's backstreets. I'm Stallone's Machine Gun Joe in Death Race 2000, where maximum points are scored for running over old people and prammed babies. I can hear Silv from two years ago shouting that accidental death is never accidental. Ones that deserve to die are all beadies, flaps and honker. Tone, those fucks can see, hear and smell their 'liberator' coming and they fight like all fuck just to fuck-up the rest of us... making it hard to eeease. Well, give us an example, I asked him. He thought for a long time and shrugged his shoulders with an ...ahh, I can't think of one. You're full of shit Silv, I told him, and he did what he can do well and he walked away.

I stop the car and check the front of the Alfa.

There's light panel damage and a broken headlight. Not too bad. I thought it'd be much worse.
They're auto skin surgeons nipping and tucking until new identities are resolved. Small injuries to any panel treated with the concern and effort of doctors grafting skin onto a burns victim. The Murphinos boys are waiting for the Alfa- they want its guts: engine, gearbox and differential. Without them, the Milan Marvel is just another metal husk lavished with glass and hypnotic synthetics.

Their lax payments are wedged comfortably into our agreement, which is pretty loose anyway. But, I want my money on delivery; I've told them this, even though I can never pinpoint my exact arrival. It's when delivering a consignment on a date and time asked of me that I'm: boss, king, ahead in a hierarchy of deception. The same goes for the Murphinos boys when they phone to remind me of their order and me almost squealing yeah yeah, sure boys, I'm stuck but it's gonna be there: like that!!!, snapping my fingers into the mouthpiece for added effect that nobody remarks on any more, just: okay Tone, when it gets here, we'll talk.
It's a red one, what they want- a red one.

Fuck! I gotcha one didn't I? If they insist that they don't want it because of the minor damage caused by the old man, well, to another beater I'll go. It's a total immersion; momentary, but passing itself off as forever (until their next order probably). One rejection of a consignment and my orders are finished from that pocket of Coburg. But they wouldn't dare. I'm good at what they want. They don't want to pass me around like the last full bottle at a drunken party. If they do, I'll spew all over, making it like a baptism where I christen them into the Order of the Soon to be Dead. Risk has to be honoured with a purchase if an order is placed. If what's been requested is no longer what's wanted, well, too bad! It has to be paid for, either in cold cash or tepid flesh. Between these two, there is little else but fast words issued with darting eyes casing for a quick escape. Dodging a commitment is a life-long commitment to dodging.

One of them walks to the front of the Alfa and loses his smile to the mangled front, picking out a chunk of scalp adorned with fluffy, white hairs.

Na, we can't take it Tone... but we'll give you the bucks for it, eh? one of the Murphinos boys tells me with a yellow-toned pitch, testing to see how I'll react. What ever you want boys. There's not that much damage. Yeah, we can see Tone, but there're plenty of insurance blokes who ferret around. What if they see the Alfa and recognise that it's the one... you know, that mowed down the old man you told us
about? Up to you, boys. Can I have the bucks now? I'll be out of circ for a bit. Yeah, sure Tone, sure. And it's the clean bucks they hand over as they usually do. I leave the Alfa in their garage and as I'm walking away I hear their rollerdoor coming down, echoing across the industrial estate like a moaning witness.

I've never seen them that shit-scared of me. Good.

Fear, money and honour are the best of allies when you've nourished them right and they're no longer a seedling but a massive tree casting a shadow so broad and tall, that no matter what direction you run in, a branch will always snag whoever makes a lunge for the clearing.
Chapter 14

So much catching-up. Bulls' horns, conception of a child and the one-hundred and other little jobs that make me.

Painter as the father of Sue's child... my child if I pay for its existence. Maybe I'll chuck in a bit of obligatory affection and yelling too. Sue.

Sue, who are you?

I ask nobody in particular, got to ask, like she must ask of me, has asked of me when our house is empty and she's at her folk's place; all safe and soft. Their home; with its disinfected air, where the world stops at the front door and me a part of the nether realm. Sue's 'invisible other half' her old man, Jim, calls me.

When I got him a two year old Commodore with minor fire damage for ten percent of its value, I became very visible. Jim's drunken slurring and his arm around my shoulders, proclaiming: 'Tone, you're the son I've never had' bullshit. He cried a little, but it was actually a bawling considering Sue's quizzical, shit Tone what did
you say to him? He hasn't cried like that since his greyhound was abducted. I remember looking at Sue, uttering, shit darlin', I only said ten percent'll do, Jim. I couldn't tell either of them that I got the car for nothing. But to somebody expecting to pay the full price, ten percent is almost the same as nothing.

The: we offer a good dowry here Tony, when are you gonna make a claim, son? And I had to respond with something; pointing to a picture of the Pope that was gently sliding away from its fixture. Backslaps and shandies all round. Just because it was easter Sunday (and the small-talk was about resurrection) had nothing to do with my saying yeah, it's a matter of time Jim, we'll see how it goes, hey? The word wog, dago, or eyetie just two to three shandies away from Jim's Drum-tarred and abandoned lips; the best time to leave.

I don't want any kid of mine to do as I've enjoyed doing. The competition could end-up killing us both. Sometimes, preservation is too selective an intention with the benefactors of conservation becoming the new gods.

I'd rather a kid with a degenerative congenital condition than a healthy baby with all of its mind, limbs and able aspirations. Such a kid poses a smaller risk to my business and when abandoned, the government'll take care of it, because nobody else will.

I'd rather that, than the kid being reared in Jim's place. In there, its mind would be flooded with lectures about ethnic invasions, half-baked notions on social biology and the drinking of shandies which are
all a lame attempt at toning down the lustre of Jim's red-brick alcoholism. Sue's nothing like her dad, so my opinion about Jim's child rearing is completely fucked-up. But like his beliefs, my beliefs can be straightened to fit into the space available at any given moment.

I've never met her mum. Sue's the only person her mother sees or speaks to from a room at the back of their house. The idea of going near that room scares the shit out of me now. I've gotta say, I enjoy getting off on being frightened by something that I know can't hurt me. Kind of like visiting my parents at the cemetery, only to find that they're alive but confined by the vastness of death in their mausoleum.

I tried following Sue into the room one time. She placed her hands flat on my chest with her head tilted to the ground, as though she was talking to the carpet, then turned and slipped through the curtains and into her mum's.

Can't I just ask about it, the whole weird room thing? You've got no say in it Tone, so there's no point. And Sue smirked after stressing the no point. Is she mad, sad or glad in there Sue? She smirked again, convinced I'd never find out cos she'll never tell me, and, I'll never ask anybody else. Sue has that over me. I'll pay it, cos, yeah, it sort of kills me not knowing, but that's okay too. We're all entitled to family jewels which appreciate because they stay boxed, wrapped and secured from everybody else's damaging light of truth.
Chapter 15

Come on, I need a hand. We'll use a silencer. The farmer won't hear a thing. Once the bull goes down, that's it, the job's over. Tone mate, it's not that we don't wanna help, ya know, it's just that we can't. You think we're fuckin' cowboys or what? I need some eyes for a few minutes, that's it. Just in case the farmer's a sick fuck and starts letting off a few rounds at us. Oh, right Tone, there's gonna be shooting, huh? Probably not, but ... Naaa, I can't do it, Tone. Can't say no for Tom, but I'm sure he won't be into it.

Neither of them want to help me. Sounds like Silv and Tom are too busy doing the same sort of stuff that I'm trying to do; getting the money-energy flowing the right way, towards us.

What, you Tom's agent now? There's a bit of a pause, then a careful: Tone, you're asking for just a bit too much. If the cow cookie unloads on us, you know what'll happen, someone's gonna fall. Just for some fuckin' bull's horns? Buy some mate, don't be so tight! The thought of him smirking at me from the other end of the phone. Yeh
aweright, aweright. I know where you stand Silv. And I hang-up. My mobile starts ringing. It's Silv trying to smooth things over because he's had to say no. Let the bastard sweat. A silent distance, like a stare across a packed bar, it either diffuses like cigarette smoke or somebody ends up coughing blood. I don't wanna hurt anyone I know without some solid reason. Silv's answer just wasn't what I was after. He knows it and I respect him for his honesty. But I won't forget it and neither will he. He's probably phoning Tom by now, so they can bad-mouth about it; cursing me as an arsehole, a mutherr fucka or whatever else their frightened tempers want to make of it. I'd better keep my distance. I won't look for them, and they won't look for me. Nobody'll move out of the way when we see each other again. We'll probably lock and tumble towards the ground and won't remember it, until a doctor or a nurse takes our pulse in a ward that's as quiet as a funeral parlour.

The present seems to move at a pace that is alien to most friendships. Good memories stake their claim and transform the coalition into some slow-motion sequence in our archive of loyalty. And to think I've located some tyres for Tom's Merc. He's the tight arse!

I wouldn't help someone to assassinate a full grown bull in the middle of the night, in a corner of some paddock where a red-eyed, gun-toting farmer may be lurking between the hay bales. But that's not the point; Tom and Silv know it's not the point.
You can always distinguish the disguised, mocking laughter of someone who knows you by the slow, drawn out questions they ask, and how your name seems to be tacked onto the end of most of their questions. It's not a one hundred percent certainty that they're cackling themselves at my expense, but a refusal based on personal security is not a good enough reason for turning me down. Shit, we've had shoot-outs with coppers who tried pulling us over for speeding. So I guess their refusal is about personal security, but not the dodging hurt variety. They want some of my business and refusing me is their first step.

We're supposed to visit Vic at the pen this Saturday. It's my turn not to be too sick to go. I can't see it happening. They must've heard about Painter wanting to do the sperm-daddy deed with Sue. Someone's mouth has been singing the wrong kind of songs. Trust is cheaper than a set of bull's horns, but trust isn't stolen because it's not as alluring.

