Silence
in contemporary Australian
war fiction

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Statement of Authentication

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

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Abstract

**Novel: Home Leave**

**Exegesis: Silence in contemporary Australian war fiction**

This dissertation consists of a creative component, a novel *Home Leave*, and an exegesis exploring silence within three contemporary Australian works of war fiction, *The Great World* by David Malouf, *The Wing of Night* by Brenda Walker and *After the Fire, a Still Small Voice* by Evie Wyld.

Silence within fiction sits uneasily between what is known, what is unknown and what is unknowable. Present in both content and form, it encompasses a) literal silences, where secrets are kept, actions are hidden, and information is lost or missing, b) characters’ silences, where they don’t speak to each other, they speak indirectly, are traumatised or otherwise abandoned in states of unknowing, and c) formal silences, where silence is embedded in the writing through syntax, imagery, and structure. In war fiction, these silences are the consequence of each individual’s war experience and its impact on their family and community.

The exegesis derives this interpretation of silence from a variety of sources, including history with Jay Winter’s essay “Thinking about silence” from *Shadows of War: a social history of silence in the twentieth century*, seminal trauma theory texts *Testimony: a crisis in witnessing* by Shoshanna Felman and Dori Laub and *Unclaimed Experience* by Cathy Caruth, literary criticism on silence with *Literary Silences in Pascal, Rousseau, and Beckett* by Elisabeth Marie Loevlie and *Language and Silence* by George Steiner, psychological text *Memory, War and Trauma* by Nigel Hunt, and literary analyses *Trauma Fiction* by Anne Whitehead and Bernadette Brennan’s doctoral dissertation, “The Wounds of Possibility: Reading absence and silence in some contemporary Australian writing”. This understanding is used to demonstrate how silence is an integral component of the three works of war fiction selected for study. Malouf explores the silences around masculine intimacy and the prisoner of war experience in World War II. Walker explores the enduring power of grief and trauma from World War I, and how it is both bound up with, and healed by, the
Western Australian landscape. Wyld investigates silence in the connections between intergenerational trauma, war service in Vietnam, masculinity and landscape.

The novel covers two weeks in the lives of the Talbot family in Glebe, Sydney, leading up to Anzac Day. Kate Talbot, a soldier coming home on leave from Afghanistan, discovers that her brother Ben, also a soldier deployed in Afghanistan, is missing. When Kate arrives home she meets her uncle Greg for the first time in seven years. He is a photojournalist and has photos of Ben in Afghanistan, but he has no memory of where or when he took them. Kate and Greg search for Ben, using Greg’s photographs as a starting point. They delve through their contacts, through the family history of military service, and through Greg’s traumatised memory. In their pursuit of any leads about Ben, Kate uncovers family secrets, and Greg partly recovers his memory, and both gradually come to understand the secrets they have been keeping from themselves. Ultimately, Ben is not found, but Kate finds out enough to be sure that he will not come home alive.
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Silence in contemporary Australian war fiction: an explanation of the critical framework

A personal introduction to my research

My English grandfather had a long career with the Royal Air Force. This was never spoken about in my presence at family gatherings, and it was only after his death that I learnt what he had done in World War II. The discovery was not through stories or diaries, or even through photographs, but through his logbooks. The entry dated May 30\textsuperscript{th} 1943 reads, ‘Pilot: Self. Duty: Periscope bombing.’ Was his mission successful? Was he bombing through the morning, or late in the afternoon? Where was he flying? How did he feel about the bombing? Did feelings even come into it? I had to look up ‘periscope bombing’, as I was initially unsure what the phrase meant. His logbooks are a tantalising record, where what is written competes with what is left unsaid.

My grandfather logged his actions but there is only the bare minimum of information – who, what, where and when. None of the text reveals in any way the quality of the experience – it is not a war story. Yet I can hardly help reading into the gaps, using my own knowledge of my family and of the war to create a picture of what he did. I know that it was spring in the middle of the war, that he had married my grandmother secretly the year before, and that his three brothers and father were also in the RAF, but I do not know if these things had any particular impact on his life on May 30\textsuperscript{th} 1943. I had not read his logbooks or asked about them on any of the family trips I took while he was alive. I only saw the point of reading them after I had begun my doctoral research, but by then it was too late to ask him.
Figure 1. Photo of log of HAS Disney (photo by Tessa Lunney)
The spareness of the text reminds me of a story at the beginning of *Dispatches* by Michael Herr, told to him by a Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol Soldier, or ‘Lurp’:

*But what a story he told me, as one-pointed and resonant as any war story I ever heard, it took me a year to understand it:*

*‘Patrol went up the mountain. One man came back. He died before he could tell us what happened.’*

*I waited for the rest, but it seemed not to be that kind of story.*

This quote reveals not just the ambiguities, the pain, the sheer ‘spookiness’ of war in Vietnam, but also much about Herr’s understanding of the war, how he lived it, how he observed how others lived within it, and most importantly, the nature of the war stories that would come out of this time. The story is three short sentences, where the only things left are the bare facts. But around those facts are everything the Lurp feels he does not need to say – the danger of his work, the overwhelming and senseless death, losing friends, ghosts and spirits in the jungle, that life has been pared back to its essentials, the pride and pain at being misunderstood by the rest of the Army and the rest of the world. Herr also does not explain the story, but uses its obvious silences to amplify what he does write. In other words, he uses it as the Lurp does.

There is a great difference in intent between the two texts. Herr’s is deliberately ambiguous, the brevity of the story revealing its potency and relevance to the Vietnam War. My grandfather’s logbooks, on the other hand, are official documents with the specific purpose of recording his flights, and were not intended as any sort of political statement or emotional barometer. Yet they both represent a type of silence that occurs repeatedly in war writing. Everything is removed but the bare minimum description of action, and it is up to the reader or listener to understand the political context and emotional consequences. Indeed, the ‘silence’ is often within the receiver of the story – I know there must be more to my grandfather’s war experience, just as Herr waits for the rest of the story.

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Lurp’s tale. The few words suggest so much, especially to an avid reader of war stories, and yet confirm so little. In this context silence is not just a function of what is not said or written, but what is expected and is then not delivered or withheld.

**An outline of silence**

War stories are old stories – works like *The Iliad* are some of the oldest stories in Western literature. They often become part of foundation legends and myths, full of heroes who sacrifice their lives for their countries or their brothers in arms. But contemporary novels about the wars of the past century increasingly eschew heroic action and the type of heroism that makes up the ‘great sacrifice’ that is spoken about so passionately on Anzac Day. Instead, they choose to explore an individual experience within a larger framework, with war sometimes the central focus, but sometimes more of a prompt for explorations of trauma, identity, memory, history and time. Within these explorations are events or emotions that defy articulation, that have no objective reality, that contain paradox, contradiction, elision and multiple meanings. These elements are neither clear nor direct, but instead use language in a way that is poetic, oblique, and ambiguous. They highlight the way language can be manipulated when attempting to relate the ineffable. Silence is not simply, or not only, a lack of speech. Within literature, silence is also the way something is not said. In war fiction, it is the way the war experience is not directly told, the gaps and spaces in the telling, the way the experience is repressed and then returns, and the language and structure used to show how these not-tellings, these silences, sit around and within the war experience. Contradiction, elision, and paradox may not within themselves contain silence, but when used in the context of war fiction, they become some of the key literary techniques used to write silence.

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2 The Anzac Day dawn service at the Sydney cenotaph includes in the dedication, “We wish to be worthy of their great sacrifice.” See Appendix I.
3 Some of the more well-known novels, in both an Australian and international context, include Pat Barker’s *Regeneration* trilogy, *Birdsong* by Sebastian Faulks, Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* and *In the Lake of the Woods*, *Traitor* by Stephen Daisley, *HHhH* by Laurent Binet, and *The Tiger’s Wife* by Tea Obrecht.
into the narrative. By exploring these within Australian fiction, particularly
within novels that focus on Australians’ involvement in war, I explore the
silences that are created in an Australian context and with an Australian idiom.

War has been a formative influence in Australian culture, and continues to
play a dominant role in ideas of Australianness. Indeed, the Anzac Day dawn
service at the Sydney Cenotaph includes the phrase, ‘the Landing on Anzac Cove
was the dawn of a brilliant era in the march to nationhood of Australia and New
Zealand’, a phrase that boldly claims the importance of war to Australian
identity, self-promoted as it is. These wars include, at the furthest limit, the
colonial wars of invasion that began modern Australia, and Australia’s current
involvement in Afghanistan, the Middle East, Timor-Leste, Solomon Islands,
South Sudan, and the South-West Pacific. World War I – the Great War – was
Australia’s first war as a federated nation. From this war CEW Bean, Australia’s
official war correspondent, formed his opinion of the Australian Diggers as being
known for their ‘reckless valour in a good cause, for enterprise, resourcefulness,
fidelity, comradeship, and endurance that will never own defeat’. Bean’s
passion for memorializing Australia’s involvement in war has been highly
influential; he was one of the founders of the Australian War Memorial in
Canberra (AWM) and he edited the *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918*. Although Bean’s quote comes from the AWM website, Bean’s
portrayal of the Australian Digger has become iconic – it is listed on the AWM
website under the heading ‘The ANZAC Spirit’ – and is thus a template of the
Australian soldier that writers must work with or against. The figure of the Anzac

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4 An interesting discussion of the link between Australian identity and war is Bill
Gammage’s chapter ‘Australia During the War’ in *The Broken Years*, where he
writes about the attitudes of a newly federated Australia to the outbreak of World
War I. Bill Gammage, *The Broken years: Australian soldiers in the Great War*,

5 Anzac Day Dawn service order of service. See Appendix I.

6 Information on current Defence Force operations found on the Defence Force
work/Current-Operations

7 CEW Bean on Australian War Memorial website:
http://www.awm.gov.au/encyclopedia/anzac/spirit.asp and

8 CEW Bean, *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918*, Sydney:
Angus and Robertson, 1934-1942.
Digger is crucial to ideas of Australians at war, and for this reason, when writing about silence and war in Australian fiction, I refer to wars from World War I onwards.

To understand writing about war, one must be able to read the silences and make sense of what they convey. To read silence relies on cultural knowledge of dialogue and idiom, social hierarchies and important historical events. To use an Australian example, this means to know what ANZAC represents in literature, and to know when the image of the Digger is being subverted. The nature of silence can change over time, as historian Jay Winter writes, ‘…silence, like memory and forgetting, has a life history, and – when new pressures or circumstances emerge – can be transformed into its opposite in very rapid order.’ Literature is a key way to understand the past, especially the unsaid and its continuing effects in the present. It is therefore necessary to continue to analyse the use and impact of silences in war fiction, to create a nuanced understanding of war.

The links between historical analyses, trauma theory, and literary theories of silence in this dissertation were forged through my creative practice. Researching silent characters led down parallel paths – one into trauma and literary theory, and another into the historical research into the long-term affects of war. The former explored trauma and silence within a text, the latter explored historical subjects refusing or unable to speak. These paths are parallel as they go through much of the same landscape, not only the event of a particular war, but also ideas of memory and memorials, psychoanalysis and post-traumatic stress disorder, and the importance of fiction in understanding war. In this introductory chapter, I talk about literary theories of silence, trauma theory, and historical analysis together, as important methods for reading and writing silence in Australian war fiction.

Australian war fiction has a history as long as Australian war involvement. Some well known examples include Leonard Mann’s *Flesh in Armour* and Frederick Manning’s *The Middle Parts of Fortune*, about the Great War; Dymphna Cusack’s and Florence James’ *Come in Spinner*, and T.A.G.

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Hungerford’s *The Ridge and the River*, about World War II; and William Nagle’s *The Odd Angry Shot* about the Vietnam War. These novels show Australians in the middle of war. Often, the book begins with the start of service or of a battle and ends with the end of the battle, the tour of duty, or the character’s life. Even *Come In Spinner*, which is a week in the lives of three women in home front Sydney in 1944, does not show life after the war. The contemporary novels I analyse in the following chapters for their use of silence take a much longer view of war. There are scenes of battle and imprisonment, but these are used as part of a wider perspective on the impact of war on the individual. *The Great World* by David Malouf has a prisoner of war experience during World War II as the central war experience, but both main characters, Digger and Vic, are sons of Great War veterans, which profoundly shapes their lives. *The Wing of Night* by Brenda Walker concentrates on the immediate aftermath of the Great War. *After the Fire, a Still Small Voice* by Evie Wyld focuses on the lasting impact of the Vietnam War, although the lineage of the characters’ war involvement includes the Korean War and World War II. Malouf, Walker, and Wyld each have a strong personal connection to the wars they portray – Walker’s grandfather served in World War I, Wyld’s uncle served in Vietnam, and Malouf lived through World War II as a child in Brisbane. But their fictional portrayal of war

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is not bound by the war itself. This is due to a combination of factors – their generational remove from the battlefield, living through different wars themselves, and different social and literary contexts surrounding the writing and publishing of each of the novels. To use Walker as an example, *The Wing of Night* uses her grandfather Ted Walker’s service as inspiration. The author’s mother, Shirley Walker, has also written about Ted in *The Ghost at the Wedding*, a fictionalised memoir of the Walker family from before World War I, through the family’s military service in World Wars I and II, to the late twentieth century. Brenda Walker was born after World War II, the right age to live through conscription for the Vietnam War. The novel itself was published while Australia was involved in conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Although only Ted Walker’s service is listed as inspiration, the layering of different wars through Walker’s personal history and social context cannot help but add to the novel’s long perspective on the conflict. The Miles Franklin winning *My Brother Jack* by George Johnston, perhaps the best-known Australian war novel, could be seen as a bridge between the earlier war novels, such as *Flesh in Armour*, and the three contemporary novels I analyse in the following chapters, namely *The Great World*, *The Wing of Night*, and *After the Fire, a Still Small Voice*. My Brother Jack takes a long view of the impact and influence of the Great War on an ordinary suburban Melbourne family, the Merediths. Narrator David Meredith’s perception of how the war shaped his parents marriage, his home life, Melbourne society and his own future is typical of the writing of post-war generations. But it finishes in the middle of World War II, with David Meredith a star journalist, just as Johnston was. Just as with Cusack and James, Hungerford, Nagle, Mann, and Manning, Johnson does not show post-war life after the war he fought in. The war of the author’s own experience is once again written as ‘now’.

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There are many references to Malouf’s childhood, one such being an interview with Colm Toibin in *Bomb 101* magazine, 2007: http://bombsite.com/issues/101/articles/2947
A definition of silence from literary theory and historical analysis

In the following intense scene from *The Great World* by David Malouf, the slippery, potent, nature of silence is revealed, as well as the reason why it so often remains unbroken. Ellie is playing hide-and-seek with her foster brother Vic and their family. It is in the months after Vic has come home from three years on the Thai-Burma railway as a prisoner of war. Vic is compulsively secretive; when he reveals his true self, the effect is so startling that those who witness it are bound to him:

She was looking past his known face to one she had never seen. It was the one he wore when he was too deep in himself to be aware any longer of what he might have to conceal; the face he showed no one, and which even he had not seen.15

Writing about silence is like Ellie seeing the face behind the known face. Winter defines silence as ‘a socially constructed space in which and about which subjects and words normally used in everyday life are not spoken’.16 A combination of Winter’s definition with Cathy Caruth’s description of trauma as the place between knowing and not-knowing creates a space for silence that lies uneasily between what is known, what is unknown, and what is unknowable.17 Silence can encompass all three states, and sometimes more than one at once. Silence is written into literary works, as characters not speaking or speaking obliquely, or as metaphor, elision, broken chronology and broken syntax – content and formal properties that are integral to the way war is written. Winter writes:

17 “If Freud turns to literature to describe traumatic experiences, it is because literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing”, Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. (Baltimore, Maryland: John Hopkins University Press, 1996), 3.
Silence is not one but many things, and all occupy and frame the landscape of our remembrance... To speak of silence as a social phenomenon...is to speak of the myriad ways in which we all observe silences, and thereby agree to deal with moral ambiguities, to live with and through contradictions, by both remembering and forgetting the past.\textsuperscript{18}

Winter here makes the link between silence and remembering. He is explicit that the silence is not in the event, but in its communication. Silence lies in the war story, and in the services and commemorations that support and surround that war story. He writes ‘as war evolves, the stories we tell about it evolve in turn’. He argues for an analysis of silence around war as a way to navigate the new terrain of war and violence, to go beyond the ‘moralized and moralizing moment’ of blame and compensation, and ‘to develop a wider vocabulary to explore the sphere of signifying practices in the contemporary world’ – that is, to make our understanding of war more nuanced and multifaceted.\textsuperscript{19} As an expert of the history of the Great War, with a focus on memory and the memorialising practices that followed the war, finding complex and flexible ways of understanding the continuing effects of war is a core concern of Winter’s research.\textsuperscript{20} That he has identified silence as a key practice for understanding war shows that the value of analyzing silence in war is important across disciplines. He identifies three main types of silence – liturgical, such as the silence of remembrance practices; political, such as legal government amnesty in a post war era; and essentialist, where only those who have experienced war have the right to speak about it.\textsuperscript{21} He emphasises that silence and silencing practices are different between cultures, and change over time, thereby making the study of silence around war a continuing and constant practice. Winter makes a point of addressing writers as a group that deals specifically with silence, ‘Are writers

\textsuperscript{18} Winter, “Thinking about silence”, 31.
\textsuperscript{19} Winter, “Thinking about silence”, 11, 13.
\textsuperscript{21} Winter, “Thinking about silence”, 4-5.
among the unseen legislators of rules about silence? Do they help us break it? …the realm of silence with which writers deal is imbedded in complex social practices of specifying and obeying codes of delicacy or tact.\textsuperscript{22} In other words, we must recognize the codes in order to read the silence. His specific focus on silence around war, his definition of silence as having multiple flexible parts, and of the importance of writers in understanding silence, make his work, and this essay in particular central to the development of my thesis.

Winter’s argument can be used to read other historians who write about war and silence. This is especially useful if they are historians of Australian war history, as it means their use of silence can be used for Australian war fiction. Two such historians are Joy Damousi and Bill Gammage.

In \textit{Living with the Aftermath: Trauma, Nostalgia, and Grief in Post-war Australia}, Joy Damousi directly addresses silence around war in her chapter ‘A Question of Silence’.\textsuperscript{23} Her work is an analysis of identity and memory of war widows, based on the interviews of seventy women. Her discussion of silence focuses on literal silence, the long-term effects of soldier husbands not speaking to their wives about their war experiences. The silences Damousi discusses are straightforward, she establishes the strong connection between silence and war:

Histories of war have often been discussed in relation to questions of silence… What is spoken about and what remains unspoken, form a pervasive pattern in narratives of those who survived atrocities inflicted during the Second World War… the reticence of returned men, their reluctance to speak freely and fluently is now almost a cliché in discussions of ex-soldiers… often, these men remembered in silence…. The silence of survivors has been a powerful motif in the public and private memory of all wars.\textsuperscript{24}

Her portrayal of the silent veteran, while it might be a cliché, is nonetheless crucial for analyzing the silence of soldier characters in war fiction. Damousi

\textsuperscript{22} Winter, Thinking about silence, 14.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid, 99, 100, 107.
quotes many widows saying that their husbands never spoke of their war experience to them, only to other men, or only put it in print. Her work is exclusively on Australian war widows and their Australian husbands, providing an image of the post World War II, post-Korea, and post-Vietnam veteran that can be seen in the characters such as *The Great World’s* Digger and Vic, or Roman and Leon Collard in *After the Fire, a Still Small Voice*. Her chapter on silence comes at the midpoint of her work, a reflection on the loss and grief explored in previous chapters, and a framework for reading the trauma that is explored in the following chapters.

Bill Gammage’s well-known work, *The Broken Years*, focuses on the lives of ordinary Great War soldiers. *The Broken Years* was initially published in 1974 and its aim was to break the silence around everyday experiences of the Great War, ‘the returned men… could rarely convey the enormity of the experience to those who were not there. That huge gulf was clear when I began in the 1960s.’

Republished in 2010 in a glossy illustrated edition, Gammage writes of the continuing silence around these veterans’ war service. This silence persists as ‘most of the voices in *The Broken Years* are on good behaviour’, and he had to read between the lines to understand the true meaning of the letters and diaries, a silence that became reinforced as the soldiers died. Gammage also writes of the enduring personal effect of his research:

> War stalks my life. Old soldiers predicted that… an elder’s warning: ‘The war will never let you go, you know. It will come back at all sorts of times. You finish up enlisting twice, once for the war and once for the nightmares.’… *The Broken Years* has sifted me from most Australians.”

Trauma and silence are not the sole property of the veteran, but part of understanding war and what it means. Gammage’s work is not an exploration of silence, but an uncovering of a significant silence at that point, in the late 1960s when he conducted his research. His portrayal of the Digger is a significant

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26 Ibid, xviii.
27 Ibid, xviii.
revision of the initial sketch by CEW Bean, and therefore an important component in analyzing contemporary Australian war fiction.

These works of historical analysis are necessary for exploring the outline of silence and war in an Australian context. However, within a literary-critical context, they are most useful when they fit within Winter’s analysis of silence and war; in particular, the way they can combine with trauma theory to provide a framework for reading silence in war fiction. Winter’s three part definition of silence in relation to war can be added to ideas of silence and trauma within literature, to create a practice for reading and understanding silence, silence that is unstable, provocative, and pervasive.

Many ideas about silence can be found in the work of trauma and memory theorists. Described and debated as the unknowable gap, the missed event, the event without a witness, the collapse of witnessing, the collapse of narrative, the collapse of historical referentiality, memory as fixed and literal, memory as symbolic and fluid, interrupted time, and questions of truth, such ideas have been used to create a literary space for and of silence. Yet none of these ideas by itself, or all together, can define silence. An unknowable space is bordered by several ideas, because to be contained by one idea would make it known. If silence is a space for the unknowable, then it must have flexible boundaries, porous borders that can absorb or expel new ideas and individual actions.

Shoshana Felman’s analysis of Camus’ The Fall in Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History places silence in the event itself as the missed event. Events that are missed, that have no witness, lead inevitably to a discussion of silence, of what is not said because it is not fully known. Felman’s extensive discussion of Camus’ The Fall explores the notion of a legacy of silence, and ‘the ways in which one silence masks another… The suicide scene [in The Fall] becomes a figure for historical occasions in which silence reasserts itself, a metaphor for history as the assertion and reassertion – as the displacement and the repetition – of a silence.’

Felman writes about a concrete missed event: the narrator of *The Fall* does not see the suicide – the jump into the river, the eponymous ‘fall’ – that becomes the central traumatic moment of the novel. Not all missed events are so concrete. Felman wrote *Testimony* with Dori Laub, a psychologist and Holocaust survivor. Laub writes instead of the collapse of witnessing in relation to the Holocaust – that the Holocaust is an event without a witness, as ‘Not only… did the Nazis try to exterminate the physical witnesses of their crime; but the inherently incomprehensible and deceptive psychological structure of the event precluded its own witnessing, even by its victims.’

Laub’s chapters are not a discussion of literature, but of the testimony presented to him as a founder of the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies. His inclusion in *Testimony* is precisely to do with the specific view of the Holocaust as an event without a witness, a view that Felman finds in works such as Camus’ *The Fall*. Felman also combines the idea of the missed event with the idea of the collapse of witnessing through a discussion of Claude Lanzmann’s film *Shoah*. Many witnesses in the film refuse to or cannot see the extent of the Holocaust and their participation in it. Silence is embedded in their memory of the Holocaust, from a literal obstruction of their ability to witness, to a verbal and metaphoric one.

Caruth in *Unclaimed Experience* places the missed event in more abstract terms. She writes of the belatedness of the remembered experience and of the metaphoric porosity this establishes through traumatic memory. The idea of belatedness is shown through the image of the wound, which serves as a focus for the literary analysis of trauma. Caruth identifies a gap between the event that

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30 The missed event in *The Fall* can be found on pages 165-166. Dori Laub’s collapse of witnessing can be found on pages 80 and 83-84. The discussion of silence in the film *Shoah* can be found on pages 207-211.
31 Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 4, 37, 62. Caruth introduces the idea of belatedness in an earlier work, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, an edited volume that has a much stronger focus on post-traumatic stress disorder and psychoanalytical interpretations of trauma. It has a more physical or literal understanding of trauma. Although her predominantly literary analysis of trauma is clearly in development in this volume, along with essays from Felman, it is in *Unclaimed Experience* that her idea is thoroughly explored, is more literary in its analysis and examples, and is therefore more relevant to this thesis. Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1995, 13-60, 236-255.
caused the trauma and the traumatic actions or symptoms of trauma.\textsuperscript{32} This could be a gap in the text, a gap in consciousness, a gap in awareness, or any combination of these, where the traumatic event is imprinted, stamped in the memory in its literal entirety.\textsuperscript{33} Caruth refers to the gap as a wound:

the wound of the mind – the breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world – is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that…is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor.\textsuperscript{34}

The image of the wound is extended, and the repeated actions and nightmares that are typical of trauma survivors are portrayed as the psychic wound ‘bleeding’ into awareness. But unlike a physical wound, which is an entrance to a known and knowable quantity, the psychic wound leads to an abyss, where truth is not, and cannot, be known: ‘What returns to haunt the victim…is not only the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known’.\textsuperscript{35} Trauma must be interrogated in ‘a language that defies, even as it claims, our understanding’, as ‘Through the notion of trauma… we can understand that a rethinking of reference is aimed not at eliminating history but at resituating it in our understanding, that is, at precisely permitting history to arise where immediate understanding may not.’\textsuperscript{36} That is, you cannot read trauma without also reading silence. This unknowable space, this silence, is integral to Caruth’s idea of trauma in literature.

Placing silence in the event, and conflating the text and the event, are central to trauma theory. The ideas that silence is, and is not, in the event are

\textsuperscript{32} For example: “The father must receive the dead child’s words. But the only way truly to hear is now by listening not as a living father listens to a living child, but as the one who receives the very gap between the other’s death and his own life, the one who, in awakening, does not see but enacts the impact of the very difference between death and life.” Caruth, \textit{Unclaimed Experience}, 106.\textsuperscript{33} Caruth, \textit{Trauma: Explorations in Memory}, 5.\textsuperscript{34} Caruth, \textit{Unclaimed Experience}, 4.\textsuperscript{35} Ibid, 6.\textsuperscript{36} Ibid, 5, 11, emphasis author’s own.
irreconcilable, yet together they provide a fruitful dynamic for exploring silence within literature. These opposing ideas make silence a fluid state that can encompass both the subject of a novel, such as a traumatised character or a mystery, as well as its structural and technical elements, such as the use of metaphor, elision, broken chronology, irony, and understatement. Far from being destructive, the instability created by the is-and-is-not dynamic can itself reveal how silences work within a novel.

Elisabeth Marie Loevlie argues for this fluidity in her work *Literary Silences in Pascal, Rousseau, and Beckett*.³⁷ The idea of silence being a movement or dynamic is central to her work. Loevlie argues that language creates a very particular type of silence, a silence that is only available through literature and that is part of literature. Silence is not the dualistic opposite of speech but part of speech. Loevlie stresses the idea of a specifically literary silence, where silence is woven into the syntax, that is not only part of the meaning, but is the meaning of the literary work. She writes:

> Literary silence is literary exactly because it arises through the literary, not as the unsaid, but as a dynamic of the literary said. Literary silence is therefore better thought of as inside language, rather than outside it; as coming through literary language, rather than existing beside it… Silence is not the other of language, not in the gaps, not at the end of the text; it is the result of the text itself.³⁸

Loevlie argues that silence is not found by literature but created by it. She bases her argument on Blanchot’s conception of the relationship between silence and the text, ‘The death of the last writer gives rise to a new noise, a murmur. And it is this murmur that deafens silence… But whereas the individual is incapable of relating to this murmur, literature can….literature…can somehow protect us from this noise and give us silence.’³⁹ That is, only literature can mediate and shape the incessant murmur of ‘raw silence’ that is continually present, therefore

³⁹ Ibid, 27.
only literature can create silence.\(^{40}\) She has three main ways of identifying this silence: complex repetition, aporia, and implosion. Complex repetition is not repetition as it is ordinarily understood but to remain in an endless now, a now that is unstable and fluid, that is always on the cusp of becoming stable and static. Aporia is an impasse, where something must be but cannot be, it ‘describes the instance when the positioning of silence as the other of the text destabilises and potentially shifts.’ Implosion is where the text collapses in on itself, by which she means that conventional referential meaning is lost. The text must be experienced in poetic language and not analysed rationally, and language floats and plays with ideas of silence and meaning and meaninglessness. It ‘describes how literary silence changes the relationship between reader and text’: the implosion does not change the text so that it mediates silence, but changes the reader so they can understand silence.\(^{41}\)

All three components of literary silence rely on movement, so Loevlie’s conception of silence is not as an object or event that can be isolated, but the way a text moves and plays with language. This is one way in which Loevlie’s argument reflects those of Felman and Caruth – that silence is in the dynamic of the text. Felman writes of Shoah making ‘the silence speak’ and of Camus’ The Fall as ‘a book not merely about silence, but the way in which one silence masks another.’\(^{42}\) In the introduction to Unclaimed Experience, Caruth explains that her analysis will use one of four main ‘figures of “departure”, “falling”, “burning”, or “awakening”’, all of which are images of movement.\(^{43}\) Caruth writes repeatedly of repetition, another correlation to Loevlie’s analysis that is useful for this thesis.\(^{44}\) Repetition and movement are methods that Malouf, Walker, and Wyld use to write silence into their novels. These methods of writing silence can be seen not only in the content of the novels, but between chapters, between paragraphs, and within sentences, and can be analysed in the space partly outlined by Loevlie, Caruth, and Felman. Loevlie makes no reference to trauma.

\(^{40}\) Ibid, 28.
\(^{41}\) Ibid, 26, 28, 85, 86, 89.
\(^{42}\) Felman & Laub, Testimony, 266, 192.
\(^{43}\) Caruth, Unclaimed Experience, 5.
\(^{44}\) There are many examples of repetition in Caruth’s work. In Unclaimed Experience, a list of these can be found on page 132 of the index. In Trauma: Explorations in Memory, they can be found on pages 7-11, and 151-156.
theory, yet her definition of silence in literature shares many markers with Caruth’s and Felman’s textual trauma.

Caruth and Loevlie both conclude with a metaphoric leap that places their work in a much more complex and nuanced literary world; that places the unsayable at the heart of literature as a powerful force that must be acknowledged.\textsuperscript{45} For my analysis of war fiction, this kind of metaphoric leap – that trauma is literally in the text, or that the text refers to nothing but its own literary silence – is a leap too far. War fiction refers to specific actions and events outside the text – it refers to a war, to the events before and after, and often to the author’s own history of war involvement. Even when silence resides in the text, when it resides between sentences and surfaces within paragraphs, when the structure of the writing embodies the thought processes of trauma or of meaninglessness, these silences are still used to illuminate the process and consequences of war – the silences are not an end in themselves, for if they were, then the fiction would no longer be about war.

Winter’s idea of silence as a potent place where things are not spoken is key to what I regard as the necessity of understanding war through fiction. War punctuates history; it disrupts borders, literal and national, temporal and psychological, and it defines the lives of those who lived through it. Yet it is an experience that is repeatedly met with silence – the silence of a memorial, of traumatised people, of euphemism and propaganda, of the missing and the dead. War fiction is a way to understand this silence and is therefore vital for understanding war and its myriad continuing effects on society. Loevlie uses Maurice Blanchot as a core component of her argument, the idea of ‘raw, unmediated silence’ from \textit{The Space of Literature} as the springboard for her conception of silence being created by the text. Yet even Blanchot’s initial writing on silence came from his experience as a writer and newspaper editor in Nazi-occupied Paris during World War II, publishing ‘The Silence of Writers’ in

\textsuperscript{45} The metaphoric leap applies to Felman to a lesser extent. Her work is about testimony first, and trauma second, so most of her examples relate to a concrete war experience. However, the idea of the unsayable is at the heart of witnessing is fundamental to her work, especially in relation to her analysis of Lanzmann’s \textit{Shoah}. Felman & Laub, \textit{Testimony}, 204-283, especially 266-267.
The connections between silence and war refer back to lived experience, an important component of which is a literal silence. As war and its effects become better understood, the idea of soldier’s heart during the American Civil War becomes a twenty-first century understanding of post-traumatic stress disorder, and the unspeaking veteran’s silence is no longer portrayed as an absence. The veteran writes his or her story, and the silence becomes more nuanced. Authors write work inspired by their parents and grandparents, by the lives of those in their community, and the scope and use of silence becomes as complex as the scope and use of literature. Sometimes this makes the leap into a literature of silence, where the wound is in the text, but mostly it stays grounded in the subject matter of seeing a way through the fog of war.

The grounded nature of silence in war fiction means that even a simple silence, when it connects to war, has the capacity to absorb less obvious silences: for example, the silence created by euphemism and propaganda, or the silence where outrage and protest should appear but instead there are only fragments and absence. George Steiner’s discussions in his collection of essays Language and Silence are one such example. He writes of language in the face of barbarism, the writer’s retreat into silence when confronted with barbarism, and both silence and reading as political acts. He refers most often to Nazism, and the horror that it brought. Steiner wonders, how could the Holocaust happen when the Nazis were so well read? How could German, the language of Goethe, Nietzsche, and Rilke, produce such monstrosity? How can German ever recover, when every German sentence reminds the world of Nazism and its atrocities?

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46 Loevlie, Literary Silences in Pascal, Rousseau, and Beckett, 25-30, 180-192, among many others. Maurice Blanchot, “The Silence of Writers” in Michael Holland, The Blanchot Reader, (Oxford, U.K. and Cambridge, U.S.A.: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1995), 25-28. Winter also uses Blanchot, the aphorism ‘to be silence is still to speak’, from The writing of the disaster, as an epigraph to his chapter ‘Thinking about Silence’. However, rather than being the beginning of a deconstruction of historical writing, he uses the phrase as a potent image to illustrate his idea that silence, in war, is rich and resonant and should not be ignored. He applies to literal silences, as well as to textual ones. Winter, “Thinking about silence”, 3.


Steiner’s discussion of the effect of war on language is mostly found in ‘The Hollow Miracle’, discussing post-war Germany: ‘Agreed,’ he writes, ‘post-war Germany is a miracle… But at the heart, there is a queer stillness… The thing that has gone dead is the German language.\(^49\) Its death can be heard through the use of cliché and jargon, the end of a disease that began with Prussian imperialism in the late nineteenth century and continued through the Great War.\(^50\) His passion for literature and language makes his outrage at its abuse eloquent:

> When the soldiers marched off to the 1914 war, so did the words. The surviving soldiers came back, four years later, harrowed and beaten. In a real sense, the words did not. They remained at the front and built between the German mind and the facts a wall of myth.

> The German language was not innocent of the horrors of Nazism… Nazism found in the language precisely what it needed to give voice to its savagery.

> How should the word ‘spritzen’ recover a sane meaning after having signified to millions the ‘spurting’ of Jewish blood from knife points?

> Use a language to conceive, organize, and justify Belsen… something will happen to the words. Something of the lies and sadism will settle in the marrow of the language… the cancer will begin, and the deep-set destruction. The language will no longer grow and freshen.

> Everything forgets. But not a language… And so far, in history, it is language that has been the vessel of human grace and the prime carrier of civilization.\(^51\)

\(^49\) Ibid, 117. ‘The Hollow Miracle’ is found on pages 117 – 132.

\(^50\) Ibid, 118 and 119.

\(^51\) Ibid, 120, 121, 122, 124, 131-2.
His judgment of German and its speakers is damning as he relentlessly connects language and action. This is not the straightforward silence of Winter, but neither is it fully the abstract silences of Loevlie. Steiner’s discussion has the capacity to absorb both literal and abstract meanings of silence because he argues that the barbarism war is held within language. Memories of war are held within the memories of people who speak German and communicate death; using German means bringing these memories into play, whether explicitly or not. The best post-war German writers play with levels of explicitness; they play with silence, by sometimes bringing Nazism to the forefront, and at other times leaving that history as a memory, a shadow, a chill down the spine of the reader. Steiner writes that ‘languages are living organisms’, capable of growth, of infection and death, and of silence.52

Steiner also discusses language and silence in more general terms in ‘The Retreat from the Word’ and ‘Silence and the Poet’.53 In this latter essay the conception of silence moves closer to Loevlie and trauma theory, as he quotes writers who find ‘living truth’ unsayable under the burden of language that has been used barbarically.54 Perhaps, then, there is something about the atrocities of World War II, their effect on the imagination, on memory and our ideas of history, that means that the effects of euphemism and propaganda can neither be ignored or accepted, but must be uneasily incorporated into everyday writing. Steiner’s outrage that the project of literature failed leads us to an expanded understanding of silence, as the echoes of barbarism, of action and propaganda as outlined by Steiner, fill the spaces in war writing.

Other theorists of silence, such as Ihab Hassan, or those who discuss silence in relation to other art forms, such as Susan Sontag, have outlined a space for discussing silence. Hassan argues in The Literature of Silence: Henry Miller and Samuel Beckett, ‘Literature, turning against itself, aspires to silence, leaving us with uneasy intimations of outrage and apocalypse’ and writes of ‘the silence

53 ‘The Retreat from the Word’ is found on pages 30 to 54. ‘Silence and the Poet’ is found on pages 55 to 74.
54 Ibid, 71-72.
that the new literature whispers in our ears'. 55 He writes of outrage in Henry Miller and nothingness in Beckett as two main types of silence, but like Loevlie’s discussion of Beckett, these cannot easily be applied to war fiction. In *The Aesthetics of Silence*, Sontag writes how ‘Silence is the artist’s ultimate other-worldly gesture: by silence, he frees himself from servile bondage to the world’; silence, here, is against speech. 56 But she also writes that ‘Silence remains, inescapably, a form of speech…and an element in a dialogue’. 57 Sontag’s conception of silence is that it is both literal and abstract. Silence is an action, an aspiration, a decision, it has a long history in art and yet it is utterly modern. However, Sontag’s view of silence is too general and too abstract, talking of silence in Art but not how that relates to silence in everyday life, so that its usefulness is limited to my concerns in this thesis.

One thing that does unite these separate theorists of silence is style. The is-and-is-not style of argument of Caruth, Laub and Felman creates a template for understanding silence as much as the subject matter of their analysis. The elegant rhetorical style of Caruth and Felman is as much part of trauma theory as their discussions of Freud and the Holocaust. 58 It is the movement between ‘is’ and ‘is-not’ that elaborates the silences, as the rich metaphoric space between the facts or between two interpretations of an event. Similarly Loevlie’s gradual layering of precise terms for something as slippery as silence, Steiner’s outrage and Sontag’s wit equally provide ways for thinking about, and in particular writing about, what is silent, silenced, and unsayable.

None of these theorists discusses silence in an Australian context, and this is where the insights in Bernadette Brennan’s doctoral thesis, *The Wounds of Possibility: Reading absence and silence in some contemporary Australian* 55

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57 Ibid, 11.
writing have particular relevance. Her work was a foundational text in researching silence within Australian literature, and only the fact that I have tried to delimit my discussions to war, war fiction, and trauma, has placed its analysis near the end. However, as a concluding text, there could be none more pertinent.

Her use of disparate sources in her introduction – from philosophy and poetry to musicology, history and visual art – to define both a space for silence and a practice for reading it, have influenced my own practice of both reading and writing silence within fiction. Her introduction shows how a space for silence could be constructed in a way that is scholarly, but still allows enough room for artistic interpretation, a theoretical framework that is flexible enough to support creative practice. Her discussion of Australian literature is broader than mine, and her introduction is correspondingly broader in its use of theoretical material, including an exploration of philosophical texts on absence as well as silence.

Like Caruth and Loevlie, Brennan places silence in the dynamic of a text. Writing of both absence and silence, she argues:

They are multi-layered and multifaceted terms which resist attempts to frame them or sharply define their focus. Theirs is a dynamic, interactive relationship. At times they function as related but separate terms, at others they slide into and over one another to become loosely interchangeable. As elements of art or literature, absence and silence can perhaps best be read as movable points on a continuum and understood, or rather, experienced, by the way they operate, by their effect.

Silence resists, it must be experienced, it slides into absence – these ideas could easily describe Loevlie’s complex repetition or Caruth’s textual wound. While Brennan’s introduction, with its clear writing and disparate use of sources, had an impact on my creative practice, her dissertation had a more profound impact on the way I read and analysed silence in Australian literature. After exploring

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59 Bernadette Brennan, “The Wounds of Possibility: Reading absence and silence in some contemporary Australian writing” (PhD diss., University of Sydney, 2001)

60 Ibid, 2.
silence and absence in music and painting, she addresses directly the imperative for reading silence and absence, because ‘the implicit or unspoken dimension of a text… qualifies or transforms that which is said and it stimulates the reader into active participation with the text.’ This definition establishes the necessity of reading silence in war fiction, a necessity that becomes more forceful through her reading of Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families, colloquially known as the Stolen Generations Report. Her analysis of the Stolen Generations Report moves away from the ‘creative and comfortable’ literary criticism of silence in Francis Webb and Brian Castro, to ‘“The Great Australian Silence” of Australian Aboriginal dispossession and oppression.’ Brennan’s incorporation of both subtle literary silences and destructive historical ones in her thesis serves as a counter-point to trauma theory. Felman’s analysis of Holocaust trauma focused on Europe and America, and is connected Australian war fiction only through the global nature of World War II. An analysis of silence in Bringing Them Home puts this imperative of reading silence in writings of historical events into a uniquely Australian framework. By doing so, the thesis implicitly argues that it is within this framework that these works must be read, regardless of their application to other countries and cultures, as it is here that the silences have most power, most resonance, and therefore most relevance. The inclusion of Webb, Castro, and a government report in Brennan’s thesis convincingly argues for the importance of reading and of understanding silence, and for reading these silences in Australian writing – arguments that are central to my dissertation.

Using the variegated understanding of silence as outlined in this chapter, I explore silence in relation to trauma and war in the chapters that follow. They offer close analyses of The Great World by David Malouf, exploring silence and male intimacy; The Wing of Night by Brenda Walker, exploring poetic language and trauma; and After the Fire, a Still Small Voice by Evie Wyld, exploring a structural silence that houses a family legacy of trauma and silence.

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61 Ibid, 11.
62 Ibid, 33. Her analysis of Bringing Them Home can be found on pages 190 – 270.
The Great World by David Malouf

...there grew up between them a relationship that was so full of intimate and no longer shameful revelations that they lost all sense of difference.

It wasn’t a friendship exactly – you choose your friends. This was different; more or less, who could say? There was no name for it.⁶³

In The Great World (TGW) by David Malouf, silence around the trauma of war becomes part of a general reticence around the things that matter. The war experience is the ‘organising referent,’ the ultimate example of life lived within silence, and thus becomes the yardstick of everything before and after.⁶⁴ Malouf is concerned with the stories behind the official history, with the nuances of daily life, with the ordinary men behind the heroic images. TGW looks at the lives of two men, Digger and Vic. It moves from their childhoods, to their meeting as soldiers after the fall of Singapore in 1941, through their years as prisoners of war (POW) on the Thai-Burma railway, to the rest of their post-war life in and around Sydney.

It is the force of all that remains unspoken that is thoroughly explored in this novel.⁶⁵ The trauma of war, and the subtle shifts in power and human relationships that come with the experience, are part of a larger picture where all that is most important and most potent remains silent. This force initially separates the two men, but once they meet again, it binds them more firmly than any civilian relationship. From their shared experiences as prisoners of war, Digger’s and Vic’s friendship develops in a way that accepts everything, yet acknowledges almost nothing. The years as POWs confirm the necessity of things remaining unspoken. This begins when Digger wakes from a malarial

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⁶³ David Malouf, The Great World (London: Chatto & Windus Ltd, 1990), 134. All subsequent in-text references are to this edition of The Great World.
fever and Vic is eating Digger’s rice as well as his own, to when he first meets up with Vic after the war and relapses into a fever with the weight of memory, to the moments they sit outside Digger’s country shack in companionable silence (133; 190-193; 7). The important events in their lives are too powerful to be discussed – either the reference to it would plunge them back into those times, or else discussion of it would turn the unspoken into something else, thereby dishonoring it or nullifying it. However, it is not just that breaking the silence would change the nature of how they understand each other. The intimacy they share in silence is so powerful that they cannot come near to breaking it without also breaking a part of themselves; in particular, who they became once they had abandoned the protective layers of social self in order to survive the war. Their silence protects them, and protects the power of the knowledge they share.

Close reading of particular scenes is necessary to distinguish and recognise the silences. Silence often resides in the slippages between phrases, in the gaps between words, in a gesture or a look. These slippages and gestures are never fully excavated and explained – an essence of the silence, some integral ineffability of the war experience, of human relationships and of literature, remains within the tale and the telling.

The pivotal scene in the novel in is Thailand, at the edge of the POW camp. Digger is found to be a cholera carrier and is quarantined with the other desperately ill men. While in quarantine an ulcer on his foot becomes gangrenous, deteriorating until he can no longer walk. One night Vic saves Digger’s life by taking him to the river so his rotting flesh can be eaten away by carnivorous fish. Standing in the river, they cannot help but connect their wasted bodies to the fish, the water, and the stars above the canopy:

When he came back into himself and looked about he was standing knee deep in oily water, stars overhead, so close he could hear them grinding, and he could hear the tiny jaws of the fishes grinding too, as starlight touched their backs and they swarmed and fought and churned the blackness to a frenzy round his shins.

‘Did any of that happen?’ he asked Vic later, when they lay exhausted in the dark.
‘Yes, it happened, an’ it’ll save us. I told you it would. It works.’

(161-2)

This is almost exactly in the centre of the book and is the moment, deep within the experience of ‘up there’, that cements Vic and Digger’s intimacy. In character terms, the scene is secreted within many layers – the POW camps are hidden from the world, the cholera isolation ward hidden from the working parties (156), the hospitalised men are hidden from the ones who can still walk, and when Vic takes Digger to the river it is just the two of them. The experience is intensely private, physical, and close to death – they are concealed from everyone else, but they reveal everything to each other, as Vic struggles to haul them both out of the twilight place of near-death into the daily grind of the camps.

This scene is pivotal because it is so intimate. Both men are acutely aware of not just the possibility but the likelihood of their own death. They inhabit a liminal world where social niceties and mental armour of ordinary life are rendered useless. There is nothing left for them to conceal from each other and no point even if there was anything to conceal – they are at rock bottom, at the furthest edge of life. The limits of their world are porous, yesterday and tomorrow infiltrate today (158, 159), and just as other times wash into the present so do their personalities connect with each other. They feel the weight and shape of their own and each other’s death (159, 160, 161); they will never again feel anything so fundamental, elemental and raw. But within this, even when death is as tangible as smell, they reach towards what has life and brings life. Digger hears the stars and Vic concentrates on the fish, the water and the air mingling on the surface of the river (160) that washes away their disease and dirt. However, it cannot wash away the memory of their closeness. In this twilight place their emotional space expands, their revelation of each other coming to include the whole world, moving past the borders of what is possible to the point

66 Neilsen explores the ideas of boundaries in *TGW* as ‘places of special possibility’ that may also function as a ‘site of transformation or transcendence’ (Neilsen, *Imagined Lives*, 179-180, 186), which is similar to how they function in relation to silence. Although Randall uses the idea of boundaries in terms of language, the context of post-colonial theory makes his usage less relevant to this discussion (Randall, *David Malouf*, 190).
where the grinding of stars and the gnashing of the fish’s teeth are audible. The
narrow physical space and bodily disintegration is reversed to become an
expansive moment of wonder and understanding, surpassing their literal physical
boundaries and achieving a communion with nature and with each other. They
stand at the junction between life and death, and the moment binds them
irreversibly together.

Throughout the second half of the novel, there is a lot of ‘up there’ that
Digger and Vic can refer to – the lists they make to keep their memories alive
(148-150), their catalogue of strange illnesses (139-142), and Mac’s death at the
beginning of their imprisonment that forces them to depend on each other (120-
125). This moment ties it all together – the physical to the mental, to time,
history, grief, and trauma – and leads them out of the nightmare of the camps
into the long convalescence of peace. When Vic has the shakes and needs to see
Digger (205-6), it is this moment that serves as an anchor to his identity – when
they were both at their utter lowest, and yet complete and whole within their
intimacy, ‘the opposite poles of a single magnet that sets up a field of force
embracing the whole world’.67

This scene is also representative of silence, as most of the communication
between the two men is with touch. Vic talks to Digger, repeating little
encouragements, but mostly what he says is simply Digger’s name – fourteen
times in three pages, until Digger thinks ‘For Christ’s sake… doesn’ ‘e know any
other name?’ (159). What he is saying, in effect, is nothing, his words have
another purpose – to call Digger back into the world. This leaves other things to
communicate more strongly, such as Vic’s arm around Digger, the mud and
slime of the river, the stench of their bodies, the tickle of the fish. Speech is of
the world, but when it becomes babble it becomes part of the soundscape of the
river. It lets Digger hear what he cannot possibly literally hear – the grinding of
stars and the grinding of the fish against his legs – and for Vic to take this
imaginative leap with him. Yet they are as aware of those sounds as they are of
the river and of their own pain, it is intrinsic to their experience.

67 Peter Knox-Shaw, “Malouf’s Epic and the Unravelling of a National
When a touch is translated into speech it is often ambiguous, but communicating through touch is very direct. In this scene, touch bypasses words and the social sphere that words are part of, and communicates directly with emotions. It is personal, individual and most of all, intimate. In a society where there were few acceptable ways for men to touch one another, only in a situation such as this can Digger and Vic achieve this kind of touch-based intimacy. The visceral, disgusting description of their bodies is not only part of it, it is an essential to its manifestation, ‘the grounds upon which the intimacy is built.’

In order to survive, they must touch in each other what is most repellant in themselves, and they must acknowledge, even if only for a moment, that this repellant thing needs healing and that they cannot heal themselves. This touch can only be granted and accepted in an environment so devoid of human interference, and so resistant to it (156-7), that their reduction is not degradation but a gateway to a new understanding. It lets them experience the sensuality of death through the detail of death’s physical manifestation. The smell and taste of death is new to them, and together they discover how death can take shape within a body. The physicality of their impending death is as individual and detailed as their lives, and the knowledge of this is more intimate than any other physical knowledge.

Just as the disgusting nature of their bodies is a necessary component of their intimacy, so is the hardship of war, with the accompanying shame of being a prisoner (120). War was men’s domain (and arguably still is) and the camps even more so, without even the feminine influence of a local population, a nursing corps or letters from home. Being a prisoner of war was seen as shameful, as it did not fit the active, battle-hardened Anzac warrior image – it was seen as passive and feminised. This shame is reinforced by the fact they were prisoners of the Japanese, a people who were regarded as racially inferior. They were made to be ‘white coolies’, doing the work that previously only belonged to the colonised indigenous population:

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‘If they keep feedin’ us this much, and we keep eatin’ it, our eyes’ll go slanty. Dja know that? This professor tol’ me. It’s what the bastards want! T’make fucken coolies of us. They hate white men.’

