THE FABLE OF ALL OUR LIVES

A Novel

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Part One
AN OLD SONG

Part Two
THE CODES OF MEANING

Part Three
BLOOD AND LIES

Part Four
BURN WHAT YOU LOVE

Part Five
GHOST DANCE
You will learn that your trouble is but part of the trouble of all the western world.

J.R.R. Tolkien

*The Lord of the Rings*
Part One

AN OLD SONG

Chapter One

He had been let out of the institution after ten years and given a grant to write poetry. Now he was looking for a place to dwell, a spot where he could settle into his work and into the new life he hoped for.

That’s how Tait came to be staying temporarily in the caravan in Jimmy Sale’s backyard. Jimmy had been a new psychiatric nurse at the institution and they’d got to know each other because of a mistake Jimmy made. Noting from the file one morning that it was Tait’s birthday, Jimmy had wished him many happy returns and said he would get the other patients to sing Happy Birthday at breakfast. Tait earnestly asked him not to, but Jimmy went ahead and of course it was awful. Hardly anyone joined in and there were jeers and hoots, and Jimmy had to coax the two or three who did sing to keep their tuneless quaver going to the end. The other nurses looked on with sardonic faces, while old Mrs Crawford, the senior pantrymaid, stood with arms folded across her gleaming porridge ladle, looking as though no human folly could surprise her.

Jimmy came afterwards to apologise for going against Tait’s wishes and when they got talking they found they related easily to one another. They were both in their twenties, and they liked many of the same things, like poetry and history and folk music and all that was quaint and outmoded. “Quaint and outmoded” became their key term of approval. Then they shortened it to “Q and O,” and finally to “QO.” The QO stood for an entire value-system, and when Jimmy did night-duty they would sit and talk about it into the wee small hours.

Jimmy’s wife Lauren was also a nurse at the institution and shared some of their interests and ideas. She seldom worked in Tait’s ward, but when she did night-duty in other wards he would go and have a cup of tea with her and keep her company while she knitted. Lauren Sale was a brilliant and relentless knitter.

After about three years Jimmy had had enough of the institution, or at least of that side of it that he and Tait called “the Regime.” Inmates consoling each other with a birthday song was a QO concept, while the spirit that turned it into derision was that of the Regime. Their notion of the Regime expanded to mean everything in the world that was the opposite of QO. The
QO and the Regime stood for light and dark, good and ill, and were at odds everywhere. Jimmy had gone into the community side of psychiatric nursing and was now a mental health counsellor with the regional health and welfare service. Lauren had escaped into home nursing for the elderly and infirm, none of whom would lack woolly scarves for the winter.

With those two gone the institution was a bleaker place for Tait, but then he won the MacLew Prize for poetry and there were signs that his release was on the cards. After the release he had lived for a few months in a supervised hostel, and was then more or less free to make his own arrangements, with the aid of the Arts Board grant which had just come through. He wanted to settle in the coastal lakes region near Jimmy and Lauren, so he’d come to stay a while in their caravan and have a look around.

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He was heading into Turrawong on a bus he hadn’t taken before. The route ran for some way along the shore of Lake Turrawong and he was looking at the water, thinking how lovely it was with the sunlight and the blue sky and the green line of the far shore in the distance. Most of the time you just saw fragments of the scene, bits of sky and water through the screen of trees, and there were shacks and weekenders and the occasional new house to hinder the view as well. But then there’d be a break in the trees and nothing else in the way and for a few exhilarating moments you would see the whole panorama.

There were lots of estate agent signboards. Every third or fourth block on both sides of the road seemed to have one. FOR SALE, they all said. He’d got so used to them that he almost didn’t notice this one in particular. It caught his eye because it was the first he’d seen that said FOR RENT. He looked past the sign into dappled shade and saw the cabin. The bus happened to be stopping to let someone off, so he got off too.

The cabin was at the far end of a very long block, with the dirt track of a driveway meandering up to it. Most of the block was shaded by tall trees and had the muted feel of a forest glade. The adjoining block to the left had an old shack on it but the ground there was open and grassy and covered with blue and white daisies. On the other side, to his right, were several blocks with nothing on them but scrubby bush.