If I don't do the chasing job for Andrew Dover...

I've gotta get those fuckin horns. A bull is fattened and groomed for its virility and mounting prowess. If I become the killer of the bull, I'll be over-riding the significance of the stud.
Chapter 16

By now, it seems to be worked-out. The right weight going in the direction of desire.

I'm waiting. I gave details about why I need horns. Painter mumbled he'd be here by now. He's coming along for a possible vision of red. To see a grown man, which is me, running and ducking to the sides, avoiding inevitable grappling. Tony, why do they call you to chase them, isn't it obvious their chances are nil? I nod a who knows to Painter, as it's the laziest, but a polite response.

I lost an art competition in grade four; the best bird drawing competition. A vulture. Its eyes; two crumpled Baci wrappers and I was told savage, preying birds aren't pretty, just an excuse to avoid color. Painter softens my reflection. Why I've had him around me.

I'm going through the cool of blue and Painter can't help me anymore.

He's as faint with me as I can be to him. One color is easy to slip into for an unknown amount of time.
I've added tone of Sue to my range, he boasts, digging his hands deep into his old mens' op-shop trousers. Thanks Painter, Sue hugs him, fondling his hair slowly, like her hands have mapped his head before. He moves abruptly away from Sue and turns towards me. Are you into neutrals Tony, or pink or blue for you? he asks, but not looking at me; enough fake sniffing and coughing to know he's avoiding bodily matters. Sue's mainly, and only. No other words about pink or blue between us.

Wants to catch a bull with me.

...but I want nothing to do with the gun thing, Tony. The decapitated bovine scene needs Painter in it. Just to caress the bull's horizontal hooves, that's why I'll come, he added. A gracious animal should be eased into decay. I don't know why Tony, but big things look more pathetic when they've gone down, you know, complete and final?

I don't mind neutrals, if they don't fuck with me. That's a fair answer Tony.

He sauntered away looking through a broken coke bottle and said he'd meet me at 2 am, which is now. This boy to father my son. Waiting for him so we can search for, then slay, a bull.

Whether he pulls the trigger or not, well you'll be there won't you? I asked him. His involved isn't involved. I need extra eyes Painter, cos if farmer Fred hears, then tippy-toes around us in the dark? Just scream like some crazed freak!, if you see anybody prowling. It's
what they'll least expect, giving us enough time to hide or aim. He smiled at this, then at me; his first open-mouthed smile since Sue explained to me about his spermability.

After driving through some ominously lit hamlets, Painter sniffs at the slipstream as a setter would. Pointing the way with a hand out the window, and flopping it against the windscreen when he's lost the scent. Could you stop smoking for a while Tony? It's putting me off. I sigh, lean across and flick the cigarette out of Painter's window. He's doing me a bigger favour than he realises so giving in to his small demands is a minor trade-off. I'll reserve little pleasures once the homs are in the boot.

He's concerned about the bull's breath steaming up his path. Don't even think about leaping if it charges you Painter; makes it easier for the beast to flick you further away. Gee Tony, Painter reassures me, you've got lots of info in that crown.

I think he's stoned and has made decisions, but doesn't tell me. This new distance, a soiled friend too wrecked to explain. Nodding vaguely, like a fuckin' hero who forgets the detail in his flag. Hoping for someone else's impulse to kick start my intentions, and when the crusty bloody bouquet hits you, you're gone! waiting anchorlessly, needing nobody's help. Playing out imaginary scenarios where familiarity gets gnawed on like a half severed limb caught in a trap. Instead, I have to exercise my sincere but unconcerned pal lines with him:
Painter did you bring a knife? Not that it's gonna stop a bull, but we'll need one to cut off its balls. I've heard they're a delicacy. There's a long silence and he doesn't face me.

We could talk about Sue and the baby thing, instead we're hovering around impending death because it's supposed to be so final and comfortable. No, he nods, I didn't bring one. I thought you would've been ready for that sort of thing, Tony? The car stereo's soft light reflecting off his disgusted face.

Painter's unfamiliar with insurance. Any contract details through the mail are supermarket fliers to him; all about best prices money can buy, and if you're not big on big money, cheap margarine is as good as pricey, low cholesterol, organic butter.

Not into money, but it's good to have, Painter reminds me as though his decent repertoire is something I've forgotten about. Yeah, but you gotta get it before you can have it, I remind him. Don't be such a smart arse Tony.

He's lost interest in the conversation and looks ahead with his chin resting on chest, his horizontal eyeballs. I'm afraid for him.

This isn't some challenge is it? he asks, having long given up on scent.

I think he knows where I'm heading for, aware of his limited use to me, like a footy star the crowds no longer cheer. Oh, it just sounded like a contest, Tony, that's all. I look towards the horizon. It's
blueblack and boring, the stars are lazy tonight, so beasts will be hard
to sense.

Like anywhere else, the trees in front and along Flowerdale's
farmlands shield history. Witnesses are rumours until they come forth.
Anybody can bury their dead flesh here; just buy a block, or look for an
abandoned weather beaten humpy and kick-in its hinges. If you're
alone then usually it's safe and just another tacky scene for cops to
furrow and scrounge through. I don't know, Painter, I finally answer
him.

I didn't come fully prepared the first time I drove out here. This is my
third try; Painter's first, and my last performance with him. It'll be
familiar, but regrettable.

Maybe more regrettable for Painter. Still, I'll think about him in
an insect preserved in a polyresin mould kind of way.

The bull we're about to do in. Once it goes down, it's the smell
and sound of hide hitting the turf I'm looking forward to. Gluing it into
my memory like a favourite photo, framed and dangling off a wall. But
snapshots suggest only what's in its frame; no smells, no dying moans,
just light off solid objects caught in a moment between fright or flight.

Slaughtering hour. I don't think of myself as an assassin. The sun
promotes stench invisibly, as its rays smother all we can make of it.
When burying, the ground should offer little resistance, or it'll never
heal what can't be seen. I've been doing my homework Painter. He
stops caressing the dash board and nods appreciatively without glancing at me.
Chapter 17

The bull's balls have been cleansed and separated; absorbing a delicious beer, garlic and tarragon marinade. The recipe's out of *The Taste of Regional Spain Cookbook*, which neither Sue or I have opened before. A heavy red wine is recommended with the meal. The recipe has an italicised note near the bottom of the page:

*The author, publishers and editors take no responsibility for:

(according to Catalan myth)

• pregnancies which may be induced by the regular consumption of this traditional, delicious dish;

• men who experience severe hair loss as a consequence of overindulging in *Torrestes a la Catalana*; or

• children who become irritable and heavy handed.

*May you enjoy this meal in moderation and with a serene temperament!*

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Some occasions require fastidious books to compliment them. Their appetising words and succulent pictures induce impatient, internal drool which my body copes with in the best way it can and so sweats. I could hardly wait to separate the crisp pages.

I'm to meet Andrew Dover at 10.00pm in the paddock. The horns are clean and ready for him. Dover knows they're to be bolted through the car's head (its bonnet) as part of our duel.

I gathered-up all of Painter's canvasses and stashed them in lot 6701Z at Harrigan's Long Term Self-Storage Facility in Port Melbourne. Paintings waiting to appreciate with all the other potentials I've wrapped-up.

Storage facilities are sacred, contemporary pyramids in which anyone can stash almost anything and very few questions are asked.

Just sign here thanks mate, the keeper of the pyramids ordered me as he glanced like a nervous sparrow at everything in his office, except my face; in case he needs to recall its features in a modestly furnished government office. And it was hazy, trying to etch a signature that's not quite mine, through a pair of prescription glasses I'd kept from some job. It's not as if the keepers care about what you're storing, so long as you don't insult them, store vintage cheeses or members of the family you can't bear to part with. If banks could make the space, they'd let anyone store anything in their safety deposit...
boxes. But big, bulky items concealed in secretive metal caskets make banks appear undignified and their greed as obvious as their profits.

The only paintings I’ve left hanging in the house are the portraits of me and the one of Sue. I thought about storing Sue’s portrait. But trophies need to be displayed to have any impact on challengers. It’s a beautiful, lusty picture of Sue. Her hair arranged in liquidy twists of gold that ignite her stark, agate like eyes. Vibrant.

It’s a painting I would’ve assembled if I knew how.

I think about Sue, in the skilled and competent way Painter stroked her; with care, timing and affection. I’m talented with other commodities, and it’s with these abilities that I construct my feelings for her. I don’t care if other fucks don’t get into my approach, it’s the measured way I think then act that's best for me and sometimes for those around me.

I should make it to the paddock in time to meet up with Dover.

It’s seems like a long time since the whole chase job deal was organised then arranged. It's not just the thousand dollars I'd better be paid which makes the deal attractive. It's the prospect of mowing over Dover which appeals to me. If I mash him up and he stays that way, I get to keep his car. A great, suspicious looking Mercedes saloon which scares children and impresses business associates into signing long-term fixed contracts. Its Teutonic steel blue duco reinforces positive doubts. The Merc's negotiating prowess appeals to me so completely
that it would be a wasted shame not to fulfil Dover's mechanical wet
dream of chase and 'see'!

On the way to the Seymour plot, I stop off at a servo, to fuel-up and to
be seen going in a direction away from the way I'll really be headed.
I'm a good half hour away.

This place looks like a copy of a servo which originated in some
ergonomically considered office in a city in another country. A country
whose commercial aesthetics seem to have been infused quickly and
efficiently into the smallest of independent outposts.