Digger frowned. Was he crazy? (113)

This comes at the beginning of their captivity, the other men in the division having nothing better to do than to repeat wild rumours. ‘This was despondency in its physical form, so childish and shameful that grown men wept at it. ‘I hate this,’ Digger told himself.’ (111). The burlesque language shows that this is not an opinion that Digger shares, but the fact that it is represented shows how prevalent this attitude was.69 A shared knowledge of this shame, and of their participation in it, is a binding factor in the men as a group, but for Digger and Vic this type of social shame was incidental. Their shame is personal and individual – Vic feels that his youth has been taken away (120) and Digger feels he should have saved Mac (128-9). By being personal, their shame can be ameliorated through touch. This touch is transformative but it has no proper context outside the camps, it must remain silent.

This section is like a passage from one state of being to another. Safe passage – that is, making it back to the living and then home to Australia – is dependent on them being aware of the stars and the fish. This awareness is symbolic of a new understanding of the world, of both its detail and majesty, and how they fit into it. But more that this, it is symbolic of losing the last vestiges of their pre-war selves, including the anger and shame of all that has happened in the camps, so they can properly inhabit their post-war selves. This passage cannot be

achieved through language, but only by being open to the possibilities and ambiguities of a moment and a place without words. They are aware of different things, according to their natures, but their awareness comes when they are together – silence and intimacy cannot now be separated.

The fact that Digger does not recognise what Vic is doing is part of the twilight world that Digger inhabits, that Vic has to enter in order to haul Digger back. Digger hears his mother’s tone in Vic’s voice (158), just as in his fevers it is his mother who yells at him and refuses to let him die (136-7). Similarly, Digger does not sink when he falls in the river – ‘in his own case gravity did not function’ (159) – the ordinary laws of physics are suspended in this out-of-time place. But while gravity doesn’t seem to work on the river, it works overtime when Vic tries to lift Digger. ‘Vic was astonished. Digger was just skin and bone but the weight of him was enormous.’ (160). But in keeping with the idea of liminality, this is not because Digger has no capacity to lift himself or that Vic is also so wasted that he has little strength left, but because Digger carries in his body ‘the weight of death, heavy as lead’ (160). It is not only Digger who carries this weight, but Vic as well: ‘he felt that part of him stank worse even than this river-slime, and had the stink of a dead body. He was carrying the beginnings of a dead body along with this live one.’ (159). This is what makes Digger so heavy – each man has two bodies, one dead and one living. It is not just Vic who supports Digger, they support each other (160), and are supported again by their comprehension of their intimate connection to each other and the place:

Digger rolled his head a little. There were stars, big ones, very close… They were heavy, he knew that. Tons and tons of gas and luminous minerals burning, rolling, travelling fast but managing to stay up. The weight of them, that light balancing act, was an encouragement. (160)

and

Vic too was in a kind of wonder at it… The stars high up, so still; and underwater there, in what seemed like silence but wouldn’t be, close up, the jaws fighting for their share of the feast. And all you felt from
up here, from this distance, was a pleasant *contact*. The touch of their savagery was soft. (161; emphasis author’s own)

Their views are both typical and atypical of their natures. Digger is the dreamer, he sees the stars – Vic is the realist, he is focused on the river. But Digger is obsessed, almost possessed by detail (227-228, 297), he remembers the name of every man in the unit (149-150), and his most fervent wish when he returns to Australia is to bring back everything that was lost – in his head, if that is the only place where it can be resurrected (179, 187-188). Yet here he looks at the bigger picture, he wonders at the immensity of the stars and the ordinary magic of energy and light. This wonder at the ordinary magic present in the macro level of life becomes Vic’s domain, where he marvels at and revels in the way his business dealings and his personal energy become one (253-259). But here, he concentrates on the tiny detail, looking at the level of the fish’s jaws and the minute threads of interconnectivity. It is as though they have swapped perspectives for a moment, and back again; only in this moment could it happen, when the borders between things are so porous, and it could only happen without language, without the markers of the social, human world.

That this is without language becomes explicit later:

There were times, up there, when they might have known all there was to know about one another, things you’d never find out about a man, never have to, in the ordinary run of things. It meant something, that. But back here, at the edge of normality, these were matters that could not be alluded to. (167)

This becomes the struggle – their experience of the camps means that back in Australia they are often on the edge of normality. The memory of the experience is close, as a nightmare or a relapse of fever or just an image, but cannot be spoken about. This is partly because the remembrance that they were so degraded is shameful, and partly because of the pain of having so many fellow soldiers die due to their treatment. But it is also because the knowledge that they acquired of each other is more than they can openly admit to themselves, and the fact that another man holds the kind of power that knowledge brings is almost unbearable.
As Vic knows, ‘[Ellie] had seen him… Only one other person had ever seen him like that, and that was different. It was a man. It put you at risk, of course, but Digger had not let him down.’ (224). To make that knowledge, and therefore that power, explicit, would be to break all the trust between them, would be to betray the intimacy. The intimacy is what holds them together – both holds Vic and Digger to each other, and stops their memories becoming traumatic – so to betray this intimacy would be to betray themselves. Their survival depends on their silence.

Death, shame and masculinity make a potent mix for a relationship. This chapter shows ‘the fierce flip-flop of inside-outside’ where ‘Imagination… dwells full in the body…a sensuous, sensual space… suffused with libido.’ It is the intensely physical nature of these things and the sensuality of their description that gives this scene in the river a charge of eroticism and makes it ‘suffused with libido’. Death is not an abstract concept, but visceral, it can be smelt and touched in the form of Digger’s gangrenous ulcer, their emaciated figures, the stink of their unwashed sweat beginning to decompose on their skin. Their death is a product of their degradation, but by dissolving their social selves, their situation makes their death a natural process, which can be reversed by another natural process – the fish eating their dead skin. This process occurs in a natural setting, but one that is dramatic (this is no pastoral idyll), meaning the natural process is not a gradual movement towards harmony but sudden metamorphosis. Vic’s insistence on life forces a confrontation with death. It forces them to know intimately the detail of their own and each other’s bodies, a detail they had previously ignored (142-44). At the same time this insistence on life pushes death, and its accompanying eroticism, into the background – once they have survived the camps, the knowledge is useless. What remains is the memory of this knowledge and the physical nature of their intimacy, and only in silence and with silence can they achieve it. Intimate silence, and silent intimacy, is the foundation of their post-war identities.

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The scene of the wedding between Vic and Ellie shows how this intimacy is played out in a post-war setting. This chapter shows many of the different types of silences that Malouf uses in *TGW*, as well as the links between silence and history, memory, and identity. Vic is an orphan, originally from a poor, coal-mining family in Newcastle who, at age twelve, goes to live with the Warrenders – Vic’s father was Pa Warrender’s batman in World War I. When Vic returns from the camps, he marries Ellie, the younger of the two Warrender sisters. They have their reception in the garden of the family home at Strathfield, ‘with its turrets and the big hallway laid with blue, white and brown terracotta tiles and lit with a fanlight,’ (233) the typical Federation mansion. The chapter has several scenes, all of which use the wedding reception to show the intimacy between Digger and Vic, and how this intimacy can only reside in silence. However, the pinnacle of the chapter is the moment where Vic eats his wedding cake as though it was rice in the POW camps:

Then, with a gesture Digger had seen him make a thousand times, but under very different circumstances, he tilted his head back, cupped his palm, and, very careful not to lose any, let the crumbs and mixed fruit roll back into his mouth.

It was utterly characteristic. That, his concern not to let a single crumb get lost, and the way too, when he tilted his head back, that his whole throat was bared, gave so much away to anyone who could feel it that Digger found himself choked. All the resentment he had felt went right out of him.

Vic…then looked up, half-shy, as if he had been caught at something, and they were back immediately in an intimacy that was so strong, and appealed to something so deep in both of them, that they had to draw back from it. (238-9)

This moment is unremarkable from the outside – two young men standing next to each other eating cake. Yet it reveals all the ways that they are bound together, in particular how their war experience has shaped them and made their friendship the most important relationship of their lives.
Digger had been upset at the wedding. The house and the reception appeared grand and opulent to him, a wealth that Vic had never mentioned and Digger was unprepared for. ‘He had taken it for granted that Vic’s people would be like his own’ (233), not realising that Vic comes from just the same poverty as Digger, and his place in the house, and this life, is an accident. This sets up the first silence, of mismatched expectations and the disjunct between who Digger knows Vic to be and the material facts of Vic’s life. What Digger knows of Vic is essential and untouchable, but borne out of degradation and suffering. Vic’s relatively wealthy Sydney life takes Digger by surprise, and this surprise turns into resentment – that Vic had lied to him, or that all the knowledge they had of each other had been betrayed:

Not the least sign now, Digger thought, of the close-cropped, half-crazy character who had come to him at the Crossing. When was that – two months ago? No sign in fact of anything Digger had known of him, or of any of the things they had been through… all this appeared to make nothing of what he had been, what they had both been, just a year ago. It denied that as if it had never been.

Digger felt injured, and not just on his own part, but strangely enough on Vic’s part too, the Vic he had once been close to. (234; emphasis author’s own)

That is, until Vic eats his cake like camp rice. No one else would recognise this gesture, it is performed only for Digger and only through Digger is it given meaning, purpose and context. It shows not only how they both survived physically, but how they depended, and continue to depend, on one another – through the recognition, and therefore protection, of each other’s vulnerabilities. Vic bares his throat literally but metaphorically as well, opening up his weakest point to the one man who sees it, who feels the weakest part in himself open up in response, and whose honesty makes him bound to protect it.

For it is not just the gesture of eating the camp rice that catches at Digger, it is Vic’s look as well, ‘half-shy, as if he had been caught at something.’ The gesture softens Digger, dissolves his hurt and reassures him that he had not misunderstood Vic, nor had their intimacy been betrayed. The look is what binds
them together, just as it had in the camps (133). The look shows Digger that there is a part of Vic that will always be that man in the camps, ragged and determined, but only able to succeed if Digger is right next to him. The look itself, however, is ambiguous. It is easy to imagine but hard to define, and Digger’s attempt to unpack it in the following paragraph merely skirts the edges of the power the look contains.

The look has power because it shows the core of who Vic is, the contradictory forces in his nature that compose Vic’s energy and individuality, and that only became apparent during his experience in Thailand. Vic still has the substance of that look, but the POW experience is the only lens through which to see it – not just the components of his character, but how they were earned and formed, what they mean and where they come from. Which means that only Digger sees that particular look; Ellie, Vic’s wife, although she sees Vic exactly as he is, will never see him so deliberately unprotected as Digger does. The look’s potency resides in the fact that it must continually pass through their war experience; it is inseparable from that time. It is too painful, and at this point still too recent (234), to be spoken of. Vic is in the centre of the world, where he is being the most he can be, in a life rich with opportunity. Yet he chooses this moment to remind Digger, and thereby remind himself, of his true nature and the truth of their lives. The look brings meaning to the accident of their lives, and does so through their war experience.

This is why Digger must be a witness to Vic’s life. ‘It was a moment Digger would remember; when he saw clearly, and for the first time, what Vic wanted of him. He was to be one of the witnesses to his life.’ (251). As Felman and Laub write in Testimony, ‘To bear witness is to take responsibility for truth’, and Digger is given this responsibility by Vic.71 Digger has seen the ‘truth’ of Vic – the animal-innocent look (133), the contained power of his youth in the warehouses at the start of their captivity (119), lived with him through the shame and fear, disease and debasement. Most importantly, Digger initially disliked Vic, but was forced to change his mind as their imprisonment continued. Digger’s good regard has been very hard won, and only won by a revelation of all that is finest, and therefore most vulnerable, in Vic’s character (126, 134-5).

71Felman and Laub, Testimony, 204.
The look can only reside in silence. The discovery is too powerful for Digger or Vic to be comfortable acknowledging it, and must remain ‘unspoken, hidden away in those depths within themselves into which Vic and Digger repeatedly descend.’\(^{72}\) It is Vic’s essential self, without any of the protective social coating that Digger sees at the wedding – Vic’s charm and the confidence brought by his family position and his new marriage. Digger’s immutable honesty, his capacity for loyalty (232), and his inability to forget mean that if Vic shows that part of himself to Digger, Digger must respond in kind (252). Digger is incapable of taking advantage of Vic; it would never occur to him to do so, and he would not know what to do even if it did. Digger’s first reaction to Vic opening up is to push this knowledge away. “A man’d be a fool,’ he told himself, ‘to make anything of this.” (239). But the knowledge and the bond touches him; he was transformed by it the first time, and the experience it came from, and the look renews and reminds him of that change. Digger needs it, it has become as integral to him as his extraordinary memory: ‘Still, something was restored between them, and for the moment he was relieved.’ (239). ‘Something’ was restored; Digger cannot name precisely what it is, and in many ways it cannot be named. To name it would be to change it, and part of the look’s integrity, and the integral place that what it represents holds in their lives, is its resilience to material conditions; neither the brutality of the POW camps nor the luxury of a spring wedding can change the look’s power, meaning or bond. Naming it would also remove some of its ambiguity, and another part of the look’s power is that it is more than one emotion, one action, one ‘something’; its ambiguity holds possibility. The look, while potent, is silent and will remain so.

But what is precisely so ‘utterly characteristic’ (238) about the gesture? It is the way it combines vulnerability with ruthlessness, the way it encapsulates two seemingly opposing emotions. In the camps, Vic was ruthless in the way he managed to survive, eating Digger’s rice when Digger was too ill (133), making sure his body got what it needed. But this ruthlessness included Digger, it made sure Digger also had enough to eat, that his brow was cooled in the midst of fever (133), and saved Digger from losing his leg. By including Digger, the ruthlessness changes shape and becomes vulnerability; Vic needs Digger, in

\(^{72}\) Indyk, \textit{David Malouf}, 106.
particular he needs Digger’s recognition, and this need is a point of weakness that must be revealed in order for the need to be addressed. It is the combination of animal cunning and the need for recognition that is so utterly characteristic of Vic, and that is what the gesture reveals. The gesture and the look are a shadow of the ‘close-cropped, half-crazy’ hyphenated character of irreconcilable opposites, a character that is not always noticeable but is always present. That, too, is utterly characteristic – the way Vic displays the look for Digger that is both deliberate and unconscious, the way he uses the look as an affirmation, and the way he carries the half-crazy character around with him so that it informs everything he does.

Digger and Ellie meet for the first time near the end of the wedding, away from the band and the other guests, in a small scene in a quiet part of the garden. They begin a conversation, but are interrupted when Vic notices them together and joins them. It is where Malouf is at his most explicit in what silence between two people might contain. He writes in what Digger understands is their unspoken conversation:

Ellie looked at Digger, made a face, and smiled.

‘Well,’ her look said, ‘that’s that. This is the only moment we’ll have. But that’s all right, isn’t it?’

Digger found that he too was grinning.

‘He’s scared. You know – that we might get on too well together. I mean, of what we might find out – you know, about him, not about one another – if he leaves us alone too long. He’s like that.’

‘I know,’ Digger agreed.

‘He can’t help it.’

‘He’s a difficult cuss.’

‘Oh, you don’t have to tell me.’

These were the thoughts that flew between them. (241)

Digger is much more comfortable with what can be said without words. Often words embarrass him (240, 242), as though speech and subtext operating simultaneously is somehow dishonest, and the truth can only be conveyed in a look and a smile – in silence. Ellie’s few words and gestures make him feel at
ease, as though he can understand her as well as he understands Vic, so that Digger says exactly what he thinks without stopping to consider how it might sound (240).

Yet even here, not everything is explained. As soon as Vic joins them, Ellie says “‘I was just asking Digger to come and see me sometime,’ she said, contradicting what Digger thought had been agreed between them. ‘You will, won’t you, Digger?’” (241). Their silent conversation was certainly imagined, but was their immediate ease with one another an illusion? Had Ellie changed her mind, or was she trying to change the rules of their triangular relationship? Was this the difference between masculine and feminine silence? Or had Ellie’s smile meant nothing more than ‘here comes Vic’? The scene, and the chapter, ends with Digger’s embarrassment and confusion, and this contradiction is left unresolved. If, however, it is like the rest of the wedding chapter, then Ellie’s contradictory statement means all of these things. Their immediate ease is not an illusion, as shown when they strike up a friendship later in the novel (264-7). But Ellie is more comfortable with speech than Digger, and comes from a background of open familial communication that Digger does not know or understand. She has not had the brutal lesson of silence that Digger has had from the war. Not only this, but no one’s world is as ‘dense with causes, possibilities, consequences’ (296), as dense with remembered detail, as Digger’s. Ellie does not see as far into either the past or future as Digger, cannot unravel an entire possible relationship with a smile. The conversation Digger imagines is not a misunderstanding; Ellie means all of this, and understands that Digger has a deep knowledge of Vic. But it is not all that there is to it. Silence continues to reside in the slippages between characters.

What Ellie and Digger really share is an intimacy with Vic, and their friendship comes from the place where their knowledge of Vic overlaps (289). Yet this too encompasses silence. Years later, when Ellie is in despair over the estrangement between Vic and their son Greg, she appeals directly to Digger. Digger denies his relationship with Vic. “‘I don’t know him,’ Digger found himself saying, and he was sorry the moment after. It was true, it was what he felt at the moment, but it seemed like a betrayal. He saw from her look how surprised she was. He was surprised himself.” (289). Digger’s intimacy with Vic can only be directly addressed when they are alone together. When it is brought
into the social world, and in particular a female world, it becomes ambiguous to the point were Digger, never fully at ease with language, feels he does not know Vic at all. His knowledge of Vic cannot reside in a social setting and cannot be articulated – it remains silent.

Malouf does not always make the silences explicit. Often he will get just to the point of describing an emotion, the core of Vic or Digger’s character and then stop, calling this emotion a ‘something’ or simply ‘it’. He traces the edges of the something, so that it is known, it has a place and context, but the thing itself is not defined and made known. For example, take Ellie looking at Vic after her father’s funeral, as Vic sits in Pa Warrender’s study:

He did not see her for a moment. He was seated with a pool of lamplight on the desk before him, his face half-dark. All round the shelves was the flicker of far-off lightning. He did not look up; he was not aware of her. In the moment before he turned, all that she knew of him was confirmed. (288)

But what exactly is it in him that Ellie knows? There are a number of aspects of Vic’s character this could allude to. It could be his vulnerability, which he keeps so meticulously hidden, or the relentless reaching for concepts just beyond his grasp. It could also be the ‘guilty-innocent’ look that Digger saw in the POW camps, the naked look that she first saw when they were playing hide-and-seek when he returned from the war. It could be the complete lack of social self that she sees here, and what Ellie knows about him is not a quality of character that she can name, but a recognition of him as vulnerable, and driven by a need for recognition, a need to overcome the ignominy of his past. It is the possibility that this moment could mean all of these things that both makes, and keeps, the silences within this novel. By this stage, several different sides of Vic have been shown, in different contexts and at different stages of his life, so there is plenty of information given on what Ellie might know. But it is not made explicit – we must understand both the knowledge and the type of knowing that Malouf writes about in order to understand the power of Ellie’s observation.

Silence in this novel is in the delicate balance of power in relationships. Not just between characters but the relationships between characters and the world,
both the world as a place full of people, and the world as a place imagined – their memories, their understanding of history, the way they perceive themselves in this web.\textsuperscript{73} Intimacy is the core of the unspoken, and the knowledge acquired in intimacy is unspeakable. This is the lesson that was taught by the war – Digger and Vic cannot name what they know about each other. This expands to include their other relationships too. What Ellie knows about Vic is in a look, and although Vic is aware of her seeing him, they do not discuss it. Vic cannot articulate the fear he feels when he sees his son (290), initially because his son is so small and vulnerable, and then because his son openly adopts the outward appearance of Vic’s previous degradation (271-274). Digger is with his lover Iris for twenty-six years (301), but he is only ever referred to as her friend (280). Iris continues to wear her wedding ring from her previous, short marriage (190), and Digger is not mentioned in her eulogy (300) – his love for Iris remains unspoken to the point of being unacknowledged.

There is one point when Digger and Vic speak about ‘up there’ – towards the end of the novel, when Vic is using Digger as a blind for an unorthodox business deal. But this passage reveals how much Vic had chosen to forget (297-99). Nigel C. Hunt, in \textit{Memory, War and Trauma}, writes that memory is identity, and how Digger and Vic remember their war experience clearly shows this.\textsuperscript{74} Their memories of the war are their interaction with history and show how they conceive of the abstract ‘great world’. Their war experience defines the world for them, and thus the experience shapes not just the content of their memories but their ability to remember, their experience of remembering, and their system of memory, what Randall calls an ‘ethic of memory.’\textsuperscript{75} Digger remembers everything, and he eventually becomes the official record of all the men in their unit (149-50). Vic, on the other hand, lives moment to moment, a conscious decision to deal only with the pain of the present (143-4; 167). This is why the end of the war is so hard on Vic; his single moment must become a series of


\textsuperscript{74} Nigel C. Hunt, \textit{Memory, War and Trauma} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 96.

\textsuperscript{75} Randall, \textit{David Malouf}, 113.
moments, it must become both past and future, and the visions he has had of the future are now upon him (167).

Vic’s saving moment of what Loevlie calls complex repetition again becomes simple repetition, and no longer protective silence. Loevlie’s arguments are about the text performing, embodying, and becoming silence – not silent, but silence itself. Her arguments are specifically not about the content of a novel, rather about the performance of a text. However, I want to apply her arguments to the behaviour of Vic and Digger here. Loevlie writes that silence speaks to itself through the porous membrane of poetic language.\(^76\) I want to make this poetic language the stars and river of Thailand, the natural world a porous membrane between Digger and Vic that confirms their intimacy. This membrane again becomes porous when Vic bares his throat at the wedding, and shows Digger that all times exist simultaneously, and that their intimacy is at the heart of this. Loevlie’s thesis argues against this type of literary analysis, and is adamant that literary silence is experienced through form, not understood through content. But war fiction depends on content, and silence cannot only be present through form, so to use Loevlie’s ideas we must be able to apply them to characters in war fiction. Understanding silence in war fiction depends on the porous membrane between form and content, which means that we can apply at least the essence of her ideas – of the endless now of complex repetition, or the dangerous unmediated silence – to Vic and Digger’s behaviour.

For Digger, this period becomes one among many, but although he doesn’t admit it, it has made him a man who carries the past with him at all times. Whereas Vic has an ever-expanding future, Digger has an ever-expanding past, from the men who lived and died to the dozen years of letters he writes to Ellie (302). Through their system of memory we get their understanding of time. Through this understanding of time we see their participation in history, the connection between destiny and the accident of war – the capricious, random nature of the great world. After Vic’s death, Digger reflects on his friendship with Vic as the result of accident, and yet simultaneously something bigger and deeper:

\(^76\) Loevlie, *Literary Silences in Pascal, Rousseau, and Beckett*, 189.
Curran, Victor Charles, one of a list. But they had, after all and despite all, been as close as any two men could be. How had that happened?

...What they had done... was let the spirit of accident lead them. First the monstrous accident of Mac’s killing, then the stranger one of their physical dependence on one another in the coming and going of their fevers, till what was revealed was something stronger even than their first instinctive hostility; unless that had been, from the start, only the negative sign of a deeper affinity. Which they might have missed, by a long shot too, forty years, if accident had not imposed itself as the true shaper of their lives.

Accident? But what more mysterious force was that the name for in their inadequate language? (327-8)

Accident is the flipside to destiny, or an idea of destiny without narrative or memory – a destiny locked in silence.\(^{77}\) Accident has been the true shaper of their lives as it is their connection with the great world – that they were fighting in Singapore when it fell, that they were made prisoners and that they survived the war – yet what they do with the accident, how they fill out the shape of their lives, turns accident into something like destiny, that makes it more a mysterious force than a random series of events. The fact they imbue the accident with meaning, that they make accident a spirit that leads them into such intimacy and knowledge, makes it no longer an accident. When he returned from the war, Vic spent months labouring and living in dosshouses, as though he might have chosen the life led in Thailand for himself anyway, as a deliberate way of forcing accident to become destiny (204-6). This effort ultimately fails, yet the spirit of it survived and shaped both his and Digger’s lives. For the accident was not so much that they were trapped in hideous conditions – this was the accident of many people’s war. The accident was their intimacy, the revelation of each other and, through each other, themselves – the accident was love. This love gives their lives meaning, and thus the accident of their knowing each other becomes a

mysterious force. Yet this knowledge could not have been gained in any other way other than through this ordeal. The connection between war, suffering, and intimacy is unbreakable.

These unbreakable links mean male intimacy can only be achieved in *extremis*, and the novel uses the war as a metaphorical framework for exploring it. There is little room for masculine intimacy in the ordinary world, but situations like war give it legitimacy. In one sense this is very ‘natural’ – war has been traditionally male, and one of the most enduring aspects of warfare has been the close bond between warriors. In his book *War*, Sebastian Junger analyses the nature of this bond, in his third chapter, “Love”:

> The willingness to die for another person is a form of love that even religions fail to inspire, and the experience of it changes a person profoundly. What the Army sociologists… slowly came to understand was that courage was love. In war, neither could exist without the other.\(^{78}\)

His novel-length work of journalism reports on a platoon of American soldiers fighting in the Korengal Valley, Afghanistan in 2007-08, and his observations come from his experience living and working alongside them. It seems not to matter whether it is Achilles’ grief or the determination of a twenty-first century ‘grunt’, love between men is an integral part of the war experience. However, most of this love comes from a shared experience of combat; as Junger writes, “For some reason there is a profound and mysterious gratification to the reciprocal agreement to protect another person with your life, and combat is virtually the only situation in which that happens regularly.”\(^{79}\) Yet Malouf does not choose combat as the setting for male intimacy. There are no scenes of combat in the novel – the war skips from Digger enlisting to the moments after the fall of Singapore. Samuel Hynes, a literature professor and World War II veteran, is more circumspect about soldierly love, which he terms comradeship: “But though comradeship is accidental, it is intense beyond the likelihood of back-home life… and at critical moments [a soldier’s] life may depend on [his

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\(^{79}\) Junger, *War*, 234.
mates’] fidelity and courage." Combat – the ‘actual killing’ – is often the focus of war stories, and the idea of love is connected to these intense moments. But the POW experience, just as intense, also requiring ‘fidelity and courage’, is not a moment of action, and this change in context changes the nature of masculine intimacy. Long years of slavery required patience and constant attention – when Vic takes Digger to the river, this is not a spectacular moment of battlefield triage but tender hours of slow and careful cleaning, the type of work that was usually left to nurses. No combat, passive imprisonment, slaving for a nation that was regarded as racially inferior, obsessive attention to the bodily details normally left to women – this is not a typical war story situation, and the masculine intimacy that comes from it is not typical either. Australian society had to adjust the Anzac image to accommodate the high numbers of POWs, so that these returned prisoners could also be heroes. Malouf uses this moment of societal change to create a place for masculine intimacy that is both historically believable and defiantly sensual. The war itself may be just a moment to live through for Digger and Vic, but the intimacy that endures through the rest of their lives is shocking.

Love and intimacy, history and destiny are brought into contact and shaped by war through their manifestation of memory and their manipulation of silence. Together, these things hold all their memories, the years ‘up there’, the men who did not return, the subtle shifts in power that form the strength and vibrancy of their bond (6-8, 296-299). With other people – Jenny, Ellie, Iris – their use of silence has a similar, if diluted, quality, it holds much of how they really feel, vastly much more than what they say. Both of them, but especially Digger, expect the people around them to understand their silences, and the people that become important in their lives are the ones who do – Iris knew what Digger wanted before Digger did (183), Ellie sees Vic for who he is and understands it.

http://journals.publishing.monash.edu/ojs/index.php/ha/article/view/ha100058
Silence, as much as memory, becomes part of how they interact with the great world.

Memory, place and identity are closely linked. In TGW, memory is so closely linked to place that the influence of memory is also the influence of place. This is most obvious with the war experience – the war is Thailand, Thailand and ‘up there’ mean the entirety of their war experience, eclipsing the weeks in Singapore and any other fighting they might have done. Coming home means a specific set of behaviours, and how to behave is a major source of anxiety: ‘The prospect of going home scared them… How they could just walk around the streets and pretend to be normal’ (166). For Vic, place and memory are linked through an idea of time. Vic’s difficulty in assimilating Thailand as a place of memory and identity is partly due to the fact he has tried to erase his childhood in Newcastle, the dirt and the helplessness of it – being a POW of the Japanese brings it back. Vic feels he somehow deserves his treatment, it is some kind of payback for the life of ease he has lived with the Warrenders. Digger’s understanding of place is in one sense simpler – he is a country boy from the Hawkesbury and has no desire to be anything else. But in another way it is more complex – Digger always carries the past with him, and each place becomes so dense with detail that it is hard for Digger to move.

Both men try to ignore the link between identity and place – both who they were at home and who they became in Thailand – by avoiding ‘going home’ when they are repatriated after the war. Digger lives in Kings Cross and works as a bouncer, using up the last of the adventurousness that led him to run off and join the circus, then led him to enlist. He writes to his mother and promises to return, but he knows as soon as he does that the responsibility of memory will overwhelm him and he will never leave (198; 229). It is only once Iris is secured as his lover, his link to the great world, that he can return to the Hawkesbury. For Vic, much of his delay in going home has to do with shame. He is ashamed of what happened to him in Thailand – on the one hand it is too much like his former life in Newcastle, with its filth and debasement, but on the other, camp life was so extreme that it is impossible for him to own it. Yet he regularly suffers from bouts of shaking, as though he suffers from a schism in his identity that is a rift between memory and place, and through Digger, memory and place are joined and he can be himself again. However, it is only when he returns to the
family home in Strathfield that he recovers his proper sense of self, and it is the place that restores it: ‘Some impression of his presence had remained here and was waiting to be filled. He could, with no difficulty at all, step into it now as if he had never left.’ (217).

Their lives pre-war were determined by place, and this influences the way they deal with their camp experience. Digger is anxious to see the world because his home is too predictable and quiet. Vic is anxious to be someone influential and wealthy, after the poverty of his first dozen years. These pre-war places become totemic in the camps. When Digger is delusional with fever, he imagines his mother’s voice haranguing him to stay alive, and his early childhood desire to sleep in the dog’s kennel becomes a delusion of becoming the dog (137). Vic is also visited by ghosts, of his alcoholic father at the beginning (127) and of his older foster-sister Lucille at the end (169). All of the men use their pre-war lives as markers for their time in imprisonment (148-151); identity is based on memory, and their memories are bound to place. In a novel dominated by the war and memories of the war, this makes the chapters on their childhoods important, as where they have come from is vital in understanding how the war changed them.

At Pa Warrender’s funeral, a ‘man from the university’ (283) speaks about the role of poetry. The use of poetry, and Digger’s interpretation of it, contains many resonances with silences and the war experience:

How [poetry] spoke up, not always in the plainest terms, since that wasn’t possible, but in precise ones just the same, for what is deeply felt and might otherwise go unrecorded: all those unique and repeatable events, the little sacraments of daily existence, movements of the heart and intimations of the close but inexpressible grandeur and terror of things, that is our other history, the one that goes on, in a quiet way, under the noise and chatter of events… To find words for that; to make glow with significance what is usually unseen, and unspoken too – that, when it occurs, is what binds us all, since it speaks immediately out of the centre of each one of us; giving shape to what we too have experienced and did not till then have words for, though as soon as they are spoken we know them as our own… what
it is that cannot be held on to but nonetheless is not lost. (283-4; emphasis author’s own)

Poetry can find words for what might otherwise be silence. It shows ‘the power of language to complete reality’, giving ‘the other history’ a shape so that even if it is not spoken in precise language, it can be recognised and known. This is what Malouf’s novel is also doing, though on a larger scale. Male intimacy, the accident of the war experience, the closeness of shared suffering, the daily sacraments of remembrance – this is the other history that goes on underneath the big events, a history that is silent until it is given form through poetry. Plain words are not always possible as the content of this silent history is an inseparable mix of emotion and sensory information (192-3; 206; 232). The sense of ‘the inexpressible grandeur and terror of things’ can be felt about both the network of roots at Keen’s Crossing (227-8) or Vic about to make a huge business deal, but whether it looks at the endless detail or a leap into an unknown future, the ‘things’ are not named. All that ‘cannot be held on to but is nonetheless not lost’ encapsulates the way memory works when confronted with death. A few pages before this quote occurs in the text, Vic moves swiftly back from staff member and close friend Meggsie’s illness to Greg’s possible national service in Vietnam to Vic’s own war service to his mother’s death (277-9). None of these things can be properly ‘held on to,’ either metaphorically or physically through mementoes, but nonetheless remain in Vic’s imagination and memory, despite the time that has passed and the pain associated with each event. Death as the ‘closest of all realities’ (279) cannot be held on to – it is either too specific, to die of cholera in Sonkurai – or else too big and amorphous, Vic could not drink a cup of tea and read the paper with a constant awareness of this knowledge. But the awareness of death is not lost, just as the dead men themselves are not lost as long as Digger remembers them – it remains in the unconscious as nightmare, in the body as a relapse of fever, and in daily life as Vic’s fury at Greg walking

83 Randall, David Malouf, 120.
85 Randall, David Malouf, 121.
around without shoes (273-4). It becomes distant in the rebuilding of post-war life, and although it becomes close again once Meggsie and Pa die, it is changed. It is not the simplicity of a physical struggle but a dance with grief and history, and where life and therefore death fit between the personal and the public. Death, coming back to the body and all its surprises, becomes intimate again, and invokes the intimacy that was born ‘up there’:

It went back to that animal-innocent, candidly guilty look he had seen on his face when he was finishing off the second Dixie. It was a look that risked judgement, even invited it, then revealed, through its utter transparency, that there was none to be made. (135)

By utilising silence, by using the connection between the war experience and the unspeakable, poetry is a connecting thread between the social world and the silent knowledge that resides in intimacy.

*The Great World* explores how the lives of a whole generation could be dominated by the forces of what is unspoken. It deals with the main themes of war fiction – death, grief, trauma, memory, time and history – yet the effect of being caught in these abstractions is not the core of the unspoken. Love, intimacy and knowledge subdue the characters into silence – to give voice to the knowledge acquired in silence would be to break the trust between them.
The Wing of Night by Brenda Walker

What do I know? wrote the poet, myself alone. The words lay there, next to the cotton thread and crushed marsupials of home economy. What do I know? myself alone./ a gulf of uncreated night.

But what if the self changed, helplessly? What if the dark self was suddenly bright with unfading fear, or some other feeling that could not be controlled?86

Silence in The Wing of Night can be found in the juxtaposition of images. Between the cotton thread and Christopher Brennan’s poetry, silence lies as an expansive ‘uncreated night’, a gulf that can contain all the ambiguities of identity. It is a space created by placing two unconnected images next to each other to suggest all that is left unsaid. This is done within a sentence, between sentences, and between paragraphs, silence created through ‘slippery’ language.87 This sense of space allows for resonances – for a proliferation of meanings – that are more than the sum of the images. In reviews, both Birns and Stolz write about the movement of time in the novel, as ‘sinuous,’ ‘a symphonic modulation,’ and ‘like stepping-stones across a roiling brook. It is up to the reader to connect the segments.’88 These lines could just as easily apply to the movement and sequence of the imagery. The literary technique used to create a sense of space in this novel is also used to show trauma. Silence and trauma are on a continuum – the more discordant and disconnected the two adjacent images, the more discordant the characters’ thoughts, the space of silence between images widening and changing until it reveals trauma. These formal silences are strengthened by silences in content, such as the characters’ reticence in talking to each other about their emotions, a dearth of letters from the frontline to the

87 Loevlie, Literary Silences in Pascal, Rousseau, and Beckett, 135.
women at home, and the lies, euphemisms and misconceptions that abounded in the early years of World War I. The silences contained within content are fewer than the silences of form. Joe Tully’s post-war trauma is the main purveyor of silence in the novel, and his trauma dominates the second half of the book. Elizabeth Zettler’s silence, a natural reticence made jagged and impenetrable through grief, plays an important part in the first half of the book and in the dynamic of her relationship with Joe.

The significance of these silences is manifold. Firstly, the juxtaposition of images is an effective way of expressing trauma, as it seems to mimic a broken or confused thought pattern. Secondly, when the text closely follows a character’s thought pattern, whether for a traumatised or non-traumatised character, the reader becomes emotionally involved. The substance of the character can be shown economically as the place of silence is the place where the image expands into emotion. Thirdly, the reliance on imagery to create narrative momentum makes the portrayal of place central to the story, making the landscape vibrant and real. Fourthly, the spaces and gaps created by this use of imagery can show more than one emotion or thought at once. They can include trauma and grief, but also the reticence of Edwardian social norms, how everyday sexual behaviour differed from social expectation, the taciturn nature of a typical rural Australian, the utilitarian and understated vocabulary of uneducated people, a sense of the unknown as men leave for war, despair in the field of battle, and the non-linguistic emotional resonances of the Australian bush. The ways in which silence and war – in particular the Australian involvement in war – interact in this novel are subtle and moving. Through Walker’s patterning of images, the turbulence of trauma, grief, war, memory and identity is bounded by, and tied to, the Australian landscape and an Australian social milieu. This can be shown through a close analysis of particular passages.

_The Wing of Night_ is set in south-western Western Australia, some sections in Perth but mostly on a farm further south, outside Bridgetown. Elizabeth Zettler lives on the farm, initially with her husband Louis, then alone once Louis leaves for war and does not return. Joe Tully is from Bridgetown, and he begins a relationship with Bonnie, Elizabeth’s neighbour, before he too leaves for war. Joe survives the war but is deeply traumatised, unable to reunite with Bonnie until it is too late. Bonnie marries Elizabeth’s father, Ramsey, a lawyer in Perth,
and Joe goes to work on Elizabeth’s property. The novel moves from 1915 to 1922, beginning with Louis and Joe leaving for war in February 1915, with the action taking place either in 1915 or post war, in 1920 to 1922.

In July 1921, Joe returns to Bridgetown, partly by accident, and occupies an abandoned hut by the river that runs through Elizabeth’s farm. On the second day he is woken by the two young boys next door, and he relates a story to them about a giant fox that chased him and the other Light Horsemen across the desert during the war. On this ‘blue-grey day. A day for remembering’, Joe ‘settled in one chair and put his feet up on the other. It was good to sit still with an empty belly and wait for the shreds of memories.’ (149-50). The next four pages explore these shreds of memory; through a pattern of images they give a precise measure of Joe’s trauma, how he copes with it, and how the waxing and waning of his traumatic memories rule his life.

From the beginning we see how the vicissitudes of trauma invert Joe’s existence. Rather than feeling good to have a full belly, and sit back and enjoy the pleasure of nostalgia in his hometown, Joe feels good to have an empty belly, to cope with his shreds of memory. The idea of the good empty belly shows that his memories are difficult, and that remembering them has a physical effect – perhaps they make him feel nausea or make him shake, perhaps he needs to recreate the difficult conditions at Gallipoli, perhaps he cannot eat properly due to wounds or injuries from long illness, like Walker’s own grandfather. Walker has mentioned in newspaper articles that she grew up with her Great War veteran grandfather, who suffered ill health from his service, and that this influenced her writing of the novel. This is more thoroughly explored in The Ghost at the Wedding by Shirley Walker, Brenda Walker’s mother, a fictionalised memoir of the older Walker’s mother-in-law Jessie and her life with a Great War veteran. 89 It is not clear why he feels good to have an empty belly, but if food is necessary for life and health, then it becomes a symbol of joy in the present and hope for

the future. The fact that Joe cannot participate in that hope shows the extent of his trauma.

There were such black drifts in his memory. Sometimes when he rubbed his eyes dark clots slid around in his vision. A doctor who explained it to him in the camp in Egypt said it has something to do with the inside of his eye. What Joe saw as immense, as shadows moving before him, was in fact the smallest imperfection deep inside his eye. It meant nothing. It would come and go. He wondered if his memory might be like this. Some small clotting within him made black shadows on his memory, and when he was rested they would clear. He thought it would be a gradual thing. (150)

This kind of movement between the abstract and the concrete, the concrete then coming to represent the abstract, is both typical of Joe’s trauma and Walker’s style in this novel. The shreds of memory are marred by black drifts, or perhaps come in drifts that smother him like black snow. This image, at once suggesting the surreal experience of war in winter for men who have never seen snow, as well as the black-outs and blank spots associated with trauma, becomes something concrete in the next sentence – Joe has a problem with his eyes. The black drift is a literal and verifiable experience that Joe can get medical attention for. But for Joe, everything comes back to the difficulties he has with his memory – the concrete becomes abstract again. The black spot in his eye might mean nothing, but a clotting within his memory becomes ‘immense, as shadows moving before him’, it becomes a shadow of madness. His eye problem clears with rest, but the last line of the paragraph suggests that rest has done nothing to lessen the shadows in his mind. What he thought would be gradually restored to normal is actually a permanent change – he still cannot remember much of the fighting he did, he is plagued by nightmares and hallucinations, and he forgets to eat (144). His real existence in the physical world becomes an imitation of the twilight life he lives on the edge of his memory, rather than his dreams being a simulacrum of his physical life. Through his trauma, the normal pattern of everyday life is inverted.
This paragraph is part of a long sequence of remembering. The movement in this paragraph between the abstract and the concrete is also shown on a bigger scale through the whole sequence, where Joe’s actions mostly serve as a trigger for memories. The next paragraph has the two boys next door playing soldiers, and flow of memory and action run as follows: Joe remembers his pre-war sweetheart – he sees an aeroplane crash in the bush – he remembers the camps and how soldiers tied their identity to interpretations of the landscape – he realises that the aeroplane is a hallucination – he puts paper in the fire and tries to hold on to what is real – he remembers seeing a plane crash in the desert during a fight – he pulls himself back to reality and thinks he might be mad – he remembers his traumatic illness after being wounded in Gallipoli – he decides madness is bearable as long as you keep quiet. Each paragraph shows the layers of silence and war trauma. The two boys pretending to kill each other is an ordinary game, especially as they have just met a returned serviceman. But Joe notices their game, and this aspect of it, instead of the birds singing or the river bubbling – Joe sees violence and death in everything familiar, he cannot separate the ordinary from the ominous. Walker does not write that Joe sees the game as an imitation of war, or that the cries of the boys remind Joe of the cries of fallen comrades. The paragraph only describes the boys, but as the paragraph before was on the war, the connection between the two is clear.

This connection is reaffirmed when Joe ‘suddenly remembered’ something that had nothing to do with war, his being with Bonnie in a shed – ‘suddenly remembered’ indicating that this pleasant memory is unusual. But this pleasant memory also ends up being about the war, as Bonnie was his pre-war sweetheart and he lost her due to his war trauma. In the next paragraph he sees an aeroplane crash in the bush, which he later realises is a hallucination. The aeroplane becomes a symbol of his broken memory, of the intrusion of the war into his post-war life, the alienation he feels being at home and the fact that his pre-war self was destroyed by his service. All his memories come back to the war – ‘the war’ is not so much an experience that Joe endures, but the persistent memories of that time that colour the rest of his life. Talking later about his mother to Elizabeth, he remembers the typhoid that soldiers suffered from, and how their suffering reminded him of his mother (195-6). His mother does not dominate the conversation, his war service does. What he sees, hears and understands around
him is dictated by his war service. In this sequence, he knows the land well, as Bonnie lived here and he worked in the local town. But now he lives in an abandoned hut and does not eat. He uses the familiar backdrop as a place where he lets himself remember, but his memories of the war consume his memories of the place, so all he can see are the boys playing at killing, and his sweet memories of Bonnie turn into dark hallucinations.

The silence is in the gaps between images, between the paragraphs, between sentences, and between clauses. This becomes more obvious in the longer passages, and close reading of this passage will reveal the use of silence within the novel as a whole. The end of the sequence is quoted in full:

The smoke was gone. He blinked. Suddenly he understood that there had been no aeroplane, just as there had been no fox.

Joe got up and crumpled more newspaper into a ball and fed it to the fire. It burned for a moment. He'd load up the firebox with wood soon. But the paper burned with a brief white heat, very hot, which was what he wanted.

He had seen a real aeroplane go into the desert once. After three days of fighting in a cactus thicket. Punching bullet-holes through big fleshy plates of cactus and getting shot at yourself, white wet stuff turning up across your face and chest with the odd cactus spine. Fellows crouched down and flicked it across at each other. In the middle of it he looked up and saw an aeroplane, theirs or ours, spin across the sky. The sand had no spring, no give in it. When something hit, it hit. He felt it, hard. If he could have chosen the thing he’d keep with him later, the thing his mind would reproduce for him, it would be pitching a handful of cactus pulp through the air, not watching an aeroplane go down.

Rats had been living on the beam above the stove. He saw their small beads of waste. He put his hands halfway into the firebox for what was left of the warmth. These things were real. The rats, the coals, the soft drift of ash from the newspaper. The aeroplane wasn’t real. He might be mad.
They said the men were mad, after the reports of riding through the old stone city. Maddened by thirst, they said. A drink of water would set them right. He had been mad after he was blown out of his sniper hole as well. He was strapped into a bed and talked into getting better. Or was he strapped? Did he just lie still? A nerve doctor talked and talked to him. Laid a hand flat on his breastbone.

Being mad was only a problem if you talked. If you kept to yourself you could watch an aeroplane out of the corner of your eye. It wasn’t breaking any branches because it wasn’t real. You could feel the shadow of stonework across your back. You could hope to be standing somewhere, anywhere, standing with your hands in a firebox and a neat pile of animal shit before your eyes and a woman might step up behind you bringing an old sweetness, an old smell of sweetness with her that you thought had vanished from the face of this earth and she might slide her hands across your belly as you stood at the stove feeling the pressure of the side of her face between your shoulder blades and it would be well worth being mad for that. But it could only happen if you kept to yourself, kept your mouth shut and your head clear and open to the sound, the taste, the visions.

(152-3)

The gaps widen and change shape with the movement of Joe’s thoughts. The tie between thought and action is broken; what Joe does is not necessarily related to what is running through his mind. Joe lives in several times at once, the present being simultaneously the most and least important – it holds the weakest emotional pull, but Joe must involve himself in it or else he will lose all sense of himself. This passage shows a combination of silence in content and silence in form. Joe cannot remember his service coherently, large parts are missing, especially if they are to do with killing. Also, as his memory comes to him in drifts, thoughts drop away or merge into something else – an aeroplane, a shadow – and he cannot stay in the present. Joe has taken the silences of war into himself, he has made it part of his identity – the horror of killing, mourning of dead friends, the inability to describe the conflict in scale or in sufficiently
emotive terms, the shame of traumatic illness – so that he cannot remember properly, and what he does remember slides away from the core of his service.

This is trauma, the ‘total physical, psychological and emotional breakdown that can have a long-term or permanent effect on [a soldier’s] sense of identity’ that leads to ‘an incoherent, disorganised and fragmented narrative.’ Trauma appears as a silence between paragraphs. The realisation that the aeroplane is a hallucination is important – it is both the first step to recovery, and the devastating knowledge that he cannot trust what he sees and hears to be real. Nothing is said about it immediately, Joe does not sit and think about what the realisation might mean. The first thing he does is put paper on the fire so that it will burn very hot. This is explained two paragraphs later, that Joe is trying to affirm what he knows to be real, trying to find a way of differentiating what is real and what is imagined. But the immediate response is silence. The images shift abruptly from a revelation of Joe’s mental state to minute details about the fire. They then shift back to the war, to the aeroplane, via an image that is partly expressive of fun and partly terrifying – the soldiers throwing cactus at each other after a firefight. The viewpoint moves around as well – into the far distance in the bush, at Joe’s feet, into the sky in the desert in the Middle East. Every time there is a shift there is a silence, as the link between one thought and the next is left unsaid. Sometimes the link is clear, such as between the revelation and the fire – Joe needs to find what is real. But sometimes there does not seem to be a link at all – why does the fire prompt a memory of the cactus? Why does the aeroplane make Joe notice the rat droppings? Joe’s thoughts jump between the past and the present, trying to find a solid foundation. The conclusion he draws is that there is no solid foundation, that he can only remain whole if he keeps silent, and with this realisation he can close some of the gaps – the final three paragraphs link together clearly, as his thoughts follow a linear progression.

Silence also exists between sentences. In the final two paragraphs, Joe thinks about madness, and a sense of the wholeness of the world drops away. One type of madness is the same as another, and one reality interchangeable with another.

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90 Hunt, Memory, War and Trauma, 10, 128. Hunt, writing in 2010, provides a synthesis and summary of earlier ideas of memory, history, and trauma. But unlike previous works, his exclusive focus on war, and his argument on the importance of narrative, makes his work particularly relevant to this thesis.
His hallucinations, private and terrifying, are placed next to the collective delusion of the Light Horsemen in the desert. The two delusions are qualitatively different, but their difference is not pointed out except by placing them next to each other. It is clear from Joe’s sentences that he only half believes that the men were ‘maddened by thirst’, and half believes that they really did ride through the old city. Joe does not say this, but the repetition of ‘they said’ implies that Joe did not say or think they were mad. This is then placed next to his suffering in Gallipoli with his physical injury. His physical injuries were substantial, ‘He was naked; a mess of papery skin and crusted blood… He was whole but he was paralysed, unresponsive.’ (33), suggesting that when he was blown out of his sniper hole he suffered burns, and possibly concussion. But he subordinates the physical injuries to his mental ones, eliding the physical and the mental until he cannot remember if he was actually strapped to a bed or merely ‘paralysed, unresponsive’. Regardless, he was ‘talked into getting better,’ the doctor’s hand on his breastbone both a gesture of healing and of force. The placement of the sentences makes it ambiguous as to whether Joe was somehow forced into recovery, or whether through the doctor’s talk he managed to find a way out of his paralysis. It could well be both, the desire to recover and the repulsion at rejoining the killing unresolvable for Joe, as the process of healing and destruction are inseparable in the actions of the doctors – he was recovering in order to kill and be killed. This ambiguity is a type of silence, as the meaning of these gestures, these sentences, lies somewhere between two opposing ideas. As the narrative progresses, the reader must decide what the sentences mean – whether Joe was forced back on to the battlefield, whether he wanted to recover, whether this is just the talk of madness, whether any of it happened, or some combination of all of the above.

Silence exists not only between sentences, but within the sentences themselves. The final paragraph of the quoted passage includes an eight-line sentence that dominates the paragraph and draws it to a conclusion. The paragraph begins with Joe talking to himself, convincing himself of the need for silence – that in silence, madness was not necessarily malevolent, but could be a source of comfort and even joy. He then goes on to list what he has felt through madness, ‘the shadow of stonework’ riding through the old city, but this immediately merges with what is real, ‘your hands in a firebox.’ It changes from
what he has felt to what he hopes to feel, the touch of a woman and the comfort and joy of union.

Silence is in two places within these sentences. The first place is the obvious references to silence and keeping quiet, not talking and not socialising. Silence becomes a protection from the world and its questions, from the need to declare what is verifiably real and what is not. Silence is also a protection from oneself, so that Joe does not need to know so precisely where reality ends and fantasy begins, he can once again trust his senses as there is no longer any need to choose between the aeroplane and the firebox, both exist for him and are part of his experience. But they only exist in silence, the ‘living truth’ is unsayable; if he turns what he sees into words or actions, then the protection is lost. The protection afforded by silence leaves Joe ‘open to the sound, the taste, the visions’. By turning away from participating in the concrete world he can have full access to the insubstantial world that his mind creates. The sanctuary of silence is a form of double-think; Joe knows the shadow of stonework is not literally real, but it feels real, it feels more real than an actual shadow, so therefore it is real. He can live with these two opposing ideas simultaneously as long as he does not point it out, as long as he keeps it silent.

The second place of silence is in the inarticulate flow of desire in this long sentence. Joe does not declare what he wants or what he feels, his desires and emotions are transferred into actions or objects and addressed back to himself, ‘you could hope to be standing somewhere’ and ‘a woman might step up behind you…her face between your shoulder blades.’ This is silence because it is indirect, his needs are hidden, the first layer of silence being his needs made into an action or object and the second by not thinking of his own experience as ‘I’ but as ‘you.’ The length of the sentence layers action upon action, following Joe’s thoughts. It seems as though he hopes for a woman, some comfort in a domestic life. But he hopes for that through his madness – he hopes that his mind will conjure a convincing enough delusion of a woman touching him, so he can draw comfort from the delusion. The fact that he hopes for a delusion of something so quotidian shows that he wants these ordinary things, but cannot conceive of a place outside of his protective silence where he might be able to

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91 Steiner, *Language and Silence*, 72.
make it a reality. The shape and depth of Joe’s pain and trauma from the war lies underneath the images, and is powerfully revealed through the movement of the sentences.

Silence as a reaction to war is shown repeatedly in the novel, and often in a literal way. Joe describes the gunfire as being so loud ‘it was like a perfect silence’ (129) which traps him and the other soldiers in a deadening layer, ‘For whole seconds all he could hear was hissing in his ears… Some found a single word to say, or a name, repeated until the meaning stretched. You couldn’t hear…. He didn’t hear Brazier’s whistle’ (130-131). This is the raw, unmediated silence that Loevlie refers to. From under this layer the soldiers talk to themselves, to remind themselves of their individual, unique lives, or take the opportunity to observe, half in wonder and half in dread, as Joe does. Joe takes this silence into himself, as not only the fitting response to the carnage but the only refuge from it and how it has changed him. ‘He found a way of making conversation, giving out a small observation, or taking up other men’s sentences, smiling, repeating them with care. He was well liked for this. His own name felt like someone else’s uniform.’ (132) Joe’s silence is part of his trauma, but he is liked for it – either Joe’s silence makes him tame and agreeable, or the other soldiers recognise it and approve, or else they too are wrapped in silence and are glad that they are not interrupted.

The silencing effect of war is not confined to the soldiers. Elizabeth’s reaction to the fatality of war is also silence, ‘My husband has gone. It was like losing a sense. Your hearing. Like standing in the street with everything crackling and booming about you, and riding within your body in a heavy silence’ (76, emphasis author’s own). Elizabeth’s grief at losing her husband is described in a similar way to Joe’s experience at Anzac Cove. Elizabeth’s grief immediately moves beyond of her physical self to invade the entire landscape. The next line, beginning a new paragraph, describes the parrots flying over the river, how they move with the air currents. The obvious linking thread is Elizabeth’s perspective as she stands on her property, but the effect is that everything Elizabeth sees and does becomes encased in silence, as though actions are not connected to consequences, and one day does not lead, through the night, to the next. This is

92 Loevlie, Literary Silences in Pascal, Rousseau, and Beckett, 27.
made obvious when her work on the farm is described as being haphazard, as being mostly the work of grief (170). Her relationship with Joe once again allows connections to be made, most clearly through her pregnancy, but a thread of silence runs through everything they do.

It is apparent from the beginning that silence is a component of their relationship. Paul Antze and Michael Lambek write that with memory ‘ambiguity is the rule,’ as it is ‘the continuous traversal of the space between what goes without saying and what cries out to be said.’\textsuperscript{93} This fluid movement that is the practice of socially constructed memory serves as a useful way to look at the differences between Elizabeth’s and Joe’s silences. On the evening of the day Joe is hired, Elizabeth follows him into the night to ask him about Gallipoli, whether Joe knew her husband Louis and what happened (172-6). Neither person says everything they are thinking and there are long gaps in the dialogue. Their conversation is written from Joe’s perspective, but Elizabeth’s grief and obsessive thoughts have been outlined previously in the novel. The silence here is evident – Joe does not say everything he remembers about Elizabeth and about the war. Added to that, Joe does not remember much about Gallipoli, certainly not a narrative of the campaign that he could reduce down and tell his employer. There are other less obvious silences too. As soon as Elizabeth says she needs to talk to him, Joe is listening for what is not said, ‘Mostly Joe could pick the forks in a conversation. He didn’t like the turns this one might take.’ (173) He gives only one-word answers to her questions, until he feels comfortable that she does not desire to break his protective layer of silence. ‘Joe relaxed. He could keep his job and his room. Mrs Zettler missed her husband.’ Joe moves through his memories and observations of Elizabeth as she smokes in her husband’s old shirt, giving only the minimum amount of detail to satisfy her.

This beginning establishes many covert boundaries; Elizabeth still feels to be married, Joe will not talk about the war and will use this relationship to try and forget it, they both rely heavily on what is not said to judge where they stand in relation to other people. Their first touch is in silence, ‘He had intended to talk about the summer… But he did something else instead. He walked over and put his arms around her.’ (180) Elizabeth says nothing and avoids him for three days,

\textsuperscript{93} Paul Antze and Michael Lambek ed., \textit{Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory} (New York, London: Routledge, 1996), xvi.
and when she finds him camping by the river the only word spoken is when she says his name. But much is communicated without words. Joe’s simple touch is clear, he ‘was no interloper’ (182) which is why Elizabeth panics; he was asking for part of her, and offering part of himself in return. The silence that she had been wrapped in was now letting through sound, and with it many associations – the sounds Louis made in his sleep, other grieving women seeing mediums, the lives of other women in the district, the sense of being alone under the sky. She seeks out Joe by the river, and responds to this rupture in her silence by making ‘a little sound like a single note under her breath every time her feet touched the ground’ (184), a sound that affirms her new direction in life. Joe says nothing when she lies in his arms in that first meeting, but the images attached to his emotions have to do with sound and memory:

Now he was flooded with the joy of holding Elizabeth, of listening to her breath in the darkness. It was like listening, hidden, to the kind of music which usually passes unheard. It was like the sudden loss of fear. (186)

Joe’s reaction to war is to imagine himself in silence, and his reaction to love is to imagine himself in sound, while keeping speech to an absolute minimum. The play between silence and sound is complex, the different layers of real and imagined and remembered noise indicating the various emotional states of Joe and Elizabeth. For example, as they come together Elizabeth makes a noise under her breath, Joe remembers his father playing the piano – through sound, they are opening themselves up to the possibility of connection and bringing the world back into their lives. But they do so with very little speech – they are still traumatised, still grieving, and the work of the mind is yet to become action. Silence within form is potent and emotive, but within the characters it is a response to death – it is absence, and presence is indicated by sound.

This happens throughout the novel – a layering of different types of silences, gaps between paragraphs pulling the text one way while the sound suggested by an image pulls the text another way, the combination of the two giving a strong sense of the characters’ emotional state. Images and gaps rub against each other, moving from inside the characters to the landscape and back again, until an
understanding is gained of the intricate connections between silence, war, trauma, identity and memory.

This kind of link between silence and war is far more prevalent than any other link in the novel. In the pages of fighting in the Middle East, Joe’s observations are full of shape and colour, texture and light, but devoid of sound, making them feel as though they are viewed from far away. Joe remembers the desert insects (133), but the way they look and move, not the cicada’s hum or the scratch of the beetle as it crawled over his belongings. What is interesting is that this silence is often just a feeling, is only indicated by the absence of some sensory details and the prevalence of others. As with the long sentence describing Joe’s hope for the delusion of a woman, discussed above, a silence within the sentences works through an elegant juxtaposition of imagery, by removing all punctuation or by making the sentences one or a handful of words: ‘Scarab beetles crawling through your pack. Locusts. And the huge pale spiders.’ (133). There is a sense of absence, rather than an absence or silence being pointed out.

This technique also creates a sense of immense space. As Joe or Elizabeth look at the land around them, this immensity encompasses the landscape, as though the silence was within Western Australia itself. It is not that the land is empty, as the birds and kangaroos, insects and plants are precisely described, and these things form the boundaries of Joe’s and Elizabeth’s world. It is more in the way that an emotional revelation will be followed by an observation of the landscape, so the silence of the emotional life is moved directly outside and onto the property. Silence is human, it is a component of a world created through language, and the sounds contained within nature are both more and less than speech – they can be as communicative and as mute, depending on how Joe or Elizabeth hears them.

The section titled ‘August 1920’ shows how the landscape changes as Elizabeth slowly comes to terms with her widowhood. This is not a function of the landscape, but the way the images are juxtaposed makes it appear as though the landscape itself changes. Simon Schama writes of the memorial grave at Giby, Poland, drawing connections between war and landscape, memory and silence: ‘memory had now assumed the form of the landscape itself. A metaphor
had become a reality; an absence had become a presence.'

The way Schama combines literal and metaphoric presence is similar to the way Walker makes landscape work in *The Wing Of Night*. What Elizabeth sees around her provides a sanctuary, a place both of silence and of sound as she comes out of the worst of her grief and notices the life around her. Elizabeth remembers the immediate months after Louis’ death, ‘blankness and tears and conversations with the empty night’ (92), and how her farm slowly brings her back into the world. The images are not of sound, but mostly of sight, for example, ‘The same birds, it seemed, watched her from the same branches, year after year’ (92). This image conveys both her sense of the endlessness of her grief, but also comfort in the stability of the natural world. Elizabeth often sees animals watching her: ‘Kangaroos watched her from behind a screen of grasstrees. It was a year before she saw them there, before she saw anything more than the squat black trunks’ (94). The animals may or may not be watching her, but she is certainly watching them. The sense of being watched reminds her that she is physically part of the landscape, the silent attentiveness that is attributed to the birds and kangaroos showing how Elizabeth gradually reconnects with the world. As she moves out of the worst of her grief, the black trunks are revealed as kangaroos, and she notices wisteria by the water tank for the first time (94). But it is not until she hears the landscape that we know she is part of it. She has a pet crow who cries out to her, and she hears birds ‘waking and bursting into song’ at the full moon (94-5). The section ends with ‘Chickens murmured outside the barn and one or two gave a sharp call like an indrawn breath. Elizabeth heard her own cattle calling: one long deep blare of sound and then another.’ (99). Elizabeth has moved from blankness to a weekly routine of roast chicken and washing with Bonnie. Although she is still grieving, she is moving further into the world, which is expressed as an awareness of the sounds around her.

Joe also uses the landscape as both a refuge from and path back to the social world. When he returns from the war, he stays away from the city and works on the land, where he ‘almost never spoke’ (134), one of the many traumatised soldiers wandering the countryside. When we first meet Joe, in February 1921 (123), much of his anxiety about talking to people, about his traumatised
memory, is projected onto the natural world. How he sees the animals around him – the frogmouth owl, the skinned kangaroo, the fish with the hook caught in its mouth, and the whale skeletons on the ocean floor – reveals the shape of this anxiety. Joe tries ‘not to listen to whatever war story was being told to him’ (124), but these details show how his thoughts continually focus on anonymous, painful death. Nevertheless his view of these animals is always through their relationship to people; the owl is at the campfire, the fish and kangaroo have been killed for food, the whale skeleton appears in a story from a seaman. When Joe needs solace, he moves beyond the relationship of animals to people and goes to the land itself, to retrieve something elemental and unbreakable:

In the morning he would walk downriver until he came to the trunk of a burned-out tree he knew of. It rose out of an outcrop of stone with the same grain as the bark…. The air smelled of gingery eucalyptus. He’d climb over stones and great waves of dead tree roots. Then he could put both hands flat on the smooth bark. Breathe deeply once or twice. Stumble back to his swag. He could remember more, these days. Sometimes he thought he could remember everything. (127-8)

Joe uses the sequence of moving through the landscape to achieve some calm and clarity, ignoring the animals to focus on trees and stone. It is only after he has put his hands on the tree that he can admit to himself how broken his memory has become. The burned tree helps him deal with his nightmares, including the repeated nightmare, in which he was ‘the size of a bullet moving through human flesh’ (137), that he gets after seeing Bonnie.

However, Joe’s attachment to place is more extreme and unstable than Elizabeth’s. Elizabeth’s property was her husband’s, but it has the ability to hold many emotional resonances – the erotic honeymoon camping by the river, the blank misery of empty paddocks, the native animals returning and mixing with her livestock as she heals, the return of joy in the workmen’s hut with Joe. It has enough spaces and gaps that Elizabeth can fill these silences with herself – what Elizabeth notices about her home directly relates to how she is feeling. But for Joe, place is linked to memory and his memory is ruined through war trauma. For the most part, the Australian landscape is healing, but it has the ability to shift
and change without warning. The stump is soothing but the frogmouth is unsettling; Elizabeth’s cows are soothing but the trees begin to look like men in the distance (188, 189, 196). Joe finds joy and love with Elizabeth, but Bonnie was Elizabeth’s neighbour, this is his hometown, and he is constantly reminded of the man he used to be and the opportunities he has lost (166-7). Over the top of that are the memories of the war: ‘Now it was raining, in the night. A light rain that drifted before it settled. In a cold country it would be the first flurry of snow.’ (192). He hears the rain while sleeping in the workmen’s hut on Elizabeth’s property. There is nothing to remind him of snow in a cold country except the drift of the rain, except that his entire life is now being lived in relation to the war. These sentences end the chapter, and end a section on the developing love between Joe and Elizabeth. Whatever Joe does, the war continues to define his life and identity.

Joe’s memories – broken and traumatic, terrifying, or simply missing – are the most potent sources of silence in Walker’s novel. Memories are bound to place, and place contains, prompts and shapes memory through sensory triggers. The cliffs of Gallipoli and the desert of the Middle East are places of terror and trauma, and even in the midst of building a life with Elizabeth, Joe cannot help going back to his war years. This comes to a head when Elizabeth is in hospital, giving birth to their child. Joe gets drunk in a local park, is picked up by the police and locked in a cell. The cell is completely dark, all he can feel is the floor and the wall – it is a space without any physical markers, a space without landscape. The cell is windowless, and the contrast between the morning outside and the lack of light inside makes the darkness impenetrable and full of spectres. The darkness is also a function of his madness, as in this place Joe has a complete breakdown – he remembers all the details of his time in Gallipoli, and hangs himself (223-232). His fragile sanity is tied to the landscape, the daily work of being on the land allowing him to ignore his traumatic memories. Without that distraction, in this non-place, Joe cannot help but remember what happened in Gallipoli. If place shapes and prompts memory, which in turn shapes identity, then being in a non-place sets Joe’s identity adrift, his sense of self has no anchor except the terror and trauma of his memories of war. Joe cannot cope with his killing, and so kills himself. That he is adrift is clear from the start, as he talks to another man in his cell, a man also called Joe who has the same life as
Joe himself – a doppelganger, a delusion, who ‘tells’ Joe what he did in Gallipoli (235-239). Joe asks questions of himself, and he constantly doubts the sensations of his body. He knows he is delusional, but the voice of the other Joe is too strong to resist.

On the one hand, this two-part sequence is the end of silence, as we find out the source of Joe’s trauma – he accidentally killed an unarmed Turkish prisoner and then he becomes a sniper. But it is also a time of confusion and madness – Joe fights against his delusions but also believes in them, and we already knew that he was a sniper and was badly injured. This concrete detail – the killing of the prisoner – does not contain all the pain, shock and terror of the years of his solitary killing as a sniper. The madness in the cell is contained, so even though the pages are punctuated by questions and doubts, one image rolls into another, using symbols from throughout the novel to make Joe’s madness comprehensible and provide a climax to the narrative. But the second half of the sequence, his memories of Gallipoli, is full of gaps and silences. Dream images sit alongside reality, and physical sensations twist into dream-like proportions. This is not a time of madness, but of naivety and unknowingness – Joe in the cell knows he is mad but can do nothing, Joe in Gallipoli knows nothing about the consequences of his actions, he can only act. Walker has commented that, from speaking to veterans, ‘the border between observation and hallucination is very, very thin’ in combat situations. This combines easily with Caruth’s idea of belatedness, of an event ‘experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known.’ Joe’s inability to ‘fully know’ what happened to him at Gallipoli takes the form of dreams and hallucinations. He sees an aeroplane and an old city, he feels permanently flung up in the sky, not falling back to earth until he comes back home (166). Joe could not cope with what he did and saw, so his mind slid away from acknowledging it, both at the time by not hearing or seeing properly, and at home, by not remembering. ‘Not remembering’ is different to forgetting, as he is plagued by symbolic nightmares of blood and a single bullet through human flesh, and the knowledge of what he did comes back to him in clear detail in this cell. The core of his trauma and pain is revealed, but as soon as it is, Joe is covered over with silence again – he hangs himself, then the scene switches.

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quickly to Elizabeth so his death is not confirmed until the end of the next chapter. The silences of war are brought to their utmost degree in this climax – we find out the origin of Joe’s trauma, Joe dies just as Elizabeth gives birth. This section encapsulates the line of poetry, ‘What do I know? myself alone,/ a gulf of uncreated night.’ (45, 97). The post-war self has become a gulf of uncreated night – dark, endless, an abyss, isolated and without the movement of stars or nocturnal animals that is the ‘created’ night of the living world.
After the Fire, a Still Small Voice by Evie Wyld

The sound was right on top of him and then it stopped, just short of where he could see in the dark, and all the night was silent, the frogs and cicadas quiet, no noise from the highway. There was just the afterwards and then a kookaburra laughed long and loud and bubbly, shattering everything.96

In After the Fire, a Still Small Voice, silence is most clearly present within the gradual layering of images through a reflective narrative structure. The main characters are traumatised and refuse to speak to each other, instead projecting their fear, anxiety, and depression onto the landscape. In the above quote, Frank Collard has woken up in the night, drunk and sick, when he hears a creature howl and run towards him. He is paralysed by fear, and when the creature stops he is trapped in ‘the afterwards’, a chilling absence of the usual nocturnal sounds of the bush. This ‘afterwards’ represents Frank’s emotional state. He has just been released from custody, his friend is missing, he knows he will never see his father again, and his girlfriend has left him; in other words, he is trapped in the aftermath of a series of destructive breaks, with no hope for his future, and his despair is projected onto the bush night. Silence within content is enhanced through Wyld’s technique of saturating the narrative with atmospheric, and often ambiguous, details. The birds and trees, cars and streets are heavy with mood, alternately masking and indicating the emotional emptiness of the main characters. This is further supported by the choppy narrative structure. The chapters jump back and forth between the two main characters and back and forth in time, giving a strong sense of actions lost or forgotten or fading prematurely into insignificance. These aspects make silence – silence as the pregnant pause, as the unknown and the unknowable – integral to the novel.

The core of the story is the nexus between war and trauma; how it reshapes masculine behaviour, how these changed ways of behaving unbalance a family dynamic, and how this plays out within an Australian environment. War trauma is at the heart of the story, and the novel explores how trauma changes the

96 Evie Wyld. After the fire, a Still Small Voice. North Sydney: Vintage, 2009, 269. All subsequent in-text references will be to this edition.
relationships between men and between generations. The form of the novel mimics the content, and this can be shown through an analysis of the interaction between landscape, trauma, war and memory.

The chapters alternate between Frank and his father, Leon. Frank is in his early thirties, and most of the chapters from his perspective are set in the present in Mulaburry, a fictional town similar to Yamba on the New South Wales north coast, and his chapters involve the locals of Mulaburry, and memories of his father and of his girlfriend Lucy. The story of Leon ranges from early adolescence to his sixties, with most of the action set between his late teens and early twenties. Leon’s chapters involve the family bakery in Parramatta, the service of his father, Roman, in Korea, and his own service in Vietnam. The only characters who appear in both storylines are Leon, his first wife and Frank’s mother, Amy Blackwell, and Linus, an indigenous resident of Mulaburry.

Roman is traumatised from his service in Korea. He might also carry scars from being a Dutch-Jewish refugee from World War II, although almost nothing is made of this information. Leon is traumatised by his service in Vietnam, a trauma that returns to him after his wife Amy dies. Frank is not traumatised by the direct experience of war, but carries the anger, scars, and the template of violent, alcoholic behaviour of the two preceding generations of men. Leon and Roman had clear sources for their pain in their war service, but Frank has instead an inherited sense of injustice, his fear curdling and becoming frustrated until it is disproportionate to the source of his anger. That Frank is also a victim of war trauma is clear. He has the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder but not the initial cause; his is a secondary trauma. Wajnryb speaks about vicarious traumatisation in her work *The Silence*, which explores the use of silence as a form of communication in Holocaust survivor families. She describes how she was ‘born knowing’ about the Holocaust, but when pressed, she could recall few concrete details about the event. The thrust of her book is how she could know and not know simultaneously, and how she could interpret her parents’ silence. Psychologists who work with traumatised people also write about the problem of vicarious trauma, as both a professional hazard and a normal reaction to someone else’s pain. Hunt writes about this in his chapter *Methods and Ethics*: ‘When one constantly hears terrible stories about death and cruelty, and about unbearable emotions, the stories themselves can affect you.’ Laub describes the symptoms
an analyst might experience on hearing Holocaust testimony, and implies that this is a journey the analyst must make as part of their moral obligation to bear witness to the witness. Caruth and Felman go one step further and blur the boundary between the scientific and the literary by claiming that the trauma or wound is in the text: ‘the complex ways of knowing and not knowing are entangled in the language of trauma… a language that defies, even as it claims, our understanding.’97 Frank’s only role model is his father Leon, who is silent. Leon took this pattern from his father Roman. Silence in this novel is a behavioural pattern handed down through the generations, and its initial cause is the pain of war.

In the three novels featured in this exegesis (by Malouf, Walker and Wyld), the experience of being part of the country is integral to identity. Whether it is hands in the soil, the whisper of gums or the screech of birds, whether it is Digger on the Hawkesbury or Joe Tully on the farm, the particularities of the Australian environment hold the key to each character’s sense of self. In *After the Fire*, physical place gives a shape to Frank’s and Leon’s identity. In return, place carries much of the burden of that identity, expressing the connection between trauma and silence through atmospheric details.

The novel opens with Frank driving up to his grandparents’ shack in Mulaburry. The shack is primitive, set on the edge of a cane field and next to the beach. Frank uses the difficulty of living in the shack to come to terms with the chronic anger that has taken over his life. Frank’s interaction with his new rural surroundings is shown through a gradual accumulation of detail, which sets the tone for the subtle interaction between emotion and environment that follows:

> There was a tweak at the back of his neck and when he slapped it his palm came away bloody. (1)

> The air outside was thick with insect noise, heavy with heat, and the old gums groaned. (2)

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His hands shook and he held the back flap of the Ute, tried to look like he was securing it, but he just gripped and waited to feel still again. (13)

He floated on his back, feeling like a fat otter, letting the salt water into his mouth, to clean right inside him, where city dust lay on the tops of his lungs. (18)

He woke in the dark with the feeling that there had been some noise or movement in the shack, like a soundless bird had flown in one window and out the other ruffling the air as it went... He listened past his own breathing, past his own blood, then past the outside noise, banana leaves on corrugated iron, past the scrubbing of the gum trees in the little wind, he listened so that his body went stiff, though he didn’t dare clench his fists for the noise it might make. (18-19)

At the beginning of the chapter, Frank is in a state of nervous tension. Every time he moves he feels as though part of his body is breaking or collapsing, his neck bloody and his hands shaking. He expresses his fear through his immediate environment – the air is heavy and thick and the trees groan. He feels some relief when he runs into the waves and remembers why he has come to Mulaburry, to heal himself and ‘clean right inside him’. But when night falls his fears overwhelm him, and he imagines them coming from the bush as an impossibly soundless bird. Frank projects his internal landscape onto the physical world, until the physical world replaces an acknowledged and articulated emotional life. As he moves around the shack he moves around his memories, his interaction with the bush setting by the beach lead him from emptiness to joy, to anger and to fear. His memories are placed alongside the landscape, a detail of the shack followed by a memory followed by an action, over and over until his feelings are made concrete through their attachment to the environment.

As this is shown through accumulation, a succinct example of this technique is difficult to find; it takes the twenty-four pages of chapter one to work out where Frank stands in relation to the shack. However, one of the briefer examples is in chapter eleven, when Frank is fishing at the beach, slightly drunk.
He watches a sea eagle above the waves, which leads him to a sweet memory of camping with his girlfriend, Lucy. He hooks a fish but realises that the eagle is going to prey on this fish and probably drown, so cuts the fishing line just before the eagle swoops:

A sea eagle coasted just above him, eyeing where the water’s surface ripped up, white and hairy, probably a feeding school of bream. He cast to that spot and sensed the wobble of fish sucking his bait… He’d been fishing with Lucy on a few occasions – once, before he’d got bad, they’d taken a long weekend and camped next to a river, a little inland, and there were a few windless days when the place seemed entirely for their benefit… ‘Beautiful boy,’ she’d said and he’d kissed the sand from her belly.

By the time he saw what was going to happen it was too late… the fish had swum up to the surface and the eagle was swooping for it, as he stood there, gormless, his mouth working around words his brain hadn’t instructed him to say yet… The drag screamed… With one hand he found the knife handle and held the blade to the line, and there was an elastic snap as the line was cut… The eagle flew out of sight round the bend that was the mouth of the river and Frank knelt down, his hands on his knees, breathing hard, a lump in his throat.

With all that is going on in the narrative, Frank’s shock cannot come simply from the fact that he had almost drowned an eagle. His sense of self is fragile, he believes himself to be unworthy, violent, and uncontrollably destructive. Fishing is a way of connecting with the land and the sea, of becoming part of a natural cycle of life and death, of being independent and healthy, it is an activity that is both useful and meditative. When he almost drowns the eagle, his recovery is threatened – he is once again destroying, smashing, and breaking as he has in the rest of his life. He is responsible for the situation, as he casts to the spot where the eagle is flying, but he does not realise what is going to happen with the bird until ‘too late’ – he cannot see the consequences of his actions. When he does connect action and consequence he feels removed from the situation. His mouth
and hands seem to work separately from his brain; he mouths inarticulate sounds and ‘the line was cut’ – he didn’t cut it, even though his hand held the blade. His memories prevent him from fully engaging with the present as it is not until his memory of Lucy reaches a resolution that he notices the bird. The precise nature of his mental state is hidden in the long sentences of simple action, in descriptions of the fish and the bird, and also by separating Frank’s body parts and using the passive voice. These are his actions but he seems to have little agency. The details push the action in various directions but the meaning of these actions is slippery. The overwhelming amount of detail keeps a distance between thought and action, between action and consequence, and between agency and accident. This distance is silence; just as Frank projects his emotions onto the environment, so does the meaning of his actions, and the connection between war and trauma, masculinity and landscape, continually hide behind descriptive passages, making silence in the experience of the reader. The details are a veneer, as when they are stripped away, what is left is the inarticulate pain of a traumatised man.

Whereas Frank cannot engage with the present due to the weight of the past, Leon only registers the present and refuses to acknowledge either past or future, cause or consequence. This keeps Leon suspended in a state of traumatic tension which, like Frank, is projected onto his environment. Leon’s chapters are divided into three sections: pre-Vietnam, which addresses Roman’s service in Korea and is set around the family bakery in Parramatta, his tour of duty in Vietnam, and his reintegration with society on his return from the war. His conscription for national service and combat in Vietnam dominates his storyline and is the main narrative source of war trauma.

Wyld has written that this novel had its genesis in her uncle’s war service in Vietnam. The Vietnam chapters are written in such a way that the action is half way between adventure and nightmare. Everything is alien and new (121), including Leon’s own behaviour. Chapter 14 (158-160) is the first firefight that Leon is involved in and a pivotal point in the novel. Leon has the machine gun

98 Lovelie, Literary Silences in Pascal, Rousseau, and Beckett, 35.
within the small patrol group and half the chapter is devoted to the moments leading up to Leon firing his first shot:

The rain drummed on the brim of his hat, the trees were still, still, still, there were just the white lines of rain falling steadily down… He breathed through his mouth, strained his ears to listen, strained his eyes to see what the signal would be.

Thumb down. A baddie.

Five fingers spread open, then four. Nine baddies.

…He unfolded his tripod, careful not to jog the leaves around him, and attached the gun. No noise broke from it, no unoiled squeak that would grate above the crinkle-pat of rainfall. Even his heart was quiet… Even the sound of the rain stopped, even the sound of his own blood was covered over with a pillow. The first fellow carried a rifle over his shoulder… he didn’t see Leon, not for the longest time. And when he did, all he did was stop and there were three beats of a fast heart while their eyes met, then Leon shot him and it went into his chest, just between the top and second buttons, and he fell over backwards. (159-160)

Everything around Leon is hushed as he focuses his mind and body on killing the young Vietnamese soldier in front of him. This death is momentous and carries far more weight than even the deaths immediately afterwards: ‘He knocked men off as they appeared, four, maybe five men, one after the other’. Slowing the action and removing all sensory detail but sight is the clue that this is the moment when Leon changes, and he experiences the moment as wrapped in silence. His tension is projected onto the scene; his gun is as silent as his hushed heartbeat to show his inarticulate knowledge of the importance of the situation, the rain stops to show his complete focus. As a battle scene it remains in the present, but as it occurs almost precisely in the middle of the book, Leon’s inheritance can be read into the details. Mud is ‘like burnt chocolate’ and the dead soldier’s skin like ‘unset caramel’, images that remind us of the bakery without referring to it, signalling that Leon is unaware of the influence of his past. His inheritance of silence is shown as the chapter ends, with Leon taking a photo of the dead man,
'and he found himself wishing he’d got someone to take a picture of him with the dead boy. And then he wondered where that had come from’. Leon does not connect his actions to his emotions. Taking the photo and wanting a portrait take him by surprise, and although he returns to the photo, he does not analyse why he took it. Wyld is explicit that this came from her family history, from wondering how her loving uncle could have an album of men he had killed in Vietnam:

I realise now that it must be impossible for him. This is one of the brutalities of war, this lost piece of yourself that you can't show other people. No matter how hard you try to grasp it, there will not be the words. I wonder if this is why the photographs needed to be kept, and perhaps why you would stay close by your family your whole life, why you would revisit the places that you went to as a child, to remember who you were before you had to take those photographs.100

Wyld’s uncle’s actions remain ambiguous and disturbing, his reasons for taking the photographs surrounded by silence. For Leon, the moment of taking the photograph marks a change. Whether he takes the photograph to honour this moment of change, or as a reminder of what was, because the moment is profound, or simply as a trophy, Leon’s change is a permanent rupture in a coherent sense of self. From this moment, he must rely on other people to remind him who he is, from his fellow soldiers, to veterans in the desert, to his wives; he does not know who he is when he is alone. Leon takes many more photos, and keeps an album of his tour of duty like a gruesome travel diary.101 He feels the photos are ‘like dirty pictures’ (246) but they are really a record of the most significant events of his life; the pictures eclipse everything that went before, and

100 Wyld, “What Uncle Tim did in the war.”
are so important that as soon as he finishes the album he throws up (248), a visceral reaction to the potency of the pictures, the album, and the war.

The rupture in his sense of self contributes to Leon’s remaining in the present and rarely considering his past or future. At times this seems ‘natural’ – in Vietnam, everything was too new and strange to think about the past. At other times this is a distinct mark of character. Not once does Leon think of his father’s trauma as he is out on patrol, nor when he is recovering by wandering the countryside, despite it being desperately obvious that he is following in his father’s footsteps. Leon has spent days in the jungle, and Roman writes home of the impossibility of living in the jungle (42), but to Leon, this connection is so silent it may as well not exist. However, towards the end of his tour of duty he cannot help but be aware of how he has changed:

He held his camera up and took a shot into the black. It had been fine when they were all together, when you could see other people and think about other people, but here, alone, he thought about those three heartbeats, holding the gaze of that first boy he had killed. The feel of the thing crawling up inside him. The hole his gun had dug between his legs, the sick feeling when the barrel jammed. The dead. (213)

Leon takes photos of people or objects that hold significance for him, that alert him to the change in himself and the strangeness of his environment, such as an enormous spider, his platoon, or a corpse. A photograph of the night would only show up as ‘a perfectly black square’ (247), as nothing, so to take a photo of it reveals the extent of the nothingness inside him. When he is alone, he cannot help but go back over the details of killing. He does so in fragmented sentences, his trauma present in the way his thoughts jump from the concrete of ‘the gaze of that first boy’, to the imagined ‘thing’, to the general and abstract ‘the dead’. In this section the text says what Leon feels and is a moment when Leon specifically remembers his past. But the present must be removed in order for him to remember, and his remembering does not flow in a narrative with complete sentences. Trauma and silence often merge for Leon, as more explicit moments such as this reveal. But such explicitness is rare. Mostly, Leon’s trauma is shown through an absence of feeling or reaction, and his emotions are
projected on to his surroundings. One example of this is when his best friend in Vietnam, Cray, is shot:

Cray sat propped against a tree, a small leak of blood coming from between his fingers where he held on to his stomach. He smoked a cigarette. ‘Flesh wound, I should think,’ he said quietly…

They returned to find that Cray was dead, a long tube of cigarette ash next to him.

Daniel was tight-mouthed. ‘He had one through the throat too,’ he said, ‘don’t know why the bastard didn’t tell anybody.’

‘Probably nothing to be done anyways,’ said the medic, shaking his head.

Leon spat into the grass.

On the bitumen of the base airport he felt an awkward jab in his pocket. As stinking tired men poured around him, he looked at the mud baby that rested in his palm. Somehow it was still in one piece, brittle as pulled sugar. An eye had rolled out of his socket, but the baby still smiled. (241-3)

Leon’s only reaction to Cray’s death is to spit. But the mud baby is his talisman, his lucky charm that he fashioned out of mud from his boot like he would sculpt a figure out of sugar for the top of a wedding cake. The mud baby reveals how Leon is feeling – alive but broken, forgotten and hidden, smiling without emotion. The moment of Cray’s death slips away from Leon, barely registered at the time, an instance of belatedness. It is registered instead in the tiny details of his daily existence, the mud baby mute but powerful, ambiguous but telling in the same way as the photograph album. It is registered with silence.

When Leon returns from Vietnam, he initially slips back into his old life, ‘It was like he had never left’ (246). This is a delusion; his real life is still in Vietnam, as shown through his attention to making the photograph album and a visit to Cray’s house. He is told bluntly that Cray’s widow committed suicide.

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and the news destroys the pretence that he could just step back into his pre-war existence. In the next chapter he is driving relentlessly ‘inland’ (262), not caring where he is going or for how long. The scenes in the desert directly address his trauma but do so only by describing his actions in, and reactions to, rural New South Wales. Although ‘the daytimes were always good’ (262) he begins to sleepwalk, waking up in the black desert half believing he is back in Vietnam (263). He cannot keep his trauma in check and eventually he runs out of petrol, stranded somewhere between Cobar in New South Wales and Quilpie in Queensland. This shocks him, but it is another self-destructive action from a man who refuses to acknowledge his past. This drive towards destruction is confirmed when he begins wandering along the road, becoming more and more sunburnt and dehydrated. Even when he is about to pass out, his past only comes back to him in broken, disconnected thoughts:

He tried to remember why he was there. Answers presented themselves, but they were like answers to different questions. The butterfly hands of his mother flapping at the old man when it would have been better to do anything but flap. That thick jungle with the breath of the fresh dead right there in the mist for him to inhale. The thing mawing in the night. He threw his arms in the air, mouthed the things in his head, which helped unsettle the flies that landed on the sun blisters on his face and stayed there, comfortable as cattle. (270)

He has left the bakery because he is traumatised by his service in Vietnam, which compounded his inherited trauma from Roman. Leon does not address these things except in the briefest, most oblique way. The landscape must convey his emotional state. Unlike with Frank, where trees groan and water soothes, the desert’s only emotional resonance is in its power to destroy Leon. It is an absence of a spectrum emotional tones, and therefore a double silence – in form, where his emotional life must be read in the descriptions of the desert, and in content, as what is read in the environment is the terrifying void within Leon.

The desert is a hiding place for traumatised men, as affirmed when he is rescued by a group of Vietnam veterans and taken to the old cattle station where they live. Surrounded by people, Leon can once again control his nightmares.
The derelict farm absorbs all the extra emotion from Leon, the landscape bringing his internal rhythm back into line with social expectations. All the behaviour that would be out of place in the city, such as shooting for fun, seldom washing and speaking less, can be expressed here. This is made explicit by a speech from Klyde, the head of the group of veterans, while he and Leon are shooting oranges:

‘No bugger’s looked after us.’

Leon lifted the gun and took aim but now his heart bounced in his arms. ‘See,’ Klyde went on, ‘but here, we’re all in the same boat. I can tell you are, or else you wouldn’t come rambling through the desert alone and half smoked. This is the place a bloke can let loose.’ … He pulled the trigger just to have taken his turn, but the bullet still found its mark. He looked at the place where the orange had been, surprised. (274-5)

Even though Leon resists the speech, but the bullet still finds its mark – that is, he is here because he is traumatised. Klyde mentions pain and grief, but Leon never does. He is continually surprised by what he does, from shooting the orange to the length of the beard he grows (276), and when confronted by intense emotion, ‘he kept still so that his thoughts wouldn’t touch the edges of his body’ (278) and then runs away. He keeps himself in silence; only the narrative technique of accumulating action and landscape detail gives an indication of his motivations.

Another example of this narrative technique is the shack at Mulaburry. His parents disappeared while staying at the shack and are presumed to be dead. While Leon understands this as a fact, it seems to have little emotional resonance for him. All the objects in the shack seem detached from each other; they show his mother’s neat housekeeping, but say nothing about his parents’ daily existence:

What the superintendent at Mulaburry had been able to tell them had not been much. Clothes left on the beach, no sign of his parents... There was a selection of things left on the kitchen table... His
mother’s grey woollen gloves, a pearly seashell, a photograph of the three of them taken when he was a baby. A hard old loaf of untouched bread, baked to cement. They all seemed to have been laid out exactly and deliberately. He sat at the table and picked up the gloves. He knew what he expected himself to do. He expected to hold them to his face and smell them, smell his mother’s hand cream... But instead he held them in his hands, lightly, as though they were made of dust. Then he put them down again. He looked into the faces of the three people in the photograph and came up with nothing. They were just pictures, one of a baby who didn’t even know anything yet. The shell he put on a high shelf, resisting an urge to crush it underfoot, or to put it on his tongue and taste the sea. (289)

Each article on the table seems significant, as though it will provide a clue to the parents’ death, if not into their lives as well. Yet Leon cannot absorb that knowledge. These physical objects seem to float in space, untethered from any context. It is the combination of the potent moment and Leon’s removal from it that creates silence, as the place where emotional connection, history and identity should reside, yet are absent. Steiner’s unsayable living truth has become unthinkable.103

Most of the action takes place in Mulaburry, so there is a sense that all the other places refer back to the shack. The structure of the novel adds to this sense, as each chapter in the bakery in the 1950s or Vietnam in the 1960s is preceded and followed by a chapter in Mulaburry. Bamboo becomes sugarcane, treacle tart becomes freshly-caught fish, Amy becomes Lucy. The menace of a Vietnam patrol bleeds into the next chapter until the sugar cane becomes menacing; Leon’s drinking on R&R in Vung Tau is directly contrasted to Frank’s drinking at the Mulaburry pub.

As written in a review in the New Yorker, ‘The stories of [his] wounded forebears are layered into Frank’s tormented recovery, trauma seeping from one

103 Steiner, Language and Silence, 72.
man into the next.\textsuperscript{104} Frank’s chapters are set in the present with passages of memory. Frank’s memories are the main thrust of the narrative in most of his chapters, to the point where the ‘now’ action often breaks so the memory can stand alone. This happens again and again; Frank’s chapters use the past as action, and his memories are the only context for his actions. For example, in chapter eleven, without the memory of his girlfriend Lucy, it would be difficult to know why Frank dropped to his knees at the thought of almost killing a sea eagle; without the sea eagle episode, it would be difficult to know why Frank lies in bed and remembers the first time he was violent towards Lucy, and how this changes the way he sees and hears the shack (144-6). Leon’s chapters are from 1952 to the 1970s, with little excursion into memory, using the past only as context.\textsuperscript{105} This makes Leon’s chapters seem like memory; even though they are ‘before’, they are all ‘now’, all written in a way that is immediate. Added to this, we know that Leon returns from Vietnam alive and uninjured, as we have already seem him in memory in Frank’s chapters. The timing meets up in the final chapter, the only chapter to be written in the present from Leon’s perspective.

The alternating chapters mean that actions appear to last much longer than they are written in the narrative. For example, Roman leaves for Korea in Leon’s first chapter, and arrives home in Leon’s second chapter, but because these are chapters two and four, pages 35 and 71, there is the sense that Roman is away for a significant length of time. This is heightened by the way the chapters reflect on each other, so that Roman’s absence in chapter two is felt as the aftermath of Amy’s death in chapter three (55); Frank remembering teenage sex in chapter three (63) becomes the beginning of the love affair between Leon and Amy in chapter four (70). Roman arrives home after the love affair begins, presence.


\textsuperscript{105} I suspect that the timing of Leon’s chapters does not match up. Leon is described as having his first facial hair in 1952 (25) and as being conscripted for Vietnam (106). The first conscription was 1965 and was for twenty-year-old males: http://www.naa.gov.au/collection/fact-sheets/fs164.aspx (accessed April 24, 2012). It is not impossible that Leon is twenty in 1965, and therefore has facial hair at age seven, but it is highly unlikely. Specific dates are never mentioned in the novel, although signaling events are, such as the death of King George VI (25). This confusion with dates does not reduce the value of what the novel says about silence and war.
becomes absence becomes presence again, through the chapters and through the decades. Because it moves constantly between the two men and in short chapters – 34 chapters in 300 pages – a sense of completeness is missing from the story. Although the sequence of events can be plotted, jumping between time periods gives a strong sense of pieces missing, of memories jumbled and important events forgotten. It is as though the novel imitates the traumatic memory within its structure, and therefore the silence that surrounds traumatic memory also becomes part of the structure.

While it is not always the case, in this novel most of the silence is indicative of trauma. As trauma is about memory, this means that silence in *After the Fire* is focused on memory and the ability to remember. Sometimes the whole novel seems like a memory, as one chapter reflects on another, as Leon’s present mixes with Frank’s past until it is as though Frank remembers what he cannot have known, such as his father’s service in Vietnam. Other times the novel seems as though there is no memory at all, as all the action is an accumulation of detail, there is no strict sense of ‘now’ and ‘then’, only a blank space on the page or the start of a new chapter. Frank cannot help remembering, but this means his healing is conscious and solid. In his final chapter, Frank dissolves the wedding-cake sugar figurines of his parents and grandparents in the ocean, digs a trench in the sand with his seven year-old neighbour, Sal Haydon, and prepares dinner with the suggestion of Lucy having returned (291-4). These actions release him from the past, allow him take joy in the present, and look towards the future. Leon does not actively remember, and his healing is a repeated process of breaking with the past and starting again with new people. In the final chapter he does not think about his son, he does not turn at the ‘small whispering wind’ that indicates Frank’s presence, and he cuts off remembrance of his former life when he closes the car door (295). He can only understand something when he touches it – his gun in Vietnam, his cakes, his new wife Merle – and when he refuses to hold an object, such as his mother’s gloves in Mulaburry, he is also refusing to acknowledge it. Leon cannot come to terms with his trauma, so Frank must resolve the family story. The way the novel is structured makes this possible, as the information from the Leon chapters is used in the Frank chapters, Frank’s memories and Leon’s present merging to give a full account of how trauma has been passed down through the generations.
In keeping with the men’s inability to communicate their pain, and in superimposing their emotional state on the landscape, both Frank and Leon imagine their pain as a living creature. Leon hears an animal that is sometimes like a large dog and sometimes a huge and monstrous creature. It walks through the house and bakery to Vietnam and through the desert. It is initially described as ‘a noise like a dog snuffling in the street… a whine, a scritch-scratch at the front door… it made him climb under his sheets and pull them up to his nose’ (35). But it quickly becomes ‘that thing’ (40, 213), a ‘terrible mute animal with big eyes and long fingers’ (263) that appears when Leon is alone. It first appears when his parents are fighting about Roman’s enlistment, and later Leon says to Amy that he feels ‘hounded’ (70), making it clear that this is a manifestation of his depression. The creature is never seen, only heard and felt as a menacing presence in the dark.

Frank imagines a bird in the cane called a Creeping Jesus. He hears screeching, but never sees the bird itself. This is more than a bird, however, it purrs and grunts (60) and makes other odd noises, ‘sometimes it sounded like a dog or a fox and other times it had the lightest touch of a man or woman about it, like it was trying to shape a word it couldn’t finish’ (144). It can be both terrifying and malevolent (157), and somehow comforting, Frank often talking to it (59, 146). It appears when Frank is at his lowest as a physical manifestation of his emotional pain.

The way they imagine their creature is like the way they use memory. Frank’s creature is much more versatile than Leon’s, it is part of the bush and the sugarcane. Frank’s memories, while painful, are also fundamental to his identity, and the Creeping Jesus holds a similarly unstable place, always arriving when Frank is unhappy, but not always unwelcome. Leon’s dog-monster is only evil, it skulks and waits in readiness to haul him under the bridge, out of his foxhole in Vietnam or into the wilderness of desert. Leon’s memories are traumatic and he does his best to ignore them. The animal is not real, but their fear is, and is yet another way that their emotional lives are invested in their surroundings, an emotional life that they cannot quite claim as their own.

What they do claim, however, is their ability to drink. Drinking is a retreat into silence, into a place where other men cannot touch them. Both Roman and Leon drink to obscure their pain. Their drunken episodes are not written from
their perspective, but from their son’s – Leon writes about Roman drinking when he returns from Korea, and Frank writes about Leon drinking after Amy dies. For Leon and Roman, only the effects of drinking are written, but none of the turmoil that prompted it. Once they begin drinking they disappear – they stop speaking to their family and spend hours at the pub or in self-absorbed pursuits. Roman goes walking around the suburbs of Sydney, sitting on train stations and drinking from a hip flask (81). Leon brings home women he has picked up at the pub and spends hours in bed with them (157, 225, among others). Leon follows Roman, Frank yells at Leon, but their alcoholic fog is impenetrable. This kind of drinking is a decisive break – Roman leaves for Mulaburry and Leon does not see him again, Frank runs away from home and does not speak to Leon again. It is other men, and sons in particular, that the drinking isolates. Frank is the only son of an only son of an only son; the male lineage of trauma is direct and concentrated. Women, however, are part of the silence, either as balance, a little bit of the world that alleviates the pain, or else they are silenced too. Perhaps because other men are a source of violence and Roman and Leon are retreating from the specific violence of war, but women become part of their alcoholic disappearance.

Frank’s drinking is written from his perspective, and so brings the turmoil and menace out of silence and makes it known. Frank does not necessarily drink to forget; half the time he drinks because there is little else for men to do together. After work, or when Linus or neighbour Bob Haydon turn up at the shack (21, 131), the template for behaviour is to sit down with a beer, a template so accepted that Linus helps himself when he arrives while Frank is out (187). The structure of the novel means that Frank’s drinking becomes Leon’s drinking becomes Roman’s drinking – all Frank’s anguish is reflected back onto the previous generations.

Men disappear, women disappear, and children disappear in this novel. Men leave for war, and parents leave their children. Sometimes this is metaphorical, such as Leon disappearing into an alcoholic stupor. Sometimes this is a combination of literal and metaphorical, such as Roman becoming an alcoholic, then wandering around Sydney for hours, then finally leaving Sydney for Mulaburry.
Roman’s behaviour sets the pattern for the next two generations. He is lively and takes pride in the bakery before he leaves for Korea (25-8). Once he leaves, his behaviour is a series of disappearances, each time going further and for longer until he fails to return. Part of the move to silence within contemporary war fiction is the desire to show a different side to war; not the heroics, but the long suffering that can occur after combat, that affects the whole family, and is the framework of understanding the war for the next generation. While an understanding of trauma is not new, as much trauma theory has shown, it is no longer thought of as malingering as it was in World War I, nor is it a footnote in the bigger story of world politics and heroic individual actions. That trauma is passed on through the generations means that we can infer what Roman is experiencing by combining Frank and Leon’s perspectives.

Two disappearances haunt Frank’s chapters. When Frank arrives in Mulaburry, local girl Joyce Mackelly has disappeared, her dismembered remains turning up later in the novel (62, 180). Near the end of the novel, Sal Haydon disappears for a week. Frank is arrested for her disappearance, but she turns up filthy and holding an animal carcass, claiming she needed to find the Bunyip (251-260, 268-9, 279-80). At this point, Sal is the only person in Frank’s life whom he can properly care about. As a child, her silences are literal and not manipulative, and her disappearance reveals the fragile nature of Frank’s adult relationships. Disappearing people, especially children, is a trope in Australian literature, but most of the disappearances in this novel are gradual. When the narrative is made up of action and detail, the absent body is as potent as the present body, and a return can be another form of silence for all that it should say but does not. For example, Leon’s return in the final chapter, sober and straight, is thick with all that it refuses to acknowledge about Frank, about Vietnam and

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about the past. His presence in Frank’s memory is more potent for Frank and more active within the narrative.

‘After the fire, a still small voice’ is a biblical quote from 1 Kings 19:12 of the King James Version: ‘And after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice’. In the New International Version the translation appears as ‘And after the fire a gentle whisper,’ and in the New Revised Standard Version it is ‘and after the fire a sound of sheer silence’ – the link with silence, in both the quote and the title, is clear. The ‘still small voice’, the sound of raw silence, slips in between the noisy action and whispers the last word, it is a voice that may be still and small but cannot be ignored. After the fire, the fighting, the action, the upheavals and inversions and ironies of combat, the still small voice speaks of all that war has come to mean. Around the image, beneath the noisy detail, the still small voice whispers of trauma, of the past, of memory, and, most importantly, of the silence that follows the fire of war.

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Loevlie, *Literary Silences in Pascal, Rousseau, and Beckett*, 27.
Concluding Discussion

One of the great wounds of war always is that the people who’ve been through certain kinds of experience really don’t want to talk about them. Sometimes they can’t talk about them because they don’t have the words, or because they want to spare their wives and their children what they’ve seen. But that makes a very strange dislocation in family life. A man walking around with all this experience in his head that he can’t communicate… what can’t be talked about is something very powerful for the fiction writer.109

Malouf states, in straightforward language, the premise of the research in the preceding chapters – that silence, war and trauma are intimately connected, both on an individual and national level. When trauma and silence are the foundations of character, issues of memory and identity become problematic. Each memory becomes an action, pushing a character’s sense of identity in unusual directions. Literal silences, where characters do not speak to each other, are one way of expressing silence, but they quickly become repetitive as a literary technique. War trauma is most often experienced individually; a thousand examples of personal trauma build into a collective understanding of war, both as real events and a metaphorical framework. When individual trauma contradicts the national story of war, it creates cracks and silences within memory, and within identity. Identity, formed by silence, can be reshaped into skewed patterns within families.