Doors woosh open. Its lighting is as severe and awakening as is
the interior at the rear of an ambulance. The shelved products are so
cute and juicy to look at, that I end up buying a Free 20% Bonus sized
packet of colonial flavoured chips, a pineapple and chocolate striped
doughnut, a huge Econo sized bladder of coke, and the food of
teenagers in nervous families: Peter Jackson cigarettes. Na, I'll pay
cash thanks mate, I respond to the young, saggy-eyed kid behind the
bullet-proof counter. He places the credit card scanner back in its desk
holder then bumbles with the cash register but hardly takes his eyes off
me; casually scanning the shop for unusual customer behaviour.
Ca'mon, willya, the tank topped customer waiting behind me squeezes
out under his breath. I'll be with you in a see sir, the kid mumbles. Ya
fuckin' better be! Tank spits out.

I turn to look at Tank, and he stares past me and straight at the
attendant who's recounting my change. No wonder all you cunts get
shot at out here, Tank tells the attendant. The kid gets it right and hands me my change through a neat, bevelled slot in his counter. Would you like a bag sir? he asks. A slow, Darth Vader sigh from behind wafts the hair off my shoulders, na, thanks, I'll be okay. I grab my goodies and hurry out through the automatic opening doors.

There are thousands and thousands of kamikaze bugs circling, crashing into the domed overhead driveway lights. They come from every direction, attracted to the promise of luscious eats- as are weary and irritable drivers, who find the food ready and waiting in plastic sheen and foil fresh wrappers. Prospering with the aid of electricity. The lights provide fuel for everyone and they get brighter and sharper every time the price of fuel increases.
Chapter 18

It's adventurous getting into the cages we construct around people. If you're happy standing on the outside, throwing in an occasional scrap (and are prepared to absorb ricochets) well, I suppose that's the risk weighed-up.

Consider arcing your body in, snatch the goodies at the bottom of the cage while they're focussing on nails bitten to the quick or other preoccupations which electronic entertainment has to compete with. That's what I'm doing here, on the road to a paddock, reaching in and snaffling the bucks that waft to the floor of The Bull Chased Club. If its members are content watching dollars fall in a lion too engorged to move from its prey kind of extravagance, I don't mind swooping in from the sides and cleaning up the goodness. I hope Dover's waiting like he said he would.

I've never owned a Mercedes; a feature of Dover's cage which I wouldn't mind slinking into. Lurching around on thick, squeichy rubber; pedestrians nodding with their chins: eh, look at the fat Fritz
fucker. Dover should wait. I want to command a vehicle which offers minimal resistance when steering it, while braking around unforeseen rejection suddenly spilling onto city's rushways.

My car coughs as I'm getting wet-hot on the Merc idea. The engine smooths out as I stamp for more fuel, Monaro responds well, but its superfluous appeal reminds me of a condemned prisoner who offers their judge a personal, obscure fortune in exchange for the right to experience bodily functions going awry. I pat the Monaro's dashboard, whispering, I soothed your rust prematurely, remember?

I look into the rearview mirror, all I see behind me is behind me. Nothing obvious apart from the visible lack of definition. I let go of the steering wheel and clap my hands a couple of times, honk my horn then repeat the clapping, advising my car: Don't make yourself sick. Some edgy, leering spoon can't wait to drink beers leaning against your boot during breaks from the transplant he and his shedhead pals'll be giving you.

Anyway Monaro... a longer life in another costume is only as alarming as the moment when walking out of a hairdresser after having hair shaved off because the apprentice didn't like your attitude and smiled, with an: I'm only learning white-flagged across their face. But really, it's a smoothness that you've thought about but decided was better on heads other than yours. Cars don't grow hair, and people don't rust in any obvious way.
I stroke my chest as I would a child's head, inhale a massive breath to help clear my smokers' phlegm, then flick my barely smoked cigarette out off the half closed window.

As the butt deflects off the lip of the window, an awesome cindery splash of tobacco flecks freak me out so much I surrender control of the steering wheel, braking heavily from 140kmph and like a delirious self-flagellator, with one hand I viciously pat my singeing hair, the smouldering carpet. My other hand just manages to pilot the Monaro from biting into the chocolaty, soft edge of where the resilient (but high maintenance) tarmac fuses with the menace of unsealed security. In the death throes of a vehicle while being transported-aahhhhh.

My car stalls as it rolls to a stop, while alabaster faced night travellers slow past me with gaping eyes and hangdog mouths. I unbuckle my belt in a jiffy and flash my arse out of the half-opened window. I can't follow their faces, but I'm sure their expressions haven't changed. The kids in the backseats might laugh and the arguments about slowing down will begin: YOU SICK FUCK!!! yells a woman who's taken the time and precautions to reverse back in the dark. If she could've heard it, the fart I let rip in response was louder, bassier than some, but, hardly fair competition compared to the basso beer farts the morning after a saturating session at the Olympic Hotel.

Screaming at night in open spaced country doesn't need qualifying, nor does the other garbage that's snared and dangling off rusty barbed and razor wire.
I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand and like after many near tragedies, I consider lighting another cigarette as I don't know what else to do and even if I did, I haven't practiced enough for recovery to come as naturally as it seems to in scenes from movies where heroes and villains reward themselves for a job well done or a job just missed.

I'm feeling pretty relaxed for someone who's running late and start rummaging under the passenger's seat for the cling-wrapped two-tone doughnut.

How did eating cold, icing-disguised donuts become so acceptable? They were usually served hot, bain-marie warm or not sold at all. I sniff the doughnut's iridescent crystal glaze before devouring it in two bearish bites. Who cares about how they were sold? It tastes fine (without the help of heat) cloaked in its irresistible icing. Heat used to smother the flavour of fat; chemicals seem to have slipped into that camouflage. Hot doughnuts can still be found over the counters of historic, double-axle vans parked outside the Queen Victoria Market or at other sites of consumer entertainment.

I'm getting pretty close to the paddock now. I honk my horn at a party who're ominously encircling a witch-burning type of bonfire. I slow down.

They don't acknowledge my toot-toot-toot. I yell: You ring-lickers! in their direction but the slip-stream absorbs my scream. I speed-up and away. What the fuck are they doing? It can't be about
warmth, as it's comfortably out of the bastard winter pall and their dark body length tunics would do well against night chill. I twitch in my leatherette bucket seat and smear sleazy left-handed sweat across my thighs. I look into the rearview (as is always best to do out here) and see the witch-burners dispersing in all directions, stopping, then they bolt back to the pyre. I nod my head from side to side and up the volume on my stereo as Redgum belt out *Poor Ned you're better off dead, at least you'll get some piece of my-ind ...* the lead singer has a clear, forceful voice that reminds me of a town-crier who's abandoned passionless, objective news.
The paddock is fenced-in by an arrangement of blackberry thickets which have been professionally tortured. The Bull Chased Club pays a deaf pensioner, Cheryl I think it is, who trains the blackberry hedge to grow vertically in as unaffected a looking way that is believable. There's only one opening through the hedge into the paddock and it's hardly wide enough for most vehicles to squeeze through.

I've left my car parked about half a kilometre away. I've heard about the modifications he makes without giving any notice. It's not that I don't trust Dover, but he might have changed his need for the night.

I feel safe with the bull's horns dangling off my hand. The stainless steel caps I've glued onto their tips aren't reflecting anything. I use my cigarette lighter, hoping its flame reflects off the caps. They reflect so well now, that I see a very small contorted version of my face stretched around the points of the caps. I don't look pretty as a half shadow, half'
human. I ignite the Bic again, to study my face a little closer, but the longer I look, the hotter the lighter is to hold, so I have to be content with the limits of the flame. I have to buff the caps with my t-shirt before I can continue on.

Underfoot is squasy fresh. My rubber, *Techno Sneaker* soles are supposed to soak up any bad steps. They're innocuous in black and were hard to find; almost hidden behind the other mostly white and chunky injection-moulded sneakers. You sure you want them in black, sir? the shop assistant asked me. And I darted my eyes around the shop to see if anybody else had heard the question. Well, yeah, I suppose I do, I answered. Okay then, black it is. Her colleague behind the counter winced at me, shaking his head from side to side a couple of times. My feet feel reassured and warm tonight, as though they're being seduced in the velour interior of a car designed to emulate coffin like snugness.

I lurk along the perimeter of the blackberry hedge. Through some of the small gaps in the hedge, I can see Dover's Merc. He has his back to me and his car. It's probably him, but it's so dark out here. The moon's decided to be tight tonight. The figure that's probably Dover is smoking; arms crossed, cigarette drooping out of his mouth. He appears relaxed; too relaxed maybe, as though he's recalling glorious moments from his life.

I've already got him down I reckon.

It's a bit 'unsporting' to spy on Dover before the chase. There are no umpires here. His precarious posture has helped to massage the word *vulnerable* into my mind. Oh well, I want his car. And whether
he paces around or loosens-up (as he has), I'm feeling confident about the outcome. I can virtually feel him being minced by the undercarriage of his treacherous machine.

Someone slowly and quietly opens the front passengers' door of Dover's Merc. The salty-mouth sensation and all over body fuzziness, which overcomes me in unpredictable moments of high anxiety, kicks-in like a recreational drug manufactured in backyard labs. I couldn't see her before. She must have been lying across the front seats.

She's a tall woman compared to Dover and I hear her ask very gently: Mr Dover, do you think the driver will present himself tonight? He doesn't answer her, but instead slides a look down at his wristwatch. I look at mine as well. It's a few minutes before 10.00pm. She looks behind her then slinks back into the car, a metallic extension of her right hand tinkles against the door's glass. I crouch down to check my ankle holster, feeling for my pistol. It's still there. What the fuck is he doing here with someone else? The night is getting colder. I sense tepid sweat blistering on my brow and wipe the beads away. A wafting chill sweeps across the landscape, my forehead feels as though it's been peppered with tiny ice crystals.

I decide it'd be a good idea to head back to my car. My walk develops into a loping jog because the horns are hard to balance while on the run.

Sprinting past the Monaro, I double back to it; my upper body flopping across the bonnet as though I'm lying on a beach tanning my back. Leg muscles and lungs are burning from the unfamiliar exercise.
After gulping some air, then spitting out oyster like chunks of phlegm, I fumble around in my pockets for the car keys, swing the door open and rummage under the drivers' seat for my mobile phone.

Before fingerling the number pad I take three long, controlled breaths then retrieve Dover's particulars from the phone's memory bank and enter his number. His phone only rings twice: It's Tony here, Andrew. He exhales sharply, then a calm, Heli-o, Tony? How are you? Oh pretty well, I lie. Good to hear... um... Tony, I was wondering, are you on your way yet? he asks very casually. Yeah, kind of, Andrew. Sorry about being late, but a truck carting ball bearings and stuff overturned on the Hume Highway. It's messy out here tonight. The cops are redirecting all traffic, through Tallarook. I should get there, but I can't guarantee anything. Oh, I see... um... well, um, okay see you when I do. Okay, see you then Andrew; bye. He's in a strategic mood I wish I was in, but my intentions might cost me chase jobs in the future. I can't cut the ropes to all of my feral notions or I'd have little time for anything else. A person's got to cram-in some, what I call, dull-time.

Anyway, it'd mean having to dip two instead of one, and, I haven't got the boot space for it.

Ahmed's only been paid for one dipping. He takes payment in advance (fair enough too) and insisted: only one at a time, och-kay Tony? och-kay Tony? Yeah, yeah, sure Ahmed. I guess he's meticulous and doesn't want to deal with eye-popping surprises. But I can't really think
of much that can surprise somebody working on a shit farm. One of the baths at the Werribee sewage works, holds hungry bacteria that munch on Melbourne's excrement; dissolving organic stuff quicker than hydrochloric acid.

I stroke the horns. They're resting on the front passengers' seat. I whisper to them: tonight's going to come 'round again real soon. When the moon'll be out and teasing. We'll check the calendar next time, eh?.

I think I'd better reconsider these quick one, two, thankyou jobs. They can turn on you like a cattle dog who decides it prefers rounding-up whatever it likes.

I might just relax here for a while before driving to Danny's hamburger place on St Georges Road. He's always open and the faces in there are so gorgeously pale with dread. I don't want to eat alone tonight.

Pit-chu, pit-chu, pit-chu snaps me out of the sleep I must've fallen into. I fire-up my car and accelerate away without really looking around, leaving the headlights off for a few hundred, faithful metres. As soon as I feel I'm a bad target, I flick the headlights on; the road lights-up and I slingshot away. There are all kinds of people who hunt at night.
Chapter 20

Sue must be doing more overtime or she's over at her folks' place; in that enigmatic room with the green velveteen curtain draped across the doorway. Probably continuing in there whatever it is that Sue does with her mysterious mum, who I still haven't met.

Haven't seen Sue for... since we ate _Torosteses a la Catalan._

I'm not much of a wine drinker, but I took the cookbook's advice and selected a heavy red wine to complement the torosteses. At $8.95 a bottle, I'm glad I don't drink the stuff too often.

I left an invitation for Sue, resting up against the sugar bowl on the kitchen table. The invitation was written in cursive script using a gold, felt-tipped pen. I asked her to attend a special meal and to dress for the occasion.

She looked pretty luscious in her black, strapless evening gown. I'm sorry Tone, but I couldn't handle wearing the stilettos. They feel like they're biting my feet by the end of the night. She lifted her dress half-way up her shins; we both looked down at the white, around-the-
house sneakers. I shrugged my shoulders, trying to shift the attention away from my disappointed face. Oh well, they're your feet, Sue, I nodded. Yeah, tell me about it Tone! Sue looking at me; it would have been brave timing to look straight back at her just then.

After freeing her dress, back down to the floor, Sue asked me, Do you think my legs are getting porky? She lifted the dress up to her panty line, exposing the lower curvature of her gut and I noticed her stockings had laddered around the inner thighs/crotch area. I stared at her legs, saying nothing, exhaling a loud: hmmm. That's enough! she insisted, letting the hem collapse across her sneakers. Well? Tone, what do you reckon? I started uncorking the bottle of heavy red wine, I haven't really thought about it Sue. The cork made a 'pop' sound after I tugged it out of the bottle's neck. Yeah, but you've just perved at 'em? Her eyes drilled through mine. I don't fuckin' know. They're fine. They're great legs! There, are you happy? And I didn't have an opinion that would've sat as appetisingly as a dry aperitif before a heavy, exotic meal. God Tone, don't you ever loosen-up about anyone else? I banged the bottle onto the table. Oh, all the time darlin'. I'll go and get some glasses, eh, Sue? She sighed; rolling her eyes, brushed hair away from her mouth, turned quickly, and made her way to the dinner table.

Me in an olive-green woollen suit I air-out for births, deaths and marriages. We even took photos: of each other, the dinner table and the meal I'd prepared. Can't I do something to help out? Sue asked that night, looking around the lounge room, annoyed about something. Na,
all you've got to do is chew properly and enjoy the meal. She lifted a corner of her mouth and shook her head in mocking agreement.

Sue shook her head a lot that night, as if she was trying to dislodge a hunk of disbelief that had been booby-trapped in there. I don't cook that often, but neither does Sue. Take-away food: the national cuisine of the suburbs; affordable and as nutritious as food can be when it's cooked and reheated.

Eating bull’s balls and the other Spanish dishes I spent half a day preparing was going to be a memorable occasion. Of course, I didn't tell Sue exactly what we were eating, saying I wanted the night to be 'special'. I tried lighting the candles. Sue snatched the box of matches off me as I unsuccessfully tried to strike a third match with my clammy hands. Here, she said, let me do that at least; I'm not a fuckin' invalid you know Tone! She tried a couple of matches, but I'd dampened the striker board beyond its use. You've stuffed 'em up. Sor-ry, I yelled back sarcastically. She tossed the box across the room, the matches spilling, leaving a curved trail of their trajectory. You can't help what you are, Sue told me, and poked her tongue out, at me. Well, I'm glad you know that, poking my tongue back at her. But my comeback made little impact cos Sue ignored it, rifling through her small leather backpack for the gold cigarette lighter I'd bought for her a few birthdays ago. The lighter engraved with:

For someone who deserves the best,

from your best half.

XXX

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I had the lighter delivered by special courier to Sue's work, so it'd arrive together with the singing-stripping Fat-Man-O-Gram, to let her workmates know a bit more about Sue's 'mysterious' Tone. She didn't thank me for the lighter until two days later, after I'd asked her what she thought about it.

It was good of Painter to say goodbye, eh Tone? Sue asked me, agitated, on that night of the special dinner. Yeah, well, I don't know. One minute he was here and then he's just gone, I lied. She tilted her head towards her portrait. Painter seemed to have put more movement into that piece than most of the other stuff he'd worked on while staying here. He could've told us when he was leaving? Sue asked. I chewed on a piece of the bull's ball, to keep my mouth busy; nodding in agreement with whatever Sue asked or commented on.

Maybe I'll give him a call, soon. I looked up from my plate, resting my loaded fork on a slice of crusty cabata bread. What for, Sue? Let him call first. I mean, I think we've already done him a big favour, now a bit of dignity! Those words shot out of my mouth like ricochets. Sue held up her hand- gesturing for me to slow done/shut up. Easy, Tone. I'll call him when I want. I just want to say hello more than anything. See how his work's coming along, she smiled. Yeah well, fuck him. No goodbye, no note; who the fuck did he think was? I asked, without expecting an answer. Sue lifted her glass slowly, to make a toast, thought about something halfway through her toast. She didn't say anything straight off, then: He's the father of your child Tone, cheers! Sue informed me, just like that, like she was telling me
about the weather or the price of trevally cutlets at the Preston Markets, patting her belly and smirking at me. I remember my what seemed like forever silence before putting my glass to my mouth. Sue refilling her glass while looking at me. Fuck Tone, say something. That long silence. Say something? I repeated, what the fuck do you want me to say? Did you have a good spread? Did Painter's cock tickle you right? What, what the hell do you expect me to say? Sue gnashed her teeth, easing her palms down onto the table, splaying her fingers then pushing off the table before standing; burning ozone layer sized holes through me with her gaze. CON-GRAT-UL-ATIONS would be fucking nice, you arsehole! and I remember her chest heaving, her cleavage opening and closing into itself as she sat back in her chair, turning away from me. I looked the other way too, seeing my portrait, thinking Painter's not that talented; never did get my nose right. He couldn't look at me for too long it seemed.

After we'd cooled off, I broke the news to Sue: Now that you're carrying, you probably shouldn't eat these. With my index finger dipped in the plate, I pointed at the remaining gristly testicle. Why not? Sue asked. Oh, well, they're unhealthy for the pregnant... they're bull's balls. A disgusted frown sprouted on her face. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. Sorry, Sue, but I didn't want to say anything. They're pretty tasty; don't you reckon? Sue wordless, just stared at her plate, shaking her head gently. Not bad, Tone, but I think I've lost my appetite. Staring down with a curious look, toying with the big testicle stranded on her plate. What about the small one I've already
eaten, was that a little bull's ball? Yeah, I lied to her, that one's a real delicacy. Anyway, the recipe said that pregnant women shouldn't eat them. If I had of known you were fixed-up, I wouldn't have served 'em to you. Sue, transfixed by the contents on her plate, looking cautiously across at my plate, asked me twice, why are the little balls so tiny compared to the bigger one? I didn't respond. Then Sue eased the chair away from under her, I'm going to the toilet, she uttered softly, without looking at me. Anybody else would've sworn she'd whispered it like a secret code to her belly.