Silence is present in much war writing, not just in fiction but in poetry and drama, and in the letters, diaries, emails, memoirs, official documents, official and unofficial histories of wars, battalions and battles. But the deliberate use of silence to convey the complexity of the war experience, making the silence pointed and nuanced, is the domain of fiction, poetry and drama. Silence in fiction may appear to be an oxymoron, but as Malouf, Walker, and Wyld have shown, it is often only in the telling of a war story that the silences are noticeable. It is only once the events are put into a structure that what is said

obliquely, falsely, or not at all – the gaps and silences – becomes apparent. War novels can show the gap between what was, what is and what should be, between the interpretations of different characters and different histories, and can use poetic and rhetorical devices to define and explore these gaps. These spaces are often shown through structure and syntax, which means silence in fiction is an essential part of its form. Anne Whitehead, in *Trauma Fiction*, reflects on the link between trauma and silence, and much of what she writes about trauma is also true of silence. Discussing Pat Barker’s novel *Another World*, for example, Whitehead writes ‘[n]ovelists have frequently found that the impact of trauma can only adequately be represented by mimicking its forms and symptoms, so that temporality and chronology collapse, and narratives are characterised by repetition and indirection’ and ‘[Barker] raises the issue of whether the act of killing can form part of a war narrative that is passed on as family history. How many war stories, like Geordie’s, circle around a ‘central silence’ (158), a legacy that cannot be passed on or acknowledged?’

With Frank and Leon Collard as one such example, the answer to this second question is many.

Nigel C. Hunt, in *Memory, War and Trauma*, has the relationship between memory, history and narrative as the core subject of his study. ‘If we are to understand memory,’ he writes, ‘we must explore the influence of culture and society, and how memories are affected by the stories we tell ourselves and others – the narratives.’ To understand silence in war fiction, I have explored the ways that trauma, memory and identity influence each other. By understanding the nature of the silence, the nature of the trauma becomes clearer, as does its power and pervasiveness in war fiction. Trauma is a major component of silence, present in the shock of a world torn apart, and the myriad ways the post-war world is reconstructed, both literally and imaginatively. This trauma need not belong to the character, but if it does not, it still belongs to their larger story. Silence resides within the tale, and within the telling, depending on the socially constructed space that allows for speech. Silence can also reside within the teller, as memories of the event change over time, or new interpretations are

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given to actions as others choose to speak. More particularly, silence can reside in literature as published and deliberate ambiguity. Writing about silences directly addresses this unspeakability, which is an undercurrent of war.

Focusing on the aftermath of battle and of war makes silence a large component of the storytelling. Characters struggle to convey experiences that have no markers or similarities in ordinary life. They do not have the verbal agility to convey the particularity and peculiarity of their experiences, to bridge the huge differences between the frontline and the home front. These character struggles become an issue of how to demonstrate silence through structure and form. It is the struggle of the telling, not the struggle of battle or of waiting, that becomes the core of the story.

In *Remembering War*, Winter writes about two French soldiers of the Great War and their stories, of René Cassin, who went on to draft the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and Louis-Ferdinand Destouches, who wrote the novel *Voyage a bout de la nuit* under the pseudonym Céline. Winter writes of Céline, ‘[The novel’s] truth value is of no great interest, since war novels are never documentary… What is intriguing is the way Céline defined shell shock in his novel as a convenient cover for malingering and misanthropy.’ This is in a chapter on shell shock, memory and identity, and reveals how such novels as Céline’s, ‘a classic of twentieth-century French literature,’ both reflected and influenced the debates on shell shock at the time, as well as showed how the novelists’ ‘memories of war… were built into their identities.’

History uses the novel to understand war, just as novels use works of history to construct their stories. The novel’s emotional interpretation of the war becomes as much part of the remembrance and understanding of the war as a work of history or a piece of journalism.

Silence in contemporary Australian war fiction occupies a space that touches and overlaps with other literary, historical and personal spaces for understanding what it means to be Australian, to be at war, and the concept of silence. These include the silence of male intimacy, as written by Malouf, the silence of poetic language and trauma as shown by Walker, and the structural silence that houses

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the unacknowledged, as written by Wyld. For the novelist, there is ample raw material in Australian involvement in war, with examples of silence across generations and across the continent. Particular examples of silence have a wider application – Walker’s grandfather’s pain, Wyld’s uncle’s unexplained behaviour, and Malouf’s childhood experiences are shared or known by many. Malouf said in his interview with Toibin, ‘what can’t be said is very powerful for the fiction writer’. As the preceding chapters have demonstrated, this is not only true for the fiction writer but also for the fiction reader. In order to become ‘literate in the grammar of silence’, in order to trace the borders between the known, the unknown and the unknowable, we must use these texts and ideas to form a framework for understanding how silence works within contemporary Australian war fiction.113

Home Leave
Chapter One: Monday April 11th

Greg closed his eyes to force sleep, or at least to stop the bed from spinning. He was lying in a single bed half a foot too short for him so his feet dangled over the edge. The air was fetid, full of cigarette ash and dust. He still regarded the Glebe terrace as he did when he was seventeen and just entering university. It was where he dumped his unwanted baggage, a place to recharge before he left for his next trip. Greg had convinced himself that he had no permanent base, least of all in Sydney, but the attic of the terrace was full of his photos and carefully packed negatives. Cupboard after cupboard was filled with scrapbooks of newspaper cuttings. Old cameras were lined up along the lounge room mantelpiece and bags of travel diaries were stashed in the old drawing room. His bedroom was the same as it had been when he was a teenager. Early 1960s Man magazines were still stashed in the wardrobe and a world map from 1961 was still on the wall, the continents a rainbow of empires.

He heard a thud from the garden. He poked his head out of his window to see two tanned hands hook onto the fence. A young woman swung herself over, strong and agile, following the backpack already on the grass. His niece Kate. He was excited to see her – he hadn’t seen her for so long – his feelings were unexpected and he caught his breath. She was heading towards the back door and he lurched downstairs to meet her.

“Kate!” He threw open the double doors.

“Greg!” She clutched her pack tighter and stood staring at him. “What are you doing here?”

“I live –”

“No, you don’t – well, you haven’t for seven years –”

“So there’s a time limit on being in a family?”

Kate snorted and looked away.

“Because if we’re totting up the years we’ve each lived in this house, darling niece, I think you’ll find –”

“Did you take the key from under the mat?”

“Mat?”

“On the veranda.”
“Possibly. Probably. Perhaps. Perchance. If ‘twas a pertinent preamble to my perambulation –”

“OK – it’s OK, I just, I was expecting to find it and it wasn’t there…” Her eyes roamed around the kitchen as if searching for the missing key in the light fitting or under a chair.

“Shall we start again?” He met her frown with a raised eyebrow; match you and raise you, niece.

“How about I say ‘Welcome!’ and you say ‘Uncle Greg! I haven’t seen you since I was a teenager –’”

“Twenty, I was twenty… well, almost twenty.”

“Almost twenty! So big and strong… is that the merest, heretical hint of a smile I detect, Miss Almost-twenty?”

“No! Maybe…”

“Look at me –”

“You’re so ridiculous –”

“Come on.” He held out his long, skinny arms and motioned her towards him. “Come here, Miss Almost-twenty, and give Uncle So-far-from-twenty a hug. Can’t have this sniping. Not at this ungodly hour.”

She smelled him when she came close and flinched slightly. He instinctively tightened his hold, round her shoulders and her pack, pulling her to his stained shirt.

“You stink of whisky, Uncle Greg,” she said, partly muffled by his shoulder. She pulled back to check his eyes; red-rimmed and raw.

“Just of whisky? Phew. I thought I might stink of cigarettes and hypocrisy.”

“It’s only just after six … is that last night or this morning?”

“I choose C – all of the above.”

She watched him move to the kitchen to prepare coffee in an old, battered percolator. His white hair stuck up at opposing angles. His shirt was buttoned up incorrectly and his chinos barely hung on to his bony hips. It’d been so long since she’d seen him that she’d forgotten that no one was like Uncle Greg – that he never said sorry or made excuses. Ben had always found their uncle funny, his antics pure larrikin, his comments always a tease.
“Did you even notice when last night became this morning?”

“Night becomes day with the dawn.”

“Poetic.”

He grinned at her.

“None of this ‘0600 dawn parade’ bullshit that you and your brother go in for.”

“It’s not bullshit—”

“Last night becomes this morning when I have my first cigarette.” Greg patted his pockets for his rollies and started to cough. He kept coughing, heaving over the sink, supporting himself on shaking arms. She moved swiftly over to him, holding his arms as she steered him towards a chair.

“Outside,” Greg gasped. “Smoke.”

She tried to sit him at the kitchen table but he ignored her, stumbling towards the door. She followed him in case he fell but he sat down heavily on a battered wooden chair and pulled out his sachet of tobacco. She could hear the harsh scratching sound he made as he breathed, trying to roll a cigarette but his hands were trembling. He seemed all folded up, legs crossed at the knees and ankles, thighs supporting his arms as his nicotine-stained fingers fiddled with the tally-ho paper. She wondered how he could take his photos with such shaky hands. His cough, his weight, his whisky stink—she got an inkling of why he was home after all this time.

“I’ll get you a drink,” she said.

“Whisky.”

The water she brought out tasted like a hangover, ash and phlegm. Although he couldn’t really taste anything at all in his polluted mouth except an exotic bitterness, a memory of drinking whisky alone in the dark. Not in Sydney but somewhere else, where the dust in the air smelt of spices and sewage, where the noises outside were diesel trucks and Dari. It was just a flash, sitting with a mug in air so dry that his skin cracked, but the image was as clear and present as his niece beside him. He dropped his rollie and tobacco spilt over his bare feet.

He could tell she was frowning at him, but when he looked at Kate he was haunted by unplaceable images. It was this house, it bred memories and grew them with the rampant nasturtiums in the garden. Like the nasturtiums, the
memories crept further and further into the everyday space where he lived, into the coffee cups and trouser creases. Memories crept into his lines of vision, into the photos he automatically framed as he moved about.

Like the photo he was framing now: Kate in the doorway, the strengthening light splashing onto the planes of her face. Eyes deep and dark brown and he had a strong sense of something like déjà vu, although he didn’t know if it was a memory of a photo he’d taken or a premonition of a photo to come. He couldn’t look her in the eye. He looked everywhere else instead, at her slouchy cargo pants and surf-brand t-shirt, her dark ponytail and her lean arms where her tan was fading.

“You’re home on leave.”

“For a fortnight.”

“From?”

“Afghanistan.”

He thought for a second that he might throw up and clutched his chair. Thankfully she didn’t notice, she was looking out over the garden, full of shadows in the early morning light. He drew deeply from his rollie.

“I could’ve gone to Europe,” she said. “I could be in Rome right now, but Ben said – he said…”

Ben had said that she should come home on leave to see their grandmother, just like he had. That he had said it, that he was the reason she was here now, made her pause. Questions that had been put aside with the shock of Greg’s appearance came rushing back, racing forward from what Ben said to what he meant to where he might be now to what she could possibly do about it. She didn’t want to appear weak in front of Greg, but she’d never faced a situation like this and had no idea what to do.

She couldn’t say anything when he raised his eyebrows at her, waiting for the end of her sentence. He stubbed out his rollie, took her by the arm and walked her to the kitchen table. He made coffee without saying a word, pouring hot milk into her mug, stirring in two heaped spoons of sugar and adding a finger of leftover whisky at the end. He’d poured it in before she had a chance to refuse. He sat down in front of her, his hands steady as he drank his black coffee. His eyes were bright blue and cheeky, just like her grandmother’s, looking at her as if
he could see her for who she really was. She was so used to fighting to be heard by Army men who had little respect for her that it was strange to have someone waiting and listening. She couldn’t resist.

“Ben’s missing.”
Greg breathed in sharply.
“AWOL? Captive?”
“I don’t know.”
“Where was he last seen?”
“On base in TK… I think.”
“So he’s somewhere around Tarin Kowt. In Uruzgan? Kandahar?”
“I don’t know.”
“He wasn’t seen last by you, then.”
She shook her head. Her knuckles were white around her mug.
“Who did see him last?”
“I don’t… I don’t have any more details.”
“Right. What are your sources?”
She relaxed her grip. Her instincts had been right. He didn’t say ‘that can’t be true’ or ‘you must be crazy’ or speak in that sarcastic tone her mother used. He just wanted the facts, like a journalist; like a true soldier.

“The source –”
“One source?”
“Yeah. She –”
“A Digger?”
“Yes –”
“A right little bitch, then?”
“Oh my god, you have no idea –”
“So why do you trust her?”

This was the pointy end. She wanted to dismiss the story, here in the kitchen with its deep blue walls. Her grandmother would wake up any minute – she could see all the pills laid out on the kitchen bench – so why should she worry, when it might not be true?

“Because I questioned her for almost the entire thirteen-hour flight from Dubai.”
“Ah…”
Greg fidgeted with his cigarettes and his coffee, not looking at her face.
“I don’t trust her as a person, but I trust her – her –”
“Desperate desire to make you shut up?”
“Yeah, exactly. Like, she could’ve just said ‘it’s not true’ and I would’ve left her alone. She spreads a lot of bullshit rumours, but what she said about Ben stayed the same. Ben’s been missing for –” she swallowed, “for a few days –”
“Days!”
“Apparently. But because of when he’s meant to report back –”
“No one knew till now.”
“It’s still not official. It can’t be – they would’ve told me. So I guess, technically he’s not AWOL or whatever, he just hasn’t, I don’t know…”
“So why does little Digger say he’s missing?”
“’Cause of who she’s fucking.”
Greg raised his eyebrows.
“Well, it’s true. It's the best mate of someone in Ben’s brick.”
“Brick?”
“Four man team.”
Greg just nodded and swilled the last of his coffee. He seemed to come in and out of the conversation, nodding at odds points as she spoke. His questions were spot on but his eyes kept sliding away when she looked at him. He lined up his cigarettes and leant forward.
“So, what are we going to do?”
“We?”
“We.”
He was looking directly at her, waiting for a reply, but she had to break the stare. The blue walls made the kitchen dark but it felt comforting, like a cubby house that smelled of biscuits and coffee. She glanced back at him. He’d barely moved, he was just watching her with a slightly amused look on his face. Could he tell what she was thinking? Surely not. But she had the sense that he wasn’t waiting for an instruction, but for permission to do what he was going to do anyway. If he wanted to help, maybe he really did have something to offer. Maybe she would just have to take the risk. Ben would and she knew he’d make
her take the risk too, so she swallowed her doubts along with the last of her coffee.

“Any ideas?” she said.

Greg grinned, taking a cigarette to smoke at the door.

“Call triple 0? ‘Hello? Police? I’ve lost my nephew.’”

“I’ve lost my brother.”

“I’ve lost my mind.”

She grinned at him but his smile faded as he looked over her head. She turned around and craned to see a hunched figure shuffling in the dark hallway, one hand against the wall.

“Nan!” She jumped up to hug her grandmother, holding her firmly but tenderly so as not to hurt her. She looked even shorter than she had six months ago.

“Katie love!”

She helped her grandmother to a chair, chatting, bringing over her pills and preparing tea. Ben had been right; it was the right thing to come home. Nan was ninety! She hated pink but when she saw her grandmother in her pink flannel dressing gown, that was when she knew she’d come home.

“You two must have a lot to catch up on,” said Elsie, “with both of you back from Afghanistan.”

She stopped. The hiss of the kettle died away.

“Greg, is that true?”

Greg cleared his throat to speak but it turned into a cough and he went out and hung onto the veranda railing. She followed him, not realizing she was still holding a teabag until she was outside, squinting through the morning sun.

“Greg –”

“Yes, yes, I have – it’s true.”

“Why didn’t you tell me before? When did you get back? Did you come straight here? Where were you –”

He tried to answer but his voice was scratchy and he winced in pain. She fetched him more water from the kitchen, not looking at her grandmother, not looking at the whisky bottle on the table.

“Well?”
“Ah – well.” He wouldn’t look at her but looked over her head, at the walls, at the blanket of nasturtiums by the garden fence.

“When did you get back?”

“Yesterday. No, the day before. No – what day is it today?”

“It’s Monday the eleventh. Of April.”

“Right. So I got here on Thursday or Friday, I think –”

“You think.”

“You know, it’s not all – it was a long journey, and Mum was ill, I couldn’t tell – no, it wasn’t that, I think, maybe the whisky –”

“The whisky? You’ve been drunk since you got home?”

“I haven’t – I mean, it’s been…” he trailed off, staring at the back fence.

She didn’t know whether to be angry that Greg couldn’t finish his sentence, or worried, or both. His clumsiness, his mumbling, his eyes alternately vacant and penetrating, were so different from the last time she’d seen him. Then he’d been in full flight at his sixtieth birthday party, smashing glasses and hurling colourful abuse at the guests. He’d told outrageous stories from the photos that they’d put up around the house as decoration. He might be irresponsible, unreliable and rarely at home, but he’d always been sharp. He’d woken up after his party and said ‘I dreamed I photographed John Howard taking bribes from George Bush – if only’.

“You really can’t tell me?”

“I can… I can’t…” How could he say the pictures in his mind wouldn’t translate into words? That the images were so fragmented they were incomprehensible, just feelings, so muddied that they looked and felt like nothing at all?

He inhaled deeply, glad to have something to cover his pauses. He had all the information upstairs, in his ticket and boarding pass stub, but he’d lost track of the days. He’d had black holes in his memory before. Once or twice he’d gone on holiday and forgotten to return for weeks. But by then his reputation as a mysterious freelancer was well established. If someone asked him what he’d done in 1984, all he had to say was ‘I was away’ and people imagined for themselves what this meant. His niece was asking him specific, logistical details,
her dark eyes pleading in the sunny morning and he could hear the question that pulsed under all the others: ‘Did you see Ben?’

He didn’t know. All he knew for sure was that he needed this cigarette like he’d never needed anything else in his life.

“Katie!” Elsie called from the kitchen. “What’s going on? What are you two talking about?”

He watched her fist as it crushed the teabag still trapped within it, the tea slowly leaking out from between her fingers.

“You’ve got tobacco on your bottom lip,” Kate said.

She waited while he rubbed it off, nodding when he was clean before going inside.

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She handed her grandmother another tissue and poured another drop of whisky in her tea. She wondered how many times she’d have to have this conversation about Ben. Telling Greg had been necessary, but her grandmother’s tears were unexpected. She’d expected some tough talking, like ‘What a fool – can’t he read a map?’ or ‘He’ll make himself found if he knows what’s good for him.’ But her grandmother had crumbled, spilling her tea on the tablecloth, just nodding as she received the information about Ben. When she spoke it was to give all the details of Greg’s sudden arrival in Glebe.

“Greg hasn’t given me two coherent sentences to rub together since he came home,” Elsie sniffed. “I do know he got here on Friday though. If you can manage to get some sense out of him…”

She nodded. Her grandmother’s look was sharp behind her enormous glasses as she gripped Kate’s hand.

“You will find Ben.”

“I’ll do my –”

“No. You will.”

Her grandmother was holding on to her as tightly as her frail fingers would let her. Tight enough to feel it leave a mark as her grandmother held her gaze.

“So,” said Greg, leaning on the doorframe, “what will you tell Lynette?”
She sighed as her uncle placed the phone in her hand. Her grandmother sipped her tea and Greg smoked his cigarette, both of them watching her. She couldn’t call her mother with an audience, she could hardly speak to her mother at all. She moved into the dusty hallway and dialled.

“Lynette Silk.”

“Mum.”

“Kate – what’s happened? Where are you?”

“Nice to hear from you too, Mum.”

“Oh, you know what I mean, you haven’t called me at work since you were a teenager.”

“Because you always treat it as an imposition.”

“Well, what do you expect? I’m at work.”

She made herself pause, listening to the traffic on the street.

“I’m at home.”

“Why?”

“On leave.”

“And you didn’t think to tell me? That’s nice.”

“I might’ve if you’d emailed me.”

“I emailed you –”

“Your PA did –”

“And so why have you rung me now?”

She bluntly told her mother about Ben. She leant against the wall, holding the phone out from her ear so that she wasn’t hurt by every spike in pitch and volume. The conversation had unravelled even more quickly than she’d expected. Her mother’s instinct to attack made her feel very tired.

Greg walked in and put his hand out for the phone. What a relief. He’d always had a magic touch with Lynette.

“– I deserve better than this, Kate –”

“Nettie!”

There was a long pause and he winked at her.

“I could hear your ranting from the back gate and I decided that Kate could do with a break. Changing of the guard. Alright, resume your attack.”

The room was so still that he could almost hear Lynette breathing.
“Greg.”
“The one and only, Nettie.”

He heard a sniffle on the line and he knew Lynette had softened. It was the use of her nickname, Nettie – no one else called her that, she hated it, but he’d never called her anything else and it’d become a term of affection. Kate was looking at him, waiting. He gave her a thumbs-up and she quickly left for the kitchen.

“My son…” Lynette’s voice was full of tears.
“We’ll find him.”
“How?”
“Clairvoyance.”
“Greg –”
“Trust us, Nettie. We’ll do everything we can. More.”
“You’re staying in Sydney?”
“I’ll do whatever needs to be done.”

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“I promised your mother you’d visit her tonight.”
“Why?”
“Oh, come on! I had to give her something – you have to tell her something.” He rolled another cigarette. “She loves you.”
“Ha! She doesn’t show it. She’s as defensive as –”
“Defence Force Personnel? Well, you’d know about that.”
She looked up at him and he smiled.
“So… what do we do now?” he asked.
“We.”
“It has to be.”

He inhaled with a cheeky look. Is this how everyone forgave him? The morning was warming up, but Greg’s skin was still grey and he could barely hold himself against the doorframe. Perhaps he was right and ‘it had to be’. He’d been to Afghanistan, he knew combat, he knew Ben. He could do things and go places she’d never think of. She needed someone to help her look for Ben while she was
in Sydney and who else could she trust? It could only be family, which meant it could only be Greg.

“I need to tell Dad. Then sleep. Then see Mum. And you…”

She watched the smoke billow round his face. It stank but she was already getting used to it. She thought he might wink again but his eyes changed and he looked down as he nodded, picking bits of tobacco from his tongue and moving to the veranda railing.

The sun had already warmed the railing where he leant against it. He knew his shirt was buttoned up incorrectly and his fingers were stained. He knew the morning light made his skin look blotchy and old. What he didn’t know was what photos he’d taken in Afghanistan. It was all locked away in his camera bag. They were the first thing he thought of when Kate had said she was home on leave, but he bargained with himself: tomorrow is soon enough. Talking to Kate was more than he’d done in days. He watched her run to help Elsie back from the outside toilet she used to avoid the stairs. Kate’s lithe limbs were swift in the sun and he was reminded of his father, both of them moving with that same energy. But more than that Kate reminded him of Ben, as she reminded everyone of Ben, they spoke alike, their hands moved with the same deftness. His mother caught his eye as she wobbled up the veranda steps and he knew, from her choked laugh, that she was thinking the same thing.
Chapter Two: Tuesday April 12th

Mr Ba’s Noodle House did not advertise. There was no sign on the grimy door that led up from Sussex St, no number and no light in the stairwell. Greg and Harry had been going there for thirty-five years, ever since Greg returned to Sydney after the fall of Saigon. Today, he stood outside the door at exactly 8am, the peak-hour traffic around him dissolving into noise. He’d felt just like this the first time he came here, disoriented, jittery and full of nicotine. Only then, he’d sent all of his film home before he’d jumped on the plane and he’d known exactly what was in his camera bag, down to the last pencil stub. Now his bag still had the padlock on it from the flight. He hadn’t needed to bring it with him, all he needed was a flash drive or two with his files. But he wasn’t thinking. He was seeing Chinatown in 1975, young Chinese men in flares with cheap cigarettes between their lips, women looking like Saigon bar girls in tight, floral polyester dresses.

“Greg!” Harry clapped him on the shoulder, and he lurched forward. He started to cough and Harry’s smile dropped.

“Mate, that doesn’t sound too good.”

Harry stood hands on hips. He was a lot shorter than Greg and stood up straight as a fighter. He’d got fat in his middle age, his belly pushed against his shirt, but his silver hair still stuck up like a brush. Greg knew that Harry had seen him in worse states than this, but perhaps only in Saigon, when he’d come out of the field to receive Harry’s cure—all of paracetamol and booze.

Harry led him straight through the restaurant and out the back to a tiled rooftop with a high fence covered in vines. Men were smoking and drinking Vietnamese coffee, or slurping bowls of Pho. It was an all-male domain here on the balcony, except for Mr Ba’s daughter, whom they’d known since she was twelve. Harry chatted easily with her, ordering coffee and omelettes, while Greg gulped down water and avoided her eye. When they were alone, Harry leant forward.

“So, Greg.”

“Harry.”
He couldn’t look Harry in the eye. He knew he should, this was a test and Harry was taking his measure.

“What the fuck happened to you? I haven’t heard from you in weeks. I wrangled a sat phone for you so you can keep me updated, and then you just disappear into the wilds of Afghanistan without warning or…”

He clenched his fists. He tried to calm his pulse by breathing deeply, but he wanted to hit Harry in the mouth and run all the way back to Glebe. His knuckles turned white. He closed his eyes and in the pinky-black behind his eyelids saw a flash of desert. He could taste blood and dust in his mouth and heard a yell as though from far away. He waited for another flash, but heard nothing but the pounding of blood in his ears.

After a while he noticed that Harry wasn’t talking. Their breakfast was in front of them, the coffee dripping into the sweetened condensed milk. Harry was looking at him with a strange expression, but he couldn’t look at Harry long enough to decide whether it was pity, sorrow, anger or curiosity that he saw in Harry’s face.

“What’s in the bag?” Harry asked.

He swallowed hard, his throat was dry again. He dragged the ashtray over to his elbow and lit up, keeping his focus on the table, knowing he had to answer the question behind the question, the one that had nothing to do with the contents of the bag at his feet.

“My nephew’s missing somewhere outside Tarin Kowt. My niece just got in on leave. I think there’s something in the bag.”

“What kind of something? For what? For your nephew?”

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean, you don’t know? You’re not making any sense, Greg.”

He coughed his smoke into the vines, seeing Harry’s frown out of the corner of his eye.

“I don’t remember.”

“You don’t remember what?”

“Anything.”

Harry ran his hand roughly through his hair.
“And the cough, Greg? What’s that – cancer?”
“Let’s hope so. Then it’s not TB.”
Harry laughed; he’d been waiting for Harry’s sudden bark.
“TB! You’re a fucking mess.”
“Of course,” he said, “Why else would I call you?”

He inhaled and risked a fleeting look at Harry. Harry was smiling slightly at him, as though he might be some loveable rogue who’d got into yet another scrape. As though he didn’t have white hair and wrinkles. As though he also saw the young men in flares and the women in polyester dresses, and the sunglasses he wore were still the aviators they’d picked up off the chopper pilots in Saigon.

“Eat your omelette, and tell me about this nephew of yours,” said Harry softly. “He’s Army?”

He knew by the way Harry stuffed his food in his mouth and promptly ordered seconds that he was forgiven. Harry asked a hundred questions, picking up the bag and checking it for rattles, taking notes on his iPhone over his half-glasses.

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“Right, what’ve we got?” said Harry, adjusting the screen of the laptop. They were sitting in a meeting room in the Reuters’ city offices. Harry opened the bag – it reeked of coffee, mould, cheap cigarettes and sweat. As soon as Greg smelt it he felt weak.

“Geez, what a stench,” muttered Harry, wrenching the dirty zippers open to excavate the tightly packed contents.

Greg wasn’t paying attention. The flashes had started to take on definite forms. Amir, his fixer, welcoming him into his flat in Kabul. Amir was always smiling, which made him smile in return before he knew what he was smiling about. Street kids yelling in play in Amir’s street. Soldiers yelling at him to get out of the truck. His hands were trembling and he felt dizzy from breathing too quickly.

He gradually focused on Harry’s face, first his nose, then his chin and finally his eyes.

“Amir,” he croaked.

“Is he alright?” Harry asked. “You never gave me his number, you secretive bastard, or I would’ve called him weeks ago…”

He started to roll a cigarette, concentrating so his hands didn’t shake too much, so he didn’t think too much about Amir.

“You can’t smoke in here.”

“Can’t we open a window?”

“All hermetically sealed, mate.”

“Hermeneutically sealed, you mean. The fucking PC Police come and check, do they?”

“They installed alarms.”

He looked up and Harry was smiling. If he was still able to banter then he couldn’t be totally lost.

“I’ll just sniff the tobacco, then.”

“You do that. It’s as close as you’re going to get to a smoke until we see your shots.”

Harry stuck a flash drive from Greg’s bag into the laptop and laid his camera on the table. He wanted to snatch it up and cradle it, but he turned it over in his hands, feeling the old scratches and searching for new ones, holding it in his lap. Harry frowned at the pictures on the screen, clicking on them to check the date and time.

“These are alright,” Harry said. “March 22 and 23. Some hospital or other.”

There were shots of rooms with broken tile floors covered in urine and blood. Doctors frowned over mangled children. A male doctor was haggling with a man about his wife. The wife was lying in the bed in a chadri, the sheets covered in blood. Both doctor and husband were pointing at the dying wife and yelling, clearly over whether she should take off the chadri in order to be treated. The last shot was a large hole in the hospital wall, with a little child’s face poking around, wide-eyed and cheeky.
Greg breathed in sharply. He could hear the bang and its echoes as the building shook. Harry looked up at him, waiting.

“It’s an NGO hospital run by MSF, just outside Kabul.”

“What happened?”

“Suicide bomb. Half a window fell onto me.”

He could taste the rubble in the back of his throat and his nostrils stung with petrol, dust and burnt flesh. The smell of war was so familiar.

“There are no shots of the bombsite.”

He leant forward and looked through the photos. He pushed at his memory, making the image on the screen open out into smells and sounds, making it move.

“I was injured.”

“Not badly?”

“I was helping this pretty blonde…”

“Why?” asked Harry.

He was confused but Harry just raised an eyebrow.

“Accidental compassion?” said Harry. “I didn’t think you were still prone to that.”

“My cameras – I needed to go somewhere quiet to look at them, to see if they were alright.”

Harry was still looking at him, amused. They both knew what he would do given the opportunity.

“Now, where’s this?”

It was a market. There was Ben in uniform, grinning between two old Afghan men, piles of spices behind them. Just a flicker on the screen.

“Is that your nephew?”

“Yes.”

“April 3rd – you’ve skipped ten days.”

He stared at the picture. This was his worst nightmare, to be trapped with shots and no story. If a picture held a thousand words, then he’d forgotten the language. He’d become deaf. The silence expanded until it filled the room.

“Well?” asked Harry.

He shrugged and he shook his head. He had nothing.
The next shots were disjointed. There were half a dozen of Amir and his wife Samira in their little flat, with even a couple of him smoking on Amir’s balcony as he looked over the Kabul street below. He sighed.

“Amir covets my camera. He thinks if he had a camera like mine, he could shoot his way out of Afghanistan.”

He’d let Amir play with his equipment, spending all afternoon photographing his wife and the kids in the alley. Amir deleted most of the shots before he could even look at them.

“These ones are back to March 22 – your shots are all out of order.”

“So it seems.”

He played with his camera, ignoring the question of why. He could feel Harry looking at him. He only exhaled when Harry turned back to the laptop.

“Where’s this then?” said Harry. “Looks like the south.”

Bleak, snow-topped mountains lined the horizon and the ground was rocky. The first few shots looked like nothing, just desert, until a dust cloud showed a vehicle coming up the dead straight road that cut the picture in half. The shots focused on the frowning faces of the two soldiers in the vehicle and kept going until the driver jumped out and ran towards the camera.

“They’re Australian,” said Harry. “Is that your nephew again?”

Harry zoomed in on the driver’s face. It was definitely Ben. The last shot showed Ben recoiling in confusion, a blonde soldier behind him yelling something, then the scene switched to a town. Harry flicked back to the picture of Ben confused, taken slightly below his face.

“It’s him.”

“And?”

He realised he must’ve taken that last shot as he was lowering his camera, telling Ben why he was there. The road was sealed, so it had to be one of the few highways in Afghanistan, but he couldn’t tell from the photo where it was or which way he’d been travelling. He could hear Ben’s voice in his head but not the words he’d spoken. Each time he tried to tune in to the precise memory, there was just white noise.

He looked away from the screen and into Harry’s face. Harry had been watching him closely, but when their eyes met Harry just sighed and went back
to the photos. He’d expected further questions, teasing, cajoling, even a reprimand, but Harry said nothing. He didn’t need to wonder what this meant. Harry had been reading his face for too long, his thoughts were written in every wrinkle.

The next pictures were of a dusty town, with packed dirt roads and old cars, stalls selling mobile phones and brick buildings with Afghan men and children walking around. Shot after shot of Australian soldiers. He sat up a bit straighter, he could feel some memory returning, filtering through his system like the nicotine he craved.

“That’s Tarin Kowt,” he said.

He remembered the blonde soldier, next to Ben in their vehicle, turning around and spinning some wild story, then being in Tarin Kowt taking pictures of the soldiers working.

“Ben took me there. He was with me the whole time, like an escort.”

“He was gagging you.”

The shots looked like Australian Defence Force publicity. Soldiers smiled at the camera, listened seriously to locals, laughed as they bargained with the market sellers. Harry had to be right. He only took these kind of photos when he was being paid to and Reuters certainly hadn’t paid him to shoot anything so anodyne.

“Every shot, he’s in every shot,” said Harry.

Either Ben or the blonde soldier was there as a hand pointing where to shoot, or standing in front of a doorway, or next to a local, blank-faced and watching the main action. There were few pictures, maybe thirty in total, all dated April 2nd. The last one was of Amir, arms crossed, lips pursed and eyebrow raised.

“That’s your fixer.”

“The happiest man in the world.”

“He doesn’t look too happy there, mate.”

“Ben and the blonde must’ve been treating us like idiots. Otherwise Amir would never be so rude.”

But the fact that Amir had been with him gave him a glimmer of hope. Until Harry clicked to the next photo.
“Greg, that’s brilliant.”

It was a mid-shot of Ben’s face and torso, with Ben’s face in centre frame. Ben was in a dark alley and in the shadows around him kids and women hovered in the doorways. A slash of sun highlighted Ben’s face. He was wearing a kameez, his uniform underneath the traditional tunic. Something, perhaps a rifle, was slung over one shoulder. He was walking in such a way that he looked detached from gravity. His large brown eyes were wide open and unfocused and his lips were parted in half a smile.

“He looks like a saint,” said Harry.

“Like a military Messiah.”

“It’s perfect.” Harry zoomed in on different parts of the shot, reframing it so that Ben’s face was more prominent.

He knew he should publish that shot immediately, regardless of whether it had captions or not, regardless of the damage it might do to his family. It was a career-making shot, a war-changing shot, but he wanted to cut open his skull and forcibly extract the information that must be hiding in there – where the shot was taken, why he was there with Ben and not with Ben now. The way Harry was fiddling with the shot made him feel sick. He looked away, hoping Harry would see him and stop, hoping Harry wouldn’t see him so ashamed of his own work. Why did he feel sickened? Wasn’t this the kind of shot that justified his whole career?

“Is this the same town?” asked Harry. “April 4 – are we still in Tarin Kowt?”

The shots were indistinct alleyways, some pock-marked with bullet holes, everything covered with dust so he couldn’t tell if the walls were concrete or mud. Dirty faces peered from doorways and in rare patches of light children stood and stared. In each photo, the people and the walls crept closer together. He leant over and took the mouse from Harry to flick through his shots.

“Fuck me,” said Harry, gaping.

It was a beautiful shot. In a room in a derelict building, a stream of light illuminated the bodies of men covering the floor. The dark walls were smeared with filth. The men had blank, blissed-out faces and the paraphernalia of heroin use was scattered around them. Only one man looked alert and directly at the
camera. Ben, again in a kameez, was kneeling beside a grubby young man who had clearly just taken a hit. Ben was holding his hand out to receive something but it wasn’t clear what that was. What was clear was that Ben was not high, that he still had his boots on under his Afghan clothes and he was the only westerner in the room.

“You knew this was coming, Greg.”

“No… yes…”

“Why is he alone?”

“I don’t know.”

“Where is it? TK? A village?”

“I don’t know.”

“It was only a week ago – do you remember anything about this?”

He stared at the screen. There were three almost identical shots of Ben in this pose and then nothing. Harry sat back in his chair.

“That’s it. That’s the shot,” Harry grinned. “OK, you can have your smoke now.”

“Harry…” What did he want to say – don’t use it? That’d be ridiculous.

“I don’t know what it means.”

“It means your nephew knows the drug dens of Afghanistan, that’s what it means.”

—— 0 ——

The traffic noise and thumping music from the cafe surrounded them and he felt more protected than he had in the meeting room.

“Greg, you are the most frustrating individual I’ve ever had to work with. If you weren’t such a reliable genius I’d never work with you again.”

He almost choked as he inhaled.

“A compliment? Really, Harry?”

It was mid-morning now and people in suits were walking briskly between offices. Nobody looked twice at two scruffy middle-aged men, one tall and skinny, one short and stocky, grinning at each other.
“Well, you know I don’t believe in praise. But you come back a mess and deliver the biggest scoop of the year – right in time for Anzac Day.”

He inhaled deeply and tried to steady himself – an Anzac Day scoop, and Kate was here –

“The only problem is the captions.” Harry looked at him. “You don’t have anything else with you, do you?”

“Some clothes, my coffee pot,” he shrugged.

“So you don’t have your travel diaries, do you?”

His travel diaries, he’d forgotten about them –

“Or your other camera, or all your memory cards, or your papers – you don’t have them at home, do you?”

He felt that the air had stopped moving, that the cars were gliding silently by as if in a vacuum.

“Kate’s here,” he said.

“Who’s Kate? Is that the niece you mentioned earlier?”

“She – I can’t –”

“Greg, you can’t show me those shots and then say we can’t use them. You were working for us on that trip. And that sat phone is still missing…”

The cars sputtered into sound. The people on the footpath moved faster and faster, their business shoes clipping loudly on the asphalt.

“I can give you a few days grace, Greg. Enough time for you to tell your family. And to call your fixer – dredge up those captions.”

—— o ——

The harbour was relentlessly beautiful from where Greg sat at Circular Quay. The deep blue water glittered, the Opera House was white and majestic and ferries cut a straight path under the strong, solid Harbour Bridge. Even with his prescription sunglasses, the sunshine hurt his eyes. It was a perfect day but he was barely in it. His head felt as light and empty as his hands.

It wasn’t the photos of Ben that chained him smoking to the bench. It wasn’t that he looked like a fool in front of Harry, he’d always looked like a fool in front of Harry. It was Amir. Greg could hear Amir’s voice chattering in his
head with a sing-song cadence, as though the Dari was bubbling underneath. Amir was twenty-seven, with the face of a forty year-old and the energy of a teenager. He linked the few shots of Amir together in his mind, playing them over and over in between the traffic noises. He watched the looping memory, ignoring the buskers with their didgeridoos, until he felt such a strong yearning to run back to Amir that he almost cried.

— — o — —

Kate wasn’t crying, she was swearing under her breath. She was cursing the fact that she was sitting at Parramatta Police Station, waiting to talk to Constable Thomas Lee. Tom Lee had apparently served with Ben in Afghanistan and this was the only name she could get from her contact at the Department of Defence in Canberra. She’d rung him and caught the train out to Parramatta immediately. She had a lot of respect for the police but the plastic chairs in the station foyer were uncomfortable and all she could smell was disinfectant and nervous sweat.

Two young constables walked in the door and she didn’t need to be told which one was Tom Lee. He wasn’t tall but he stood up very straight. While the other man looked weighed down with his gun belt on his hip, Tom Lee walked as though it wasn’t even there. He had fair hair and freckles and noticed her as soon as she stood up.

“Kate Talbot.” She held out her hand.

“Tom Lee… oh yeah, you left me a message, like, an hour ago.”

“I believe you served with my brother, Ben Talbot, in Afghanistan?”

“Afghanistan! Geez, that was a while ago –”

“Is there somewhere we can talk?”

“Ah –”

“It’ll be quick.”

She fingered the photo of Ben in her pocket. She’d taken it from her mother last night, a picture of Ben and two Afghan men grinning in front of a wall of spices.
“We’ll step outside for a mo.” Tom motioned her through the door and down the steps at the entrance.

“Your brother, he’s a commando, right?”

She nodded.

“Yeah, I think you’ve got the wrong Tom Lee.”

“What?”

Tom grinned and shook his head.

“Yeah, I know, there were two of us in the ‘Ghan at the same time. But everyone called the other one Fred.”

“Fred – Fred Lee. I’ve heard of him.”

“He knew your brother well. I only met them in Dubai on the way home, whenever it was, two years ago.”

She stared over to the courthouse, bureaucratic and pale in the sun.

“It was funny, two Tom Lees, I got a photo of the two of us together. We kept in touch.”

“Well do you have his number?”

“Ah, yeah, I do.” Tom pulled out his phone and hesitated.

“You can give Fred my number instead.”

“What’s this about, anyway?”

She felt sure that people were looking at them sideways.

“It’s confidential.”

“But it must be pretty important, for you to come and see me at work.”

He pushed his sunglasses on top of his head and straightened his shoulders.

She’d have to tell him something to get Fred’s number.

“There’s… Ben’s in trouble.”

“Trouble? Like…”

“In the ‘Ghan. He’s…” she took a deep breath, “missing. It’s not official, I only heard two days ago, on my way home –”

“You’re Army? You’re on leave?”

“From the ‘Ghan, yeah. I need to do something about it, find out where he went. That’s why I’m here.”
She hoped he understood, that he could hear the imperative behind her short sentences. Her need must have shown on her face, because he gave a little nod and pulled out his phone.

“Here’s Fred’s number. I’ll call him for you too, let him know.”

“Cheers.”

“Good luck. And, like, call if you need anything else.”

She felt the photo in her pocket again. It was becoming a talisman, something of Ben to hold on to. She didn’t want to show it to people unless she had to.

She hadn’t even reached the train station when Fred rang. He was home on leave from Afghanistan too. He’d managed to time it with the school holidays.

“Look, you can’t come up now, I’m out with the kids, but come up anytime tomorrow. Do you have a car?”

“No.”

“Then catch the train to Gosford, the bus to Copacabana beach and I’ll come and collect you. I wish…”

There was a pause, as though he was about to say something about Ben but stopped himself. Uni students in tight black jeans talked over each other as they headed into the Max Brenner Chocolate Shop, not that much younger than her but a world away with their celebrity gossip and weekend party plans. She guessed his unspoken wish was everything she also wished for, everything every soldier wished for when confronted with MIA.

“Come as early as you like tomorrow. My youngest wakes me at six so I’ll be up.”

—— o ——

“Greg, your room stinks.”

Saucers overflowed with cigarette butts and clothes were scattered on the floor. Every surface was covered with used tissues and dust. The bed was unmade and stained with rings of sweat. She opened the window with a jerk to breathe in the fresher air from the garden.
She waited for him to make a joke about this filth, some come-back to her abrupt assessment. Greg could barely control the trembling in his hands as he set up his laptop. He stood on top of his clothes on the floor, not bothering to kick them aside. He didn’t say anything, just stood by the desk and held out the old wooden chair for her to sit on.

“So what am I looking at?” she asked. She tried to keep her tone light.

“My shots of Afghanistan.”

She spun around to face him and saw him flinch. She was shocked. How could she possibly hurt him? The green walls reflected on to his skin. She could see the ash stains down the front of his shirt.

“They’re from this last trip, aren’t they?”

He moved to the window to light up.

“Is Ben in there?”

“Just scroll through,” he croaked, exhaling his smoke out the window. He was watching something intently on the wall, trying to hide his thoughts by doing something else. She knew what he was doing because she did it herself.

She could almost hear his thoughts: ‘Words – just tokens – as useful as a dollar thrown in a wishing well.’

She stopped at the shot of Ben with the spice sellers. She pulled the photo out of her pocket. It was the same one, the same pose, the same slant of sunlight. She handed it to her uncle, watching for a reaction. He looked at the photo for a long moment then turned and exhaled. He didn’t meet her eyes once.

“Keep going.”

She recognised the road immediately, even before she recognised Ben.

“That’s outside Tarin Kowt,” she said. “When did you say you took these?”

“I didn’t.”

“So…?”

Greg cleared his throat.

“The date’s on the file.”

“April 1st – I was still there then.”

Greg didn’t answer. Was that Luke Miller with Ben? Why were they there, just the two of them? Ben looked thin and his skin looked dirty. He had a tattoo
on his hand – that was new. Why hadn’t she known that Ben was in Tarin Kowt? She didn’t understand how she could have missed him. She flicked forward. She lingered over the photos of Tarin Kowt. She knew every street corner, every market stall that Ben stood next to. She could just imagine the noise of Pashto and engines.

She clicked the mouse and stopped.

“The Messiah shot.” Greg’s rumble was low and bitter.

She’d never seen Ben look like that. Ben was there and not there, his wide staring eyes in his slack features – that Afghan shirt he was wearing, his rifle on his back – it was all so wrong, so dangerously unprofessional, especially from Ben, in his position. Greg coughed and sniffed. The dark room closed in around her until all that was left was the picture of Ben.

She clicked the mouse again – there were the shots of Ben in the drug den.

She couldn’t hear the traffic in the street. She couldn’t smell the smoke and old sweat in the air. Her blood pounded, one-two, in her ears.

She turned around to Greg. His face was blotchy and wet and he kept flicking between her face and the screen. He didn’t say a word, his skin waxy in the half-light. He inhaled then blew the smoke out through his nostrils, a long tendril that floated up and settled in the air above her hair. She noticed her face was also wet; it must also be blotchy, she got like that when she cried. Greg looked at her like he was drowning and wrenched his eyes away, out the window.

She turned back to the laptop. She wanted to touch the screen, to touch Ben’s face in the picture, but she stopped herself. Ben, as she knew him, was not in that photo.

“I don’t believe it,” she whispered.

“Neither do I,” said Greg.

But there it was.

The breeze from the garden was the only sweet thing in the room as they pushed themselves through the remainder of the day. She tidied Greg’s room as he sat by the window and smoked. On Elsie’s suggestion, she put a bowl of nasturtiums on the desk, so after an hour Greg’s room smelt clean and light.

As his niece filled garbage bags with tissues and baskets with laundry, Greg gave her all the information he remembered, everything he’d said to Harry
and more that he hadn’t. He talked to keep her moving, talked to keep her in the house, talked until they could get drunk together later, until they could drain a bottle of Jameson’s Irish Whiskey and swap soldier stories, Afghanistan stories, favourite family anecdotes. He wanted to hold Kate and make it better for her but she was twice as strong as him and he was half her problem. So instead he did the only other thing he was skilled at and talked. That he’d spent the past week between a stutter and silence he did his best to forget.
Chapter Three: Wednesday April 13th

The pre-dawn train to Gosford wound through the lower Hawkesbury, gliding over estuaries and ridges that looked untouched since the time of the rainbow serpent. It was still dark when the train pulled out from Central Station, still dark as it plunged through Strathfield and the unlit suburbs of Epping, Ryde and Hornsby. As it reached the Central Coast, the first glimmers of sunrise flushed the sky purple through the carriage windows. The dragonflies in the grasses shimmered in the in-between light. Wondabyne looked like it might’ve done when the track was first laid down, with a single wooden shack that faced the sea. Koolewong was never so romantic, the call-and-answer chorus of currawong and kookaburra rising with the tide between the mangroves. The slow unpeeling of the earth, the removal of night into naked day, was a time of revelation for those who could see it. Kate wasn’t usually one of these people. She’d never romanticised a sunrise in her life nor thought of dawn as anything other than the time around 0600. But perhaps it was her mission that affected her, or the empty train carriage, or the way her thoughts fell into rhythm with the clack of the wheels, but she felt some hint of revelation this morning. Some hope, some possibility, or perhaps just the purity of sure purpose, but as the purple brightened towards the coast she felt the tension of the past forty-eight hours shift. Greg had already drastically changed the burden of looking for Ben, increasing its shape and weight but helping to carry it too. She had a copy of the shots in a flash drive in her pocket as well as the photo she’d taken from her mother. Fred Lee would have to tell her something – she was sure of it.

It was properly dawn when she got off the train and headed for the bus connection. As she rang Fred, she touched the photo of Ben in her pocket.

—- o —-

“You look just like him.”

“You must be Fred.”

Fred stared at her as he shook her hand in his huge, firm grip. He was very tall, with dark brown hair and stubble, skin both tanned and freckled. She could
tell he’d just come home on leave; he looked too skinny for his frame as he waited at the bus stop by the beach.

“Ben’s a good mate. He…”

Fred kept hold of her hand, long enough for her to notice that his palms were calloused. The sun was in her eyes, reflecting off the white sand and the concrete around the bus stop. She didn’t like to drop her gaze or in any way make herself seem smaller than Fred, but she was squinting up at him and it’d begun to be painful. At the edge of the beach a tree had been blown sideways by the ocean wind so it had grown at an angle. He turned around to see what she was looking at and she stretched her hand when he let go.

“The tree,” she said, pointing. It was twisted and stunted but clung tenaciously to the dunes. Its branches waved and danced in the breeze. She waited for Fred to say something, like ‘It’s always been there’ or ‘Tough little thing’ but he just stared at it.

“Let’s get a coffee,” said Fred, straightening up. “It’ll be more private there than at my place. We can always move to the beach if we have to.”

The café looked out over the expanse of Copacabana and McMasters beaches, shining in the morning sun. There was a pine tree in the middle of the café’s outdoor seating area and in front of that the front table, secluded from the other tables and almost on the street. The breeze from the beach repeatedly blew over the sugar pot, regardless of how she arranged the packets of sugar. Eventually she gave up, watching the pot roll around on the table at the say-so of the wind.

“I grew up around here,” said Fred, staring at the sea. “It’s nowhere near Holsworthy or Randwick or any of the bases, but when I’m away and I think of home, it’s always here that I think of.”

The metal canister of the sugar pot whirred over the formica. The air smelt clean, it made her skin feel clean, but the coffee wasn’t as good here as it was in Glebe. It was too milky and bland.

“Sorry,” said Fred. “You just look so much like Ben –”

“– I’ve heard that before –”

“– that I just start talking to you as though you are Ben.”

Fred looked down at his coffee with an embarrassed smile.
“He’s a good mate. I miss him.”

Just like Greg, everything was in what Fred didn’t say. It made her nervous. She watched him and wished Jim was here, he’d know what Fred meant much more precisely than she ever could. He’d have kissed her all the way in on the train too.

“I’ve been thinking about this a lot, ever since you called,” said Fred. “We used to work together, but not anymore.”

“You’re a commando?”

“Yeah. But Benny got himself transferred to a different unit last year, more dangerous work. More secret. I’ve got kids, you know, I didn’t want to…”

She nodded. He spoke mostly to his coffee cup, hanging his head as if he felt ashamed.

“Anyways, we kept in touch. Or we used to…”

Fred looked at her with a pained expression. He was waiting for her to talk but his faded sentence didn’t match the way he was looking at her. He sat up straight and looked out to sea and she felt that she’d failed some sort of test.

“No one’s contacted me,” she said.

“Really?”

“It’s like it hasn’t happened.”

“Really.”

Fred’s sceptical tone cut across the sparkling view of the beach.