While Sue was in the loo, I sipped on my wine. Trying to think-up babies names, but none seemed right to me. I remember a back door closing quietly, thinking it was the door to the toilet. Then Sue's car sparking-up and inching out of our drive-way like a heavy hearse. I dashed to a window, parted the venetian blinds and just managed to see the smudged, red glow of her tail-lights as she braked approaching the stop sign at the end of our street.

I held the venetians for so long after Sue was out of sight, that I've left a permanent upside-down V-kink where I separated the slats. I finished off my special meal: chewed extra hard on the testicles (I ate Sue's left-overs), washed-up and went to bed reading half of my

*Caring For Your Compact Colt 45: A Busy Persons' Guide.*
Our living space seems untouched since I was here last. It's a bit too messy, with mould flotsam floating in coffee cups and pizza boxes stained with salami juice. Ah, some cleansing. I got a pounding headache the last time I scorched plastics. I might stand back a bit today. It's pretty windy anyway. That'll whip the flames into a lurching frenzy!

Yesterday was visiting day at the Pen, and I know Vic gets all narrow eyed and taut lipped when one of us doesn't visit him.

Neither Tom or Silv have bothered to phone me.

Ah, fuck 'em both. I mean, it's not that I expected them to contact me... but in a hands in pockets, kicking a can kind of way, I thought, whatever has happened wouldn't last (and I don't really know what has happened, I just know that there's a new silence between us which reminds me of the moment after wind stops blowing and before rain starts bucketing down).

We've had our flip-outs before. The worst was losing a tooth to Silv's snappy fists. He shouldn't have tried to pinch one of my customers off me. We rode out of that misunderstanding (as we seem to do) by making, then stomping along our own tracks for a few sprained months. Neither of us admitted we'd patched things up, but giving-up our pistols for safekeeping anyway, after Tom threatened: I'll keep away from both of you hasty bastards, if you don't hand 'em over!

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Silv's supposed to be dead, the fuckin' arsehole. He's forgotten about that too. The two weeks I helped him to track down the Egyptian who was trying to track him down.

I throw a match into the incinerator and back-away, watching the thick whooshing tongues of fire licking at the air as though they can't lap-up the oxygen fast enough. I feed the incinerator a few more plastic containers and other supermarket synthetics. The fire devours them and anything else I throw it.

I keep forgetting what day the garbage is collected. Sue can't be expected to remember what I forget. This way, it's easier on the both of us. Fire sterilises everything that's noxious; giving back to the air, where most things start off. It's my religious offering to the atmosphere.

Bodies are cremated when they're of no physical use anymore (except to necrophiliacs, who, I'm told, walk streets with their heads cocked towards the ground, arms crossed hard against their chests while smiling because they celebrate death selfishly) so what's wrong with burning the carcasses of consumerism?

It's kind of okay to pollute when producing but, not when discarding. I don't know who balances that account. I think about the Murphrinos boys, how they juice-up their lungs with misty acrylic paints while they're in their manic insurance-repairers'-swing.
I'll relinquish my junk in any way I want. A product isn't fully consumed until its packaging is exhausted. The colors a fire makes when it's ingesting petroplastics is awesome! Television can't really capture the polychrome rainbow released by charred chemicals. When Coode Island exploded, all that live television relayed was mournful, smoky-blackness. No brightness, no lustre—just a tedious gray/black. Where's the celebration of expiration in that? Even live telecasts of Royal funerals have more color in them.

Heyyy, hey! excuse me Tony. It's Stewart, my new neighbour with the parted hair and crisp-cuffed office shirt, waving at me as though I'm serving behind the counter of a very busy delicatessen.

I think it's illegal to burn-off, he announces, pointing frantically at the incinerator without looking at me. Yeh, thanks, I wave to him with a wince as a smile and turn back to the fire, throwing in some coke containers and a stack of those mouldy pizza boxes.

I start whistling a tune I've just made up so it'll drown-out Stewart. TONY! can't you just recycle that stuff? He's an accomplished pain in the arse who isn't familiar with being ignored. I turn towards him again and gawk at the part that's scarred across the middle of his scalp, it reminds me of the seam on stone fruit. I'm thinking this guy's a real ball breaker, how an axe's blade could rest comfortably in his part. Ah, I'm just preparing the barbecue, I yell back (too loudly) with an innocuous, neighbourly smile carved across my face. He nods in disbelief, his mouth in the shape of the letter O.
I turn back to the fire. Nothing more from Stewart, so I keep whistling and humming the tune: *eat it up, burn it down turn the whole damn thing around ...burn it down turn the whole damn thing around...* its sharp, hypnotic rhythm wedging itself (catchy tv and radio ad jingle like) into some of the warm and fatty space in my head. I'm stuck with the tune for the day, and only today (I hope).

But it could bump into me as loud-mouthed acquaintances seem to do when you least expect them, or least want them to: in bank queues, in change rooms at public swimming pools, as I'm about to manipulate a cars alarm.

I can try: body slamming myself against our lemon tree's trunk, squeezing my head by the temples while screaming to chase it out. That won't work. I tried both of those treatments on the *Doop Doop* song. There's no quickie cure. Instead, I'll stand by the incinerator and concentrate on pastel colors; humming that tune until it's sick of itself: *eat it up, burn it down turn the whole damn thing around burn it down turn the whole damn thing around... around around arou-ou-ound I say eat it up...*
Chapter 21

The last time that it was worth crying properly, my brother was lying prostrate on a regulation stainless steel trolley; shiny castors on each of its corners. The castors, with their thin, slick rings of rubber tread, were like four hovering ringed planets in the space of mottled green flooring.

I tried propelling the trolley out of the viewing room, pretending to be the booster to my brother's rocket. I only charged as far as an Apollo mission exploding after take-off. Dad yelled in his dialect: come back, you son of a whore! Chasing us with an outreaching arm yanking at, stretching my South Melbourne footy jumper. Mum, still bunched-up with a soundless, open-mouthed scream stretched from earlobe to earlobe.

It wasn't dad's backhanders, detonating all over the back of my body which stopped me, but my brother rolling off the trolley as I tried cornering on the over-waxed floor. Seeing, then hearing my brother
splat face down. All that goo as opaque as a heavy red wine, encrusted around his arse. Contorted down there on the floor just like his busted-up Six Million Dollar Man action-doll. The fall-out from Johnny Telfi's experimental mission.

My brother spent hours at his telescope, the one dad lifted from the planetarium where he swept and buffed surfaces. My brother would have whoohooed!! astronauting through the uncharted universe of that morgue. It was worth crying in there for the last time.

Most of our relatives and friends at the wake avoiding my dry-eyed gaze. He'll let it all out later, whispered some cousin (twice removed) who I'd only ever seen at weddings. Heads nodding in agreement with her comment, and how wrong they were about me hording the crying for another time.

Don't worry about it Tone, Vic whispered into my ear from behind, as he squeezed his condolences into my shoulders like talons pinching prey. We'll have a look around, see if we can find out who the sick fuck is, he assured me, then reassured me using almost the same words for the next twelve years. I was pretty much wordless that first time Vic mumbled his promise, agreeing with him by closing my eyes and nodding a: yeah, go for it.

Vic's matured into a curt, snap out of it Tone! kind of adviser. But, in that one flutter of my heart (and only in that single moment) I loved Vic so much after he whispered: don't worry about it Tone. It's those kind of involuntary twinkles of the heart, when left unchecked, that can leave you sapped. I might go and visit Vic, without the others.
They found a few flecks of Vic's blood on Telfi's petrol saturated shirt. That's all they'll ever find of Telfi. Ahmed knows where Telfi's resting; with all the other crap that ends up where it belongs.

Of course I'll admit I cleaned the animal out of Telfi! If they get me, but nothing else Tone, that's all they'll get. I shook my head in unbelieving happiness. Vic explained: Twelve years wasn't long enough. He should've hid-out up north for good! With the pensioners, and all the other freaks who're stretching-out their lives. I just kept smiling and shaking my head like the proud father of a new born tragedy.

I remember rambling: thanks Vic! yeah, look thanks, eh? until Vic got so embarrassed he had to shake me with those talons of his so I'd stop. Look mate, it was a pleasure. Even the cops'll thank me when there's nobody else around to hear 'em. I looked down at my twitchy feet, telling Vic they won't pin you. Mate, there's not enough to get you on, I assured him. Oh, I hope not, but I really don't give a fuck if they do. I enjoyed it, Tone! That fucking dirty animal! Vic leered, looking through me and biting on, trimming, one of his thumb nails.

They got Vic, and he screamed (to make it look like I was cleaning, Tone. Fuckin' oath I screamed- it's what got me out early I reckon!). Now he's in again, and I'm driving through Sydney road's barely pulsing traffic because my heart wavered for Vic.

Vic didn't scorch Telfi because he felt a great drop in his guts for me or my brother. Na, it was more about being awarded two red and blue swallows; gaol-bird Indian ink tattoos, one frozen in flight on
either side of his neck, just under the ears. Badges of graduation into the: this guy's proved himself honour roll. His eyes persistently cutting to and from faces, coupled with a: no worries, Toney! (or whoever else thanked him) whenever he was patted on the back for dissolving Johnny Telphi.

It's not the usual Saturday arrangement. The Pen can be visited on almost any day, so long as your name isn't in the visitors' register more than once in any week. Haven't been here for a while. It's as if I'm rolling through a blink; opening my eyes from the last time I was parked here and closed my eyes.

After being eyed-off and allowed to pass through the tall, outer metal doors, I saunter on into the reception area. There are some new signs:

PLEASE LEAVE ALL BAGS AT RECEPTION.
NO MOBILE TELEPHONES BEYOND THIS POINT.