“It has happened,” she said. “He is missing, I’ve verified my main source, and I…” she thought of the flashdrive in her pocket, “I have some other evidence that, ah, would suggest…”

He watched her, waiting. She pulled out the flash drive.

“Photos.”

Fred weighed it in his hand – so much power in something so tiny and cheap – it was the opposite of a gun.

“Best come back to mine then.”

—— o ——
Fred’s house was barely five minutes walk from the cafe, across the road from the beach on Del Monte Place. Most of the Central Coast had suffered the same fate as Sydney’s Northern Beaches, little holiday shacks turned into mansions by sea-changer millionaires. But Fred’s house was still chipboard and wood veneer with bindis in the crabgrass. Fred’s three kids were playing in the ring-shaped garden around the house, their toys scattered everywhere. His wife Kylie was surprised to see them. One look from Fred and she immediately turned her full attention to Kate. She offered her tea and biscuits, chatted easily about the kids, the school holidays, the house. Kylie asked her lots of questions and if she didn’t answer, Kylie just kept talking as though nothing had happened.

“I’m sorry,” she blurted out.

“For what?” Kylie blinked and smiled too cheerfully.

“For not… y’know…”

Kylie’s smile faded. She shrugged and started aggressively cleaning the kitchen.

“We only just got him back, and now he’s upset. I know it’s not your fault, but… now’s the time for him to be with the kids, y’know? Not running around…”

“I’ll be gone soon.”

“But the worry won’t be,” Kylie shot her a look. “Time’s precious.”

She felt useless standing by the kitchen bench with no words of comfort or reassurance. Kylie turned back to the sink, lips pursed in a line, stopping now and then to listen to her children’s game outside, actions so personal and internal that she couldn’t help but feel like an intruder. Kylie rinsed the last dish and gave her a little conciliatory smile.

“Serves me right for marrying a soldier, I s’pose.”

She wanted to say, ‘Yeah it bloody does’, but she didn’t feel it and Kylie certainly didn’t mean it. Besides, watching Kylie wiping down the benches, she saw her grandmother in the kitchen, waiting for Poppy Jack to come back from the Islands and never quite getting the man she loved. She saw her mother in her clean white apartment, watching and waiting for Ben.

“Is this for real?” Fred yelled from the door of the study. Kylie looked at her, alarmed and pleading. She had to look away.
“Well?” Fred demanded.
“Apparently so.”
“Well? How?”

She walked into the tiny study to see which photo Fred was looking at, to walk away from Kylie’s desperate stare and Fred’s furious one. The photo of Ben in the drug den was on the screen. She could hear the kids’ game outside, their yells and cries.

“My uncle took the shot. He’s a photojournalist. Just returned from the ‘Ghan.”

Fred was still standing by the door, watching her, stunned. All the anger seemed to leach out of him with her words. This must’ve been what she looked like to Greg – she hadn’t been wrong in her reaction to the photos then.

“I don’t believe it,” he said quietly.
“Neither do I.”
“But they’re real.”
“Yes.”

Fred sat down again in front of the computer. Kids’ fingerprints covered the walls a metre from the floor. The only light was coming through a little high window covered with flyscreen so that Fred’s face was mostly in shadow. Kate perched on the edge of the table so her main view was not of the screen but of Fred’s face.

“This explains a lot. This explains a lot,” said Fred, shaking his head. “You know, I’ve been trying to contact him for months, but it’s like he’s been AWOL. If he was… if he…”

He looked at her, his eyes sunk in his face. She nodded – if Ben was doing drugs, no wonder he seemed AWOL. He would have been in all but the most literal sense.

“For me, you know, he disappeared earlier this year. He didn’t answer my emails and any time I asked about him, no one had seen him.”

“I heard from him a bit, but not much. Not since Christmas.”

Fred stared at the screen, first at the Messiah shot and then at Ben in the drug den, flicking between the two. She watched his frown, waiting for a nod or a soft look, for a clue.
“It’s not him,” he said.
She sighed to herself; this was not what she wanted.
“It looks like him –”
“No, I mean, there was some dodginess in his new unit. He never told me what it was but it pissed him off. This,” Fred waved at the screen, “he’s been forced into it or tricked into it or something. This is not naturally him.”
“No, exactly –”
“I’ve heard from him once since Christmas,” he said. He paused, staring at the screen but not looking at it. She concentrated so tightly on Fred that she could hear him breathing.
“He didn’t… he wasn’t…” he began. He looked up at her like he was asking her to finish his sentence. She could’ve shaken him.
“Here, I kept the email. Read this,” he said and abruptly changed the screen.
“January 6th – he’d just finished his leave then,” she said.
“Yeah, he was still in Dubai.”

How’s it going. Sorry I haven’t written before but things have been hectic. To top it off I went home for some RnR and didn’t find any. Plenty of family love but its all lies. Makes me wonder what Kate is up to. Now back into the breach with those brothers of mine. What is it about family. It will get you either way.

Sorry about the whinging. I hate it here in Dubai. Just get us in and get us out again that’s what I say.

Stay well mate. I’ll probably eat some dust with you soon.

She swallowed hard. She could feel Fred watching her but couldn’t look at him. If she did, she’d do something she didn’t mean to, like burst into tears.
“I wrote back, of course. It’s the wrong kind of email for coming back from leave. It’s the kind of email as if he’d gone home to find his woman having
it off with his best mate. I mean, what does he mean, ‘plenty of family love but it’s all lies’?”

She shook her head. Ben had never been very articulate in writing. But she’d had plenty of emails from him over the years and none had been so full of hurt as this one. She could see Fred’s reflection in the screen as he watched her.

“You said you got an email from him before Christmas?” he asked.

She nodded and went into her emails. How had she not noticed this change in Ben but Fred had? The kids’ play had been replaced by television. She could just discern the familiar sounds of Play School from the main room, ‘Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall, Humpty Dumpty had a great fall…’

“Here.”

*How are you. Merry Christmas, I should say first. Beautiful sunny day here in Glebe, bet your freezing your nads off in TK. Everyone sends their love but I’m sure youll get their emails.*

*You should come home on your leave. Nan will be 90 this year and I’m sure she has one or two things to say to you. She said one or two things to me that have been very unexpected. But I’ll let you talk to her yourself.*

*Miss ya Sis. I can’t remember the last time we had Chrissy together. It would be good to have someone to talk to. Nan’s getting on and Mum and Dad are hopeless as you know. We must have a beer next time we’re both home.*

“That’s a very different email,” she said. She winced at the defensive tones in her voice.

“So, sometime between your email and mine… Do you know what your Nan said?”

“No.”

Fred read over the email again but said nothing. Play School was finishing and Kylie called the kids for morning tea, supervising the shouting and the
banter. She could see his focus waver, listening to his family, hearing something in the pattern of their voices that she couldn’t decipher. She knew she had to leave soon.

“Do you know where this is?” she asked.
She showed him the photo she’d taken from her mother. He started.

“Yeah, that’s between Tarin Kowt and Kandahar. On the –” he looked at her and grimaced. “It’s classified.”

He stared at the photo. She felt he should just talk, Ben was more important than any Defence classification. But she knew Army men, he wasn’t going to tell her anything more.

“When was this taken?”

“It’s my Mum’s. She said Ben sent it to her a few months ago.”

“Huh!” he said. “My unit’s only just met Mohammed and Mohammed. Ben must’ve got there first.”

He peered at the photo, glancing up at her, clearly not knowing whether to believe her or not. She felt that the only thing on her side was how much she looked like her brother.

“Maybe it was September, when he’d just arrived?” she asked.

“I don’t know what he’s doing there. We never heard of anyone else being there.”

Fred’s little boy came running in, with a ‘Luke! Get back here!’ sounding down the hall.

“Dad, Dad, are we going down the beach now? Please? You said!”

“Yeah, in a minute, mate.”

Kylie came in with one of their daughters trailing behind her.

“Sorry, they’re just so excited to have you home, darl.”

She saw a look pass between Fred and Kylie and looked away. She had to leave, but there was part of her that wanted to stay, to watch Fred and Kylie and imagine that Jim could kiss her like that, in front of everyone, that she could claim him as Kylie claimed Fred.

She didn’t look up until after the kids had left. She expected Fred to look fed up but his expression was sad.

“I should go, leave you to your family –”
“No worries. Look, make sure – you can call –”
“Yeah, sweet. Thanks. Can I get you to forward me that email…?”
“Yeah, ‘course.”
She stood up but she didn’t know if she should shake hands or hug him or just leave. She knew her face mirrored his worried expression.
“I’ll walk you to the bus stop.”
“It’s alright, it’s not far.”
Fred hesitated, standing next to the door, not letting her through.
“I’ll keep you posted, Fred.”
He nodded.
“We’ll have a beer when you come down to Sydney.”

— — o — —

“‘A woman’s place is in combat’,” Greg said as soon as she came in. “See, if that’d been the case, then you could be missing as well as Ben!”
She peered at the photo in the A Plus lift out section of The Australian.
“It’s ‘Army medic Jacqui de Gelder’ – know her?”
“Nuh. Why should I?”
She searched the cupboards for food; now that she was home she realised how hungry she was. All she found were biscuits, Milk Arrowroots, Iced Vovos, Gingernuts. Didn’t Nan eat anything else? Greg and Elsie were sitting at the kitchen table, papers spread in strips of light among the tea things. Greg was jiggling his leg and rolling a cigarette. Her grandmother looked at her, eyebrows raised in a ‘Well?’ She didn’t want to talk about the email just yet.
“Why do you have the papers anyway, Greg? Checking up on your contact?”
“Harry said he wouldn’t publish the photos until the weekend, but journos can’t be trusted.”
“You should know –”
“– I’m one of them.”
Maybe she could rely on him for a joke, after all.
“But you wouldn’t really go into combat, would you?” her grandmother asked.

She sat down heavily at the kitchen table. There was a tone in her grandmother’s voice, something sharp that she didn’t want to answer.

“I dunno, Nan. The boys wouldn’t like it. I reckon I’d do a good job though.”

“You’d be a commando like Ben?”

“No.”

She’d said it too quickly. Her grandmother raised one eyebrow and tapped her tea mug in irritation. Greg gave her a look as he took his rollie to the door.

“You went to see Ben’s friend this morning, didn’t you? Fred?” her grandmother asked.

She nodded but looked down at the tablecloth, the faint stains of tea and wine that had been bleached over and over and still wouldn’t come out.

“Well… what did he say?”

She could tell her grandmother was worried but the sunlight flashed on her glasses and she couldn’t see her eyes. Instead she saw the blank blue wall, the double doors, Greg’s face as he stood smoking.

“You told us last night that you were going to see Fred.”

“Nan – what was Ben like when he was here at Christmas?”

She watched her grandmother take off her glasses and spend a long time cleaning them, as though she hadn’t just been asking about Fred, as though the last few minutes hadn’t happened. She looked up at Greg but he just shrugged.

“Nan?”

“He wasn’t quite himself, Katie.”

“I know, but how?”

Her grandmother leant forwards across the table.

“You know, do you? Fred told you this?”

“Sort of.”

People chattered on the street outside, out to lunch, she could smell hot chips. Her grandmother looked at her then sat back, looking past Greg and out the door to the garden.
“Ben was not himself when he arrived. Not in any clear way. His shoulders slumped. He was too quiet. He didn’t smile enough.”

Her grandmother looked at her and her expression changed, the frown opening and relaxing.

“You look just like your grandfather,” she said with a wobble in her voice, “sitting there with the light behind you. Just like he did when he came home that first time… don’t sneer, son, you were conceived during that home leave.”

“You were telling us about Ben,” Greg drawled.

“Alright, but Kate looks like Ben and they both look like Jack….” she sighed and crumbled a gingernut onto her side plate.

“Ben spent a while with your father. He spent hours sitting around the place. Even when he broke his leg, I’ve never seen him so still.”

She tried to imagine it but she could only see her brother still if he was asleep. If this was all, she didn’t understand why her grandmother was being so defensive, why she looked at her like she wished she was someone else.

“And what did Fred say?”

“That Ben had been angry. Sort of… absent.”

Her grandmother stared at the wall to hide her tears, pushing her hand away when she tried to comfort her. She looked round at Greg for an explanation but he just shrugged and shook his head.

—— o ——

Greg didn’t recognise the number. He was sprawled on the cushions out the back of Al Mustafa Lebanese Restaurant, rolling himself a cigarette as Kate and Elsie finished off the last of the hummus and baba ganuj.

“Greg Talbot.”

“Hello, Greg? It’s Amir!”

The restaurant went quiet. His stomach flipped and for a moment he thought he’d vomit all over the table. Kate and Elsie had stopped eating and were watching him.

“Hello? Greg? Are you there?”

“Amir,” he croaked.
“Yes! I am here!”

“Here?”

“In Coffs Harbour. For the wedding of my cousin. I told you before you left…”

He lit his cigarette, pushing his way out the back of the restaurant as the manager came up and waved at him, “no smoking”. He leant against the steps, avoiding the afternoon light. He’d just been thinking that this was the best meal he’d eaten in days but he wished he’d stuck to coffee. Now that Amir was in reach, he thought he might faint. Instead he started to cough, trying to control himself but his chest was in spasms.

“Greg? Are you OK? You are ill.”

“I’m fine,” he wheezed.

“No. You were ill when you left us in Kabul.”

“Amir…” He closed his eyes to remember but his thoughts were drummed out by the throbbing through his body.

“Yes and with your injury –”

There was a noise on the other end of the line and he could hear Amir answer in Dari. Amir’s voice was light and smooth when he spoke English, especially compared to his own disease-ravaged bass. But it took on an edge when he spoke his native language, gutteral and sharp.

“Are you still there, Greg?”

“Amir, I need to see you.”

“Yes, I will be in Sydney next week, because I –”

“I need to see you sooner than that. How long will you be in Coffs Harbour?”

“For a week. I arrived yesterday. Greg –”

“I’ll be there tomorrow afternoon.”

Amir paused. He strained to hear anything Amir might be doing but all he heard was the traffic on Glebe Point Rd.

“Good. I will give you your things then.” Amir’s voice had lost some of its brightness.

“My things?”
“Yes, your diaries, your memory cards, your camera – you left them with me. You asked me to bring them –”

He was no longer in the restaurant but packing his bag in Amir’s small apartment, giving instructions to Amir as he ran out the door for the taxi, over and over again. Over the phone, he vaguely heard Amir say something about visas and staying in Australia and help and he mechanically said ‘Yes’ to anything Amir asked.

“Greg? Greg?”

“Yes.”

“Let me give you my phone number and address.”

He stood up to grab a pen but instead he handed the phone to Kate and bolted to the toilet to throw up.

“Who’s Amir?” Kate asked quietly when he returned. He felt lighter but also light-headed.

“He sounded a bit pissed off that I didn’t know who he was.”

“He’s my fixer.”

“What’s a fixer?”

“A guy who organises things up like visas and cars, speaks the language, knows where to go and what to do and who to talk to. Amir has worked as a journalist in Kabul, as well a number of other jobs that means he knows –”

“He rang you from Kabul?” Kate’s eyes were wide and her body became very still. His mother watched, clutching her hankie and waiting.

“He rang from Coffs Harbour. We’re leaving tomorrow to see him.”

“He knows something then,” said Elsie.

“He knows everything,” he said.
Chapter Four: Thursday April 14th

Amir was staying with his cousin in a red brick box in Sawtell, fifteen minutes drive south of Coffs Harbour. Kate had driven up with Greg this morning in her mother’s Audi. Her mother had wanted to come along, had even wanted to drive, and it was only a long phone conversation with Greg that had changed her mind. Her mother had looked thin, brittle somehow, curled up in her black leather armchair in her spotless white apartment, frosty blonde bob bent over photos of Ben. She could feel her mother’s ribs through her shirt when they hugged goodbye.

But the drive had been easy. Wide sunshine and little traffic heading north, cruising over the speed limit as they listened to Gilbert and Sullivan. Greg had been surprised that she had *HMS Pinafore* on her iPod, but she’d listened to it with Poppy Jack and she knew all the words off by heart. Greg’s falsetto rendition of *The Mikado* made her laugh so hard she almost ran into the oncoming trucks. His voice became thinner as they’d wound through the streets of Sawtell, singing random words of the songs until she noticed a tear slide down his cheek. She’d been about to ask what was wrong when he’d rushed out of the car yelling Amir’s name, leaving her to park and book them into the hotel.

Greg was surrounded by men and kids when she walked up to the house. Someone next to Greg was waving his arms about and talking loudly in what she thought was Pashto. Greg was sipping tea and smiling, smoking a rollie and clearly following the conversation. He saw her and straightened up. The man next to him followed Greg’s eyeline and she heard him say her name. She stopped. She realised that she’d never spoken to an Afghan without a weapon in her hand, without the protection of her uniform and Jim somewhere close by. She took a deep breath and forced herself to keep walking, watching Greg assessing her reaction.

“Kate? You are Kate, yes? I’m Amir, so pleased to see you, so wonderful, I’ve heard so much about you…”

Amir bounded forward and shook her hand. The other men looked at her but said nothing, moving aside without a smile or a hello to let her pass. She
looked back at Greg for reassurance but his eyes were hidden behind his sunglasses. She couldn’t decipher his look.

“…wedding tradition states that men and women must remain separate, but all the women are in the beauty salon in the lounge room and garden, which is lovely, yes? So sorry about not being able to talk to you –”

“When’s the wedding?”

“Tonight.”

She turned round to stare at Amir. They were in the hallway next to the kitchen, full of women frying golden snacks. Through the back windows she could see women spread out on chairs on the grass, drying their nails, while the lounge room next door was bursting with the sound of Afghan pop music and hairdryers. She didn’t want to be in the middle of someone else’s family party. She was here for a specific purpose and it wasn’t to congratulate the happy couple. She’d felt fine among the Afghan cleaners they’d had on base and walking through the markets in TK. But now these were the people who had Ben, who had caused Ben to disappear in their violent, empty country, and she was here without her mental reinforcements. She was overwhelmed by the prospect of talking to them like everything was normal, but Amir didn’t understand.

“It’s alright,” he said, “you’re invited.”

“No – I mean, we don’t have to –”

“It’s all taken care of –”

One of the women in the kitchen yelled at him with shooing motions and he yelled back, gesturing at her. The women coming and going from the lounge room looked at her, some smiling, some frowning, before moving on in a bustle of pink, gold and green. Everyone was talking at once. She didn’t know where to look.

“Greg didn’t tell you much, did he,” said Amir.

“No.”

Amir sighed theatrically. More people pushed past them in the dim hall. She pushed herself up against the wall, not wanting to touch anyone or get in the way, trying to fit herself into a nook that wasn’t there.
“He is not well,” said Amir, his smile gone. “I love him like a brother, but it is hard for me to see him so pale and shaky. He is better than he was when he left us, but…”

“He was worse than this?”

“Oh yes! He couldn’t stop talking, he went pick pick pick at his wound, he would not let it heal.”

“What wound?”

“On his forehead –”

“Why didn’t you send him to hospital?”

“I did,” Amir frowned. “He has told you absolutely nothing?”

She looked out the door, trying to glimpse Greg. In the car, just an hour ago, he’d barely managed to give her directions for the turn-off. Now he was nodding and smiling and handing out cigarettes. He didn’t once look her way, just laughed along with all the strange men on the lawn.

“Amir, will you introduce me?” A tall, well-built woman stood beside Amir.

“Ah! Kate, this is my wife, Samira.”

“Perhaps you would like a drink?” she asked Kate.

“Ah, OK,” she shook herself into politeness. “Yes please.”

Samira smiled and took her arm. She almost flinched at the touch but Samira’s hold was confident as she weaved through the throng to the garden. She started to relax, especially after her two cups of spicy tea that Samira had sneakily laced with rum. She stood next to her the entire time, introducing everyone, translating for her, explaining customs and family gossip. When she was called into the lounge room to get her hair and nails done, she wouldn’t hear of Kate sitting in the garden by herself. She ushered her into the lounge room with quiet authority. It was unusual for her to be ushered. She was used to being ordered, or doing the ordering, but being taken care of – it made her feel on edge.

All the furniture in the lounge room had been pushed aside to create a beauty salon. Down the right side were chairs, where women were sitting getting their hair curled. At the far end, a young woman with elaborately coiffed hair was having her nails painted.

“Raha, this is Kate Talbot,” said Samira. “Raha is the bride.”
“Hey, how ya goin’?” said Raha in a thick Australian accent, not moving from the industrial dryer on the nail table. The room smelt strongly of lacquer and hairspray. Raha sat back and admired her fingers.

“They’ve got little diamonds on ‘em,” she said, a big smile lighting up her small face.

“Alright, your turn, Samira,” she said. Raha stood up and stretched, letting Samira coo over her long fake nails, before she walked over to Kate.

“I can’t shake your hand,” she said, wiggling her fingers. “You’re staying for the wedding?”

“Oh, no –”

“It’s fine. It’s an Afghan wedding, everyone’s bloody invited.”

“Raha! Don’t swear!” said an older woman having her hair set.

“What? It’s true! People I’ve never even met are coming –”

The aunt rattled off something sharp in Dari, pointing to Samira, who only smiled. Raha shrugged.

“Alright, alright. Anyway,” she said, turning to Kate, “lots of my friends are gonna be there, so it’s not like you’ll be the only Aussie at the party.”

Raha had her hands on her hips and was looking at her with half a smile. She was quite skinny, her eyes and hair rich and her teeth perfect. She looked like a wealthy Afghan but she sounded for all the world like a surfi chick from the Mid North Coast.

“Ah, thanks, Ra – Raha –”

“Call me Rachel. Everyone does. Well, not my family, obviously, but all my mates from round ‘ere, all my uni mates –”

“Raha studied nursing,” said Samira from the nail table.

“Aw yeah, just at SCU in Coffs,” Raha shrugged.

“You’re a nurse?” she remembered her small talk.

”Yep. First year working. I like it,” Raha smiled. “Most of my mates didn’t go to uni but my olds insisted. Anyway, I met Jawad there, so…”

“Jawad is your…”

“Yeah, my husband – fiancé – I dunno what to call him!” she laughed.

“Anyway, yeah, he’s an anaesthetist. We met on the ward. So romantic.” Raha said this with sarcasm but her blush indicated otherwise.
“Raha, it’s half past four,” said the aunt.

“Really? Fuck –”

“Raha!”

“Sorry, auntie. Listen,” she turned to Kate, “I gotta go get dressed, but totally come. It’s just down the road at the RSL, nice and local, you know? And we over-catered, of course, Mum insisted. Seriously, you’ll fit right in.”

Raha ran out of the room, talking on her iPhone in a mix of Dari and English. Samira waved Kate over to the nail table.

“Your turn.”

“Oh, I’m OK –”

“Just a buff, darl,” said the nail lady, “a little bit of clear nail polish, nothing fancy.”

“Go on,” said Samira, “it’s part of the wedding preparations.”

The nail lady started by washing Kate’s hands, using a little towelette to gently wipe away all the daily grime, finger by finger. It was clear that the nail lady didn’t think twice about it, but the touch felt so intimate that she had to clench her jaw to stop herself from crying. The aunt and the hairdresser had left soon after Raha so the room was quiet, the peach walls casting a soft light over their skin.

“It’s so lovely to be asked to do Rachel’s nails for ‘er,” said the nail lady. “I known ‘er so long, it’s a real privilege, you know?”

“You went to school with her?” she asked.

“No!” The nail lady laughed. “Bless you for saying so though. No, my daughter went to school with Rachel, ever since they was at Sawtell Public. They’re not as close as they used to be in second class but they’re still pretty close.”

“Raha’s been here since she was seven,” said Samira.

“Yeah,” said the nail lady, “she comes from Afghanistan, but she’s Aussie now.” She sat back in her chair, looking at her handiwork.

“There,” she said, smiling easily at Kate, “you’re all done.”
Raha was right. The Princess Room at Sawtell RSL was full to capacity. Kate was sitting next to Samira at the bottom of the women’s table. She’d been given a shawl to put over her t-shirt and pants, but it did little to help her fit in. All the other Aussies, as Raha had called her Sawtell friends, were sitting at the other end of the table, in frilly spandex dresses and platform heels. They’d looked at her once or twice when she came in with Samira and then ignored her – she was with the Afghans and not one of them. Raha’s relatives, on the other hand, introduced themselves and asked her more questions than she could answer.

“You were in Afghanistan? Oh, and where?”

“Uruzgan! Oh, full of Pashtuns. We’re not from there.”

“I mean, they’re just peasants.”

“Do they even have any water or electricity?”

“Let alone schools! Ruled by the Imams.”

“Everyone’s ruled by the Imams.”

“Well, not us.”

They were eating rice with their fingers, scooping up dips with bread and sliding cubes of kebab off the stick with their teeth. The woman to her right was Samira’s cousin.

“Yes, we left before the Taliban, in the early nineties,” she said, spooning rice onto Kate’s plate. “You must have some of this pilau. I can’t eat almonds but it’s divine. Yes, the Taliban, fuckers – I was just about to start high school, I would’ve been married off if – oh, it’s not even worth thinking about.” She glanced at Samira and looked away. Samira winked at Kate.

“It’s alright, Sadia,” Samira said softly. Sadia was fiddling with her tea glass, lips pursed.

“Are they going to have wine at this thing? I’m dying for a real drink.”

“Sadia wrote to me from Brighton. All through the civil war and the Taliban occupation. Beautiful descriptions of the white cliffs and the sea –”

“It’s a disgrace. I don’t know why uncle didn’t get you out –”

“Sadia, we’re at a wedding –”

“You know Dad would’ve lent him the money –”
Samira said something softly in Dari and Sadia stopped talking. The auditorium was filled with noise, loud chatter and music, but she could almost hear the whirr of unspoken thoughts flying between Samira and Sadia. She felt exposed, stuck in the middle, also dying for a real drink.

“What do you do for work?” she asked Sadia.

“I’m a lawyer. Bloody brilliant to have two weeks off, sun and sea in Australia. London’s freezing. You should’ve been a lawyer,” Sadia said to Samira. Samira laughed.

“I’d rather have been a biologist.”
“You still can be –”
“Sadie, I work with Amir –”
“Oh, to hell with Amir. I mean, honestly, you have to have your own life –”

“She’s trying to convince me to go to England,” said Samira.
“You could, family status, I know people –”
“Amir wants to stay in Australia.”
“Well, that’ll do, I suppose. It’s a long way from London though.”

Sadia’s attention was abruptly taken up on her other side by an aunt, who was haranguing her in a mixture of English and Dari. Kate could only catch the words ‘husband’, ‘nice boy’, and ‘Sadia, you are getting old!’ Samira looked like she was trying to hold back laughter.

“Auntie Guli’s been harassing Sadia since they left for Britain,” Samira whispered. “Sadie’s seeing an English man but hasn’t told anyone yet.”

“Except you.”
“Of course! She is my sister.”
“I thought she was your cousin.”

Samira paused and she immediately regretted being so pedantic. She needed Samira to guide her through this wedding but being dependent made her defensive.

“Technically cousin, but spiritually, more like a twin. It was very hard when she left.”

Samira looked away, clutching her hands in her lap. Kate fiddled with the rice and dip on her plate, watching Samira out of the corner of her eye, waiting
for her to look towards her or say something. Samira just stared vacantly at the honour roll, high up on the wall above the stage. She looked over to Greg at the men’s table. He was right in the centre, laughing and eating, looking more relaxed than she’d seen him in the past few days.

“‘They look so happy up there together,’” said Samira, looking at Raha and her husband. They were sitting on a raised dais at the front of the room, hand in hand, talking excitedly to the constant stream of people who came up to them.

“When Amir and I were married, it wasn’t nearly so free.”

“You said you work with Amir?”

“Oh yes. I’m his translator. And I organise anything to do with women, of course.”

“His translator? But Amir speaks English.”

Samira paused again. Kate groaned under her breath with embarrassment.

“Yes, he does. He also speaks Pashto and is very good with learning dialects. I speak those too, as well as Farsi, French, Russian and Arabic – although I read them better than I speak them.”

“Oh.”

“When the Taliban came, there wasn’t much else I could do but stay at home and read books.”

“Your father let you?”

Samira gave her an odd look.

“He was a professor of comparative literature at Kabul University before the civil war. He met my mother when they were both studying at Yale.”

Samira looked down at her hands, a sad smile on her face. She felt about a metre tall. She’d researched Afghanistan before she deployed, yet none of her learning, nor her experience in Tarin Kowt, had prepared her for someone like Samira.

“Oh look, they’re cutting the cake,” Samira said. A white, tiered cake, almost as tall as the bride, had been wheeled out. The bride and groom were brushing crumbs off each other and waiters were handing out slices. Most of the guests were eating sticky sponge with their fingers and forming into a huge circle.

“It’s the Attan,” said Samira, smiling broadly. “Come on.”
Kate followed her into the circle. She never danced sober as her only move was the drunken shuffle. She couldn’t even begin to follow Samira’s weaving and clapping. She spotted Greg by the door, rolling a cigarette and quickly left the circle.

“So, picked up any Dari?” Greg asked.
“What’s that?”
“Christ, woman! I thought you’d been to Afghanistan. It’s their language.”
“They speak Pashto in Uruzgan.”
“Even so.”
“Why didn’t you tell me that Samira was so educated?”
Greg raised his eyebrows.
“Well, technically, she isn’t—”
“She speaks, like, a hundred languages and asked me what novels she should read to get a good idea of the Australian character. Since high school I’ve only read war history.”
Greg laughed and coughed.
“What did you tell her?”
“Oh, you know, Bryce Courtenay, and that other guy, ah… Tim Winton. Actually, I told her to watch Muriel’s Wedding and The Castle.”
Greg smiled as he tucked his cigarette behind his ear.
“Yeah, the walls of their apartment were always covered in books…” he trailed off as he wandered outside. The lights in the auditorium went down and were replaced by disco strobes. She could see that the waiters were now serving alcohol and the Aussies were on the dance floor beginning their own version of the drunken shuffle to a Beyonce remix. Many of the older Afghans moved outside to smoke. She followed the crowd, watching Greg in conversation with Amir.

“Poor Greg,” said Samira. She started. She hadn’t heard Samira come up.
“He’s been a true friend to us, he even paid the deposit for our tourist visas. He was so dedicated and efficient when we first met him. But now…”

Samira shook her head, also watching Greg and Amir. Greg was at least a head taller than everyone else and deathly white under the carpark’s fluorescent lighting. She could only just see the tip of Amir’s cigarette as he waved it about.
“How long have you known him?”

“How long have you known him?”

“Since he first used Amir as a fixer, almost, yes, almost exactly ten years ago,” Samira smiled. “Amir was just a skinny teenager then.”

“And you two were married then?”

“Oh no. We didn’t marry for another seven years. We were neighbours. But even then I used to translate things for him.”

Samira turned to her. The smell of cigarettes and sea salt became stronger as more guests flowed into the carpark. Samira was taller than any other Afghan woman at the wedding and looked her directly in the eye.

“I was there when he came back from seeing your brother,” she said.

The pop music and chatter faded, all noise faded except her pulse in her ears as she waited for Samira to continue.

“The first time, Amir told me what had happened. Greg was very distracted but normal. The second time was very different. Amir hadn’t been with him then.”

“Hadn’t been?”

“No. Greg left alone at dawn and didn’t come back until the next day. He had a head injury and wasn’t talking. Greg was…” Samira paused and looked back to Greg and Amir laughing together. Greg had been wandering around Afghanistan alone – this in itself was madness – and had been injured. He was much sicker than she’d originally thought.

“He stayed in his room all night drinking and wouldn’t talk to us. In the morning he just left, commanding us to bring his stuff for him. That was the last time we saw him – rude, upset and utterly unlike himself.”

Samira looked out at the sea and breathed in deeply. She copied her and it steadied her nerves.

“It is the first time I have seen the ocean,” said Samira. “I never want to leave.”

“Do you know everything Amir knows?” she blurted out. Samira paused.

“Sorry,” she said, “I just –”

“I am his business partner and his wife. I would know more, but I cannot move as freely as he does, not in my country.”
Samira looked back at the sea. Her face was hidden by shadow and her body was still. Wedding guests washed around them, swelling as the groom came out to be congratulated.

“Herman Melville was right in Moby Dick,” said Samira softly. “This Serene Pacific, once beheld, must ever after be the sea of his adoption’. ‘The tide-beating heart of earth’. I have read those lines so many times. It is wonderful finally to understand what they mean.”

She looked with Samira out at the ocean but saw nothing but endless, formless black, rolling on to an invisible horizon.
Chapter Five: Friday April 15th

If Kate had known, she might not have come. If she had known that the endless, formless black was not just the sea at night but Greg’s internal geography, she might’ve insisted he stay at home. She had never seen anyone as shaky as he was this morning, wordless and unblinking even in the sharp morning light. But part of her had known he was this bad. Known it, ignored it and come anyway – anything for information, to find Ben.

So it was this morning as they arrived back at Amir’s red brick box. Amir and Samira were waiting on the grass outside, arm in arm, looking anxiously down the street as they approached. They were right to be anxious, the house was only four blocks from the hotel but Greg couldn’t walk that far. He’d let her guide him into his shoes, into the foyer and into the car. His cigarette never left his lips, a feat of coordination that she marveled at, seeing as he couldn’t get his seatbelt buckled up and had to let it rest over his hips. Amir’s and Samira’s reactions were instant when they saw Greg lurching to the gate, their hands went out to catch him and both started talking at once. She was glad to hand him over. Amir chattered at Greg, but Samira glanced back as she went inside. The little house seemed to swallow them up, locking out the sunlight and the fresh sea air.

The lounge room was no longer a beauty salon, even the smell of hairspray was gone. The coffee table was covered with notebooks and camera things but the room was otherwise neat and spare, the house quiet but for the ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece.

“Where is everyone?” she asked.
“A big family picnic,” said Samira.
“You aren’t going?”
“We have work to do.”
“And…” began Amir, pouring Greg some more coffee.
“Yes – and we think it’s important for us to be here to… to answer your questions, to…”
“We are worried,” said Amir softly, barely able to look at Greg where he sat sprawled on the couch. Greg paid him no attention, just filled the room with his smoke, his camera cradled in his lap.
“That’s his second camera,” said Samira. “I made a list of everything he left behind…”

Samira motioned for her to sit. Kate wanted some time to collect herself, and to speak to Jim, and a double whisky – now that the moment was here, she could hardly bear to find out about Ben. But Samira was waiting, Amir was waiting. Kate took the cup of coffee handed to her and studied the list Samira placed in her hand.

“There was one Canon EOS ID Mark IV,” said Samira as she plugged in a laptop, “two long-range lenses; one satellite phone and cables, not working; one spare battery and charger; twenty-five memory cards, both used and unused; four Moleskine diaries; two shirts; toothbrush and toothpaste; Zippo lighter; file of letters and other official documents; address book; spare prescription sunglasses. It’s all there if you want to check.”

“I believe you.”

Kate sank onto the couch next to Greg. She’d thought that Amir would simply tell them what Greg had done on his last trip. She realised that they were going to go through Greg’s diaries and photos to see what he remembered. Amir and Samira were watching her, waiting for her to begin. Greg didn’t move, not even when she coughed at his cigarette smoke. She gulped down the unsweetened coffee and picked up the first diary.

March 21st:
Kabul airport a mess as per bloody usual. Thank fuck Amir turned up in a car – the place was full of peacekeepers, politicians and police, with the little beggar boys trying to sell me ‘Marlboro Light’. I also saw ‘Mahlboro Lite’ and ‘Marlborough Lights’ – how the hell did they get that spelling?
Amir bubbly, Samira serene, all present and correct. Their flat needs repair; I’ll see if I can wrangle Amir a bonus. Chai with bootleg whisky – I don’t think I’ve tasted better.

March 22nd:
MSF hospital outside KB 1st port of call. Media Officer – who I think is also the hospital admin, secretary, counsellor and cook – showed us around. Until the bomb. Not injured, but camera scratched. Ended up helping beautiful blonde French-Canadian doctor – if only I was 30 years younger, I’d get to know her a lot better. Emmanuelle. As it is, I helped her put bodies back in beds. She was indignant – ‘What kind of fanatic would bomb a ‘ospital?’ – so she must be new to the scene.

Some good shots, I think. There was another lead for today – opening of some govt dept or other – but Amir had a couple of scratches he wanted Samira to see to, and we were both a bit shaken, so we ditched it.

“I’ve seen some of these photos,” she said.

“How?” asked Amir. The laptop was open to more shots of the hospital, very similar to the ones Greg had shown her but not as well framed. She still had the flashdrive in her pocket; she’d been wearing the same pants for days. She handed it to Amir.

“Where did you get these?” asked Amir as he put it in the laptop. “Greg had these?”

“Yes. You didn’t know?” She waited for Amir to answer but he just stared at the screen, Samira looking over his shoulder. They exchanged a glance.

“What is it?”

Samira put her hand on Amir’s back.

“He must’ve done this on the last night he was with us,” she said. “It’s, ah… it’s disconcerting that he…”

Greg coughed and they jumped. They’d been talking about Greg as if he wasn’t there. Amir offered Greg more coffee and chatted to him. Samira came over and leant down next to her, pretending to read over her shoulder.

“Greg must’ve smuggled out those photos,” Samira whispered, “which means he thought they would get him into trouble. So asking us to bring the rest means he was letting us get into trouble instead of him. It’s not… well, it’s not like him to be so unprofessional.”
Samira didn’t follow the argument through to its logical conclusion but there was no need. Kate turned back to the diaries, now searching for the change in Greg as well as any descriptions of Ben.

March 23rd:

*Turns out the dept opening was delayed because the minister was sick, so we managed to catch that today. There were English and Pashto translations of the minister’s speech – the Ministry of Women’s Affairs opened some new program funded mostly by UNIFEM and other NGOs. I wish them luck. They’ll need it.*

*We went back to the hospital too. Some better shots this time, Drs working around the rubble, kids playing in it, just an ordinary part of life. Emmanuelle delighted to see us: what a joy. It’s moments like these.*

*Off to KD tomorrow – picked up a go-ahead from the US Army. Amir will accompany me. Sometimes the way Samira looks at me, I know she wants to come. She should’ve been born a man.*

March 24th:

*At Bagram, watching the jingle trucks go by as I wait for a lift south. They never cease to amaze/amuse me. Amir says nothing, but watches blankly. I think he’s contemptuous but he’d never say. I know he misses Samira already – who wouldn’t?*

~

*Kandahar. Not as ‘Mini America’ as Bagram but still like the bastard child of a strip mall and the Wild West. Burger King, Pizza Hut and incoming fire. Apparently there are Aussies here too. I hope to avoid them.*

*The Lou Tenant who’s taking us into the field is cool. He knows my work from VN! He brought it up – I was astounded.*

*“It’s an honour to have you tell our story, sir.”* *“Please, Greg is fine.”* He looked taken aback, and then grinned widely. Snap.
If all the men are like Hansen, then this will be a snap.

The photos on the laptop switched into long sequences of American Marines. Some of these shots had Greg’s signature printed over them. Greg was ashing his rollie into his coffee cup, looking over her shoulder at the diary while flicking through the shots. She looked up at him and he gave the smallest of nods. It was more of a long blink than a nod, something Amir and Samira would never notice. It was just for her.

March 25th:
First day at OP Lighthouse – it’s on top of a ridge. Hansen gave a speech about me before we went out, but the grunts will take a bit of time to warm up. Might have something to do with the random incoming they’re copping.
Night patrol tonight – they’ll warm up when I do that with them.
Just background shots around the OP, lounging, chilling, putting aside their unlucky Charms lollies to give to the local kids.

March 26th:
Night patrol copped incoming. No light for shots, just black squares with streaks of green and red across them. Open mouths in the dark. Most shots unusable, but maybe 1 or 2 can be salvaged. I kept up, shot, and didn’t get wounded. That old adrenaline surge – it’s still there, still the same. But I’m Gramps now, no longer Cpt Greg Talbot Sir. Took several shots back at the OP, the men haggard, panting, beautiful. Bleak in the torchlight.
After never-enough sleep, I started the portraits. Got them to think about why they’re Marines, the shots look great. Strong arms, chin up, shy smile, vulnerable eyes. Quintessential soldiers. I’ll be sad to leave.
I got them to write down why they’re Marines too, but like most soldiers, their words are not as eloquent as their bodies. Mostly
what I read is clichéd patriotism compensating for their lack of education. Their faces hold a subtlety they’re unaware of.

It wasn’t just the nod that reassured her. The diaries did too, even though she knew they would lead to Ben. They showed Greg as she remembered him, witty, perceptive and rude. Uncle Greg of the World, who could talk as easily to a marine as to Amir. Not a hint of shake or stutter.

Greg sat on the white vinyl couch like a smoking statue, only moving his eyes. Amir and Samira’s chatter was useless against his intense silence.

March 27th:
No incoming. More portraits. I bring them up on my laptop – they love them. I have the software to brand them, so I give them a few – one or two also have laptops here. They clap me on the shoulder and tell me to let them know when they’re in the ‘nooz’.
I do everything with them – eat their food, go out on patrol, sleep in the dirt. Just like always. Most are amazed that I’m still here, this old – the end of their tour is as far as they can see. When I tell them this is as far as I can see too, they think I’m joking.

March 28th:
Some hierarchies emerge. Hansen is in charge and holds the moral authority. But he’s too West Point – the real top dog is Jenkins. Jenkins is older than Hansen, an inseparable racial mix, whose wife and 2.3 kids left him and then came back. He first came to ‘the ‘Stan’ 10 years ago; this is his 4th tour. He talks in acronyms and monosyllables and everything he says is factually true. He has 2 big scars – one from a knife fight when he was 16 and one from incoming fire – that carve up his face and torso like a pirate. I’ve taken his photo so many times that he’s getting suspicious.
On the opposite end of the spectrum to Jenkins is The Kid. Severely dyslexic and very strange. Will talk non-stop about anything and everything and then not say a word for 2 days. Everything he says
is a quote – film, TV and many books, which I can’t work out how he read. A perfect shot and amazing stamina. He can’t look at the camera.

Most of the men are good, ordinary, middle Americans. Bronowski likes to read fantasy. Beaupert could have been a professional baseball player until a car accident buggered his knee for 2 years. Lang wants to be a preacher when he leaves the Marines.

Night patrol tonight. All the boys resting up during the day, lifting weights, grooming.

Kate looked up when Greg put his hand on her arm. He was blinking rapidly, his eyes red and wet. A cough rumbled in his chest but he refused the water Amir offered him. He didn’t stop coughing until she handed him some tissues, didn’t unhunch his shoulders until she handed him another cup of coffee. He turned his head away from Amir and Samira, wincing as though it hurt to look in their direction.

Greg kept his hand on her arm the whole time, sure only of her solid forearm under his palm. Gunshots and braying came out of the laptop screen. Jenkins and Hansen and The Kid walked off the pages of his diary and around the peach lounge room. He could taste the dust at the back of his throat. It made his mouth and nose sting and he coughed to hack out the memory of it.

March 30th:

Straightforward patrol. No incoming, but we could hear on the radio that they knew we were there. Very dark; the men were spooked.

Getting them to finish writing in the diary, taking the last few portraits. I leave tomorrow. Patrol later today – I’ll go out, get them with the locals.

Incoming. Patrol a shambles. Barely got 100m from the OP. 3 wounded. I was in the way this time – Jones got hit stepping in
front of me. Beaupert mentioned this but the medic and Hansen slapped him down.

Time to leave.

March 31st:

No bad feeling towards me this morning. Last minute shots and messages in the diary. They order me to remember.

Grab a lift out in a Hummer, back to KD. Not that far but it takes all day, of course. Amir was waiting for me outside the base but he wouldn’t say how long he’d been waiting. We’ll go to Tarin Kowt tomorrow.

April 1st:

Up at 5am to get to KD base by dawn, to get to TK…at some point. Waiting now, waiting, waiting. Wish the sat phone was bloody working. It’s painful. Wifi here on base a disgrace. Bloody painful.

Ben is here. He found us out on the road. You never find people just on the road. Said he’d pick us up tomorrow and show us a good story.

It’s not right.

Kate cleared her throat and squirmed, pulling at her t-shirt and trouser band. He knew that wriggle.

“What is it?” Samira asked.

“Ben,” he said through his cigarette. He took the memory card out of the camera and handed it to Kate. Her big dark eyes. He replaced the card with the next one within reach, not caring which one it was.

“Greg, I don’t think that’s the next one in order…” Amir said.

His head was huge on the screen. It was a blurry shot, taken from underneath as though by someone much shorter. There was blood dripping down the left side of his face and he was lurching out of the frame.
“These,” he said, leaning forwards, “these…”

The shots were blurry and badly taken. In the middle of the market the stands were splashed with red, the dirt on the ground marked with black liquid. Afghans were yelling and crying, screaming, pointing, carrying each other out of the frames. One was a body with the face blown out. One was a child’s filthy hand, half curled on a carpet. Several were just colour, blurs of red and brown, blue and grey. Many were lop-sided, so Afghans and soldiers looked like they were running down a mountain or crawling up a hill of carpets and tarpaulin. Shadows cut faces in half and bright limbs appeared out of the gloom. The best shot, the only one clear enough to use, was of a foot, lying still on the edge of a carpet in the top-right-hand corner of the frame, red blood turning black as it dribbled into the dust.

“What happened?” Kate asked.

“I don’t know what it is,” said Amir. “I wasn’t there for this.”

“It must be when Greg went back down to Tarin Kowt,” said Samira.

“Greg?”

His left eye stung, blasted with dirt. Diesel and shit, boots and jagged yells.

He started when his cigarette burnt his lips, only then realising he had ash down his shirt, feeling the burning filter as it jumped over his chinos and under his thighs, finally crushed into the carpet. Amir and Samira fussed around him, cleaning up his mess. Kate looked at him; her big dark eyes, her tanned skin against the white couch. He’d been reading the diary over her shoulder, snatched sentences here and there, and he didn’t want her to keep reading without him. But he didn’t want her to watch him attempt to roll another cigarette either, spilling tobacco all over himself. He waved at the diary in her hands – keep reading – and concentrated on rolling.

April 2nd:

*Ben is not Ben. He’s watching us. He’s being watched. Amir doesn’t believe me but he doesn’t know – I know. I’ve seen the CIA and that joke they call ASIO. MPs watching him and Miller. I can see it. I can see them looking over their shoulders in words.*

~
We’re off. Back to KB. Ben is forcing us. Booked us the place on the plane. Everyone knows who we are, greets us by name. Almost don’t let Amir on.

It’s not right.

One guy said ‘O’Hearne’ in my ear as I get on the plane. I look back and he nods. Who the fuck is O’Hearne? How will I find him?

Can’t sleep. Thinking about Ben. Ben’s face in my shots – always watching watching – was he watching me? Why? No family reunion. I was more like an obstacle. I ruined a plan. Who is O’Hearne? No one met us at Bagram. All as normal. Amir tells me not to worry – normal is something to be thankful for. But it’s not – normal is not normal. Thank Christ for whisky.

April 3rd:

Going back to Bagram. Must find O’Hearne.

Ben – scoop. Terrible – Amazing –

April 4th:

Off to Uruzgan. Fabulous tip-off. Amir doesn’t trust me but it’s true – it must be –

Waiting at Bagram. Flight

Kate flicked forward, but there was nothing but blank pages.

“The diary just stops,” she said, unable to keep her voice steady. Where were the other entries about Ben? Where was the explanation of the Messiah shot, the drug den shot? Samira came over with more coffee but she couldn’t bring herself to drink it.

“It just stops on April 4th, before – and four days before Greg got to Sydney.”

“I’m sorry,” Amir said. “This is all we have...”
Greg stubbed out his rollie and put the camera on the table. Without a word, without even a look, he took the diary from her, smoothing out the pages with his long, stained fingers.

Her big dark eyes. He could feel her watching him, feel them all watching him. The pages of the Moleskine were comforting, smooth with just that edge of rough. The warm blank pages, that is. The written pages were dented with scratchings, his handwriting pressing through the paper. He ran his fingers over the impression of the words, touching it from the other side, reading the entry backwards.

April 2nd:

*Ben is not Ben. He’s watching us –*

Ben is not Ben. He’s watching us –

A drum-bursting noise.

Black.

Slowly light, with blood dripping into his left eye. He wipes it away – scoops the blood-clotted dirt from his eye socket – amid the cacophony of kids and goats and English and jeeps, the market carpets all torn. Locals flapping and screaming, soldiers yelling. Blood in his eye, bits of children seeping into the dirt, red turning to black. He feels for the camera – still there – he takes pictures he can’t see. He lurches into the nearest vehicle and it drives away.

A drum-bursting noise.

Black.

Slowly light, blood dripping into his left eye. He wipes it away as it clots with the dirt on his face. Slowly light, the soft sounds of shuffles and muttering. He walks down an alleyway, the alley getting narrower as he presses on, until it turns sharp right, into a door in a bare building. Dark rooms lead into darker rooms like a maze, the stench of piss and vomit becoming stronger as he follows the footsteps ahead of him –

A drum-bursting noise.

Black.
Slowly light, blood dripping into his left eye. He wipes it away as people stare at him, boys and donkeys and dirty old men stare at him. He pushes past them and out of the courtyard, turning down the dark narrow alley between the houses –

A drum-bursting noise.

He can’t hear or see. Blood drips into his eye, his ears ring with the blast, a tuning fork vibrating in his skull. His chest is heaving and his throat is raw, but he doesn’t know if that’s from coughing or yelling or dust.

“Greg! Greg, sit down!” yelled Samira.

“Greg, look at me – look at me in the eye,” said Amir. “Greg, look at me –”

“Greg – Gregory Talbot –” Samira turned to Kate. “Take everything off the shelves, will you? Make sure he doesn’t break anything.”

Kate ran around behind her uncle, putting clocks and vases on the carpeted floor. Samira heard something outside and left the room as Amir walked in front of Greg, herding him like he might herd a wounded animal.

“My eye,” Greg yelled. “Medic –”

“They’re coming,” said Amir. “Greg – Greg, give me your hand –”

“Ben,” Greg stopped in the middle of the room and started turning in the opposite direction. “My driver – Ben in the alley – my driver – medic!”

“Greg, it’s alright, your driver is fine –”

“No, no,” Greg started to sob, swaying on his feet, heaving and choking and pushing Amir away when he tried to help him to a seat.

“In here, he’s quite tall and strong –” Samira opened the door and showed in two paramedics.

“The medic is here, Greg,” said Amir, and proceeded to tell them quickly what Greg had been saying, feeding them lines so they could participate in Greg’s delusion and sedate him. Kate looked over at Samira but her expression was blank and hard and focused on Greg. It occurred to her that if Greg was stuck in hospital she’d be on her own, with these strangers, with no one to trust. But then the paramedics started quizzing her on Greg’s medical history, the family’s medical history, she was in the ambulance and in the hospital and there were forms to sign and nurses to deal with and lights and noise and too many
people. She hid behind her Captain Katherine Talbot assuredness and let the fear wait until she was safely alone.
Chapter Six: Saturday April 16th

It was raining when she woke up the next morning. The late summer weather had vanished. A curtain of water darkened her room at the hotel and made her little bed feel damp. The rain was surprisingly cold when she stuck her hand out of the window. She’d slept badly, nightmares of Greg’s screams jolting her from sleep, the night’s real silence pounding and close.

It was only three hours drive to her father’s in Byron Bay but with the flooded highway, it took her almost twice that. The rain thrashed against the windscreen and washed over the country roads so every car was forced to a crawl. She had arranged to meet her father before she’d left Sydney. When she’d called he had been about to leave Byron Bay. He hadn’t wanted to sound like it, but he was frantic that he’d been left out of all the action.

‘I’ll come up and see you, Dad.’

‘Are you sure I shouldn’t –’

‘Dad. Nan said that Ben came and stayed with you when he was home on leave.’

‘Yes! It was great. Actually, he left a bag of his stuff here, which I rang about –’

‘His stuff? What stuff?’

‘Oh, I haven’t looked in the bag, love, it’s his private –’

‘Why didn’t you tell me?’

‘I… Ben didn’t tell you? Oh, that’s right, you said your Nan told you. Well…’

‘Well?’

‘I thought you knew. You always seem to know everything.’

She’d never had much faith in the invigorating effects of life in Byron Bay, but after this phone call, she had none. Before she left she told herself she was driving up out of duty, to pay a visit to her father and to see the contents of the bag. Now she needed her father, she wanted him all to herself, his reliable, dippy softness. Her mother kept ringing her, through the night and now through the morning. Often she didn’t answer, she could barely stand to hear the desperation in her mother’s voice. She knew that when she got to Byron, she could hand the phone to her father and not have to deal with it anymore.

—— o ——
Her father stood on the veranda, hands loosely on his hips, as she pulled into the drive. She got a jolt when she saw him; standing like that, he looked just like the photos of Poppy Jack from when he came home from the war. The same wiry limbs and tanned skin, standing up straight but so casually that it seemed easy. Her father’s skin was leathery now and the lines in his face deeply carved. She bolted up the front steps and shook the rain out of her hair.

“Katie.”

He pulled her into a tight hug, not letting go even when she gulped and started to cry. He held her for a long time and she could smell spices and rich tropical earth on his clothes. The rain hammered on the corrugated iron roof, a roar that drummed out rational thought. His Tibetan prayer flags spasmed as the water hit them, the leaves of his herbs and succulents taking a thumping where they ringed the veranda. Their section of veranda was dry, golden light from inside spilling over their feet.

“I need a tissue,” she sniffed, “and some whisky.”

“Whisky! I might have a nip of Glenfiddich in the back of the cupboard. I baked for you.”

“Hippie muffins?”

“No hash this time. I’ve gone off that, it’s not mindful. Just organic chocolate.”

“Sounds good. I’m starving. Are you eating meat?”

“I bought some local free-range chicken for you. Don’t worry, love, I’ll take care of you.”

—— o ——

Her father’s house was like her father – warm, brown and covered with hippie paraphernalia. The floors were polished, recycled rainforest timber and all the chairs were covered with Oxfam cushions or crocheted rugs. He had Buddha statues sitting on bookshelves in between his hundreds of novels, histories, gardening manuals and works on eastern philosophy, but also some framed pictures of Ganesh and Krishna. Instead of marijuana growing on his back
veranda he now had a multitude of different herbs. The kitchen was cosy with baking and a fire was crackling in the lounge room.

“Dad, you look normal.”

Ken laughed.

“And what’s normal, Katie?”

“You know… your hair’s short, you’ve shaved, and you aren’t wearing crazy Thai fisherman’s pants or Jesus sandals. Just jeans and a shirt.”

“It was too hard gardening in those clothes. Besides, when I sold my stuff at the organic market, people kept assuming I was from Nimbin and asked where my dope was. Young people too, your age, lots of travellers.”

He sat down at the table next to her, laying out the muffins and tea and whisky.

“But I think I might have to leave, move back down to Sydney.”


“Your Nan. I can’t leave her with your mother anymore, even though I do go down often. And I miss you, Katie. I want to be there when you’re home. Saying goodbye to Ben last time…” He looked away and started pouring the tea. A trickle of rain came in over the top of the back doors, forming a puddle on the mat. The scent of incense mixed with the baking smells in a combination so redolent of her father that she almost forgot why she came.

“That bag…”

“It’s in the spare room, love.”

—— o ——

A small canvas backpack lay under the bed. It was yellow and old, the same one Ben had used in high school, with the anarchy symbols and pictures of penises still scrawled on the side in texta. Even holding it in her lap brought back memories of watching him hop off the bus two stops early in order to jig. She laid everything out on the quilted bedspread – two t-shirts, one pair of boardshorts, suncream, a small toiletries kit, a thumbed copy of *Counterinsurgency* by David Kilcullen and a dated diary. It seemed such a random assortment of stuff, certainly not deliberately left. She opened the little
black Collins diary, pocket-sized and a week to a page. There were only work times and places until September and then every date held an entry. She peered at it in the gloom.

“It’s dark in here, love,” her father said, switching on the light. “Find anything interesting?”

He leant casually against the doorframe but she heard the catch in his voice.

“His diary.”

“Hold on, let me get my glasses –”

“It’s alright, Dad, I’ll read it first. You need to see this.” She put the flashdrive she’d been carrying around in Ken’s hand. She realised that not only had she not changed her clothes all week, she hadn’t slept properly, hadn’t rested – she was living just like she did in Afghanistan. The idea caught at her throat.

“What is it?”

“It’s Greg’s photos of Ben.”

Her father drooped.

“Mum and Nan have both seen them.”

“When?”

“Before I left Sydney. Of course.”

“Yes, of course,” he said in a small voice, floating away to his computer.

The rain battered against the window. Why did she have to be the messenger? Wasn’t it enough that she missed her brother, that she was using all her precious leave to ... But there was no one to blame. She turned to the diary, flicking forwards to the first entry of neat, straight printing.

*September 20*th:*

*J off on his own. WTF.*

*September 21*st:*

*J & C into KD surrounds. C can’t control J. Me & M meant to be there but C ordered us to stay. So fucked.*

*September 22*nd:
\[ J = \text{US}\$50 \quad C = \text{US}\$30 \quad M \; \text{clean} \]

\textit{September 23rd:}
All good. Obj achieved.

\textit{September 24th:}
X

\textit{September 25th:}
\[ J = \text{WTF! Not following orders. C does nothing.} \]

\textit{September 26th:}
\[ J = \text{US}\$100! \quad C = \text{US}\$10 \quad M = -\text{US}\$10 \quad \text{Smart lad.} \]

The diary went on like this for pages. She could work out that ‘C’ was in charge, ‘M’ was the only one Ben trusted, and ‘J’ was causing some serious trouble, all of which seemed to confirm Fred’s story. C, M, J – Carruthers, Miller, Jones? Were they the men in Ben’s brick? She was sure Luke Miller was, he was in the photos, and he was the reason she’d heard the rumour about Ben in the first place. She couldn’t quite remember who the other two were. Jim could’ve told her, if there had been any way to contact him, any way to hear his voice.

She flipped forward. The tone changed in November.

\textit{November 9th:}
\textit{First snow. J better \& worse. At least C can control him now. The shame.}

\textit{November 10th:}
\textit{Snow \& cold. J curls into a ball at first light \& doesn’t uncurl until ops.}
\textit{The shame.}
November 11th:

November 12th:
J = $200  C = $50  M clean

November 13th:
Fuck I can’t be bothered with this anymore. I know the score.

Then the diary held only co-ordinates. She deciphered some of them as being around Tarin Kowt but most of them meant nothing. All those amounts – were they gambling? If so, why was M ‘clean’? Why was it shameful that J curled into a ball? Carruthers, Jones – Collins, Johnson? If she could just work out who those men were – but then, the only shameful behaviour she could think of was fraternization, and who were they going to have sex with in the middle of the dasht? The local women? They could only get near them at gunpoint. The local boys? $200 seemed vastly too much to pay for a local boy, even if – no, that was just too far-fetched. Besides, they got a commendation, they must be achieving their objectives – they couldn’t do that if the locals hated them, and the locals would hate them if they were gambling and having sex with their women and children. Unless it was all a massive scam – but she hated conspiracy theories. There had to be a simple explanation. There had to be some explanation of why Ben was in those photos. He couldn’t be taking drugs – he couldn’t have achieved his objectives if he was high. He just couldn’t.

The window pane seemed to ripple with water. She picked up the t-shirt and smelt it. It still smelt like Ben, though a little musty a few months later. She held back tears. Ben had been in pain in November but his Christmas email had been almost as usual. She told herself that she couldn’t have known, that it wasn’t her fault, but she felt guilty.

She found her father in tears in front of the laptop, the photo of Ben in the drug den open in front of him. She closed the computer and hid it under a
cushion. She held her father’s hand until he registered her presence. Her father’s calm was in every floorboard, the house glowed with it. Even if he couldn’t find it, she could easily sit next to him and wait. When the only sound was the drumming of the rain on the roof, she took her father’s arm and led him out to the veranda to taste different herbs in the dark. His house felt like the soft warm security of childhood and it was easy to play the good daughter for him.

— — o — —

“What was Ben like?”

Her father put down his roti. They’d made an Indian feast together, three different curries and all of his homemade pickles from the pantry.

“When he was here in December. What was –”

“Yes, yes, I understand –”

“Was he OK? Did he say anything?”

She’d just heaped her plate with tandoori chicken and rice. Her stomach rumbled, she could detect a warmth under the tandoori flavour and the sweet tang of the mango chutney. But the food smelt too rich and too heavy to eat just this second.

“He said he was tired.”

Her father looked tired. His shirt was faded and the soft light made his wrinkles even deeper.

“He was quiet, and spent most of his time either surfing or sitting on the veranda. His shoulders were always hunched. I thought he might be sick but he said he wasn’t.”

“Nan said something similar…”

“But?”

“I dunno… nothing.” She shook her head. Her grandmother had reacted oddly to the news of Ben – Ben had written that Nan had said some unexpected things – Ben had said some unexpected things in that email to Fred. It wasn’t anything she could properly piece together. Not to tell her father anyway.

“What else did he say?” she asked.
“He said that he was thinking of doing something else – of leaving the Army.”

“What!” Being a soldier was as important to Ben as it was to her. She knew it was because he’d encouraged her to join the Army. He couldn’t have said that, not and meant it.

“Yeah, I was quite pleased, you know…”

Her father’s face fell when he saw hers, and he looked away, embarrassed.

“I mean, maybe he was just tired…”

“What else did he say? Exactly.”

“Well, exactly… I can’t remember what he said ‘exactly.’ He said so little, Katie. Just a few words here and there. I remember when he said that though.”

“Yes?”

Ken didn’t answer. He looked at his daughter’s eyes, huge with disbelief, and saw his son as he’d been at Christmas. He saw Ben as he sat on the back veranda, carving a stick he’d found in the garden. Ben had gathered a number of thick branches, weighing them in his hands and piling them by the back door. He’d been making a collection of wooden lizards, carving, sanding and oiling one each afternoon. His first two lizards stood guarding the steps down to the garden and the orchard beyond it.

That afternoon had been heavy with humidity but Ben worked without a fan. He’d brought out some iced apple-juice and Ben had grunted something at him.

‘You’re welcome.’

‘No, I said – I mean, thanks Dad – but I said –’ Ben had stopped, then renewed his carving with extra vigour. He’d sat in the cane armchair and waited for his son to talk. When Ben came up to Byron he usually spent every evening in town boozing it up with the backpackers. This time, when he came back from his morning surf, he stayed on the veranda carving lizards.

The cicadas droned from the bush that surrounded the garden. Ben pushed his knife so hard into the wood that the end of the branch snapped off. He swore and threw his knife and carving on the ground. He sat back in his chair and took a long gulp of his juice, his muscles contorting the scars and tattoos on his arm.

‘The Army,’ Ben muttered.
‘Yes?’
‘What else is there?’
‘Well, lots of things. Family, for one –’
‘Family!’ Ben snorted derisively, squinting at the glare on the lawn. He turned back with half a smile.
‘Aw, you’re alright, Dad.’ Ben finished his juice with a gulp. His arm hung by his side, slack, his legs sprawled in front of him. He stared into the orchard for long minutes; he’d never seen his son give the garden more than a cursory glance before.
‘Are you thinking of leaving the Army?’
‘Hmmm.’
‘Well, you know I’d support you whatever you did. You could come up here, surf and work in the garden with me!’ He started laughing but stopped as Ben didn’t react.
‘Not quite the same, of course.’
‘No.’

The cicada drone made the air sound like it was throbbing. It was too humid to do anything in this heavy after-lunch time, before the breeze swept in with the night. He didn’t want to do anything anyway. He just wanted to sit with his son in these still, unexpected hours.

‘What else is there for you, Ben? Other than the Army?’

Ben didn’t answer but a sad, soft look settled on him. He’d looked just as he did when he was a little boy and Ken had wanted to hold his son as he used to, to rub his back until the tears went away. Ben had picked up the knife and branch again.

‘Nothing.’
Ben had turned abruptly and flashed a grin at him, a spark of his old self.
‘Nothing but you, Dad.’
He’d gestured to the branch.
‘This lizard’s gonna have to be a frog.’
‘Perfect,’ he’d kept his tone bright. ‘I’m a big fan of biodiversity.’
He started when Kate tapped her fingers on the back of his hand.
“Dad?”
The curry was congealing in its dishes and the house was closed in by the pouring dark. All the unanswered questions mixed with the smells of the korma and tandoori so they were part of the air he breathed. He put his hand over his daughter’s and held it.

“Your brother… he couldn’t think of anything else he might do.”

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“Greg… I haven’t spoken to him in a while,” he said. They were sitting in front of the fire. Kate had finished the two nips of whisky and was stretched out on the sofa, digging her toes into the crocheted rug he’d laid over her.

“Ben kept muttering about family.”

“Yes?”

“Before I came down for Christmas he’d been talking to your Nan. He asked me about Uncle Pete —”

“Great Uncle Pete? Korea veteran Pete?”

“Yes, of all people.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know, love. He always looked like he was trying to say something else, but kept coming back to Pete.”

Shadows from the fire flickered over his daughter’s face. He hadn’t seen her this peaceful since she’d joined the Army.

“Well?”

“Well, Katie?”

“What did you tell him about Pete? How did he react?”

“Right… you know I was only little when Pete came home —”

“That was in ’53?”

“Yes, so I would’ve been about six. I remember, years later, Greg telling me about how Pete spun all these amazing stories of his time there. Made out he was halfway between Biggles and Flash Gordon, you know, battling the hordes over the frozen Chosin, saving beautiful women from the so-called tyranny of communism. I didn’t believe it. I think Greg believed it, or partly believed it, but Pete… he slept in a tent in the back garden for five years.”
“Why?” His daughter’s chin rested on her arm, the light flickering in her eyes.

“He couldn’t stand to sleep inside. He’d wake us all up with his screaming nightmares – I’ve never heard anything so chilling in my life. I could see him out of my bedroom window, sobbing into Grandma Dulcie’s arms, the tent a mess in the moonlight. Grandpa Bert unable to look at him and unable to hide his crying.”

Kate grimaced and hid her face in the sofa.

“What is it, love?”

She looked up, straight into the fire.

“Greg…” She glanced at him, blinking back tears, but looked away.

The fire cracked open the eucalypt logs. His brother must be in a similar way then, without a Grandma Dulcie to hold his hand, alone under the unblinking lights of that regional hospital in that what’s-the-point town of Coffs Harbour. He hadn’t seen Greg for so long.

“Go on,” sniffed Kate, “Pete.”

“So, Pete;” he pulled his thoughts away from hospital corridors. “I went to see him when he was dying. He’d been an alcoholic for decades, I’m surprised he lasted as long as he did. ‘Forgive me’ was all he said.”

“Forgive him for what?”

He shrugged in answer to his daughter’s wide eyes.

“For telling stories? For his nightmares? The best I could think of was the way he harassed me for not volunteering for Vietnam.”

His daughter smiled.

“No, you can’t see me in uniform, can you? I mean, I registered for conscription, I conceded that much…” Receiving that sweet ‘balloted out’ letter, and later, the ballot on TV and feeling that everyone in the country was watching. “Vietnam was an exciting time for us of course, me and Greg, for our generation.”

“Didn’t you meet Mum at a protest?” Her eyebrow was raised but she was still smiling – thank goodness. Still, he didn’t want to dwell on the thrill of the protest movement with his soldier daughter. Not right now.
“Yes, well, yes… exactly. Exciting times, as I said. And it wasn’t nothing, in our family, you know, every decision not to fight was like a slap in the face to Dad, Pete, Grandpa Bert – even to Grandma Dulcie and Mum. Although that changed… for Dulcie and Mum, I mean, especially when Greg was gone.”

“How long was he gone for?”

“Oh, years… he left before my ballot in ’67 and didn’t come back till after the fall of Saigon. He stayed on long after our troops had come home. It was an international war for him… an international adventure, really. He didn’t write very much, although – hold on…”

He went to a cupboard and brought out a kid’s shoebox, Ben’s school shoes from when he was seven.

“These aren’t in an album,” he sat down next to his daughter. “I’ve never quite known how to display them.”

The box was full of black and white photos. Some were of the family, of Dulcie dressed in black and looking stern in cats-eye glasses, of him and Greg in school uniform. But most of the photos were postcards written from Vietnam. Sometimes they were shots of Saigon, or soldiers, or villagers. But most often they were pictures of Greg looking young and excited – in fatigues in a village, or covered in sweat in a firefight, or toasting the photographer in a bar. The first line of every postcard listed the photographer, most often a Vietnamese name, the writing in neat capital letters.

“Who’s Tuan Van Nguyen?”

“One of his colleagues, I suspect. I don’t know, I never asked – it wasn’t really important once he’d come home.”

He flipped over a photo of Greg being measured for a suit.

FEB 6TH 1972
PHOTO: TUAN VAN NGUYEN

I'M GETTING MYSELF ANOTHER FEW SUITS MADE BEFORE I HEAD TO CAMBODIA. THERE WILL NEVER BE ANOTHER MR MINH. HAS THE SAFARI SUIT COME INTO FASHION YET? I'LL SEND YOU ONE, COMPLETE WITH
MUD AND BLOOD SPATTERS FROM THE FIELD – THE PERFECT PROTEST OUTFIT. TELL UNCLE PETE “IT’S TIME” AND RECORD HIS INVECTIVE FOR ME.
GREG XO

“‘It’s Time’,” he said. “Pete had no time for anyone who wanted to withdraw our troops from Vietnam.” He could hear Greg’s voice as he read the card, deep and gravelly with irony.

“This is one of the last postcards we got from him. He didn’t send any once he started photographing Cambodia.”

“Because of the Khmer Rouge.”

“The Khmer Rouge didn’t shut the country down until ’75. I mean, he still got his photos out – we’d see them in LIFE magazine, your Nan had a very expensive subscription just in case Greg was published in it. So he could’ve sent us postcards, whole letters even… he just didn’t.”

He was sitting on the edge of the couch, his daughter’s legs behind him, the box between them from which Kate was picking photos out at random. The fire was dying down, a damp chill creeping into the edges of the room. She looked just like she always had – intense, focused – but more tender, more womanly he felt, less the independent soldier and more like his mother. The colouring was all wrong, of course, but there was something in Kate’s expression, the way she searched the cards as though trying to uncover a hidden meaning, that reminded him of his mother. Some unassailable core. So different from his son.

She looked up as if she could hear the thought.

“What did Ben say to these?”

“I didn’t show him. We didn’t really talk about Vietnam.”

He’d watched his son in the darkness of the back veranda. Ben’s face had been shadows within shadows, his length of tall muscle as black and still as the chair he sat on. His eyes had been hollow and he’d walked like he was always hungry. His tattoos had looked faded, as though his skin was grey under his tan.

“What did he say about Pete, then?”
“Nothing,” he reached out and stroked his daughter’s hair, and for the first time in years she didn’t push him away. “That’s what was so memorable, so… odd, distressing really. He didn’t say anything at all.”
Chapter Seven: Sunday April 17th

The rain had cleared and his garden steamed in the grey dawn. It was carefully tended but, as he watered it before he left for Coffs Harbour, the passionfruit vines and mango trees gave him the impression of a tropical jungle. Perhaps the sort of jungle that Jack had woken to on dawn raids in the Islands, that seemed to reach out to strangle him. Or perhaps it was more like the jungle that Greg had pushed through in Cambodia, a jungle partly cultivated but swarming with the Khmer Rouge. Certainly it wasn’t like the jungle that Ben had slogged his way through in East Timor. Ben’s only description for that had been ‘hard’.

Last night Kate had shown him all the phone messages from Lynette. The conversation he’d then had with his ex-wife had certainly felt like jungle warfare. Kate would need to drive all the way down to Sydney that day, an unrelenting eleven-hour stint.

‘But I’ll come with you to Coffs first,’ she’d said. ‘I want those diaries and a copy of the photos, and…’ She’d slumped against the doorframe and looked up at him.

‘And to see Greg,’ he’d said.

His daughter had nodded and her eyes flicked around the room, after her thoughts.

‘He just… we…’

He’d watched her struggle to capture something in words, the same struggle Ben had when he simply wanted to say ‘I love you, Dad’. He knew that she’d spent the past week with Greg and he guessed that she’d kept all that pain to herself. He wanted to be part of her day-to-day life, to protect her, to be close. Instead he reached out and rubbed her shoulder.

‘Go to bed, love. We have to start early in the morning.’

—— o ———

“That’s Amir,” Kate said when she got out of her car. She nodded towards a skinny man waiting out the front of the hospital. He was frowning, his restless
movements making his clothes seem too small for him. As soon as he saw Kate his face cleared and he ran towards them.

“Oh, there has been another drama! Ah yes, hello, hello, Amir, you must be Ken, delighted to meet you,” he pumped their hands in turn. “Greg woke up and told the nurse he has tuberculosis! You can imagine the fuss –”

“What? How? Do you?” He and Kate talked over each other.

“Me? Oh no, they did the skin test to me, I am clean. But Greg’s skin test came up positive, so now they are doing a blood test, and everyone at the wedding must have a test, and there were two hundred people there! I think we only test the men – and Samira, of course –”

“He’s awake, then?” Kate asked.

“Yes.” Amir rolled his eyes. It occurred to Ken that this man knew his brother much better than he did.

“Has he changed much since Friday?” Kate asked. Amir shook his head emphatically.

“He is in a room by himself – karatine? No –”

“Quarantine?” Kate prompted.

“Yes – quarantine. Alone, so he cannot give the disease to others. He is…” Amir looked up as though searching the sky for the correct phrase. Ken could feel himself become tense with every second that Amir paused.

“He is talking, sometimes. Dreaming, sometimes. He asks for a cigarette, but he forgets that he wears a nicotine patch and that he is not allowed outside.”

Greg had been put in a special room in the newest wing, one wall a large window so he could be observed. His skin was pale and grey, a grubby version of the bedsheets.

“Here, you will need to wear one of these,” said Amir, handing them each a green facemask. “You can only go into the room if you are wearing one. Otherwise the nurses will take you away for testing.” Amir put his facemask on and pushed open the heavy door. Kate moved to follow him and paused, mask halfway over her head.
“Dad?”
“Is this… is he…”
“It’s how I left him.” Her expression hardened, the softness of last night leaching out as Greg’s heart monitor bleeped.
“I’ll come in in a sec.”
She pulled down her facemask like she was going into battle.

He watched Kate and Amir chat to his brother. Amir sat on the bed but Kate stood sentinel beside it, until Greg said something and she laughed. She leant against the bed, her facemask flexing as she opened her mouth. She pointed and they all looked at him through the glass.

His brother stared. Even from here he could see how bloodshot Greg’s eyes were. Greg didn’t move, but the line on the heart monitor spiked higher and more often, loud enough that both Kate and Amir looked over at it. Greg didn’t move, his gaze didn’t waver. Was this why Kate had cried when she heard about Pete? Greg’s stillness, it was uncanny, his ghostly pale face. He hadn’t seen his brother in years, hadn’t even heard from him, except little snippets of news from their mother. Now this – tuberculosis and a breakdown – had Kate said that Greg had been sedated? Greg kept staring and the heart monitor spiked higher and higher.

Kate ran to the door.
“Dad, are you gonna come in? You’re freaking us out.”

He followed her inside and stood in the middle of the room, a metre away from the bed. The beeping of the heart monitor slowed but Greg never took his eyes from him.

“Greg,” his own voice was scratchy and muffled by the mask.
“Thought you were Dad, standing out there,” said Greg, an attempt at a grin loosening his face. “Come back to haunt me.”

—— o ——

“Dad, you sure you’re gonna be alright?” Kate had put Greg’s diaries in a green shopping bag on the passenger seat, along with Ben’s things. It looked so innocuous, that ordinary Woolworths’ bag full of books.
“Because I can stay –”
“No, no, your mother’d kill me. Greg in hospital is enough for now.”

His daughter hurrumphed. The day was a wishy-washy grey, the carpark puddles patterned rainbow with oil slicks. She rubbed at the side mirror, smoothing away every raindrop and finger smudge.

“You don’t really want to go down, do you?”

She shook her head. He pulled her into a hug; she was as tall as him, the same height as Lynette.

“Then don’t.”

“No, I have to,” she sighed, pulling away. “Mum needs the car, and Nan… the diaries, I can’t, not over the phone…”

His daughter looked around, at the ashen sky, at the carpark, at the ambulances pulling up to Emergency. He’d washed and dried all of her clothes for her, fed her eggs fresh from the neighbours, but he could still feel her vibrating with tension.

“And Ben’s diary, I have to see what… you’ll be here, right?”

“For at least a fortnight. Then, if the antibiotics haven’t worked, another fortnight, and so on and so on. However long it takes.”

She nodded, looking at her feet. People yelled behind them but she didn’t seem to notice.

“OK,” she sniffed, “gotta go. Keep him in line, Dad.”

She jumped in the car and drove off without looking back.
Chapter Eight: Monday April 18th

Her grandmother’s room was dark and musty. She’d been sleeping in the lounge room for the past few years, ever since the stairs became too difficult to climb. ‘They’re not a passageway, Katie love, they’re a negotiation. And they don’t like to compromise.’ All the lounge room furniture had been shoved under the bay window that faced the street, side-tables and framed prints all higgledypiggledy beside the sofa. At the other end of the room was her grandmother’s bed, wardrobe and television. She opened the curtains, sunlight illuminated the dust floating in the air, and her grandmother groaned.

“Nan, it’s after one…” she said. She’d got home late last night. Her mother and grandmother had stayed up even later, going through the diary and the photos even after she’d give them all of her information, even after she’d gone to bed. She’d only woken for a moment at dawn, when her mother gave her the briefest kiss on her temple before she left.

“Jack?”

“Nan, it’s me, Kate.” She sat on the bed as her grandmother fumbled for her glasses.

“You looked just like Jack, your silhouette in front of the window. I thought I’d gone to heaven.”

“Sorry to disappoint you, Nan.”

Her grandmother smiled and patted her hand.

“Just try a little harder next time. Now, pass me my teeth.”

She smiled as she passed over the glass; if her grandmother was in a good mood it’d be easier to ask her about Ben.

“My gums must be shrinking, these dentures keep clacking about.”

“Nan, what…” Her grandmother’s pink nightgown and huge pink glasses made her look sweet and frail. Perhaps she should wait until her grandmother was at the kitchen table, until she’d had her tea and a biscuit. But her grandmother’s gaze met her eyes – it was curious, then hard, ready for an attack. She looked away.

“You’ve got a lot of stuff in here.”

“Yes.”
Elsie knew her granddaughter wanted to say something else; it was in the way Kate sat on the bed like a child, hunched and fidgeting. All these Talbots were so transparent. It was just like Jack, about to leave for the Islands. She’d had to speak for him then and she’d have to speak for Kate now. Her legs ached under the heavy blanket.

“You were going to ask me something, Kate. About Ben?”

“Yes.”

“About what he was like when he came home, what he said, what he did, all the rest of it?”

Kate nodded, staring at the bedspread. She waited for Kate to ask her a question but she just fidgeted with the wrinkles in the sheets.

“Look me in the eye, girl.”

Kate looked up at her, confused, then pushed her shoulders back and lifted her chin; good girl, that’s the way.

“Go to that cupboard – third drawer on the left – open it.”

The wardrobe was full of shoeboxes, fruit boxes, postage parcels and bits of paper, covered in dust and threatening to topple over. Not the third drawer on the left though, she knew that one was neat and clean. She’d stacked all the diaries and letters in there herself after Ben had left for the airport, after she’d read them again for the hundredth time. The paper might be brittle but the words never got old.

“Ben read them when he was here. If you want to find out what he did when he was snooping around, read those.”

“What are they?”

She didn’t answer. She wouldn’t state the obvious. She didn’t need to relive all that old shame. As soon as Kate opened the diaries and letters she’d know what they were. She pushed herself out of bed and walked past her granddaughter to the door. She had plenty of time to answer Kate’s questions later.

She took her time on the outside toilet, the door open so she was looking back up at the house. The weather had been unpredictable when Ben was home at Christmas. Boxing Day had been boiling hot and the next day cold and wet. When it was just the two of them, making sandwiches out of the Christmas
leftovers, Ben had started asking questions. If she took off her glasses she could see Ben moving about the kitchen, slowly and too deliberately. She’d been waiting for it, but still, she hated it; he’d come home changed. Just like Jack had, more than sixty-five years ago. She could see him too, his pre-war clothes too big at the waist and too small at the shoulders. It wasn’t that Jack had come home skinny and haggard or that his left leg had healed so poorly that he limped. No, it was that he’d start a sentence and then trail off, he’d stand for hours by the nasturtiums as if watching them grow, he’d sit up all night, ‘to watch the stars, Els, twist snake-like, from yesterday into tomorrow.’ The only thing that hadn’t changed was Jack’s smell of shaving cream, sweat and tobacco. His smell had mixed with the flowers in that scorching January and given her comfort. Standing in the garden as she was now, she felt she was also standing in the garden then, watching her man dote on their two-year old son, that son who was now an old man himself, older than they were then and sicker than they’d ever been.

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It wasn’t just tuberculosis that was making Greg sick. It wasn’t just the breakdown either, with all the attendant phrases like ‘post-traumatic amnesia’ and ‘adjustment disorder’. It was something else, something both more and less than these diagnostic tags. He knew what it was, he’d have been a fool not to know, but he refused to think it. He’d rather take a magic carpet ride through his memories, painful as it was – crazy as it was, a trip crazier than any he’d manufactured smoking in Laos or drinking bootleg vodka during the Sarajevo siege.

The tunnel out of Sarajevo had been so small that he’d crouched through all 960m of it. Icy slush had soaked his boots and his wounded shoulder had throbbed. His ears had rung with a high-pitched whine from the blast, a whine that curled around the split-second of silence in that moment before the shells hit. At least Emir wasn’t hurt. Emir, with his huge smile and big dark eyes. He’d handed over everything except his cameras and ID papers to his doe-eyed fixer
before he went into the tunnel. It was almost a year before he made it back to Sarajevo, before he saw Emir again.

It was almost eight years before he made it home from Vietnam. Standing on the front step of the terrace he’d been struck by Sydney’s lack of smell. It was October and he’d shivered in his safari suit. Before he could knock, his mother opened the door. Her laughter had stopped abruptly when she saw him.

Only Ken wouldn’t have minded being upstaged on his birthday. Not only not have minded but be excited that he’d returned. Ken was the only one in that kitchen who’d talked and teased and jumped up and down. Everyone else had stared at him. He hadn’t known then how much he had looked like his uncle Mark. Hadn’t known until decades later how long those older generations had wished for that other homecoming and how, thirty years after the end of World War II, there it was, a generation delayed. The staring had dragged on for minutes, only Ken’s voice punctuating the silence. Then Ken had put Skyhooks on the record player and Bert cracked open the whisky and the family had partied until dawn.

“Greg? Can I get anything for you?” asked Ken from his armchair.

“How long have I been here?”

His brother’s face was open, loving, just as it had been that day when he’d hijacked his birthday party.

“Since Friday night, I think.”

“And today is?”

“Monday.”

He looked at his hands; not trembling, that was good, but hideously blotched with grey, white and yellow. He looked at his brother, he had white hair now too, although his bristles still held patches of colour.

“Got a cigarette?”

Ken shook his head with a smile.

“Where’s Kate?” He looked around the room, then stopped himself; of course she wasn’t in the room, did he think she was hiding in the corner?

“She’s in Sydney. She left yesterday.”

“You mean, she didn’t hang around to watch an old man sleep?” he said, shaking his head. “So ungrateful.”
Kate wasn’t watching old men sleep. She was reading dead men’s words. The handwriting was all over the place, sometimes neat copperplate, sometimes childish printing, sometimes what looked like ‘a drunken scrawl on a black night from the back of a ute on a bumpy road’ which is how Jim described his own illegible writing. Greg’s and Ben’s diaries had been easy compared with these, but then, those diaries had been semi-professional documents. Her grandmother had made it clear that she had to read these letters and read them alone; this might make reading them easier or it might make it harder. She sat on the sofa under the window, in the only patch of light in the room.

The first two letters on the neat pile were from Pete. The first was postmarked December 15th 1950 and was addressed to Jack, his writing childish and flat at the bottom, as though he’d written on top of a ruler.

It’s freezing cold here. My feet don’t even make footprints on the frozen ground. We get some rum for Christmas so I’m looking forward to that. Macca and Joe both have girlfriends writing to them about how hot it is at home.

I don’t think I’ve written since Pakchon, have I? First major Chinese offensive, they’re calling it. They were everywhere, what a balls-up. Advance, retreat, advance, retreat, retreat. Some drongo played the bag-pipes in the middle of the night. As Macca says, now all we’re fighting is boredom.

Is this what it was like for you in North Africa? Exciting and boring at the same time? Cold and muddy? Wait, you were in the desert, ha ha, Dad would know about cold and muddy though.

Anyway, have a good Christmas, and I hope to get a present from you soon.

She flipped it over but there was nothing else on the page. This was just an ordinary letter, nothing to excite Ben’s interest.
The next letter hadn’t been posted. It was grubby along the folds of the cheap Army-issue paper as if it had been read and refolded too often. The writing was more rounded and natural, smudged in places making it difficult to read.

July 30th 1953

Well Mark, it’s finally over. I’ve been here the whole time, three years, about the same length of time as you managed. It’s not quite what it promises, is it? Not that I regret it, not that I wouldn’t do it again. Well, not all, but… but you know about that too, don’t you.

But I’m not angry. Not in the slightest. I’ve never been so cold or so hot. I’ve never known such love or such hate, such pride or such shame. I never will either. Jack had Elsie at least. I have nothing now. It’s over.

I’m glad it’s over. But at the same time I don’t want to come home, don’t want to leave these sangers and fox holes, don’t want a bed and clean clothes. Don’t want a house or a family. I just want to stay here in this war. In any war.

But I promised Mum I’d come home and give up soldiering. It’s all over for me.

I don’t need to write to you anymore. I’ll see Jack and Greg and little Ken. Who will I write to about civilian life then? Maybe Macca and post them to his grave? Maybe no one. Maybe I won’t need it.

The Chinese cover the ground around the hill like rotting flowers. Sometimes they are two deep. All they wear is cotton and are so skinny, even dead they look hungry. So many of them.

She read through it twice. This seemed like a different man to the first letter. Like a man and not a boy. Except he was writing to Mark – was that his brother Mark, who’d been killed in World War II? That would explain why the letter hadn’t been sent, but why would he write to his dead brother? She searched through the letters but there were no more from Pete. Had he only sent one letter
to Poppy Jack? If so, why did her grandmother have this unsent one in her collection? There was something in it as well, something behind the words that she couldn’t quite grasp. She got up and yanked the window open for some fresh air. She couldn’t keep still, opening one window after another, grabbing a cushion cover and swatting at it until the air was thick with dust and she was coughing so hard she had to stop.

She sank back onto the couch and opened the next letter in the pile. It was from Poppy Jack.
Mark and I have both been re-christened with brand new names. Mine is ‘Whacko’, partly as it’s my favourite expression of joy and delight and partly because it rhymes with ‘Jacko’, which is what I was called when I first enlisted. Along with Whacko, I’m also called Whacker, Whacko Jacko, Jacko Whacko, Whack-Jack, Black-Whack, Knick Knack Paddy Whack, Knickers, Knick, Paddy, Bone, Jacket, Whack-it and every other possible variation, some of which are far too lewd to write to such a lovely young lady as yourself.

Mark is called Adeline. This comes from his habit of never swearing under any circumstances.

He first blurted out this pearler of a phrase in a trench. We’d had a night of it, rough combat, out from 2200 hrs. Shells blasted pits in the sand so we couldn’t tell if we were stumbling into a trench or into the line of fire. Tracers and flares streaked the night white and red. The only other light came from metallic sparks and extravagant fiery explosions. New moon in the desert is black, black like you’re walking through oil, black like you’re drowning. Every sense becomes so sharp that a lit cigarette is like a lighthouse torch, and when you drop to the ground, you can feel each grain of sand shifting under your weight. The disturbed air tastes of cold metal on your tongue. The smell of burning scour your nostrils, scars them, a smell you can never forget.

We were running, we were jumping, we were firing like good little Diggers. Adeline – sorry, Mark – was doing his usual, counting heads when he’s not even a Sargeant, hauling the wounded off the battlefield again and again. We’re in different platoons so I’m not always with him, but his stamina is legendary. So legendary, in fact, that the boys sometimes wonder if he’s even
human — he doesn’t swear, he doesn’t smoke and he works all night without thinking of himself.

The night was very long. The boredom of all the previous months was compressed and under the new moon the darkness stretched out across the length of Africa. By the end, we were all exhausted. No, beyond exhausted, we suffered from a deep bone weariness that makes you forget your own name, all you can think of is run-drop-fire, run-drop-fire. Dawn broke behind us and as the first fingers of light stretched and cracked their knuckles over the sand, the fighting faded, each side moving towards its base. We dropped into a trench, men from all different platoons mixed in together. Mark lay back against the wall of the trench, still wearing his coat, pack and helmet. He pushed himself up, muttering something about fetching more wounded, but Snow pushed him back and grunted, ‘No way, mate, you’re staying here.’

We sat squinting and panting, not saying anything, when Mark’s stomach growled loud enough to be heard in Cairo. He reached into his pack for some bully beef he still had left. He ripped the tin open, but his hands were shaking so much that the whole ration fell onto the ground. His mouth hung open for a second, then he slapped his forehead theatrically and said, clear as a bell, “Oh Sweet Adeline!”

We all cracked up. Jerry was only a hop, skip and a jump away, but we couldn’t contain ourselves. It’s the funniest thing my brother has ever done. The picture still makes me giggle — his hands dirty, his blonde hair stuck down with sweat, eyes wide like a matinee idol. He said he heard the phrase in a song, but it’s not from any song I’ve ever heard. He says Dad used to sing it — trust Mark to know songs from the first war better than he knows ones from now.

So he’s called Adeline. He uses the phrase quite regularly, sometimes jokingly, sometimes with real feeling. So if I refer to a man named Adeline in my letters, I’m talking about your Mark.

Keep the home fires burning, sweet one,
Jack

She could hear her grandfather speaking, like he used to when he’d started on his after-dinner whisky but with more energy and attitude. She wanted to know her grandfather as he’d been then, funny and rough and eloquent all at once. But nowhere did he write ‘I love you’ or ‘my love’ or any of the other little phrases she’d heard him call her grandmother over the years. He referred to Mark as ‘your Mark’ which didn’t make sense at all. How could her grandmother know a different Mark from the rest of the family?

“Katie! Katie, your phone’s ringing!”

Her phone was vibrating on the kitchen table. She ignored the piercing look her grandmother gave her.

“Fred.”

“Kate, what the hell’s going on?”

“What?”

“The papers! I mean, on the internet, I read about Ben on the internet, the Herald website, the Australian –”

Victoria Barracks held two hundred years of colonial secrets in its sandstone walls, all of them pushed aside by this scandal with Ben. The gates burned in the sunset and her workmates pounced on her as soon as she walked through them. Shocked, they all were, appalled – you could zoom in on Ben’s body and see the scars – and the photographer, is that really your uncle? But wait, they whispered, she hadn’t even seen the websites yet! It was the end of her career and she was the last to know! The horror, the scandal, the shame.

They didn’t know that she’d already seen the photos and of course she didn’t tell them. Ben was public property now. Ben as news, next to the weather and the footy results. Ben captured in captions and everyone commenting. This or that journalist writing ‘the Minister for Defence was unavailable for comment’, ‘Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston was unavailable for comment’ –
who’d called them, and when? She had to work even harder to protect her memories of her brother. Of the Ben who played practical jokes, who was good with his hands, who would never hurt his sister. Of the Ben who smiled. The rest – it wasn’t real.

What was real was the email from Jim. It was risky to access the Defence Secret Network but it was the only way she could contact him in Afghanistan. He’d written just minutes before:

"KT, we all know, but no one knows where he is. Rumours are as wild as Nazi spies and Charlie in the trees. You won’t be allowed back, I know it. I’ll be here on my own. I can’t be here on my own, KT. I need you. Tell me you’re all right."

Her chest felt tight. It hadn’t occurred to her that she wouldn’t be allowed to go back to Afghanistan. It couldn’t be true – she couldn’t let it be true – she heard footsteps in the corridor –

"I’m safe, which is as all right as I’m going to get. My family’s falling apart, and now my job, and now the rest of my life. Not going back – I can hardly think it. Don’t go to Europe on leave. Come home."

She just managed to send it off and shut down the network before Casey came in. They were so worried, she said, had she known about Ben? Had he taken drugs before? Had he – but she cut Casey off by walking away, walking out of the building and through the courtyard, not looking right or left until she was far down Oxford Street that no one standing at the gate could have seen that she was crying.

—— o ——

Three sharp raps at the door. She knew who it’d be, Pauly and Paddy the Padre, although she knew better than to call them that. She did one last
inspection of the kitchen. She’d cleaned the house as quickly as she could but it looked just the same. At least she was alone.

‘My superiors are coming, Mum. To tell me about Ben. I need you to –’

‘Tell you? Why wouldn’t they tell me? I’m his mother.’

‘We have to nominate someone to be our first to call. It’s easier to keep it in-house. Can you –’

‘You can’t be serious…’ It took twenty minutes for her mother to finish and another half an hour to persuade her to take her grandmother out to dinner. She didn’t care if her mother felt shut out. She knew she couldn’t handle her bosses, her family and the news all at once.

“Captain Talbot.”

“Sir, Padre, come in.”

Their huge frames filled the hall as they both moved towards the light in the kitchen. She was reminded of Ben for a moment, that muscle, that upright stance. But Ben would have dumped his bag, hugged her, shouted up the stairs and almost run into the kitchen. Their movements were spare and professional.

Pauly – Major Cross – automatically stood at the head of the table with Paddy next to him. The light reflected off the angles of their lean faces and cast shadows into their eyes. The blue walls sucked the colour from their uniforms. They sat when she asked them to and refused tea. She could hear every whisper of the wind outside but barely felt the table under her elbows.

“This is hard, Kate,” said Pauly.

“Yes, Sir.”

“No ‘sir’, don’t ‘sir’ me –”

“Sorry.”

“No need for ‘sorry’,” said Paddy. “We’re all… we all…”

They both looked away, down, around, anywhere but at her. She knew she was staring at them but couldn’t stop herself. Pauly rubbed his face and sighed heavily, leaning forward and only occasionally glancing up at her.

“OK, it’s like this. We’re doing everything we can. We’re on the hunt for him but there’s no official word yet. But you can’t – you’re not –”

He clenched and unclenched his jaw. She had to stop herself from imitating him.
“You’re not going back to Afghanistan. You have an extra week’s leave and then you’re to report to barracks.”

He looked up at her then, pale eyes pleading.

“We’ll look after you, Kate.”

They looked at her, waiting. What did they want? But she knew what they wanted. They wanted her forgiveness for bringing this news, they wanted her to acknowledge that they shared her pain, and most of all they wanted her not to cry. But if she spoke she would cry, she could feel it in her throat. She just nodded and looked away from them, out the door and into the night. She could see their reflections in the glass as they looked at each other.

“Your family…” began Pauly.

“I’ll do it,” she said, using everything she had to keep her voice steady. She breathed in and sat up straight.

“So, no official word – any unofficial word?”

They glanced at each other then away. She didn’t know if they were just avoiding her eyes or avoiding answering altogether.

“Come on, you said –”

“We can’t, Kate,” said Pauly.

“Really we would, we want to –”

“This is my family,” she said. “My brother.”

Paddy looked at Pauly, his superior officer. Pauly looked at his hands and the emotion leached out of his face and shoulders. She knew then that she’d lost; he’d be all professional now and not her friend, not her brother-in-arms. She turned away.

“You will be informed… Kate?”

“I know this script, Sir.”

His reflection winced and she turned back to him.

“It’s not what I need to hear,” she said.

“It’s not what I want to say.”

Pauly looked at her steadily, tension creeping back into his face.

“Don’t listen to the rumours, Kate. We’re all behind you.”

“One hundred percent,” said Paddy.
“Kate,” Pauly leant forward again, mouth open to speak, eyes flicking over her face as he tried to find the words. She knew he could do nothing to stop people talking. His orders not to speak would have come from high up – he was a career soldier too, though she wished right now that he wasn’t.

“I know,” she said. “Thank you.”

Pauly nodded. He looked across at Paddy.

“Come in anytime, Kate,” he said as he stood up. “We’re organising the Anzac Day piss-up soon, make sure you find out where we’ll be.”

They left swiftly, sinking into the night.
Chapter Nine: Tuesday April 19th

Elsie was sure that Harry would crush the legs of the chair he sat on. No one so bulky had ever sat in these old kitchen chairs, not even Bert at his fattest. Even Ben was tall and stretched, and he always turned his chair in one hand so he could sit in it backwards.

“How long did you say you’ve worked with Greg?”
“I didn’t. Since Vietnam, Mrs Talbot.”
“Vietnam! I knew you were old friends, you were at his sixtieth, but –”
“Yes. I worked in the Reuters office and arranged most of Greg’s contracts.”

Only his family had known him so long – although how could she be sure of that? The flowers Harry had brought lay ostentatiously between them on the table, the fat lilies spilling pollen over the tablecloth.

“So why have you turned up here today? I’ve never heard of a paper apologising for running a story before.”
“I saw Greg in Coffs Harbour yesterday –”
“Did you now?” Everyone had rights, it seemed, except mothers.
“Yes. I wanted to pick up the captions –”
“You couldn’t use the telephone?”
“Well, I also wanted to check up on him, it seemed the best way to do both at once –”

“How is he?” She’d tried to keep the wobble out of her voice but the effort just made her sound even frailer. She’d rung twice yesterday but only Ken had spoken to her, his voice and a ghastly hospital hush coming down through the phone.

“Ah, hmm,” Harry fiddled with the wet paper around the flowers. “I’ve seen him better, but I’ve seen him worse too –”

“Bullshit.”
“I’m sorry?” Harry looked startled. Got you now, my lad.
“I said, that sounds like bullshit to pacify an old woman. Tell me how he really is.”
Harry gaped, then he grinned and ran his meaty fingers through his hair. He pushed the flowers aside, leant forward and sighed.

“He’s in a bad way. Keeps falling asleep. Keeps forgetting where he is.”

She could hear her granddaughter thumping around on the veranda. Kate had taken all the papers out there with her so all that was left on the table were the tea things and the Milk Arrowroots. The flowers, the sugar, the biscuits, it all smelt sickly sweet.

“That’s not a consequence of tuberculosis, is it?”

“No. No, that’s…”

“A breakdown.”

“Yes.”

Harry looked her directly in the eye. She’d known it, known it as soon as Greg had stumbled through the door, but how she wished she didn’t. Harry’s gaze kept changing, now open, now secretive, now skeptical, now sad – a reflection of her own, she didn’t wonder. Greg always did just the same when he spoke to her.

“You’ve seen him in bad places – you’ve seen him unwell before. How does this compare?”

“It’s worse.”

“How much worse?”

The bright sunlight outside made the kitchen darker and Harry’s face was half in shadow. He was looking absentmindedly at Kate through the double doors, apparently not noticing her glares.

“Physically, he was in a bad way in the mid nineties. He’d done a phenomenal amount of work, jumped from the first Gulf war to Sarajevo to Cambodia to Sarajevo to Rwanda and back again to Sarajevo –”

“Christ Almighty! You remember all of this?”

“I signed off on all his expenses. And picked him up from hospital more than once.”

“More than –”

“Sarajevo, before Rwanda, and again after the siege had lifted.”

“He wasn’t injured twice.” His phone call from the hospital was seared into her memory. She wouldn’t have forgotten a second call.
“No, just the once – then. After the siege lifted he caught some flu or other, very badly, spent two months in hospital in London. I almost managed to make him quit smoking.”

“I wish you had.”

Harry smiled ruefully and she almost smiled back. She pushed the biscuits towards him and he took two.

“And?”

“He was so exhausted that he slept most of the time. Kept babbling in multiple languages – Khmer, Arabic, Bosnian. He called me Emir more than once – his fixer in Sarajevo. But when he woke he was lucid. Not even when he came back from Vietnam in ’75 was he this bad.”

Greg had been so changed then, skinny and twitchy and scathing. As if the body of Mark had been filled with bile.

“He certainly seemed different this time,” she said, “ not so –”

“Coherent.”

She blinked and reached for her tea. She refused to cry in front of him. She took a sip of her tea but it was tepid and far too milky. She had to force herself to swallow it.

“Sorry, I mean…” Harry put his hand palm up on the table but she ignored his conciliatory gesture.

“I was going to say ‘sharp’.”

“True, he’s not as sharp now. He’s left that up to you.”

Harry gave her a cheeky look, mouth full of biscuit. Maybe all of this was just part of a day’s work for him. Maybe he did feel upset and was just better at keeping secrets than she was; no, he couldn’t be, that wasn’t possible.

Kate slammed through the double doors.

“Have you finished giving your piss-weak apology now? Why don’t you just fuck off?”

“Hey, hey –” said Harry, standing up.

“Don’t you know what you’ve done? You’ve ruined us. How can Ben ever work after this? How can I go into Barracks and –”
She sighed; Kate would have her rant, just like her mother. She was sorry that Harry had to put up with it, but not too sorry. She pushed herself up, took a Milk Arrowroot from the table and headed out to the veranda.

Such sun, such warmth, this autumn weather on her skin. She sat with her eyes closed and face up to the sky. Her grandson, her son. She’d tried to keep track of their whereabouts, but their infrequent letters made that a near impossible task. She liked to joke that all these fighting men had aged her prematurely; she didn’t feel a day over eighty.

Her grandson, her son, her husband. She remembered too clearly those nights in bed when Jack had shaken with sobs. He hadn’t cried after the war, there’d been too much to do and finally being together was too wonderful. But when Pete came home it was like a jack-in-the-box and all Jack’s pain sprung out to surprise him. Pain over Pete and over all his mates. Pain over Mark, always, it always came back to Mark. Jack sobbed in bed, a pillow in his mouth to muffle the sound, as Pete yelled from the tent down below.

She breathed in the smell of fresh grass and nasturtiums. She loved those flowers with their flat, round leaves, the way they poured out over the grass. She would’ve given the rest of her life to have Greg and Ben on this veranda, smoking and joking and carrying on. She could almost hear them, Greg’s smoke-roughened bass and Ben’s broad accent. She could almost feel Ben’s strong hand on her shoulder, Greg’s stubbled cheek as he kissed her goodbye –

“Mrs Talbot.”