No other visitors waiting in here today. I unhitch my mobile phone off my left hip. The screw behind the reception counter stiffens her body, widening her eyes, then relaxing her stare; thankful that's it's only a telephone. I place the phone on the counter between us. She looks me up and down, and I don't care that she's just doing her job. There are other kinds of jobs around.
Yes sir, can I help you? she keeps on scrutinising me. I look at her in the same way and put my hands in front of my crotch, smirking at her. She reals her head back gently, rolls her eyes, and mumbles *please!* Just checking, I reply, throwing her the goofiest smile I can construct; she throws a wry one back at me. I hate playing with the uniformed. But even snarling guard dogs can be petted if you don't scream, or try to run. I've learned to be *nice* to uniforms, if I can, or go all out and play the dickhead if I can't.

Yeah, hi, uhm... I'm here to visit Victor De Bortolo. She looks behind her, crouches slightly and nods a yes at a tiny porthole in the wall. Above the porthole, there's a row of mass produced, wood-like plastic framed prints of: the Queen, the Prime Minister of Australia, the Premier of Victoria and a portrait photograph of the Governor of the Pen. Foyers in corporate buildings usually have paintings of their owners and managers.

Yes, well, you might be, she grimaces. Hey, I'm not here to make trouble, raising my eyebrows, releasing them and raising them again. Pursing my lips to complete a scrunched-up, obliging expression. The screw closes her eyes for longer than it takes to blink, opens them again and rubs her hands in front of her gut. I'll just check our guest list then, yeh? I shrug my shoulders, yeah, sure, I reply, even though it makes no difference to what she's about to check on. She types-in some details. And your name, sir? I spell out my name and address. She fingers her keyboard again. Haven't been here for a while, Tony? No, I reply. She nods her head in agreement while
looking into an old computer monitor. I've been trying to make a living in my spare time, I tell her. She stops typing for a couple of seconds and looks me in the eyes with a dead pan expression. Ohh, I see, she replies, in a slow and patronising pitch. You were wearing the same jacket the last time you were here?, rolling her eyes up at me while her head is bent down towards the computer. Letting me know she knows who I am to the gaol with the shortest, tightest smile that's usually the specialty of coppers. Yeah, well, my washing machine broke down! Ohh, right, she says. I look around the reception area, for something to do, so I won't tell her to go and get fucked.

Well, Tony, your friend, Vic-tor, has been released and is no longer a guest in any of her Majesty's correctional facilities. I frown at this, but am glad for Vic. He took the solii's advice and the solii has taken Vic's money, or somebody's money. Oh! when did he get out? I ask, as it's the only thing that's left to say.

The screw starts filling-out a pink form, headed: Visitors Attendance Record. I can't release that information to you. I can't give you any forwarding details. All I can say is that he's no longer with us. You can at least look at me when you're talking! She says nothing to this, and puts the pink form in front of me and holds out a pen with her other hand. Just sign your name to the right of the X. I glance down at the form. What for? I ask her, I didn't even get to see who I came to see. She places her left hand over a small recessed grille in the counter. Look, Tony, please just sign. I've only got twenty minutes to go in this shift. She tilts her head to the left and pleads with me with her eyes. I
can't let you leave without signing. I'm looking at her hat, staring at the engraved screws' motto on her badge. The motto used to be in Latin, I think. Yeah, sure, I reply and glance at the pen she's been holding out for me.

I reach into my jacket's breast pocket, and fiddle around for the gold Parker pen Painter gave me for my thirty second birthday. She straightens her body, sliding her hand off the little grille in the counter. I make a scribble on the form, swipe my phone off the counter and turn quickly towards the tall metal doors. From behind me, the screw bellows out: see you again Tony. Got to catch me first! I retort. And just as I'm about to push open the metal doors, and without turning, I hold up my left middle finger at the screw. She yells a last official word I can't understand. I smile at a screw who's on the other side of the doors; he recedes into a regulation narrowing of the eyes. I spit a few feet in front of me and punch at the air like a shadow boxer practicing for victory.

Vic was here for about three years; his second time around. I feel weak and lean on the Monaro's bonnet with my head tilted back, looking up at the dome of fairy floss sky. It's so alluring up there that I snap a couple of bites at it. It's the only tempting thing that's in my sights.

I feel like I've just been released from the Pen.
Visiting Glenroy today (all innocent like), to ask about Painter: what's he been putting together since he moved out of my place, and back to here? Christine, Painter's mother, an ex-girlfriend from my spell in university land, has learned to keep her Glenroy garden trimmed and green; civil and neighbourly. Spied on from the street, nothing would urge passers-by to report this garden to a lifestyle magazine. All the growth is contained within her side of the fences.

She doesn't jab (but probably wouldn't mind) sweet, cold needles into her depression anymore; or so Painter reckoned. And that can't be a bad turn, unless the turn wasn't completed and she's reversed back into the white loop.

I've parked on the nature-strip opposite Christine's front garden. Jiggling the keys out of my ignition while deciding, yeah- I'll flaunt my mudcake colored eyes without blinking. My: I haven't done anything
wrong eyes, parading my dial in full, so I'll leave my (aviator Ray Ban) sunglasses here, in the car; settling them on the Monaro's dashboard.

As I enter her property, I'm surprised by a dozen or so foot high, sentry-like gnomes that are concreted into the path leading to the verandah. They're new to the garden. Lonely/old peoples' little friends and protectors our elderly neighbour, Mrs Archess, used to call them.

Its chrome glistening like surgical steel. A '68 Holden lurking under the carport is smothered with a dense, two-pac burgundy. That paintjob looks like it's worth more than the whole car. Probably Christine's needle deliverer, who'd have enough stashed-cash he can dip into to salvage decay from abandonment.

Her heavy curtains are closed.

A dog (Christine's?) starts growling from the other side of the front door. I lope up the three concrete steps leading to the verandah and press on the doorbell. The dog barks so many times in a ten second interval, that I imagine it exploding into a thousand, meaty bites.

I ring the doorbell again but there's no response.

Today her house is unwelcoming. I won't be opened up to like a regular. There's no profit in it for Christine, opening up to a hawker peddling concern.

I hear a reverberating, wooden sound; the kaa-dong of a slamming door, making window glass shimmer. I turn quickly, tapping on the smoked-brown glass panels either side of the front door.
Looking into the hallway with my hands cupped around my eyes. Nobody's there. I see an array of Painter's canvases hanging on the walls along the corridor that leads up to the kitchen. I can't see the dog, as it's so close up against the front door. It's spitting short, snorty bursts through the gap between the bottom of the front door and the floor.

When I hear another door slam, I pound on the plywood panelled door a couple of times; feeding the dog's insatiable frenzy. I'll maul anyone if it gets out.

I can't blame woofa for its instinct. The kind of bearing I respect in a beast that's protecting its space. I look around the front garden and decide that the apricot tree, a few feet to the left of the front door, is what I'll be scrambling up and clinging to if that loyal, crazy dog is set free and gets anywhere near me. Petting this beast won't cool its territorial juice; only somebody else's flowing blood can smother its inclination.

Christine, is that you in there? Are you home? Hell-o-o! I holler. Chris are you there? But if she's around, she isn't answering me. The dog won't stop, can't stop now. It needs my flesh to muffle its urge. I look at the apricot tree again and estimate that two hops and a good leap will see me up there.

There's a postie on the other side of the street. She's looking at me and shrugging her shoulders, then waves a goodbye. I return the goodbye gesture, imagining scars all over her legs and hands. How mail deliverers should be issued with full length, bite-proof suits and
guns the size of canons. I wonder about how much they're paid each week to run the mail gauntlet, deciding the pay, whatever it is, isn't enough.

Christine? Hey, is anybody home? I yell out one last, less enthusiastic time. Nothing.

I consider ambling up the drive-way and around to the back door but that dog won't stop. I don't want one of my limbs to be the reason for the dog to stop clamoring. Christine didn't have a dog the last time I was around. Painter never mentioned it. She might've been frightened since Painter stayed at my place.

I turn away from the front door, putting my hands into my trouser pockets as though I'm giving up and about to descend the three steps, instead, I swivel around, looking back at the door and notice a curtain swaying at one end of a window. I kind of waddle over to the window (slightly bent over at the stomach) and press my face up against it, looking through the gap between the curtain and the window frame, but there's nobody behind it that wants to be seen.
The Murphinos orders have stopped coming through. Not officially. Our deals are only good from one order to the next.

I'm not used to my phone's silence, unless I choose to switch it off and let the voice-mail perform its polite chores. It's kind of disconcerting that that well weighted mould of plastic separates me from easy dollars. I have to use it, to see what's going on.

Hey, it's Tone! How are you guys going? I ask one of the Murphinos boys. A cautious voicelessness, an angle grinder in the background biting into some panel or sill, then, Oh, hey Tone... yeah, you know mate, okay I guess. Better than spraying fridges in some factory, eh? Yeah, sure, I respond without really knowing whether atomising whitegoods is so bad. But, there's no mangled steel or free-floating body filler in that space, just a hypnotic white lavished on sheets of cubed and pressed metal.

Look, um, do you need me to locate anything, or what? Again a carefully measured pause. Well, we've got enough on, for now, Tone.
I return a lie: Well, if you need anything... just dropping the word. It's a good time for me. But I'll be flat out after next week. He sighs, trying to assemble a believable answer. Ah, look, his pitch heightening. I'll be straight with you, Tone. There's another mob that's doing stuff for us on the reeeaal cheap. Ohhh, okay, I answer, hoping he hasn't picked-up on my bitter (but very controlled) reply. Yeah, Tone, he gets it done for us for about three-quarters what you charge, y'know what I'm saying? I know exactly what he's saying, but it's not what I want him to say. I squeeze on the pen that I'm doodling with, listening to its clear, plastic husk cracking. Oh, well, when you need some... yeah, just call me; see ya. Okay buddy (he's really overcooked me with the buddy bullshit), I'll let you know when something comes up. O-kay, Tone? he tells me, making it sound like a question. Yeah, sure, whatever you want, I instruct him.