She blinked. Harry was standing in the doorway, short and fat. He was so unlike any of her men.

“I have to go to work. But here’s my card, in case anyone bothers you.”

A business card like she was a colleague of Greg’s and not his ancient mother.

“You can call me Elsie. Come back if you hear anything more.”

“Elsie. I will, straightaway. Don’t get up, I’ll see myself out.”

At least she had Kate. She needed to have someone.
Because that someone wouldn’t be Greg. Not today, not in the next fortnight, not anytime soon. Even if his mother had begged him from her deathbed he wouldn’t come back – and not just because of state laws governing the management of tuberculosis. He couldn’t come back because he didn’t know precisely where he was coming back from. At the moment he was partly in Coffs Harbour Base Hospital and partly in Europe in the mid nineties. With a blink, the hospital would become just like the one in London; another blink, and the concrete London sky out the window would brighten into Pacific sunlight.

“Greg, do you need anything?”

“How about a juice?”

He nodded and watched his brother walk out of the room. The figure retreating was like a memory he could never have had, of his own figure leaving Emir in his kitchen. It had been their last evening together. The smoke from their cigarettes stained the white UNHCR plastic that stretched over the window frame. Emir’s grandmother sat by the jerry-can stove, pretending to sleep.

‘Please,’ he’d said, ‘come with me to London.’

Emir’s hands dwarfed the cigarette between his fingers and covered the bottom half of his face, hiding his smile. He blew his smoke at the window and watched the plastic ripple in response.

“You can remember your family anywhere, Emir, but you’re young, you need –’

“No. My duty is here. My history. You are a homeless man. You cannot understand.’

He’d emptied his bag on to the table, giving them anything he had left over, his cigarettes, bandages, pencils. Emir’s grandmother kissed him fiercely on each cheek before he left for the reclaimed night. As he watched Ken he knew that that was how he must have looked to Emir – taller and paler, but the same loose walk from the hips, clothes hanging easily from his frame.

Ken’s walk wasn’t loose when he returned with two bottles of juice and the newspapers under his arm. His step was heavy and he threw the papers on the bed.
Ben’s front-page face was huge. He couldn't read the article properly, the print kept moving in and out of focus.

“Are they your photos?” asked Ken thickly.

He nodded. Ken turned away, tears falling freely down his face, soaking the edge of his paper mask so that he had to leave the room.

The papers lay in a heap on his lap. They weren’t that bad, it’s not as if Ben was dead. But it was, really, it was as if he was dead – the way the newspaper was already crinkling in the dry hospital air, the way the text said had, went, gone.

Those dark eyes in Ben’s unnaturally serene face invited him to see other dark eyes, in other young men playing in the chaos of war. More than one image crowded in on him and more than one voice called to him. Voices that filled his head with inhuman noise, as though a mouth could boom with mortars or whine like a falling shell. Mouths that could speak that split-second silence before the shell hit, eyes that could trap him in that expectant moment.

By the time his brother returned he could no longer string a sentence together. He sat there trapped by Ken’s expectant look, a hundred thoughts racing to his tongue but none of them reaching the air.

—— o ——

Kate’s mobile rang. Lynette caught her daughter’s eye.

“It’s a private number, Mum."

The sun shone bright on her daughter’s face but her eyes were hidden behind her sunglasses. She was sprawled in a chair with the day’s papers a messy heap at her feet and her laptop open in front of her. They’d been scouring the internet for news of Ben, but only in Australia did the story make the front-page.

“Just take it,” she said. “I’ll deal with it if it’s a reporter.”

“Katherine Talbot.”

Kate immediately straightened and stood up.

“Yes, sir,” her face was blank. “Yes, I will, sir.” Kate moved inside and the house swallowed her.
She knew it was the Army with news. She also knew that if she followed, Kate would simply move further into the terrace’s gloomy labyrinth of corridors. The dark cool rooms had all the musty stillness of old photographs. They had lived here when Ben was a baby. The memories of those early days of her marriage were inescapable, they were in the stale air, in the way the heavy front door thudded into the lock. She spent as much time on the veranda as she could.

She hadn’t been to work in eight days. Each day she had received several calls and emails, employees needing her approval, colleagues seeking her advice, all of them hinting that she should come back to work. But since Ben’s face had popped up on the news last night there had been silence. No emails, just one call from the partner: “Take care, Lynnette.”

Blessed silence.

Kate moved slowly back out to the veranda and sat down heavily. The sun shone on her daughter’s loose limbs as they hung over the sides of the chair. She wanted to take those long, fine fingers and hold them to her cheek. She had to bite her tongue to stop herself from clutching her daughter. Kate would tell her about the phone call when she was ready. She tidied up the papers at Kate’s feet in order to use up some of her anxious energy.

“Stop, Mum.”

She looked up at her daughter, her sad, lovely face, waiting for instructions.

“It’s…I hoped….” Kate clenched her jaw and swallowed, blinking rapidly, fidgeting with her hands.

“What is it?”

“I want to go back,” Kate said thickly. “I don’t want to be stuck here. The phone call – I thought it might be someone saying I could go back to the ‘Ghan, but they can’t do it, it’s all decided.”

Kate covered her face with her hands and heaved a huge sob, her shoulders twitching as she tried to control herself. She was next to Kate, kissing her hair, rubbing her back, feeling the lean muscles move along her daughter’s ribs. ‘They’ – all those grim-faced men who could do this to her daughter, her son. Herself.
Her headache seemed to have evaporated. She had eaten so little in the past ten days that she had almost forgotten that she needed food to live.

— — —

Greg hadn’t forgotten about the newspapers, though he wished he could have. Ken had deliberately hidden them under the bed and pulled out the box of postcards.

FEB 6TH 1969
PHOTO: TUAN VAN NGUYEN

DON’T I LOOK LOUCHE? YOU CAN SEE MY SCAR FOLLOW THE LINE OF MY RIBS. I’M JUST BACK FROM HOSPITAL AFTER BEING WOUNDED IN THE DELTA. NOT BADLY BUT ENOUGH TO STOP ME WORKING. ALL BETTER NOW, ALTHOUGH THE BILL FROM THE HOTEL CONTINENTAL IS A BIT STEEP. THEY DIDN’T LIKE ALL THAT BLOOD AND PUS ON THEIR SHEETS.
KEEP ON KEEPIN’ ON
G XOXO

Greg picked out this photo from the top of the pile. It was black and white and he was stretched out on a bland hotel bed, his chest bare and his arms above his head. Across his pale torso a long scar snaked from his back down to his hip and disappeared into his trouser band. He faced towards the light, his lips parted and a faraway look in his eyes. Around him was the paraphernalia of his life in Vietnam – his cameras, lenses, cigarettes, a full ashtray, a small Buddha statue, a pipe, crumpled fatigues on the floor, army-issue satchel, a helmet, records out of their covers and glasses beside an empty whisky bottle. The light from the door or window illuminated his body and left everything else in shadow.

“You gave us a fright when you sent that one, Greg,” said Ken, peering over at the card. “I remember Mum almost fainted when she read it.”
Greg could taste the whisky and dope in his mouth. He could hear the chattered Vietnamese, languid in the February heat. He could feel his skin tingle as if someone was caressing it.

“Hey, look at this photo,” said Ken with a laugh, “our faces…”

The photo was of the two of them on the veranda in school uniform. The back inscription was in Jack’s handwriting and read ‘First day at school 2.2.54.’ He was looking straight at the camera, shoulders back and chin up and Ken was smiling up at him. They were standing in front of the double doors and Jack’s crouching figure was reflected in the glass.

“You know, I think I have an almost identical photo of Ben and Kate…” Ken dropped the photo quickly back in the box, rubbing his hand over his eyes with a sniff.

Greg didn’t care about the family snapshot. He’d picked out another postcard from the Indochina wars. It had no date and all that was written on the back was:

FOR YOU, BROTHER
G XOXO

He recognised the photo as his own. The sun was setting over the Perfume River behind a horizon of crumbling ruins. In the centre was a beautiful young woman with a heart-shaped face. Her mouth was open, eyes wide, exhausted and about to cry. She was wearing a ragged and dirty ao dai and pushing a bicycle with deflated tyres. She had clearly stopped suddenly when she’d seen Greg as she was looking directly at the camera.

She was Tuan’s sister.

Tuan had been with him in Hue that day. Tuan had been with him all through his time in Vietnam. The shock on the sister’s face was of recognition – she hadn’t seen Tuan in years. That shock of recognition – Greg knew it from recently – he must’ve looked like that when he saw Ben in Afghanistan. When he saw Ben floating down the alley, smiling at him blankly and moving on.

“Greg? Greg, have some water.”
His hands were shaking and he was crying. Tuan Van Nguyen; his quick laughter, his jaunty walk, the scent of his skin.

Tuan, like light, the essence of his trade. Ben, a shadow, dust.

He started to cough so violently that Ken had to call for the nurse.
Chapter Ten: Wednesday April 20th

Glebe was humid and the overcast sky seemed to press down on Kate where she sat in her grandmother’s room. The dust itched and the sticky air made her sweat. She didn’t want to be here – she wanted to be out searching – she wanted to be back in the ‘Ghan. The letters and diaries were still on the sofa where she’d abandoned them two days ago, still as thin and old. She picked up the next one on the pile. There was nothing else for her to do.

It was another letter from World War II. She recognised the AIF-issue envelope with the star badge in the corner. But she didn’t recognise the handwriting – she was sure it wasn’t Poppy Jack’s.

It was from Great Uncle Mark, the neat writing smudged in places but otherwise legible.

Dear Elsie,

I hope this letter finds you well. I’m not bad, although I miss your pretty face and hearing your voice in the morning. There’s not much going on here except that it’s extremely cold. I have included a photo of me and Jack in Palestine, which I thought you’d enjoy seeing as we’re here for Christmas. Can I ask you to send me a photo of yourself? Our wedding photo is getting grubby, I’ve handled it so many times.

All my love,

Mark

She almost ran out to the kitchen. Her grandmother had been married to Mark! Why hadn’t this first marriage had ever been mentioned? When did she marry Poppy Jack? It must’ve been after the war – but Greg, wasn’t he born during the war? How could –

The house was still. The honks and yells of the street were muted. The daylight was pale and watery over the letters. Greg had been born during the war.
Greg had been conceived during that home leave when Jack had come home without Mark. That story was part of family legend. That part of the story.

She read the letter again and then again. December 20th 1941, Palestine, wedding photo – the details seemed to settle onto her skin with the dust. Her grandmother and Great Uncle Mark and Poppy Jack. She quickly scanned the pile – lots of letters from Mark, Poppy Jack’s diary, letters from Poppy Jack after 1943 – more than enough. She listened; the traffic, someone on his phone, her heartbeat. She couldn’t hear her grandmother in the kitchen, not even the chink of a tea mug.

She studied the photo, dog-eared at the edges as though it had been carried around. She recognised Poppy Jack, brown, wiry and grinning. The other man must be Mark, tall and blonde, square shoulders straight and only the merest hint of a smile. He looked so different from Jack. He looked like the perfect soldier.

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Elsie crumbled her Scotch Finger biscuit into smaller and smaller pieces. It was too rich to contemplate eating. Mark’s death had been part of her marriage, a third in their bed, growing with the lemon tree in the garden and making the fruit unspeakably sour. The table was bare even of the tablecloth, the wood burnt with rings from too-hot cups and saucepans. Dulcie had punished her and Pete had punished her and she felt that she’d suffered enough. There was nothing Kate could do that hadn’t already been done.

There was no one on the veranda and the garden was empty. Kate had lived with her for the past decade, ever since Jack passed away. Her granddaughter was someone who loved talking about Jack as much as she did. Her tea stewed in the pot, becoming increasingly bitter.

She had everything to lose if Kate judged her harshly.

—— o ——
August 20th 1942

Dearest Elsie,

Your letter admonished me for not writing to you for months and you’re right. I’m so sorry, my love, but it completely slipped my mind. No, that’s not true – every night I think of the letter I will write to you and compose it as I fall asleep. Then at dawn I roll out of my blanket and begin working immediately. We have been quite busy, as you may have read in the papers. I am well, a few scratches but nothing serious. Jack is also well.

I’m getting a bit sick of the desert. I would like a cup of tea in a quiet spot with you. I don’t really have the words to say what I mean, but I miss you very much.

All my love,

Mark

If this was a love letter, it was hopeless. Poppy Jack’s letter was so much more vivid. His descriptions of the desert were more passionate than Mark’s declarations of love.

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“Lynette Silk… no comment.”

If she had been at work her PA would have fielded these calls. She would have written down names and numbers, tallied the reporters for possible legal action and rung back the well-wishers when more news was heard.

“Lynette Silk… Sue, how are you… Yes… no, nothing I can say… thank you, we’ll let you know.”

She couldn’t be bothered to do all that. She was content to answer the phone and have the same chat again and again, letting other people’s concern wash over her. The reporters were only a nuisance when they came to the front
door. The reporter from the Telegraph phoned her so persistently that they started flirting with each other, so inappropriate and yet in keeping with her mood of suspended time.

“Lynette Silk… Geoff? … Geoff Thompson! Yes I remember… Yes, very… no, nothing you can do… OK, yes, thank you, we’ll let you know.”

And it shielded her daughter from the vagaries of neighbourly sincerity and journalistic bluff. Kate wouldn’t let her do anything else anyway.

Still no one from work had called her. She watched herself become hysterical with lack of food and sleep. She giggled when she heard herself sounding so professional on her Blackberry.

– Then everything would tumble away and her head would thud onto the laptop and force the breath from her body –

The phone would ring again and she would be high, floating around the house, floating up to see a birds-eye view of Glebe, with all the little people in their little lives.

—— o ——

Greg had spread all the postcards he’d sent from Vietnam across the bed, lined up in neat rows, picture side up, in chronological order from his left elbow across the sheet. An elaborate game of solitaire.

“Greg? Here are all your things from Sawtell. You left a lot of stuff, although that Amir, he’s a great… Greg?”

He blinked. He nodded at Ken but his brother didn’t seem to notice, just sighed and sat down heavily, leaving the bag at his feet.

‘Photographer: Tuan Van Nguyen.’

Tuan, light, the essence of his trade.

The first picture he ever took of Tuan – shorts and a short-sleeved shirt, rubber sandals and cropped hair, smiling with all his teeth. Tuan had looked like a schoolboy. It was in his first week in Saigon. He’d taken the picture and then asked for directions.

‘Oh, too hard to explain,’ said Tuan, waving his hand, ‘I show you.’
Tuan had led him down alleyways, across courtyards, waving and chatting to people as they passed. At the end of the day Tuan took his money without counting it, folding it carefully into his pocket.

‘I see you tomorrow, Mr Greg. What time start – eight o’clock AM?’
He smiled but Tuan had looked him steadily in the eye. He nodded.
‘Best make it seven, actually, there’s a rumour of action –’
‘Yes, Que Son Valley, yes, I know it.’
‘How?’
Tuan raised an eyebrow and tapped Greg’s forearm.
‘I know. See you seven o’clock AM.’
Tuan’s sandals made a comical flip-flop sound as he walked away but he stood up straight and held his head high.

This wasn’t the photo that he’d kept with him, tucked into the back of every travel diary. That photo was out of focus, Tuan’s head thrown back, laughing and looking over his shoulder at the camera. He was shirtless and his hair had grown long. It was New Year’s Eve 1969 and their party had lasted for days. He’d taken many photos of Tuan where he looked poised and in control, but this was the only photo he’d taken where Tuan looked like he was in love.

—— o ——

Jack’s diary ran for pages and pages. From the dates it looked like it spanned the whole North Africa campaign. In her hands the diary fell open in certain places as though someone had read particular entries over and over.

13th Sep ’42:

WHACKO! 6 days leave in Cairo! Me and A are both going, a ‘special reward’ for our Tobruk action. A deserves it, he was the embodiment of the phrase ‘works like a trooper’. Bringing in all those wounded, night after night. Dunno why I got picked but I’m sure as hell not gonna question it. I’ll have something to write to E about too; something other than ‘Dug trenches in the sun ‘til my
lips blistered STOP Marched a mile through the desert, saw nothing, did nothing, then turned round and came back to camp STOP so bored I could eat my hat STOP’

The Corp. spoke to me about writing to E. About how often I write. A doesn’t know. I acted all jokey to the Corp, spun a line about how A is such a bad correspondent she made me promise to tell her what was really going on, blah blah blah, such a blatant porky. The Corp. said, “Well, alright, but be discreet. Remember, she’s not your wife.” Ha! What a prude. What business is it of his anyway? And don’t I know, don’t I fucking know, every minute of every day, that she’s not my wife?

22nd Sep ’42:

Cairo, what a blast. What shenanigans. I kept trying to keep tabs on A but he’d wander into some museum for hours and then I’d find him back in the hotel, sipping mint tea and reading the British papers. I went into a museum with him once, all ancient stuff – bloody interesting. But that dust, musty fustiness, I couldn’t stand it – I needed bodies and booze and bright lights. He’s genuinely not interested. I don’t think he even has a tug to his photos of E.

If I –

then I wouldn’t have ended up with that thirteen year old whore. I couldn’t do it, she was just a scared kid. I gave her all the money she would’ve made that night and sat talking to her. Sweet girl, excellent English that she learned working in some big house.

But E – how can she –

oh fuck it

— — o — —

His brother fidgeted, got the nurse to check he was all right, fetched some water, lined up the photos on the bed. He saw the diaries on the vinyl armchair
and the drawn look on his brother’s face. Ken was tidying – that meant he was upset. He always cleaned in a crisis. After his divorce, his house had been spotless.

“Have you read them?” His voice creaked and it hurt to speak.

“What? Greg –”

“The diaries.”

“Have I read them? Your Moleskines? No, of course not –”

“Why not?”

Ken just looked at him, clutching the shoebox of photos. He wanted to smile at his brother, be all roguish and teasing, but found he couldn’t. He stared and Ken looked down into the box. He picked out a photo and smiled with obvious relief.

“Look at this – a blast from the past. Grandma Dulcie and Grandpa Bert – don’t they look funny?”

Ken brought the photo up to him.

“Bert’s birthday 1968, it says. You were already in Vietnam by then.”

Bert and Dulcie were sitting hand in hand on the couch. They stared at the camera through their huge glasses. Dulcie was wearing black and Bert was in a pale blue safari suit, both of them with a party hat perched jauntily on their heads. They were each clutching a drink, grim-faced and fat.

“I can’t remember what had just happened but they wouldn’t smile. I think they’d forgotten how.” Ken played with the photo. He glanced up quickly and smiled in an embarrassed way.

“Dulcie and Bert… Dulcie only ever wore black. I never saw her in anything else, not even at my wedding.”

His mouth was dry, his hands were empty, he couldn’t hold his gaze. Ken wandered back to the shoebox and started looking through it.

“Of course, it’s obvious why,” said Ken, still looking in the box. “I think, you know, it must’ve been… oh, here’s another one, Bert and Pete, 1950. Bert’s smiling here.”

He didn’t hand over the photo of a proud father and son posing in the backyard, son in uniform. He placed it on the bed, lined up in one of the rows. He put the party photo next to it.
“Dulcie and her sherry... remember how she used to have one every night?”

“No.”

Ken didn’t look up but kept touching the photos.

“Oh. Well, she did, like a ritual. Said it was her one comfort in this Godforsaken world. Then Bert would say ‘What about me?’ And she’d say ‘What about you? I said comfort, not work.’ Then he’d say ‘If I’m work then fetch me a whisky.’ Then she’d put the whole bottle in his lap and sit there with her bottle of sherry and they’d watch TV ‘til they both fell asleep. Remember?”

“No.”

“Oh.”

His hands might be empty but his mouth had found a few syllables. Ken flicked through the photos in the shoebox absentmindedly.

“I think she needed that sherry. Or three, ha,” Ken smiled. “She needed it to sleep, especially after Pete... after Pete got married. I never really sat down and spoke to her — did you?”

He shook his head. Ken looked worried as though his answer meant more than just reminiscing.

“No... you know she started going to church two or three times a week? Bert never went with her, not even on Sundays. Oh yes, he went at Christmas and Easter, that’s right. You really don’t remember? No, of course you don’t. I’ve been thinking about it lately, you know, Dulcie and Uncle Mark... her brother Ed...”

“Ed?”

“Died in the first war. That’s how Dulcie and Bert met – Bert was Ed’s best friend in France. He promised Ed that he’d look out for his sister.”

Ken leant against the bed. He tried to make his face soften but Ken just looked at him with disappointment.

“I guess I did talk to them a bit,” Ken said, looking away. He could hardly bear to see Greg’s slack, immobile face.

“Never about Mark, though. I wish I had, but I mean, how can you, you know, how can you ask about these things...”
He found one other photo of Dulcie in the box. It was from his wedding in 1979. Dulcie was at a table in the garden in Glebe where they’d had their reception. She had a bottle of sherry beside her and her glasses were on the white tablecloth. She was looking at the camera in three-quarter profile, almost smiling. He’d always thought that she looked a bit tipsy, that she’d taken off her glasses as she couldn't focus anyway. Now he saw something else, a look that said directly, ‘This is it, this is all there is, this is as good as it gets.’ A look that said, ‘It’s all waiting for you, Kenneth Bertram, and you won’t survive any better than I did. You can’t, it’s not possible. But this wedding, this sherry, this sunlight – it’s just enough.’ He wished she was still sitting there in that enormous armchair in the front room in Glebe, so he could run down and ask, ‘How can I live through this? How can I live without my son?’

Greg interrupted by sweeping the photos to the floor.

“Here,” Greg patted the bed, “my laptop. Let’s look at my shots.”

—— o ——

Her mother-in-law had found out about her affair with Jack on a squally day in late September 1943. Her umbrella had turned itself inside out so she was soaked and shivering on the front doorstep. Dulcie had taken one look at her belly and slammed the door. She’d heard yelling from inside and twice the door opened only to slam shut again. After an hour she’d left for her grungy women’s hostel in Darlinghurst. It wasn’t until she was almost at full term that she was allowed back in the house, and then only because Jack threatened Dulcie with all sorts of abandonment. Dulcie trained Pete to whisper ‘traitor’ and ‘Jezebel’ whenever she walked past. Pete tired of saying it as he grew older but she knew he never stopped thinking it.

Bert was different. She wouldn’t have approached the house at all if he hadn’t insisted. Earlier that month Bert had met her by the tramyards as she was dragging her swollen feet home from the factory.

‘Elsie! I thought you were out near Bathurst with the Land Army! What are you doing here – oh.’
That little ‘oh’ with its notes of surprise, recognition and blame had made her burst into tears. Bert shushed her and shooed her into a teashop.

‘You’re still married to my son?’

She nodded. She could barely sip her tea.

‘And the baby’s father?’

‘Is Jack.’ Her whisper was hardly more than a breath. Bert looked confused and leant forward.

‘Sorry?’

‘Jack,’ she’d never done anything so hard in her life. ‘The baby’s father is Jack.’

Bert gaped. She had to look away or she would’ve cried. The street was cold and dark and the waitress packed up noisily behind the counter. They’d be kicked out for blackout any moment. She risked a glance at Bert. She could see a thousand questions cross his face – When? How? Who else knows? – but his stare was softening. She hoped he didn’t ask for more.

Bert swallowed the rest of his tea in one gulp.

‘Well, that makes you family in my book. I don’t care what anyone says.’

She could’ve jumped over the table and hugged him.

‘What about Dulcie?’

Bert set his lips in a hard line.

‘My wife needs to learn a thing or two about men and war.’

He looked at her as if to say ‘And so do you, my girl’ but said nothing more.

Bert visited her almost every afternoon for tea. He was the first person up in the night when Greg cried.

—— ○ ——

22nd Oct ’42:

Tomorrow’s the day. It’ll be all fireworks and pretty music in just a few hours. We’ve been briefed, we’ve been corralled and morale’d,
we’ve been fed and watered. We’ve gone over our orders so many times I’ll be dreaming them.

I sought out A before lights out. He was sitting outside his tent, smoking and slouching. I almost walked right past him, but he grabbed my fatigues and said “Jack,” in a voice like he was dying, like he was already dead. I crouched next to him and rolled a fag for myself.

“So Adeline, when did you start smoking?”

“This morning.”

“Geez, you’re into it quick.”

“I’m not gonna make it, Jack,” he said, and he stared, the stare.

“Mate,” I said, “don’t be a dickhead, you’ll be fine.”

“Not this time, Jack.”

“You’re just a bit tense, that’s all, what with the action tomorrow. Have you spoken to –”

“No.” He looked at me from across the night.

“Look after Elsie for me.” Then the Sarg. came along and ordered everyone in, lights out lights out. I have to say, I’m fucking scared. That he’ll do something stupid, disobey orders, just stand there and watch his wounds as he bleeds to death.

—— o ——

Elsie was the first to know, then her son had told his grandmother. Greg had accepted the orange and purple jumper Dulcie had knitted him with barely a smirk.

‘Dulcie,’ Greg had never called her Grandma. ‘I’m going to Vietnam.’

‘About time, son,’ Dulcie said and grinned.

It only confirmed what she already knew. Dulcie felt this was payback – the firstborn going off to war with the understanding that he shouldn’t return. Dulcie kept silent around Jack but when they were alone in the kitchen she didn’t hide her true feelings.

‘Now you’ll know what it’s like.’
‘They’re never the same again, you know.’

‘Being blown up is quite common in Vietnam, I’ve heard.’

‘A photographer – he won’t even have a gun.’

The day Greg left Dulcie made lamingtons and stuck little flags in them and Ode to Joy boomed through the house.

But the months slowly turned into years and Greg never wrote to Dulcie nor mentioned her in his infrequent postcards. Dulcie’s glee had turned cold and sank deep into her face, carving lines around her lips.

She would come into the lounge room and find Dulcie tracing the edges of Greg’s postcards with her fingers as if to touch him by proxy. Dulcie stopped knitting and began to clean the house, painting the entire kitchen blue over a weekend.

‘Yves Klein Blue it’s called,’ she said from the top of the stepladder. ‘I don’t know who this Yves Klein is, but he ought to be congratulated.’

Dulcie forced Pete to clear out all the junk from his childhood bedroom. On the day of the Moratorium, she baked the lavender shortbread she knew was her favourite. In the hallway, in the still late afternoon, Dulcie would look her in the face and touch her arm for a long moment, before moving away to do the washing up. The first time Dulcie did this she hid in a corner and sobbed. Her mother-in-law hadn’t been kind to her for twenty-seven years.

When Greg came home in 1975 looking so like Mark, Dulcie clutched her hand like a child.

—— o ——

27th Oct ’42:

*Fucking hell! It’s chaos and hellfire out there. I’m shaking so hard I can barely write. I haven’t seen A. No one’s seen him since the first stunt.*

—— o ——
Lynette’s recent memories of Ben were static. She tried to picture him at Christmas but couldn’t remember anything he had said. She knew she had taken him out for dinner for his thirtieth birthday. She could see him in his chair but the picture didn’t move. She had been so looking forward to his trip home, why couldn’t she remember? She could feel again her hurt that he chose to spend a week in Byron with Ken. She could hear Elsie admonishing her for checking her Blackberry on Christmas Day. But her son was mute, as still as a photograph.

Ben wasn’t allowed to ask for help, it broke the deal. When Ben first joined the Army she had made a bargain with herself: as long as he was a soldier she would refuse to worry about his wellbeing, physical or mental. A devil’s pact, really – how could she ever stop worrying about her son?

— — o — —

Ist Nov ’42:

*It’s official: Mark Edward Talbot is MIA, suspected POW. It’s taken them this long to get a verdict. His superior is fucking useless, a hopeless gibbering wet coxswain of a boy. Can you believe this was his first action? Bullets started flying and killing people, as they’re wont to do, and he turns to custard. He didn’t report A was missing ‘til the other day. *Didn’t report it! *How? Why? How could he – it’s beyond belief.*

Anyway, I hope Mark is POW and not The Other Thing. Corp. says we’ll have confirmation soon. He looked at the ground and said, “I suppose you should write to his wife.”

“Funnily enough,” I said, “I don’t really want to. Besides, isn’t that your job, *sir*?”

*Bastard.*

— — o — —
Jack had been leaning on the front fence when she got home. She’d seen him from the corner and the urge to run to him was so strong that she almost ran away. But he saw her and stood up straight, waiting for her to reach him.

‘I’ve come to take you to Glebe. Mum’s baked a cake with real cream.’

‘Real cream! What, real shaving cream?’

His eyes moved all over her face, neck, collarbones, hands, as though he was trying to memorise her, as though he was checking to see how she’d changed. His shirt flapped around his torso. She wanted to reach out and feel his bones through the shirt, to trace the framework of his body.

‘I’ll just change out of my work clothes then.’ She headed up the steps but Jack stayed at the gate. She motioned for him to follow and her heart pounded so hard that she fumbled the keys.

It was a jolt for Jack to see a house full of Mark’s things – Mark’s mug by the sink, his worn hat by the front door and his toolbox by the back. Jack stood frozen in the middle of the room, tears running down his face.

He met her at her gate after every shift until she felt she must be floating through the streets of Redfern.

‘Mark would want me to take care of you,’ he’d said as he turned her wedding photo on its face.

It’d taken all of four days for Jack’s fingers on her neck to make her gasp. She’d always known it would be that way. He could never have just brushed back a strand of hair – there were no small gestures between them.

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28th Nov '43

My dearest Elsie,

I got Mum’s telegram today. It was short and brutal. I’ve had no letter from either Mum or Dad since they found out about your ‘condition’. Just this telegram telling me about Mark. The Sarg.
had already told me – I found out last night. I drank anything and everything I could find.

I was expecting a telegram from you but I guess it must’ve been too difficult for you. Did they tell you how? He was gunned down trying to escape. That is so like Adeline, Oh Sweet Adeline.

I’m in New Guinea now – I’d tell you where but it’d only be cut out of this letter. This is just a short one to say I’m thinking of you.

Your Ever-Loving,

Jack

P.S. Write to me Elsie, please, please write, anything, an empty ration book, a recipe, I don’t care, just please write.

—— o ——

December 5th ’43

Elsie
Elsie
Elsie

This is my motto, I say it in my head constantly, I will get back to you, I will, we will, together.

Elsie

My hands are trembling so I can hardly write – can you see? Your letter means so much (you can’t have even received mine and still you wrote). I was despairing, I thought I’d lost you, and then it came, your sweet handwriting, and a photo of you so pregnant, with my child, our child.

Elsie

I love you. I have never loved anyone but you. Such a cliché, so Hollywood movie. But how else can I say it but to say it? The smell of your skin, your hands on my chest and your lips on my neck – ah,
I can’t write it, it makes me dizzy just to think it, though I think it ‘til I walk into walls, fall into the ocean.

Elsie

Never be silent again. I need you. Even an empty letter is worthwhile. I need to know you’ve alive. I want to feel your heartbeat under my hand, I want to speak to our baby, to tell him (I’m sure it’s a boy) to be good to you. I want to rub your weary feet, I want to run my fingers though your hair. Let me take your sorrow, Elsie, give it to me and I’ll make it disappear into the air like vapour.

Elsie

I’ll write every day. If I could – anything – everything, for you.

Elsie

Elsie

—– o ––

On the back of a photo, in a clear copperplate that she didn’t recognise, was written ‘Mark Edward Talbot, John Bertram Talbot, Peter Paul Talbot, September 30th 1940.’

They were lined up by age in the garden. Mark and Jack were in uniform and Pete was in his school clothes. Mark, on the left, was standing up straight and looking directly at the camera. Jack was in the middle, facing right and grinning at a joke, one hand on his hip and the other hand open to the right. Pete was staring up at his two brothers.

But they weren’t the only people in the photo. Just at the right edge, so that she was almost cut out, was Elsie. She was grinning at the brothers, walking out of the picture but with her head turned back to look at them.

To look at Jack. She saw it – Jack’s open stance, Elsie’s cheeky look over her shoulder. Mark oblivious, thinking only of the job at hand.

September 30th 1940 – this must’ve been just before they left for North Africa. The last time the family saw Mark. Mark looked confident and strong, doing precisely what he was asked. Jack looked like he didn’t care.
She flipped the photo over and over. Poppy Jack had always been the World War II hero, the eloquent larrikin and proper Aussie Digger. But Mark was the better soldier – in her Army, Mark would get promoted quickly and easily, not Jack. Mark, who forgot to write to his wife, who was a stickler for the rules and a little bit boring. She’d always wanted to be like Poppy Jack, with his ease, his good humour, his yarn-spinning ability. The perfect soldier, which she’d made him out to be, which she’d tried to be, was something quite different.

—— o ——

“Katie? Katie?”

Her mother almost never called her Katie. She also never ate Iced Vovos or drank her grandmother’s Bushell’s Tea. But she was carrying a biscuit and a mug as she wandered down the hallway, calling her name.

“Katie, I’m going home. Do you need me here? I need to sleep. I haven’t slept. I’m very tired. Should I sleep here? Do you need me? I thought it’d be better if I went home. I have pills at home. I need them. I need to sleep, I think I should –”

“Mum, go home.” She tried to make her voice soft.

“Do you need me here? I can stay –”

“No, Mum. Go home. Catch a taxi.”

“But my car –”

“Mum,” her mother swayed under her hands, “just do as I say.”

She had to take the tea mug out of her hand but her mother wouldn’t let go of the Iced Vovo. Her mother, the corporate lawyer. She came over every day now, but today she’d only lasted a couple of hours.

—— o ——

Another letter from Pete, hidden within a blank envelope. It was also unsent – there was no censor stamp or postmark – but this one was addressed to Jack, not Mark.
How’s married life? How are my nephews?

So, we don’t really get any leave for Christmas, so we make use of every second we have. There’s this little town – well, I guess it’s more like a city, but full of Koreans, you know – anyway, so we went in, me and Macca and Joe. We got slaughtered on this stuff called Soju, stronger than whisky, it tastes like nothing at all really, but fxxxing hell, it does the job. I was thinking of you in Cairo, and the stories you told me, and I thought, we gotta find ourselves a whorehouse. We wandered up and down the streets until we found one – no wait, it was just a normal house, that’s right. A grandmother lived there with her five granddaughters, and they were all sitting by the window, so we thought they were ‘for sale’, so to speak. Anyway, we went into the whorehouse – no – oh

No they weren’t

And we

— — 0 — —

“Greg.”

He looked up but Ken wasn’t talking.

“Greg.”

This had often happened to him. Just as he was falling asleep usually, he’d hear something so clearly that it was hard to believe it was an illusion. It’d never happened when he’d been awake though, as far as he could trust that he was fully awake.

Ken wasn’t looking at him. Ken was looking at the photo on the laptop, sitting on the bed so they could both look at the screen at the same time. They’d started with his Vietnam folder, which was the largest and stretched over decades. The handpicked photos were old friends and it was easy for him to tell stories about them.

“Please don’t.”

He knew that voice; it was Ben’s voice.

“Please don’t, Uncle Greg. You can’t. You mustn’t. Please.”
Ben’s grimy face streaked with shadow and dust. His scared eyes. His huge brown eyes like those that stared at him from his Vietnam folder.

“Greg, are you alright? You’ve gone all white,” said Ken.

He turned sideways and vomited over the side of the bed.

—— o ——

Kate stayed in her grandmother’s bedroom until it was so dark that she couldn’t see the words on the pages. She’d stopped reading hours before. She wanted to sit with the photos, to read the diaries over and over until Poppy Jack’s voice in her mind lost its old-man burr and became the voice of Elsie’s Jack, Jack the larrikin, Jack the lover. She couldn’t imagine Mark’s voice. Was it light like her father’s? Or like Greg’s, deep and gravelly? Or like Ben’s? Ben’s voice was like her voice, straight down the middle and sure.

The dust in the air settled in the back of her throat in the thick, chill dusk. She couldn’t gain any more intel from the letters and she knew she had to move.

She sat down next to her grandmother with the letters and diaries in front of her.

“Mark,” she said but before she could frame the Who Where Why question, her grandmother had pulled her hankie from her sleeve and was wiping away tears.

“I regret nothing.”

“No, of course not –”

“I’ve done my penance. You have no right to judge, you don’t know what it was like for me –”

“Nan,” she could hardly see her grandmother’s face. The only light in the room was the streetlight, cut into geometric shapes on the floor. She reached over and touched her grandmother’s wrist.

“Nan, I just – I don’t care.”

Her grandmother stared at her, taken by surprise, eyes narrowing as she assessed her words.

“You don’t care?”
“No. I mean, I care, but like, I don’t – it’s not…” How could she say that it didn’t matter anymore? That she only cared about Ben? It clearly mattered to her grandmother if she was still crying about it. She pulled out the earliest dated letter from Mark to try and find a way around the question.

“What happened to the wedding photo? Did you send him another one?” Her grandmother raised an eyebrow, the shadows moving on her face.

“That’s what you want to know?” That look her grandmother gave her – she just had to say it.

“Tell me what Ben said to you when he was home.”

She waited as her grandmother blew her nose, pulled her shoulders back and got out a new hankie. She seemed not to notice how dark it was.

“Your brother... he said nothing. He put the letters back in the drawer and never mentioned them again.”

“Never?”

“He came home asking about Jack in the war. So I trotted out the usual stories, got out the old album –”

“The one with the red cover?” She smiled. She’d gone over that album so many times with Poppy Jack and many more times alone. It was the official family history of World War II.

“Yes, the old favourite. But he didn’t want that. He wanted new stories. I told him I wasn’t there but he insisted that Jack must’ve told me something.”

Her grandmother paused and she could almost hear her remembering.

“Of course Jack told me lots, but it was all, all…”

“All to do with Mark.”

She only realised that she’d been holding her breath when her grandmother nodded and looked away.

“Or at least, Mark was in there somewhere.”

The moon moved in the sky and Elsie’s face was no longer in shadow.

“But Ben insisted,” she said. “I gave him a couple of letters. He saw the drawer I took them from and went in the next day and read the rest.”

Her grandmother shrugged, a gesture that meant ‘that’s it’. She didn’t believe it.

“And then?”
She felt calmer now that she could see her grandmother’s face, still and serious as it was. It took so much of her patience just to sit and listen through the pauses.

“Nothing. Like it never happened.”

Her grandmother blinked rapidly. She could see the tears that escaped and ran unchecked down the heavy wrinkles in her grandmother’s cheeks. She put her hand over Elsie’s.

“He did say – oh, he looked at me with such disappointed eyes, Katie – he said, ‘Nan, it’s not true, is it?’ I said, ‘What isn’t, love?’ He said, ‘Our family. The war. We’re not heroes, are we.’ I said, ‘Yes, of course we are. Just like everyone else.’”

Just like everyone else. The streetlight blinked out, the moon was covered and for a moment there was no light. Her grandmother patted her hand in an agitated way in the darkness.

“He didn’t believe me. I don’t think he understood what I was saying.”
Chapter Eleven: Thursday April 21st

Kate hadn’t slept for long. As soon as she heard the first truck rumble past she tumbled out of her dreams. She’d been dreaming of World War II, that letter of Poppy Jack’s about the North Africa action. She was running with Mark, his voice deep like Greg’s as it yelled instructions. He’d picked her up in a fireman’s lift and tossed her out of the dream and onto her bed. She lay, heart thumping, in a room decorated for her father when he was seven.

It occurred to her then that Cowboy and Indian wallpaper was childish. She’d lived here for ten years, taking her father’s old room when she left her mother’s house to finish school in peace and quiet. Her grandmother had still been in the master bedroom at the top of the house. Even when Elsie had moved downstairs she’d kept her father’s room. She felt she belonged here, so much so that she’d never even put any posters on the walls. Just some notes and timetables, everything else was tidied away in the cupboards.

Today the wallpaper was idiotic and the single bed too small. The room should be white and blank, with a big white bed stretching from wall to wall. A bed big enough to fit Jim, all muscle-bound 6’3” of him. She stretched her arms out and they hung over the side of the bed. Her feet did too, over the brown nylon sheets that were rough with age. Her bed was not her bed. It belonged to the other Kate, yesterday’s Kate.

She shoved off the doona, yanked open the curtains and stuck her head out of the window. The sun went straight to the side of the house, leaving the garden wet with dew. The window was just a single pane and she almost filled the bottom half. She didn’t remember being this big – was she really so tall? When had she grown? Ben would be much too big for this room, but then Ben had never lived here.

Ben. She knew how he would’ve felt when he read those letters. He’d taught her all the family myths. He’d sat on this bed, taken a long gulp from the whisky bottle and said ‘Katie Matey, you know, Poppy Jack,’ he’d whistled, ‘he fought from the beginning right to the very very end. Second thirteenth –’

‘I know –’

‘Ninth battalion –’
'I know, Ben!'  

'Alright, smartarse! Well, didya know that he almost got captured by the Japanese? Silent now, eh? He told me that a few years ago, when I first joined up. He was in the jungle, and it was so dark you couldn’t see ya hand in front of ya face…’  

They’d sat on the back veranda as Ben carved little frogs and mice from pieces of scrap wood. ‘Lieutenant Talbot – you know you’re the first one, Matey? I would’ve told you this on your graduation day, but seeing as I couldn’t, I’ll tell you now. Great Grandpa Bert, the original Talbot Digger – I found out from his records that he had a scar running from his right hip to his knee, thick as your thumb. I asked Dad and Nan – they said they’d never seen it…’  

The sunlight grew thicker on the wall. The tough Talbots, impeccable soldiers. Ben’s voice and the stories. But those letters said that there was no heroic return. Not in the way she’d expected.  

Poppy Jack was a hero. Poppy Jack was not a hero. If Poppy Jack wasn’t a hero then all the stories were false – this was surely what Ben meant in his email to Fred when he wrote ‘plenty of family love but it’s all lies.’ No. Surely it was only Pete who’d done anything illegal – and really, they couldn’t be sure of that – and if it was all lies then that would mean her own work was a lie too. It didn’t feel like a lie. And Ben – whatever the photos suggested, Ben was a good man and a good soldier. He was. Besides, hadn’t Jack been faithful to Elsie? Hadn’t they both been happy together?  

When she caught herself thinking this she caught her breath. You can’t make exceptions, you just can’t. For some things here are no excuses. There was no excuse for whatever Pete did. He might’ve been the worst but he wasn’t the first or the last. You can’t steal your brother’s wife. You can’t abandon your mission and go AWOL on deployment. You can’t have an affair with your commanding officer.  

She blinked back tears. She knew her affair with Jim, Major James Sullivan, was against the rules. Against the law. But she’d felt it was different for them. That somehow the rules didn’t apply, that the law was for people just fucking around, not for people actually in love. She’d felt it was different but really, she’d known that it wasn’t. Now here it was in a clear line all the way
from Poppy Jack to Pete to Ben to her. Soldiers who disobey. Soldiers who serve
their selves.

She couldn't keep still. She hung on the window sill, sat on the bed, got up, moved to the other side of the bed and got under the doona, kicked off the doona and stuck her whole upper body out of the window, reaching as far as she could down the wall. When that became painful she pulled herself back inside and slumped on the floor, so she could just see the top of her head over the bed in the mirror on the opposite wall.

She wasn’t like that. She’d tried so hard all her life to be good, forced herself to do everything as it should be done. She’d been sure that she’d succeeded too, but here was the fact of it: fraternization was an offence. He’d started it — by singing Gilbert and Sullivan in a full bass as he walked past? No. Anyway, she wouldn’t, couldn’t think of leaving him. Jim was all she had left.

Poppy Jack was not a hero. Poppy Jack was a hero. If Poppy Jack was a hero then he had to be a hero despite sleeping with his brother’s wife. Because of it. He was Elsie’s hero because of it. She didn’t care about Pete, not really. He didn’t count like Bert and Mark did, like Poppy Jack did. Like Ben did. Sitting on the floor, she imagined Jim in the bed-to-be. Ben was a good man and a good soldier. Poppy Jack was a hero because he’d slept with his brother’s wife.

The sunlight moved into the bedroom and the mirror shined white with its light.

—— o ——

“Katie love, hello! How are you this morning?”

Greg stopped picking at the tepid hospital breakfast and looked at his brother. Ken shrugged.

“Oh – Pete – again? I guess… no I didn’t really know him that well, love. As I said, we didn’t really –”

He motioned for his brother to hand over the phone but Ken ignored him.

“What’s PT… shell shock? I’ve no idea. He certainly never…”

“Give me the phone,” he said. Shell shock – Kate didn’t want family stories. Ken gave him a look and pursed his lips, just like their mother used to do.
“Your uncle wants to talk to you.” Ken handed over the phone, sitting back in his chair with his arms crossed.

“Greg! What’s happening?” Kate’s voice sounded worn. She had to try too hard to be perky.

“Not much. You want to know about Pete?”

“Yeah! Was he –”

“– f*cked up? Abso-fuckin-lutely. Came back from Korea broken. Couldn’t stop talking about it. Your Dad’s too nice, but he never had Pete wake him at dawn so he could hear a million stories about Kapyong and Maryang San that went nowhere.”

Pete screaming from that tent. The whole family had stuck their heads out of their windows to watch.

“Besides, your Dad doesn’t know what you’re really trying to ask.”

“And you do?”

“Ben and Pete – spot the difference.”

Silence. He couldn’t look at Ken but he heard his sharp intake of breath.

He couldn’t even hear traffic on Kate’s end of the line.

“Yeah, Pete, classic post-traumatic stress disorder,” he said. “Never recovered, especially not with Dulcie egging him on.”

“Dulcie?” Her voice was full of burrs, it scratched at him. “His mother?”

“Yeah, Dulcie was hardcore. Whipping him up into a fever over ‘what they’d sacrificed’. Every Anzac Day, Remembrance Day, Easter, Christmas, birthdays, even Mum and Dad’s bloody wedding anniversary. No one else took much notice but it really stirred Pete up. I think that’s why he ran off and got married even though he hadn’t slept in a bed for five years.”

—— o ——

“Wasn’t Pete always like that?” His brother had recovered somewhat, though he’d had to leave the room for several minutes, making comforting noises to Kate down the phone as he did so. He’d given the real answer to his niece’s question – what else was he supposed to have done? Sugar-coating the pill wasn’t his style.
“Always a fat, alcoholic voyeur?”

“Alright, alright…”

“No, he wasn’t. ‘Combat fatigue’ I think they called it… it’s amazing that Dad didn’t have it.”

The air was heavy between them. He stared at his hands, ugly blotchy things. He could almost hear his brother thinking: and you, Greg?

“It’s upsetting, you know,” said Ken, “hearing you talk about Ben like that – you know, ‘Ben and Pete, spot the difference’. There’s every difference. Pete was… I mean, Ben is…”

His shaking hands – Pete’s hands had shaken when he’d told those dawn stories. He used to grab onto his knees or tap his hands on his thighs to hide the tremble. Greg and Pete, spot the difference.

The shakes were a side effect of the bang-bang club rush. He knew it was. The photographers he’d seen leaving Saigon shook like the B-52 blasts were in their blood. Unable to work as they couldn't focus the lens. The only cure was to jump on a jeep to China Beach, to smoke away the shakes until they could shoot straight. And here he was, no jeep.

Ken was still talking, somethingy-something, he couldn’t hear it. ‘Greg and Ben, spot the difference.’ That stare that saw through his bones. That stare that saw yesterday as tomorrow, that saw now as just Afghan dust. That stare was his own, another bang-bang club side effect – that made the hospital walls now Afghan dust – that left Tuan still waiting for him, always waiting. A monsoon season that never comes.

He watched his brother rub at his eyes and leave the room.

—— o ——

Kate’s phone rang, a private number. She sighed.

“Katherine Talbot.”

No answer but crackle and breathing down the line. She blocked her other ear to hear more clearly.

“Hello?”
So faintly that she didn’t know if she was imagining it, she heard a babble of Pashto as if on a radio.

“Hello? Who’s there?” She wanted to say ‘Ben’ but couldn’t. The babble stopped and she thought she heard a voice say ‘Matey’. Then the line went dead.

She rang Telstra assistance but no one could help her. She wrote down the time and call duration just in case. She closed her eyes and said it out loud, “Please let it be Ben. Please let him call again.”

—— o ——

Kate’s phone rang, a private number. Her heart jumped.

“Katherine Talbot.”

Crackle on the line. Everything else vanished but the call.

“Hello?”

“KT.”

“Jim!”

“I changed my flight. I’m coming to Sydney. I’ll be there on Sunday.”

She couldn’t speak, there were too many thoughts and not enough words.

“KT?”

“Yes.”

“Harbour Rocks Hotel.”

“I’ll be there.”

“The boys are waiting… KT…”

“Yes. Yes.”

He hung up and she held the phone to her chest.

—— o ——

Her phone rang, another private number. Was this Jim again? She hoped nothing had changed, that he was still coming –

“Katherine Talbot.”

Buzz on the line. It sounded as if another call kept interrupting.

“Hello? Hello?”
She listened with her whole body, closing her eyes to concentrate. She heard sounds like ‘May’, ‘hep’ and ‘gah’ but not full words. Everything was faint.

“Who is this? I can’t hear you.”

The line went dead. She almost cried.

— — o — —

She received these blank calls all through the day. She never heard who it was and could never call them back. She checked the post; nothing. She checked her email; no one had contacted her. Just the same private number over and over.

“Katherine Talbot.”

Wind and a babble of voices. She was sure she could hear someone breathing.

“Please.”

Someone cleared their throat.

“Ben?” she whispered.

The line went dead.

She caught her mother’s daze. She floated through the house as though her body was a fantasy. Stared at her reflection in the mirror, in wonder that when she moved the tall, muscled woman in the mirror moved too. In wonder that her brother, her grandfather, had come back in female form.

Then two earnest Mormons came to the door and spent twenty minutes trying to persuade her to take a pamphlet. By the time she had shooed them away she’d snapped out of it. She showered twice, did all her laundry, cleaned and shopped and mopped and tidied. She went to Mitre 10 and bought white paint. She started stripping her bedroom wallpaper off with her fingers, ripping her nails until they bled.

— — o — —

It was late afternoon before Elsie woke. She was completely awake as soon as she opened her eyes. She was light, she was empty and the setting sun shone
through her skin. This was a new life. This was an afterlife. She had no more
secrets and could do what she wanted. Whatever that was.

Kate had tidied the house and cooked a meal. She helped her upstairs and
ran her a bath. It looked like they were getting back into a rhythm – opening the
post, emptying the garbage bins – but it felt like a holding pattern.

The clear day had made for a chill night and she had a blanket over her
dressing gown as she and Kate sat on the back veranda. The moon was waning
from full and stars could just be seen over the streetlights. She’d insisted on
sitting out here, on a supper picnic, biscuits and tea with rum. Something to do
while Kate asked her more questions. Anything to break the pattern.

“So,” she said.

“Pete.”

“Ah Pete,” Christ Almighty, “pour me some tea, Kate, I need that rum in
it.”

Thank goodness the tea was warm. Thank goodness her granddaughter
couldn’t see her properly on this dimly lit veranda.

“What happened to him?”

“I don’t know.”

“But those letters – one I read yesterday, those Korean women, it sounded
like…”

“He raped them.” The shock of that letter. “He never said, Katie. Not even
to Jack – or I should say, especially not to Jack. I only got those letters once Pete
had died.”