After throwing my mobile into the back seat and punching into the dashboard, steering wheel and other soft components, I start-up my car and screech away.

Some kids playing cricket across the road have been looking over at me. One of them points in my direction, mouthing something, then they all burst out laughing. I tap gently on my brake pedal and peer at them through my rearview mirror. I reach down for my pistol, hold it out of the drivers' window and point it at the sky, letting off a quick, sharp cackle of rounds. The little smart-arses disperse like ducks at the start of a hunting season.
Eating in moments of intense stress is an equivalent to fucking while busting for a leak.

I pull into a drive-thru McDonald's. Yes sir, what would you like? a voice asks. I place my order into the intercom: two fillet-o-fish, a large fries and a bucket of cola. What size cola was that? the box queries me. A big one I said, what's wrong with you? I ask the box. A pause, then an agitated, sorry sir!

I feel as though I'm keeping up to date with the refinement of anonymity as I'm placing my order through the intercom. The amplified voice: please move-up to the next window, sir. The box thanks me and calls me sir again. I drive up to the cashier's counter, extending my arm out of the drivers' window and exchange some money for the food. She smiles at me but is already into another order. Talking to somebody else through a pilot's-type microphone and headphone combo.

Cruising the McDonald's carpark for a spot away from all the other diners who've settled into their preferred dark corners.

We're devouring the baby-soft food as unhindered as kids whose guardians have turned their backs.

After the food and the swilling of cola, I roll the packaging into a tight soccer-sized ball, ignite the mostly synthetic orb with my disposable Bic and throw the ball out of my window; a couple of feet above the Monaro's roofline.

People in the cars parked closest to mine are looking on, some slow down on their chewing, following the McDonald's meteor and
tooting their horns in approval. I smile and flash my high beams. One of them gives me the *good-one* thumbs up. The ball quickly disintegrates into a fine, powdery ash. Then the latest carpark arrival drives over it.

I reverse out of my parking spot and gently accelerate away with my right arm drooping out of the drivers' window, my stereo turned up louder than I usually have it. One of the diners beep *beeps* their horn at me and I toot back.

I'd never lift a car from one of these expedient diner carparks. They don't stay parked in here for long enough.

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A salt rush floods my mouth; my skin like a plucked goose's. The light in our bedroom is on, but there's no car in the drive-way. I work the salty spittle into a tenacious, phlegmy globule and heave it out the window. I drive on past my house, parking two streets away in an ill-lit cul de sac, then lightfoot it around to the back of my place. Looking around, over my shoulder for anything/anyone I don't recognise. My calf muscle swelling against the heartening weight of the holstered pistol that's pressing into my right upper ankle.
After leaping into my yard, I complete a series of commando type rolls across the back lawn, feeling a twinge in my back. I'm rubbing at the spasm while pervig through the bottom of our bedroom window.

Some of Sue's clothes are strewn on the bed and the floor. I unhitch my Colt and release its safety catch, then calmly slide the window open and slither on through. Sue? Sue?, I call out from behind the door, the pistol resting horizontally in my clammy hand. There's no response. I switch the light off, ease down onto the floor and leopard crawl along the hallway. There's no noise coming from any corner of the house. Sue must've forgotten to switch the light off. Haven't seen her since the special dinner. I park the Colt back in its crocodile skin sheath and remember to go and look for the jerry can in the garage.

Petrol fumes are wafting into the cabin from the boot like a sweet, silent surprise. I over-filled the jerry can, while estimating how far back I should stand after dousing and before igniting. Admiring (with a little taut smile) the pearly shell effect of spit petrol and water mixing on the ground.

The leaded aroma of the fuel feels thick in my nostrils. I inhale deeply and relax my grip on the steering wheel, remembering a pulp documentary about kids in the outback cultivating a cool, teenage movement out of petrol sniffing. Brain damage.

The narrator mentioned those two words in almost every sentence. I'm reminiscing about the lead-lined kids at school who lived on either side of the freeway. Their reliable hair-trigger tempers
launched them into the best fights. Nobody fucked with the brother sister combos bouncing around their victims like oversprung pogo sticks.

It's after three in the morning. The Murphinos boys should be snoring, enjoying multicolored dreams. I've parked two blocks away from their workshop. The jerry can is getting heavier with every step. I turn a corner that leads into the industrial estate.

I scan the area. Some buildings have their security lights switched on while other buildings are illuminated by forgotten lights, left on in tearooms, or offices or toilets.

The Murphinos panel shop; splattered onto the estate's horizon like a gutted corpse. Paralysed cars and half cars, mangled panels, crushed bumper bars and other automotive organs ringing the entire building. They've left an upstairs light on as well.

Their front gate is secured by a token hefty padlock through a long twist of chain. There are plenty of holes and tears in their cyclone fence; easy enough for anyone to squeeze through.

Around to the back of the workshop.

I bend my body slightly, and wriggle through a small vertical slash in the fence; the way I've seen mad people trying to work their bodies out of a straight-jacket. I pull the sloshing jerry can in after me.

Air compressors releasing rapid-fire pressure from their tanks punctuate the quietness like a sniper volleying shots from a hidden position. I duck down onto the ground the first time I hear a tank
release its oxygen build-up. Feeling like an idiot, I get up smiling and look around, brushing off the dirt that's clinging to my clothes. I should be dead.

Rainbows can't be seen at night. Simulating one is my only option. Coupling that option with tidying-up business loose-ends is such a terrific situation to be in.

Their fuse box gets doused first because it'll help the fire along the most, then the sides of the building get their bathing. I'm careful, placing a hand over the spout to minimise the splashing sound of petrol as it gushes out.

A small hump of twenty gallon drums are the last things I perfume out of the jerry can. I stop pouring, taking in three long lungfulls of fumes, whispering, thanks, whatever your name is, for making that first oil strike.

Snagged on fence wire while trying to worm my way out of another hole. I can't break free easily, so I force myself through, tearing my tracksuit jacket. Fuck, fuck, fuck! I mumble. I dart across to their nature strip.

I kneel behind a large boulder that's part of what was once a garden, but now just a trampled spread of dirt speckled with an assortment of rocks.

This'll do: a fist sized rock for weight, wrap it in a few sheets of newspaper; done. Fumbling around in my pockets for the lighter: flick,
flick, flick, ahhh- watching its generous, healthy glow. Chuck it towards the fuse box. Coming doesn't even rate compared to this long, sustained climax.

Oh, the flames attacking and eating the building like a gang of Handsel and Gretels. And the colors, KA BANG, there goes the fuse box, spewing a cosmosrama of sparks that reminds me of fireworks over Melbourne's skyline on closing night of the Moomba Festival.

The fire's radiating a mildly uncomfortable heat and I'm taking it all like a suntan.

Some alarm finally goes off. I look around the estate, towards the sound of the alarm and then back to the pyrotechnics. Descending the external staircase of the panel shop, an enflamed figure is screaming, swatting maniacally at the flames that've virtually engulfed its whole body. It's staggering like a drunk, towards the locked gate. I walk over approaching the figure nice and slowly, thinking if this body was a car, could the Murphinos boys salvage it? The face isn't completely melted, but the hair's all crispy lumps; it's Vic!

This is where he's been living so silently since he got out. This is who's been lifting for the Murphinos boys on the cheap. The color doesn't suit you Vic, I yell at him. He's blending in with the background real well; it's hard to see his silhouette now. The screams have stopped and regressed into whimpers. He tries pointing a pistol at where he thinks I'm standing, shaking as though he has a nervous disorder. But dropping the shooter and falling to the ground himself in
a smouldering hunk; hardly moving, (convulsing really) lazy, muffled yelps escaping out of his mouth-and then he just stops.

The fire brigade's sirens pierce through the inferno's roar. I grab my jerry can and make a run for it, looking back a couple of times, gleefully jumping up and clicking my heals in mid-air, a succession of explosions shaking the ground as I land.

Some jobs seem to work out like a confusing, scrambled-up Rubic's cube puzzle that resolves itself as it hits the ground and, there's no need to ask questions about how it happened, just take what comes and smile.
Chapter 24

The phone won't stop. Oh, just a few more minutes of weightless slumber.

I try to roll over and back to sleep, pulling the pillow over my head to muffle an angry kickstart into the day.

Ringing stops, but only for as long as it takes to redial my number.

I reach up and flossick feel for and pick-up my mobile. What the fuck do...? I start. Hi, Tone. Oh? Hiii, Sue... sorry, didn't know it was you... I haven't been sleeping too well. Really, Tone? I thought you would've been spreading yourself out like a king, ha ha ha, she laughs. What are you on Sue?, I ask her, as I don't want to question or resolve her remark. Oh, nothing too strong, Tone. Listen, can you help me move my stuff back into the house. I didn't even know that she'd swapped spaces. Yeah, okay, I guess so, I tell her. Yes or no Tone? I have to be at work soon, I can't yabber now. Yeah sure, I'll come over tonight, is that okay your highness? She sighs a gutful of air into the
mouthpiece, I'll leave my key in the letter box, under all the junk mail, okay? I say nothing. Okay, Tone?, I'm running late as it is. Looks like I'll be doing all the carting, I'm thinking. Are you going to help me, Sue? How can I? My belly feels like a loaded tumble-drier, or haven't you thought about what's in it? I haven't thought much about Sue's baby gut. It's a favour I'm asking for Tone. Anyway, don't you think I can bring back what I carried away? Yeah, sorry Sue, I'm still half asleep. Give me a chance to wake-up properly, I try excusing myself. It's a bit late for that isn't it, Tone? I don't like the sweeping certainty in her voice. What are you talking about, Sue? I ask coldly. Well... you sound like you're pretty awake from this end, that's all, she forces a nervous giggle into the conversation. Yeah, I suppose so, I tell her in a contemplative voice. Anyway, Tone, I've got to go. I'll see you soon. Yeah, okay, have a good one Sue, and I blow her a kiss into the phone. Yep, see ya, she replies half-way through my kiss and hangs-up.

As I'm looking for the key in Sue's folk's letter box, her dad comes waddling down the driveway like only an old or injured person can; no efficiency or convincing prowess in his rhythm.

We don't enter the house like thieves here! Can't you knock on the door first? He's looking around in the street, whipping his neck from left to right, his jowls swinging like two mini bladders on a bumper bar. Listen, Sue didn't say you were going to be home or I would've... I don't care what Sue said, he spits out in a hushed voice, still looking around. Hey, take it easy, I advise him. Let's just go
inside then? I put my hand on his shoulder, and he flicks it off, you
don't scare me, glaring straight into my face for the first time. I pull my
lips back like a cat that's about to hiss. What's there to be scared of? I
ask. He cuts a look to my waist then back to my eyes. He turns around
and saunters back towards the house with his hands in his pockets. I
contemplate a flying kick into the small of his back. Instead, I take three
deep breaths then follow him up the driveway.

Here! Sue's dad thrusts a folded sheet of paper into my left hand. She
left this for yer. I unfold the note. It's been typed on the back of a blue
invoice notice; computer paper.

    Tone,
    my stuff's in mum's room. It's all
    packed and ready to go. I hope it
    doesn't put you out at all?????

      Sue

I walk down the hallway, standing outside 'the room', then part the
green velveteen curtain. I knock on the door a couple of times. There's
no reply. I knock again, just go in!, Sue's dad yells to me from his
favourite recliner in the lounge room. I'm as nervous as a virgin
entering a brothel.

The walls, covered with Painter's sketches, overwhelm me like a
trucks highbeams in the dead of night. Charcoal drawings, a triptych of
ball point pen drawings of Sue; on the bed in this room holding a doll with a feather boa dangling around its neck. She looks pretty good in Painter's light.

There's no sign that Sue's mum has ever lived here. I'm feeling kind of spooked. The phone in the hallway rings a few times before Sue's dad answers it.

Hell-o? he yells into the phone, then progressively drops his voice: yep, yep. That's right. Just a few more minutes, I reckon. Yep, that's right. Cheerio then, and he hangs-up.

I'm not sure if I should grab the cot that's all decked out and waiting for some squirming infant action. I walk up to the cot, lean over it and take a sniff. It smells like a puppy's breath after it's chewed one of those rubber bones. I rock it a couple of times, setting off a recorded version of ambient circus music. I stop the cot from rocking and the music stops.

Are you right in there? Sue's dad asks from the doorway. Yeah, I answer him. Well, come on then, I haven't got your kind of time to play with. I wolf-whistle at him loudly, so he stops jabbering.

If this room was a car, I'd never even think of lifting it. It's a sports coupe with a vinyl roof and automatic transmission. It has no place in my space or motion. Come on, just grab the stuff and go will yer. I give him a startled look, yeah, okay, okay I'm going. Haven't felt like returning a favour since my dad kicked me out of home. Any more advice from Sue's old man, and he'll be swapping his Commodore for a wheelchair.
I grab Sue's two orange suitcases and hurry out of that freaky room. You can always pick them out in the luggage carousel at the airport, Tone, Sue explained to me when she bought them for our trip to the Gold Coast. Yeah, I can imagine that, but fuck Sue, they're embarrassing; ugly. Don't walk near me when you're carrying them. She laughed nervously when I told her, but I think I meant it.

He slams the door behind me and offers no goodbye or anything. Some feelings are seeds in a desert, waiting for a stray and unpredictable drencher to kick-start them into a full, violent bloom. I drop the suitcases and turn back towards the door but, the moment's become a set of keys falling through a gutter grille. Stupid bastard! I yell at him, the heat from my mouth steaming-up some of the glass panel on his front door.

Our driveway is a caryard, but most of these treasures are found and don't come with any guarantees. There's: Sue's car, Tom's Merc, the Murphinos boys tow truck, Dover's Merc with personalised number plates: SILVS 1 (oh well, I almost got it; no hard feelings now), that lusciously painted '68 Holden that was under Christine's carport and a few other machines I haven't seen for a while. I'm a mercenary who's come home from a country in which I'd almost lost myself.

I catch a glimpse of my face in the rearview mirror and see a goofy smile stretched across my face. That grin Painter framed so well in my portrait. I wasn't even smiling when I sat for him. He spent a lot
of time in an obscure distance, but drifted in like a fog that hovered
over peoples' sympathies.

There's not much sound coming out of my house. They've all gone
somewhere else? Maybe I should get back in my car and drive until I
get completely lost.

As I turn around and walk back to my car, the lounge room
window slides open, where are you going, Tone? Sue asks me, half
her body out of the window. Oh, well, looks like a bit of a party here,
just off to the bottle shop. Back in a sec. Don't be a dickhead, there's
plenty of everything in here, Tone. Just come in will you, Sue
reassures me. I'm feeling pretty foolish and put the car keys back into
my pocket. Yeah, okay! Coming. I flick my cigarette into the garden
and exhale all the smoke with a sigh of confused pleasure.

They're all in there, quickly encircling me and Sue with smiley faces
and rigid eyes.

Drinks are thrust in front of me, even though few of them are holding
drinks. Sue can't celebrate for now... but later she'll wet herself with
the stuff. Everybody laughs at that and I join in. Tom slaps me hard on
the back after I cut let my laugh; giving him the, I know it's a party but
don't get carried away, stare.

Someone ruffles my hair from behind.

Painter's mum starts to cry. Sue's slipped away from my side,
then comes back with a pewter goblet brimming with yellowish liquid.
here Tone, some Jamiesons, your lucky warmer. I take it from her hands: DRINK DRINK DRINK they all yell encouragingly.

Congratulations, Sue!! they shout out. Some bearded guy is holding up Christine (almost holding her back from the ring of bodies around me- the bearded one with the shark-eyed stare- who's the freak? I'm thinking). The circle of buddies is tightening around me; won't let me get break free. Another Jameisons type of drink is forced into my hand. Downing it all, you lucky fuck! Silv screams out. Mezza is sitting on a chair near the television looking at us with a mournful, droopy head (she gets all beaten up on the inside when it's her time to bleed, Silv's told us when he brags about his little trips to the massage parlours).

The drinks are a succession of hooves kicking me down.

I say no after the sixth or seventh round and most of their hard smiles seem to be disappearing with the onset of the heaviness in my head. My eyes are weighty. I can usually drink more than what's been given to me. The laughing stops... their faces merging with the occasion like water and spilt petrol.

Sue? Sue? But it's quiet, the room swirling. They're trees around me; heads are canopies leaning forward blocking light. They look serious, concerned (I think?) but, it's all fuzziness now. Sue? Sue? Oh shut the fuck up and enjoy it! Sue or one of the other women yells back. Everybody laughs out at that. But I'm too gone to... You'll be right, Tone, a male voice blurts out; a voice I can't distinguish from any
of the other men in the room. The women's voices are one voice, the men's slurs a warm, muddy reassurance...

Hammering bings and bangs.

Metallic heat.

A jumble of voices speaking quickly... I'll cut it here... you'll blow holes in it... make sure the gas is mixed right...

On a ship motion, swaying...

I can hardly move. The taste of blood. No light. No light.

Feeling worse than after a beating from my dad.

No light. No colors. Can't move easily. How much did I drink? I reach across for Sue. Feels like a bucket seat. I wake up, but I'm not sure if I'm still sleeping, dreaming... no light, and my body's throbbing like a flat, punched-up lip.

Reaching out with both arms. I am awake, in what feels like my Monaro. Fingering under the dashboard and, yep, my knife's in its scabbard. At least I know it's there. All the windows are blacked out. Tapping on the drivers' side glass. It's as cold as steel. I feel for where the windscreen is supposed to be but, it's steel too. I run a finger over a rough welding seam where glass usually emerges out of a frame.

Welded sheets of metal over all the cavities I'm feeling around for. The doors won't open, probably welded shut too. I lean over where the passenger's seat was and vomit; I feel worse. The back
seat's gone as well. The interior light doesn't work. No light. I jiggle the switch again. No light. There's no light anymore.
Easy: a novella
Joe De Iacovo

Master of Arts (Honours) Writing
1999
University of Western Sydney (Nepean)
PLEASE NOTE

The greatest amount of care has been taken while scanning this thesis,

and the best possible result has been obtained.
I, Joe De Iacovo, declare that this work (Easy: a novella) has not been submitted for assessment for a higher degree at any other educational institution.

1 March 1999

signed: [Signature]
Tony is a car thief reliant on loyalty (the vagaries of) so that he may flourish. Allegiances, on Tony's map, are not fixed sites. He believes that schisms within the everyday occur mainly by design and are imposed on him. As these breaches are not necessarily within Tony's control, he adjusts their details according to his (perverse perception of) need; to maintain/establish a semblance of identity/control.

To accommodate Tony's rhizomatic movements, his dependence on memory wavers between a reliable recalling of past anecdotes and his awesome and playful fulfilment within the moment.

But his 'wonders' are manifested at the expense of those within his borders. Actions which, ultimately, contribute to Tony's entombment within an aspect of his physical identity.