So many and so honest. They didn’t hear from Pete from November ’51
until he walked off the ship. Dulcie’s fear had kept them all sentinel by the
postbox. When Dulcie had admonished him, he’d just grinned and shrugged, like
he’d accidentally forgotten to write. They’d had a letter a week before then.

“He wrote to Great Uncle Mark.”

“Yes.”

“Who was dead,” Kate hadn’t let go of the rum. “It was a diary, wasn’t it?”

She’d read through all the letters and gone through all the photos, four
solid days, before stowing away the evidence. Hundreds of letters to Mark.
“He kept them for almost fifty years. He left no will so I inherited everything.”

“Right. Oh! So when his house in Blacktown was sold –”

“Exactly. Your Dad helped me to sort though Pete’s stuff. Those letters were inside a box, inside another box, at the back of his wardrobe. Clippings about the war, photographs of Korea… I had to piece together what he’d done too.”

All the rest of those papers in the attic. She’d thought of sending them off to a museum, the War Memorial in Canberra perhaps, but although Pete had been a bugger she’d never hated him. She couldn’t shame him like that. Shame them all.

“Ben asked Dad about him.”

The garden was dappled with yellow and silver, the streetlight and the moon. The nasturtium leaves were puddles of light against the black back fence.

She needed more tea. More rum.

“Just before he left for Byron he said, ‘Nan, did he do it? Pete – those women?’ He didn’t believe me when I said I didn’t know.”

“Why do you say you don’t know, Nan, when you know so much?”

“Because I don’t really know. I mean, for fifty years, I had no idea. It’s a guess. And if I’m right, who am I to judge?”

She moved her head so Kate’s face was in full light.

“Who are we to judge?”

Her granddaughter’s eyes widened and her breathing sped up. She was cut into shadows, half of her washed out with white light, the other half so black she couldn’t distinguish Kate’s body from the night.

“You didn’t speak to Ben while you were over there, did you?”

Her granddaughter shook her head and looked away. Kate was all curled up in herself.

“Because?”

Kate shrugged.

“A boy?”

Is that a blush in the half-dark? We aren’t so different, Katie, you and me.

“Will I get to meet him?”
Kate’s shoulders softened, the tight curl of her limbs loosened. She reached over and held her granddaughter’s hand in both of hers. So big and strong.

“Good.”

The rum, the warmth of the tea, the rich biscuits. Kate had gone out and bought Tim Tams; what a treat. Her fingers weren’t cold tucked in around her granddaughter’s. All those letters. All those years, tucked into a little drawer. But what else could she have done? With Jack, Mark? With Ben?

“Will we see him again?”

Her granddaughter breathed in sharply and she gripped Kate’s hand. She hadn’t meant to say that but it was exactly what she meant. They’d never seen Mark again. Dulcie had wanted a body to wash and to bury, she’d needed a grave. She’d used all of her savings to put up a plaque in her church but it was never enough.

“I don’t know.”

“Oh go on, guess –”

“I don’t know!”

Kate almost cried. She was going to tell her grandmother about those calls – no, it was too stupid, just suspicion –

“You’re the only one of us who can make an educated guess, Katie. Give us a clue.”

She let go of her grandmother’s hand and pulled her knees up to her chest. A cold wind came over the fence but she didn’t want to share the blanket.

“There’s nothing official except that he’s missing. No ransom demands, not even any worthwhile rumours. Those photos… he’s in trouble, but…”

She looked into the sky. The streetlight made the stars almost impossible to see.

“But?”

“Whatever’s happened, he’s still Ben.”

She saw him in a jingle truck, bearded and turbaned – she saw him wandering from cave to cave – she couldn’t control the fantasies, they sprang out of every shadow, every time she turned around.

“Let’s go in, Nan. It’s cold.”

“Katie…”
Her grandmother looked at her. The blanket was askew, her wispy hair was curly and wild. Her grandmother reached out and touched her face. She leant into her palm, her old skin so soft, so cool against her cheek.

“Katie.”

She closed her eyes. Nan.

—— o ——

That night she dreamt she was in Afghanistan, walking in the green zone with Ben. They had no guns and were walking as if they weren’t a target, there were no IEDs, just the two of them strolling along the bank of a stream in a tiny village.

'Don’t hate me, Matey,' he said looking straight into her face, his voice clear and perfect.

She woke up crying, sure that it wasn’t a dream, sure that Ben was trying to tell her that he was alive and deliberately lost.
Chapter Twelve: Friday April 22nd

The dawn was grey through the hospital window. Greg’s heart monitor had been removed so the only way to tell the time was from this slow rise of light.

Light, the essence of his trade. Tuan.

His room at the Hotel Continental. Gunshots were still firing through the city and outside the air was still thick with smoke. They hadn’t slept since yesterday morning, they couldn’t sleep, how could they with this invasion of Saigon? And at Tet? Tuan had a deep gouge on his back, almost along the line of his rib. He emptied the first aid kit on to the bed to find the tube of antiseptic. Tuan flinched and breathed in sharply.

‘You’ll have to see a doctor.’
‘All doctors will be with soldiers. You help me.’
‘I am helping you mate, but it’s pretty fuckin’ deep.’
‘You have worse.’
‘And I saw a doctor. Besides, it’s not a competition.’
‘Yes, it is.’

Tuan smiled. He’d been so skinny. Each bone was now covered with a layer of muscle. His skin was perfectly golden, not a mole, not a freckle. Just this cut.

‘It’ll scar.’
‘Good. Then you know I’m a real man.’
‘Oh, c’mon! …I know you’re a man.’

The look Tuan gave him. Those huge dark eyes. Breath tasting of kumquat and coffee. Fingertips against his navel, his palm fit his hip bone precisely. Golden skin covering a layer of muscle from his neck to his thighs to his feet.

Feet, eyes, blood in the city. He’d been in Cambodia for three years. When he returned to Saigon Tuan was skinny again. The city was emptying and all their contacts were gone.

‘When you leave me again, Greg?’
‘I s’pose when the Americans go I’ll –’
‘I come too.’
‘How?’
‘You take me.’
‘Can’t –’
‘Yes.’ Tuan grabbed his arm but he jerked it away. Everything was different after Cambodia. Those little boys with their rifles. Tuan was different. Thin. His English had deteriorated.

‘Everyone knows you and me, Greg. Everyone. No one give me job. People laugh. All Americans, they all gone. I can’t – they will –’

‘Look, I can’t do anything. I can only take care of myself. You’ll have to do the same.’

The look Tuan gave him. Those huge dark eyes.

‘Please.’ Tuan’s hands looked too big at the end of his arms. ‘People are already, they already go, no more – please, Greg. Please.’

Those huge dark eyes. He couldn’t look.

‘You’ll find a way, mate.’

He’d written to Tuan once he’d got home but there’d been no reply. He wrote to Tuan’s family, Mr Ba’s daughter writing the letter in Vietnamese as he spoke. He saw whoever could be seen for information – nothing. In those post-apocalyptic years he began to hear the stories. To see the shaking, scarred evidence on the boat people. He knew, but he told himself he had no proof so he didn’t know, how could he?

The white blank sky broke into a flash of lucid sunshine before the clouds closed over again. He couldn’t bring his water to his mouth without spilling it.

—— o ——

His brother was wet and weeping when Ken came in that morning.

“Greg – what – are you alright?”

He thought Greg had pissed himself until he saw empty glass broken on the floor. Greg said nothing, didn’t even mumble. Not even when the nurse changed his sheets and pyjamas, stripping him and exposing his pallid, skinny legs.

—— o ——
Tuan stretched out over the hospital bed. Naked by the window, watching the war orphans sell cigarettes in the hospital car park. Playing with the mounted TV, trying to get a South Vietnamese signal in between the ABC and Prime.

—— o ——

“Katie love.” Ken couldn’t sound cheerful. He’d had to force himself here this morning.

“Dad, I’ll be there soon.”
“Oh, Katie,” he breathed deeply, she wouldn’t like him to cry. “When?”
“I’m at Coffs airport now, so, ten minutes?”
“You should’ve told me! I would’ve picked you up—”
“Dad, it’s fine. The taxi’s here, I gotta go.”

He would’ve loved to have picked her up. To get away from the beeps and squeaks, the facemasks and stink of antiseptic. To get away from Greg. For just a little while.

—— o ——

Ben’s voice, ‘Please Greg. Please.’ Ben walking through the door of his room, in out, he could see him in his peripheral vision. Ben standing in the corner, watching him.

—— o ——

Her father was waiting when her taxi pulled up at the front door of the hospital. His facemask was crushed in his hand and his wiry body was tense as he scanned every cab that drove up. She ran the few steps to him, not even dumping her bag before she hugged him.

“How is he?”

Her father scanned her face, mouth set in a line.

“That good, huh?”
“He hasn’t said a word to me, Katie. If you’re looking for something, you won’t find it today.”

Greg was sitting on the edge of the bed, clutching the mattress. She tapped on the glass. He looked up and mimed smoking a cigarette. She grinned as she pulled on her facemask and pushed through the door.

“D’you reckon you can light up in here?”

“Depends what you’ve got,” his voice was rough. “They won’t stand for Winnie Blues, but Champion Ruby rollies are just fine.”

“It speaks,” said her father.

“Had to. Kate was coming.”

“How did you know that?”

Greg raised an eyebrow. She suppressed a smile.

“You told me.”

“I thought you couldn’t—”

“Well I could.”

She sat on the bed, intending to be gentle, but Greg grabbed her and pulled her into a fierce hug. She could hear his laboured breathing and he smelt like a hospital. She couldn’t stop herself and she started to cry, hugging him round his bony ribcage and squeezing her eyes shut.

When Greg released her, his eyes were even redder than before. She could feel her father standing just behind her.

“You know why I’m here Greg, don’t you.”

Her uncle nodded, picking up her hand and playing with it. He cleared his throat.

“Just… one more day, Kate,” he looked at her, his eyes widened and he looked away. “I’ll tell you about… about…”

“Ben.”

He winced at the name. He closed his eyes and nodded.

“Tomorrow, Kate. We’ll talk tomorrow.”

—— o ——
Her father knocked on her door. She’d booked into the room next to his at the Pacific Palms Motel.

“Katie, are you hungry? Did you want some dinner?” He poked his head through the doorway.

“I usually eat at the hospital, but there’s almost certainly a Chinese restaurant near here, although take-away is always so oily –”

“Dad.”

She patted the bed and he sat down. He ran his hand over the floral bedspread, smoothing over the worn patches.

“It’s so good you’re here, Katie love. It’s been – Greg’s just been so –” he shook his head and looked around the room. The walls were brown brick with a single faded poster on the wall, ‘The Big Banana – Coffs Coast.’ The mini bar fridge hummed with the fluorescent lighting.

He reached out and touched her cheek for a brief moment.

“You look so like him.”

So like Ben. She almost cried.
“My father’s brother.”
“Yes, my brother’s daughter?”

His niece sat on the bed, her cargo pants muddy round the bottom, her grey t-shirt crumpled as though she’d slept in it. Her dark hair pulled severely back into a ponytail. She held out a tiny take-away coffee.

“Your short black. I couldn’t find any whisky – it’s too early.”
“‘The drunks at the beach usually have some.”
“No Greg, that’s metho.”

She was smiling. She was the first visitor on the ward, here even before the day nurses came in for their shift. She hadn’t needed to wake him, he’d woken before dawn again this morning. His head felt clear but his legs were heavy.

“Metho couldn’t make this coffee any worse. Where’d you get it?”
“The BP. It was the only place open.”
“I see you’re not having one.”

“I drank mine – I can’t drink with this thing on.” She pointed to the facemask. He kept forgetting, he knew her face so well. She shifted her weight and looked at him, head to one side. Eyes no longer smiling but dark and shiny under the harsh lights. He held out his hand and she took it, her brown skin against his white.

Ben. He wasn’t in his peripheral vision this morning, thank God. It was just him and his brother’s daughter. His Kate.

“I knew as soon as I saw him that he wasn't right. He had that stare, you know, that hollow look around the eyes…”

His niece nodded and frowned. Her fingers tightened slightly over his.

“That was – oh, on some road – that highway north of TK, I think. Or was it on the way to Kandahar…”

“You mean on that first time you were down there? With Amir? When you saw Ben and Miller on the road?”

“Miller, is it? Yes, then.”
The dust in his eyes and nose. The truck’s wheels grinding noisily to a halt and Ben waving at him to get out of his seat. Ben stopping with a jerk, ‘Uncle Greg –’

“Greg.” Kate squeezed his hand.

“That road was bitumen.”

“So… it’s probably the highway between TK and Kandahar. Yeah?”

He nodded, gulping down the last of his coffee. Kate had pinned down the sheets by sitting on the bed. He couldn’t move his legs.

“Ben followed us back to TK, followed us around. Wouldn’t let us out of his sight. Didn’t mention you were there. Didn’t mention anything, just shoved us on the first plane out. I mean, the Australian Army isn’t as open as the Americans, but that was –”

“Something else.”

He wanted to smooth the frown lines from her forehead. He looked down at his hand where she held it. The nicotine stains on his fingers had lightened in the week he’d been in here.

“On the flight back to Kabul the pilot had whispered ‘O’Hearne – speak to O’Hearne’.”

“Whispered?”

“As I got off the plane… but things had stopped being weird by that point. I went back to Bagram the next day and almost got arrested.”

“For?”

“Asking for O’Hearne. He appeared just as the MPs were taking my details, whisked me off to his office.”

Down labyrinthine corridors, beige walls and throbbing fluorescent lights. The smell of sweat.

“O’Hearne’s American?”

“No, Australian. Face so full of acne scars it was like orange peel. Hulking shoulders. Grey hair, grey eyes, grey skin. Unmistakable.”

Track mark scars inside both elbows. His eyes were hidden by shadow and he clenched and unclenched his fists.
“He took a photo out of a drawer. ‘Mohammed and Mohammed,’ he said. ‘They sell smack along with their saffron. Find them and you’ll find a story.’ It’s that photo you have, Ben with those spice sellers.”

His niece blinked rapidly and clenched her jaw. He squeezed her hand. Oh, for a cigarette.

“Why – he knew you were a journo?”

“Oh yes. He had some kind of vendetta going. ‘I was a shooter,’ he’d said, ‘I had it all.’ I don’t know if he was still a junkie. He found me a flight the next morning – have you ever been on a dawn chopper ride?”

His niece shook her head, wiping her eyes.

“Fuckin’ magic. Afghanistan without the dust.”

“No way,” she gave a short laugh. He needed that, so sweet.

“Pink and purple rising out of the vast slums of Kabul, the mountains aflame as the wind chaps your cheeks through the chopper doors…”

The smell of fuel. Engine so loud he couldn’t even hear himself. The freedom of it.

“You don’t have any shots of that ride.”

His niece transferred his grip to her other hand, wiping the sweat off her palm onto her trousers. His hands weren’t sweaty, they were cold.

“No, well… no. Must’ve forgotten to take any.”

“Forgotten?”

He gripped her hand to stop his own from shaking. The sheets were a ghastly white.

“Oh.” She said and placed her other hand on top of his. He risked a look at her face. Those huge dark eyes.

“Can you pass me my water?”

He pushed himself up against the pillows, wriggling his toes when she got up from the bed. Both his hands around the plastic cup; he wouldn’t spill it, he refused.

“All I had to do was show the taxi driver the photo of the spice sellers and he knew exactly where to go.”

“Which was…?”

“Was?”
“The village – what’s it called?”
“I don’t know. I never asked.”
“You never…” Her eyes widened and she took a deep breath. Please, Kate. She sat back down on the bed and took up his hand again.
“And he just… drove you there?”
“Well, he charged me triple his usual Westerner rate. I’d hired him before or I don’t think he would’ve taken me at all. That drive was, ah, tense, shall we say –”
“You were driving around Uruzgan on your own?”
“I was mad.”
She raised her eyebrow, one line on her tanned face.
“Yes, alright, still am mad.” The driver sweating behind the wheel. “The village was nestled off the main road. My driver refused to let me walk there. That drive across the dasht was an extremely bumpy ride in low gear. We walked into the village together, my driver starting at the nearest house with ‘Salaam Alaikum’ until we’d bowed and salaam’d our way to some sort of central courtyard.”
All those eyes, little boys, old men, dozens of dogs. The stench.
“I only understood a handful of words he said. I just looked over the heads of the crowd.”
“For the spice sellers.”
Her eyes, so bright under these lights. Her whole body stiffened as she realised. He gripped her hand.
“You saw Ben.”
“He saw me first and ducked into an alley. He was really agitated, jumpy, about to cry. I don't know if it was because he saw me or if he was like that before.”
His face had been dirty, his hands dirty and his rifle slung over his back. He wore a kameez on top of his uniform. His eyes flicked everywhere, over the alley and the mud walls of the houses, before flicking back to him.
“He told me to go away, ‘Just fuck off.’ I told him to hold on but he cut me off. ‘Don't, you're ruining it, you’re not meant to be here.’ I said, ‘You're not
meant to be here either.’ He was all hunched over, you wouldn’t have known we were the same height.”

She was so still, even stiller than him. His Kate.

“He begged me not to tell anyone he was there... he grabbed my arm and told me to leave, then he pulled me into a hug and said he was glad to see me, and then said ‘But family’s fucked, of course, leaves you high and dry’…”

His niece snorted and looked away.

“Sort of prophetic, really,”

“Greg, it’s not your... I mean…”

“It is. My fault. He knew it too. He said, ‘You know, right, Uncle Greg? You’ve got it bad.’”

A chill wind had blown down the alley, the smell of animal shit and rot. Ben’s hands had been so cold where he clutched him.

“He laughed at me when I said I didn’t know what he was talking about. He said, ‘Don’t bullshit. I can see your eyes. You’ve got the shakes, you’re as bad as I am. Worse, maybe. Go on, gimme the secret – how do you live with it?’”

Those huge dark eyes. He shook his head.

“Should’ve paid attention, eh?”

He let go of Kate’s hand and pushed himself up. His legs ached, his hips seemed to creak every time he moved. His niece fluffed up his pillows and straightened his sheets. Did all this only happen a few weeks ago? He felt so very, very old.

Kate sat back down on the bed, her whole body tense. The muscles around her eyes tense.

“Then…” he clasped his hands together as tightly as he could, “Ben started to cry, you know, pinching his eyes as strong men do when they show emotion. Made this keening noise, very high pitched. He started babbling, ‘We couldn’t help it, it wasn’t my fault, the intel was faulty –’”

“The intel.”

His knuckles were turning blue. He couldn’t look at her.

“Yeah, something about J? He said,” he closed his eyes, “he said, ‘The kids, there were eight of them, all of them... the intel was wrong, J’s a fuck-up,
and he wasn’t even there… but the family, the kid had a weapon… the screaming, and the women, their veils off, we saw their faces…”

The dead taste of frozen dust. Ben’s dirty fingernails.

“‘The kids’ he kept saying, ‘like geep.’” He looked up but Kate’s eyes were closed. Her tears had left a shining path across her cheekbone.

“What’s geep?”

She sniffed.

“A sheep-goat cross. They’re everywhere.”

“Inside the houses?”

She nodded and looked at the wall, her face contorted, trying not to cry.

“Sometimes,” her breath was shaky, “in bad weather. But when they slaughter them, it’s all halal, so the blood…”

She grabbed some tissues from the side table and swiftly left the room. He could see her blowing her nose, leaning against the window.

The kids, like geep. Blood draining in to the ground.

She came in and sat back down on the bed, stretching her neck.

“OK,” she said. “I’m OK. Go on.”

She wasn’t smiling but her face looked clear. Blank. He took a deep breath.

“I asked him, ‘Was this today?’ He didn’t know. Wouldn’t look me in the eye. He just said, ‘I couldn’t protect them – it’s better if I’m gone – I’ve let him down.’”

“Let who down?”

“I don’t know. He made this kind of humming sound. It wasn’t crying, it was some other noise.”

Ben had shaken his head again and again, as if to shake away a thought that clung to his skull.

“Could he have been saying ‘M’?”

“Possibly. I didn’t get to ask, he moved away. ‘I’m better gone,’ he called over his shoulder, ‘don’t tell anyone, they’ll come for me – it’s better if I’m gone.’ He moved down these alleys, quicker than me, I could only just follow him. He went into this little building…”

The stench of urine and vomit and unwashed bodies.

“Your photos.”
“I came into this room, and he was there, crouching on the floor. He saw me and ran, hopping over all the half-awake men and out a second door. I had to stop taking pictures to follow him.”

The villagers staring at them. The chill wind from across the dasht.

“He stopped running when we got outside. I could see my driver with the villagers in the courtyard – Ben had led us round in a circle. He put his hand on my camera and begged me not to publish the shots. Not for his sake but for the Army. For your sake, Kate.”

“But you did.”

“I was always going to.” He hung his head, stared at the cold, blank bedsheets. He could hear breakfast being delivered to the adjacent rooms, people coming in to visit. Kate didn’t move.

“Then my driver came running up to me – they’d heard on the radio that Americans were on their way… or maybe it was the Taliban paying a visit after a raid by the Americans? I don’t know. He wasn’t clear, he just insisted that we leave immediately.”

“Really.” Her voice was sarcastic and her look was skeptical. He shrugged and looked out the window at the patchy sky. So far away, just a sliver in the window frame.

“Ben had slipped away somewhere. My driver kept dragging me towards the car. I just wanted… my driver followed me as I went looking for Ben, kept saying, ‘You must come, we must go, there is no losing time.’ Then I saw him.”

Floating down the alley towards him, looking blissful, his rifle slung over one shoulder. Snap.

“The Messiah shot. He touched my shoulder, sort of in benediction.”

How long had all this taken? Five minutes? Ten?

“Then we left.”

Kate blinked and looked at the ceiling. Please, Kate.

“You went back to TK?”

“I’m not a bad person –”

“Greg, I’m not saying –”

“I know I should’ve grabbed him. I should’ve at least… you know, but…”

His niece reached forward and lifted up his hair.
“You’ve got a big pink scar on your scalp. That bomb in the marketplace that you have photos of – were you injured? That might explain –”

“Why I left him there.”

“Why you can’t remember. But yes, also why you didn’t tell anyone that you saw him.”

The nurse paused at the door to put on her facemask before she wheeled in scrambled eggs. The nurse chatted, Kate chatted, answering the nurse’s questions for him, yes he was fine, slept well, no problems this morning. He looked down at his hands. They looked too big at the end of his arms. The nurse took his pulse and checked his chart and bustled out.

“My father’s brother.”

She looked tired.

“Yes, my brother’s daughter?”

She pushed the breakfast aside and sat back down on the bed.

“I have to go.”

“You’re leaving me here with the scrambled eggs?”

“My flight – Dad’ll be here this afternoon, you’ll be alright.”

She sighed and put her hand on his arm. Her hand like Ken’s, like their father’s, padded with muscle. Her body slumped as she looked at him.

“Come here, you bogan.” He pulled her into a tight hug. Her t-shirt was soft with wear. She hugged him so hard it hurt.

“I’m not a bogan! You’re the bogan.”

He could hear the tears in her voice.

“Rubbish. All soldiers are bogans. It’s a pre-requisite.”

“And all photographers are debauched wankers.”

“Wouldn’t have it any other way.”

She wiped her eyes with the heel of her palm as she pulled back. She was smiling ever so slightly. It was enough.

“You know what I heard Digger say? He was talking about being outside the wire. He said ‘the sun set over the hills like dirt falling into the green.’”

“Poetic.”

“A sunset! That was a sapper, of course.”

She flashed a grin. Good.
“Of course. Engineers are awesome. Almost as awesome as freelance photographers.”

He played with her hand, turning it over and over. Her palm was callused but the top of her hand was soft. The room slowly filled with the smell of eggs and burnt toast.

“Bring some smokes with you next time, will you?”
“Who says there’ll be a next time?”
She smiled and he smiled back.

—— o ——

Her father was sitting in the sun outside his motel room, eyes closed and leaning back against the pillar. He straightened and put down his mug when she pulled up in his van.

“How was it?”

The concrete was warm where she sat down next to him. He’d been drinking tea, she wouldn’t mind some of that. And some breakfast.

“Good? Bad?”
“Good… I guess.”

Her father’s expression was soft and worried.

“If hearing about Ben can be good.”

He nodded and looked out over the road. The Old Pacific Highway ran past the gravel carpark, the bitumen breaking at the edges where the grass pushed its way through.

“So,” his voice cracked, “Ben, he’s, ah, he’s…”

He glanced at her and she shook her head. He exhaled and pinched his eyes; that gesture, just like Ben. She looped her arm through his. He wasn’t skinny like Greg was skinny. She could feel the lean muscle of his arm under his t-shirt.

“The Army will tell us – tell me – when they find him. But he won’t be…”

The sun was in her eyes. A flock of cockatoos rose screeching from a distant tree.

“Won’t be…?”
She sighed. Just say it.

“Won’t be the same. Won’t be well. He’s probably –”

“Don’t tell me.”

“…What?”

Her father sniffed and looked away. Out past the disintegrating highway, the trees, the lone cockatoo left behind by its flock. He grabbed her hand where it lay on his arm.

“Whatever he’s like when he comes back, we’ll deal with it then.”
Chapter Fourteen: Sunday April 24th

Kate could’ve taken a taxi, she could’ve caught the 433 all the way to the Rocks. But she’d woken far too early to go straight to Jim at his hotel, so she walked to Central and caught the train to fill in time. Circular Quay popped up unexpectedly as the train came out of the tunnel. The Bridge on her left huge and invincible and the Opera House sparkling to her right. She lingered for a moment at the wharves, watching the pattern of light on the water, now green, now grey, now deepest blue, the Quay slowly filling with tourists. There was no tarmac, no disinfectant, no dust. Just light playing over the bridge girders, the cruise liners, the stone.

Jim was sitting in the hotel foyer when she arrived. He started when he saw her, his eyes widened and a massive grin spread across his face. He put down the paper he was pretending to read and strode over to shake her hand.

“Well, well, Kate Talbot, fancy seeing you here —”

“Don’t be an idiot,” she said, moving past his hand to kiss him on the neck. He jumped but didn’t move away. He put his hand on her back so he could look at her and keep her close at the same time.

“Katie, we’re in public!” he whispered.

“I know.”

“But —”

“I don’t care.”

“But this means —”

“I know. I don’t care.”

He caught her up and kissed her so fiercely that she bent backwards. He grabbed her ribs to pull her closer. She’d known he would be like this. It was what he’d wanted all along only he could never say it, could never ask her. Now he didn’t have to. Everything else in her life had led her here, so she could kiss him in the plush hotel foyer and not care who might be watching.
“Yeah, I booked the Harbour View Suite. I just thought, you know, we might be spending a bit of time here…”

He looked almost embarrassed as he lay propped up on one elbow on the bed. He had a little smile on his face but he wouldn’t look at her. The suite was enormous, a king-size bed in one room, a lounge in the next, and their own balcony. Two huge windows revealed the view of the harbour, the Opera House and the point bending round to the Quay. When the sun came through the clouds the water turned from grey to glittering blue. He didn’t need to be embarrassed. She loved it, the big white bed, the wide view from the balcony.

Jim caressed her stomach with his free hand, the calluses on his palm rough over her skin. He was freckled and tanned in sections, brown and white, red and speckled, that hadn’t faded even through an Afghan winter. She was reminded again that he was more white than anything else. She reached up and touched his cheek, his skin smooth beneath his stubble. He turned his face to kiss her palm.

“I’m not being sent back.”

He nodded and blinked rapidly, clenching his jaw. He turned and hid his face in her neck and hair.

“That sucks, Katie.” His voice was muffled but she could feel it vibrate through his chest and against her skin. The sun slanted on to the grey carpet but didn’t reach the bed. He tensed and she slid her legs over the top of his, pressing herself into him until he relaxed.

He kissed her neck and propped himself back up on his elbow. He pressed his thumb softly against her collarbone as though measuring it, testing it, moving down to her breast, her ribs, tracing their outline with his fingertips. She was tanned in sections too. The air smelt of their mingled breath.

“So.”

“So, KT.”

“What are they saying?”

He sighed and turned over to look at the ceiling, so white against the dark grey walls.

“There’s just one main rumour.”

He paused. She could hear the dull drone of the traffic on the bridge.

“Just say it.”
“It’s gonna hurt.”

He turned and she turned to look at him. His eyes were always such a bright blue against the redness of his skin. He traced his finger along her eyebrow. He breathed in and turned away.

“People are saying that his boots and ID have been found and that they’re holding onto this intel ‘till they find his body.”

His boots and ID. His ‘Body’ – not ‘person,’ not even ‘Ben.’ She turned her head away from him. Their clothes were all over the floor in crumpled heaps.

“Who are ‘people’?” She couldn’t control the harsh tone of her voice.

“Everyone. The higher ranks will neither confirm nor deny the rumour. It makes everyone talk.”

Ben’s body, Ben’s body. No one, on that dusty base made of concrete and containers, was thinking of Ben. Just of Ben’s body.

“But Katie, Katie,” Jim grabbed her waist and pulled her close to him, saying her name until she turned to face him.

“You know the official word, we know where his brick was last. He can’t’ve gone that far. Everyone’s just so…”

He played with her waist, her skin going red as he pinched it absentmindedly.

“They talk,” she said.

He snorted and shook his head once.

“Fuck. I mean, Katie, you know, you know what it’s like…”

The viciousness of some of the other rumours, the attacks on Ben’s character, the attacks on her own – he wouldn’t be able to get away from it. People jumpy in the mess, arguments breaking out over a look or a brushed shoulder. She’d always been on the outside of those rumours, not in the centre.

The light through the windows was too bright. It hurt her eyes.

“No one believes it, Katie. No one who counts. Ben’s rep is flawless. But there’s been… all ops are still going ahead, but…”

She could almost hear him think it: but there’s been trouble. His face was blank. No, it was far away, trapped in a low-ceilinged mess in the middle of the dasht.

“What do they believe? Those who count?”
“Everyone’s getting extra psych screenings. Everyone at every level. Long meetings with some of them.”

“Who?”
He picked up her hand and played with her fingers, not looking at her.

“His brick?”
The muscles in his jaw relaxed and he stopped fidgeting with her hand.

That was a Yes – J, M and C had been called in, taken off whatever op they were on and split up.

“And?” She took back her hand and looked at him squarely.

“And?”

“Oh c’mon, don’t make me ask for every single detail.”
He pushed her hair away from her face, avoiding her gaze.

“Those photos are wrong. He’s clearly ill. He won’t be blamed.”

“But…?”

“Katie, I can’t… I really, I don’t know, no details, we all hope, but every day he stays AWOL…”

Makes him less and less likely to be found alive. He looked at her, pleading. She touched his face, her palm against the stubble on his cheek.

The sun reached through the windows to the white sheets, but it wasn’t warm against her legs.

— — o — —

They called up breakfast on room service, two huge fruit platters, airy croissants, fresh juice and coffee.

“Pineapple, so good,” said Jim, tipping his head back to eat another piece.

Fresh fruit was hard to come by in TK.

It was warm enough to sit on the balcony in their bathrobes, feet resting on each other’s chairs. In this small moment she felt almost as light as the sky. He’d asked all the right questions and said all the right things.

‘An Afghan wedding in Sawtell – no way!’

‘So, your uncle – sounds like he can’t decide whether to be a fucked-up champion or a champion fuck-up.’
‘Wait, so there’s Jack, Mark, Pete – there’ll be no room for your clothes with all those skeletons in your family closet.’

They’d moved from the bed to the shower to the balcony. There were no tears or harsh words, no hospital beds or stranger’s lounge rooms, just question after question. Like Greg had been two weeks ago when she first got home. Such a relief. They sat on the balcony in their Dubai duty-free sunglasses and continued to go over the details, just the details, without all the should’ves and could’ves and why-didn’t-you’s that were always part of the conversations with her mother, her father and Greg.

“So if the trouble started before he deployed –”

“That’s what Fred reckons. That’s what it looks like from his diary.”

“But he lost the plot in January.”

“Well, there’s no more info after he went back from leave. He’s silent until Greg’s photos.”

“But it was Miller too, right, that set him off? Ben felt he’d let him down by making that mistake?”

“Yes, but Greg said that he was acting weird when he saw him before that incident.”

“And the photos were taken three weeks ago?”

“Early April – 1st to the 4th.”

“So the incident that Ben was talking about would’ve been around then too.”

“It must’ve been. It must’ve been April 3rd or 4th. But – it’s so unlike him to… I mean, I’m sure he’s seen that kind of stuff before…”

“‘The kids, like geep’ – those were Ben’s exact words?”

“That’s what Greg said.”

“Oh my god, Katie, that’s just… oh my god.”

He stared out over the harbour. There was a breeze up here and she wrapped the bathrobe around her more tightly.

“Are you cold? Do you want to go back in?”

“J and C – they’re Jones and Carruthers, right?”

He rubbed her feet. The sounds of the street wafted up to them.
“I can’t tell you that, Katie. I can’t tell you that and I can’t tell you the enormous amount of shit they’re in right now.”

“Hmph. Good.”

He cleaned up the last bits of fruit, rockmelon and mandarin, licking the juice off his fingers. He leant forward and grabbed her chair, pulling her up next to him.

“We heard nothing, Katie. Greg puts him in the right place, sort of…”

“It’s not what he did. Greg’s photos back up his story, which back up the rumour I was told.”

She was glad for the sunglasses. She couldn’t look at him and say what she needed to.

“It’s why – why he gave up, why hearing my Nan’s stories made him so…and where he is now, where is his…”

His body. She could hear gulls screeching from the wharf and the long, low wail of a departing ferry.

Jim stroked her hair for a long time before she looked up at him. He was watching her, expectant. He pulled her close and kissed her. One kiss at a time and each time pulling back to look at her, like he was testing her.

“Katie…”

“Mmm?”

“Katie…” He held her face in his hand.

“When are we going to go public?”

“Jim…”

When they went public, they’d be reprimanded, demoted, and separated. Both of their careers set back, maybe permanently. People talking behind their backs constantly, for months and months.

“Not ‘til I finish my deployment, of course, but…”

No contact for four months, except the Defence Secret Network that wasn’t entirely secret. He kissed her again and again, pulling back each time as if to say ‘Please, KT, Please.’

“After that, then… we’ll work it out,” she said.

He took off his sunnies, frowning.

“Katie, I’m coming back for you. I’m not letting you get away –”
“I know. I meant…”

He pushed her sunnies back up on her head so he could see her eyes.

“You meant?”

His eyes were the same colour as the sky.

“So much has changed in the last two weeks… every day it’s different. Four months – who knows what our situation will be like then? Besides…”

“Besides?”

She buried her face in his shoulder but he lifted her chin again to make her look at him. She pulled away; OK, Jim, OK.

“Besides?”

“It’s hard… it’s hard to see myself as a soldier and a… well, a wife. I never really, you know, never imagined what it’d be like, just assumed that it’d magically happen. I mean, this hotel room – it’s not exactly the back of a van on a dirt road in Queensland, is it? We’ve always done everything so secretly… I’ll never be deployed overseas again. You know it’s true. They’ve cut short this tour and what Ben did had nothing to do with me. All those problems – you know, I’ll never be promoted, you’ll be held back, I’ll probably have to leave when I get pregnant…”

He pulled her on to his lap and kissed her shoulder.

“– they haven’t gone away. All this stuff with Ben, with my family – I can’t think beyond the end of the day. The future’s too far away. No, that’s not true – the future I imagined, that I thought I wanted… it’s not there anymore. Ben’s not here, you are here – everything’s different. That’s why I said ‘we’ll work it out.’ Who knows, a solution might’ve presented itself by the time you get back.”

She turned round to kiss his forehead. His smell mixed with coffee and pineapple. The patter of traffic and the salt on the breeze.

“If I can bear not being able to speak to you for four months,” she smiled. He searched her face.

“What?”

“Say it,” he said.

“Say what?”

“I love you.”
She laughed but turned away. No tears, there’d been too many tears in the last fortnight, in the last forty-eight hours. The sunlight on the rooftops, the shadows of clouds making patterns on the water – wasn’t it enough that she was here, didn’t this say it all?

“Say it, Katie,” his voice sounded shaky and he tightened his hold round her waist.

“Please.”

She turned round and whispered it in his ear. He held her so tightly and she stayed still in his arms, in that warm sunlight, the breeze playing over her bare feet.

— o —

It was dusk and they were half asleep, drowsy and tangled in each other, when her phone rang. Her mother or her grandmother probably, she reached over lazily to see who it was. A private number – she jerked upright.

“I’ve been getting these calls all week, Jim – Katherine Talbot?”

She heard babble on the line, clearer than the previous times, clear enough for someone to decipher. She handed the phone to Jim.

“I think – is it Pashto?”

He listened intently, his body tense. He glanced up at her, and nodded; it was Pashto, the same dialect he knew from around TK. He spoke softly, as if speaking to a child, sitting up straight and staring at the ceiling in concentration. It wasn’t Ben – she could barely hold herself still.

He hung up, looking at the phone to avoid her eyes.

“Well?”

He put the phone down and pulled her into a hug.

“Don’t, just tell me.” She struggled but his grip her around the shoulders was so firm she could hardly move.

“It was a little kid, some little village boy, who’s been calling you. I spoke to his brother. The little boy found a phone next to a pair of soldier’s boots and a rifle a few days ago and has been playing with them. He was just pressing buttons – your number must’ve been on speed dial.”
She was glad Jim was holding her now. She felt as if she would fall apart if he let her go.

“How…”

“There must be some spots of reception, who knows. Who knows what type of phone it is. I asked about the boots and the rifle, what they looked like.”

“Are they…”

“Yep.” It was more of a grunt than a yes; they were ADF issue.

If Ben had left his boots and gun and phone together, then there was almost no way that he would come home alive.

The room was dark. Her toes were numb.

“Where?” She had to force the word out.

“Next to the river. I didn't get the name of the village.”

He held her for a long time, until the sun had completely set, until she was sore with stiffness. Until the sick feeling receded, until her breath returned to normal.

“We’ll have to tell them,” he said.

She nodded. Just one more day together, unquestioned, would’ve been bliss. But they couldn’t, not with this call, not now with everything they knew. They’d have to tell their bosses. Which meant telling them that she and Jim had met up.

“I’ll do it,” said Jim. “Say that we were having a beer when you got the call. I’ll have to do it tonight, it’ll be too complicated tomorrow.”

Tomorrow – Anzac Day, she’d forgotten. Finding the right person in the right place would be close to impossible. He let go of her, kissing her arms where he’d left red marks from his strong grip.

“You going to the Holsworthy service?” he asked.

“Hmph.”

It’s where everyone would be, it’s where she should be, for the gunfire breakfast and proper commemoration. She didn’t want to see all of her colleagues and stand there as the centre of all gossip.

“No one will care, Katie. Everyone who counts will be behind you.”

“But everyone who counts is not everyone.”

“So… what, you’ll go to Martin Place with your family?”
She snorted— they’d never been with her before.

“Katie, family is family— I bet they’re hurting.”

She could just make out his features in the darkness.

“Do they even know where you are, Katie?”

--- o ---

“Katie? Katie!” Her grandmother cried out her name as soon as she opened the front door.

“Yes, Nan, it’s me.”

The house was dark. Her name echoed in the gloom. She switched on the lights as she went, the hallway, the stairs, the kitchen. Her grandmother was sitting at the kitchen table as though she was shackled to it.

“So you finally decide to show up, do you? Not a word, not a call—”

“Nan, I told you last night I was—”

“Leaving me here with your mother, who’s only slightly less useful than a chocolate teapot—”

“She—I didn’t know Mum would come over, Nan—”

“And did she make the tea? Get the biscuits? Of course not. She just blubbed in the veranda all morning and then went home. You, Katherine,” she tapped on the table, “are meant to be here. You’re meant to be looking after this place.”

Her grandmother glared at her. The dim kitchen light couldn’t hide the tear marks on her cheeks.

“Nan, how long have you been sitting here?”

Her grandmother sniffed and lifted her chin, looking out the double doors to the garden.

“Have you been sitting here alone since Mum left?”

She could hear a tap drip upstairs. There was nothing on the table, no tea mug, no tissues, no tablecloth. She sat down next to her grandmother and picked up her hand.

“I’m sorry, Nan.”
“You know, I usually sit here all day, but…” but her voice was shaky. She coughed dryly.

“I’ll get you some tea, Nan, and some water. Have you eaten?”

“Katie love, it’s just so –”

Her grandmother’s voice followed her to the sink, where she put on the kettle, filled glasses with water, piled a plate with all the different types of biscuits she could find in the cupboard. Her grandmother’s hand had been trembling when she held it.

“It’s just so… I just, I wish Jack was here,” her voice rose in pitch as she tried not to cry. “He always – oh, but I’m kidding myself, it was always hard. With Mark. Without Mark, I should say.”

Her grandmother gulped the water so quickly a few drops spilt down the sides of her mouth. She jumped up and grabbed the tissues.

“Thank you, Katie love. Ah, you always were a good girl, really. Just like Mark,” her voice tightened and rose again.

“It’s alright, Nan, you don’t have to –”

“We all saw him in the march. I asked Dulcie once, oh, decades later, after Bert died. ‘Yes yes,’ she said, ‘and Ed too. I see them all.’ Katie, this tea’s too hot.”

“Some more milk?”

“Ugh, no –”

“Rum?”

“And these biscuits – did you deliberately get the hardest and stalest gingersnaps from the bottom of the tin?”

“Here, Nan…” She poured a large finger of rum in her grandmother’s tea and started breaking biscuits in half, dipping them in the tea and lining them up on the plate in front of her.

“Ed – Dulcie didn’t talk much about her brother. Nor about Mark – never mentioned his name. I know, I listened, but never, she never… oh but that Anzac Day after Pete came home, Christ Almighty, the screaming! I’ve never heard anything so – and Jack, he was tearing his hair out, ‘I can’t take it, Els,’ and Ken was crying and Greg was crying…”

She looked at the biscuits in front of her.
“Don’t we have any Tim Tams left?”
“You must’ve eaten them all.”

“Hmph.” Her grandmother picked up a Scotch Finger and manoeuvred the soggy half into her mouth, handing over the crisp half to be dipped.

“That was the worst. Not even when Greg was gone, all those years… eight years he was gone, that first time, eight, no forwarding address. Bert almost died, twice, he lay on his hospital bed saying ‘Where’s my grandson? Where’s little Gregory?’ I sent a telegram to Reuters in Saigon but nothing. Nothing. Hopeless. We didn’t hear a thing, just like – and just like…”

Her grandmother sniffed and reached for the tissues, her wrinkled hands shaking, tears running down her face.

“I can’t stand it, Katie, I can’t do it again.”

“Nan –”

“If he doesn’t… if he doesn’t…” her grandmother clenched her fists around her tissue. “I know what it does, this family, if he doesn’t come back – it’s too hard, Katie, all this fighting, I can’t do it anymore.” Her voice had shrunk to a whisper. Her grandmother took off her glasses and put her hand over her eyes. The kitchen was still but for her grandmother’s sniffling.

If Ben didn’t come back. There was no streetlight outside and no moon. The blackness in the garden was complete.

Her grandmother took a sip of tea and spat it back into her mug.

“This tea’s too cold. I’m going to bed.”

Her grandmother pushed herself up and almost fell over. She jumped up and grabbed her, looping her arm under her shoulder.

“Nan, are you alright?”

“My legs, they feel a bit…”

“Here, let me…”

She hooked her other arm under her grandmother’s legs and gently lifted her up. She carried her to her bedroom, her independent grandmother, Elsie Talbot who was ninety and still lived alone. The bed was unmade, she could easily place Elsie down and smooth the sheets over her. Her grandmother said nothing, not when she tucked her up, not when she handed over the glass for her to put her dentures in.
“Katie.” Her grandmother grabbed her arm.

“You will come and get me for the dawn service – you will wake me.”

“Yes, Nan, I promise.”

“Lay out my clothes – yes, that wardrobe, hanging up in – no not that dress, are you mad? And the shoes – don’t forget to call a taxi, and your mother, I suppose – goodness no, can’t you see the elastic’s completely gone on those knickers? Try the other drawer…”

—— o ——

The house was empty. She heard every click and hum of the lights, the fridge, the road outside. The kitchen was cut short by the black night.

She tidied up. With each cup she washed, each half biscuit she saved and put back in the tin, she had the odd sensation that she was saying goodbye. She wanted to memorise it all as it was right now, that wooden chair with the carving of the rose on the back, this patch of lino where the green had been worn down into white. She was sure that tomorrow it wouldn’t be here, that it’d all be different. She’d wake up and the kitchen walls would be pink and the lemon tree in the garden would be growing apples. She could feel it, a tingling on her skin. She turned off the lights and stood by the kitchen door. She waited until her eyes adjusted, until she could see the outline of the furniture, until the garden was ever so slightly brighter than inside. Everything seemed to buzz, it looked fuzzy, it vibrated blackest against black.

She turned and headed upstairs. Her room was still covered with wallpaper and Greg’s still stank of bleach from when she had disinfected it. Besides, they were boys’ rooms, small rooms for smaller lives.

She climbed to the master bedroom at the top of the house. The air was dense with moisture and chill on her arms. The bedroom was musty with disuse but it was neat; someone must have prepared it and then never slept in it. Taking up most of the room was a rattly brass bed with an old floral quilt on top. A bedside table held a bowl of pot pourri, now completely brown and with only the vaguest hint of perfume. A large wardrobe faced the bed, completely empty.
From the window she could see down the street, down the hill and over half of Glebe. The network of streets was traced by lights, bright spots gathering around the pubs. People were out partying, it was still early, only just nine o’clock. This had been Poppy Jack’s and Nan’s room. Before that it’d been Bert and Dulcie’s room. Had they all used this bed? Had they all placed their night glass on the bedside table, their shoes tucked under the wardrobe before they slipped between the sheets?

The first spots of rain tapped on the window and she opened it as wide as it’d go. She felt inside out and needed the outside in, needed Glebe, needed Sydney to mark the dark floorboards. Here was the big bed she’d bring Jim home to. She could see it white, she could see the whole room painted white. The mattress was soft and the pillows smelled of lavender and tea-tree oil. These natural scents mingled with the memory of Jim’s hands of her hips. She tucked herself into the bed and listened to the rain, the water soaking into the windowsill and washing it clean.
Chapter Fifteen: Monday April 25th

The Last Post sounded clear and high above the crowd. The lights snapped off, over the road, over the sandstone GPO, over the cenotaph. Ten thousand held breaths, she could hear the creak of ribs where the air was trapped inside, heart thudding, desperate for release. Jim held her hand in the dark.

Reveille. The lights clicked on, jagged through the rain. Her mother’s face, her grandmother’s face, wet. Her own.

Umbrellas blossomed over the heads of the crowd.

— — o — —

The Argyle at the Rocks swelled with drunken sailors and pilots swaying under the strobe lights, soldiers singing rough songs in the courtyard. She leant against the sandstone, cool and damp by now, long after sundown. A soldier, she didn’t know him, turned round midway through a verse, beer raised in the purple night. She could see Ben, he’d be right there with all the others, arms around their shoulders as they stood in a tight ring, singing louder than everyone else, broad accent slightly off key. Grinning and yelling, everyone’s mate.

The soldier turned back to the group, swaying into the chorus. She gulped the last of her beer and left the pub, walking the back way, along the old tree-lined streets of Millers Point, dark and empty, towards home.
Bibliography

The Bibliography is divided into sections. I have separated the newspaper articles, film and television, documents from the Australian War Memorial, and websites from the other academic and literary texts. This is not only for greater ease of reference, but also to more clearly show the research for the novel, in particular the current state of the conflict in Afghanistan, and the character of the contemporary Australian soldier and of the contemporary Australian photojournalist.

Books, Chapters, Papers, Theses, Reportage


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Sound recording:


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Websites


Appendix I

THE 2015 ANZAC DAY DAWN SERVICE OF REMEMBRANCE
THE 2013 ANZAC DAY DAWN SERVICE OF REMEMBRANCE
Originated by the Australian Legion of Ex-Service Clubs and now conducted by the Anzac Day Dawn Service Trust Inc.

0430 hrs
MC: John Moore

HYMN: "ABIDE WITH ME"
Abide with me! Fast falls the eventide
The darkness deepens; Lord with me abide
When other helpers fail, and comforts flee
Help of the helpless, Oh, abide with me.

Hold Thou Thy Cross before my closing eyes;
Shine through the gloom, and point me to the skies;
Heavens morning breaks and earth's vain shadows flee;
In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me.

PRAYER: Chaplain: Richard Quadrio
ADDRESS: Rear Admiral Tim Barrett, AM CSC
Commander Australian Fleet
BANDS: Navy Band Sydney Detachment, Hills District Pipe Band, The Sydney Male Choir with Kuringgai Male Voice Choir

HYMN: "O GOD OUR HELP IN AGES PAST"
O God, our Help in ages past,
A thousand ages in Thy sight
Our hope for years to come
Are like an evening gone,
Our shelter from the stormy blast
Short as the watch that ends the night.
And our eternal Home
Before the rising sun.

ROYAL HYMN
DEDICATION: Lieutenant-Governor, The Honourable Tom Bathurst, QC
At this hour upon the 26th day of April in 1915, ANZAC became one of the immortal names in history. We who are gathered here think of those who went cut to the battlefields of war, but did not return. We feel them still near us in spirit. We wish to be worthy of their great sacrifice. Let us therefore once more dedicate ourselves to the ideals for which they died. As the dawn is even now about to pierce the night so let their memory inspire us to work for the coming new light into the dark places of the world.

Lieutenant-Governor The Honourable Tom Bathurst, QC, will then place the wreath of the Australian Legion of Ex-Service Clubs on the Cenotaph.

Official Representatives will immediately follow in laying wreaths.

ODE OF REMEMBRANCE recited by Madison Blackman and Leonard Cassimatis from Moorebank High School.

Please repeat after the Ode:

"WE WILL REMEMBER THEM" then "LEST WE FORGET"

LAST POST - MINUTES SILENCE - REVEILLE

"The sounding of "Reveille" at this Service proclaims our belief that the Landing on Anzac Cove was the dawn of a brilliant era in the march to nationhood of Australia and New Zealand."

SYDNEY MALE CHOIR and the KURINGGAI MALE VOICE CHOIR will render

"THERE IS NO DEATH"

HYMN: "THE HARDSHIP"

God of our fathers, known of old
Lord of our far-flung battle line
Beneath whose awful hand we hold
Dominion over palm and pine

Lord of God of Hosts, be with us yet
Lest we forget, lest we forget!

The Benediction will be pronounced.

NEW ZEALAND NATIONAL ANTHEM

God of Nations at Thy feet,}
In the bonds of love we meet,
Hear our voices. we entreat,
Lord of the free land.

Guard Pacific’s triple star
From the shafts of strife and war,
Make her praises heard afar,
God defend New Zealand.

THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL ANTHEM

Australians all let us rejoice
For we are young and free
We've gold and sand and outback fair
Our home is wide and free.

Advance Australia fair
Of beauty rich and rare,
In history's page, let every stage
Advance Australia fair.

You are asked to remain standing while the Lieutenant-Governor The Hon Tom Bathurst QC, deparls and the Band and Cadetique party march off. Ceremony closes.