He wanted to walk along the driveway to get nearer the water and have a closer look at the cabin itself. Not that he had any real thought of trying to rent it. It would be too expensive, and anyhow he was losing what little confidence he had in being able to find a place. He had never rented anything other than a cheap single room, and that was all those years ago, before
he went into custody. Renting a single room wasn’t too intimidating. Of course you needed to front up to someone and make an effort to seem personable, but you only had to sustain that for a short time. And then the arrangement only ran from week to week. If anything happened you could pick up your belongings and walk out the door. But renting a separate dwelling on its own piece of land was more daunting. There would need to be a lease, and they’d want to know who you are and what you do and whether you seem like a satisfactory person. Tait knew he could cite Jimmy Sale for a reference, but that was all he had. Jimmy had tried to talk the whole thing up in his optimistic way, arguing that Tait’s history might have counted against him once but wouldn’t necessarily do so now. Nowadays he had positive achievements on his record, like winning the MacLew.

“That’s right,” Tait had replied. “I can show them my clippings: ‘Maniac Wins Prize.’”

The cabin looked unattended, but Tait was nervous of going on to the property. He was not a spontaneous person and getting off the bus impulsively like that had been an odd thing for him to do and he still felt slightly ruffled by it. He had been standing at the front fence for several minutes and was worried about how his loitering might look to anyone who had an eye on him. He was about to walk away to the bus stop when he heard a voice call out:

“No-one there, squire.”

He turned. There was a derelict shop across the road and in front of it a big old American car parked half way up on the footpath, a car with high sweeping fins and a vast amount of chrome grille. But he could see no one.

“Go and have a good look, squire,” the voice said. “It’s okay. There’s no bugger there.”

Then he saw a movement. A man was lying on his back in the gutter beneath the front of the car. He could only see the top of the man’s head and an arm reaching up into the car’s innards.

“Thanks,” Tait called back.

“No worries, squire,” came the reply, with a clank of metal.

The cabin was painted a light green colour with dark green on the door and window frames and the paint was pleasantly faded. The structure stood on concrete piles about a metre off the ground. The door was at the side with four steps leading up to a little wooden porch. He stood on the steps and pressed his face to a window and saw a kitchen area with taps and a sink. The inside was bare and clean but quite shabby. There were cracks in the lino and blotches on the wall. But Tait liked things a bit shabby. He was still wearing one of the old grey institutional shirts that a dozen blokes had worn before him. A nice degree of shabbiness humanized a
thing and made it QO. He went to the end of the cabin, the end facing toward the street, and
looked in the window there and saw a nice little room that would do to sleep in.

He had been saving the other end till last. Now he walked around into full sight of the
water. He felt the salt breeze on his face and felt his spirit expand as though the breeze had
filled it like a billowing sail. The window at that end showed a fairly spacious room with
walls in exactly the shade of light blue he liked. He saw what a lovely work room it would
make. You could put your desk right at the window and have the lake and the sky to energise
and inspire you. Only the last line of trees at the very edge of the shore broke the view a little.
But without those trees it might become a bit too unremitting, he thought. The vistas of
eternity are all very well, but you need some shelter too.

There was a straggly wire fence that showed where the property ended, and then another
strip of ground which must be public reserve. He stepped over a drooping strand of wire and
crossed the remaining few metres to the edge. The land here was five or six metres above the
lake. He stood under the trees at the top of the bank and looked down at the lapping water.
This lake joined the sea and the tide was partly out, for he could see rippled mud and exposed
rocks. A pelican stood on a rock further away.

The breeze strengthened and the branches rustled above him and there was a sigh of air
through long grass. The lake was getting choppy and the surface far out was flecked white
with foam. He came out of his reverie and went back across the strip of reserve, noting a well-
trodden path along it, and stood again beside the cabin and surveyed the whole scene.

“This is QO,” he murmured.

He was glad he’d got off the bus. He looked at his watch and found he’d been there for
over an hour. His reverie had been deeper than he’d realized. He decided to take a last peek
into the kitchen as he left. He craned to peer into the corners of the room and something
catch his eye. Pinned to the wall was a magazine photo of the Danish pop-group Amma. He
felt a little shock of surprise and emotion, for he was in love with one of the Amma girls, the
long-haired blonde one with the more reserved manner, Astrid.

For the final couple of years in the institution she had been his mainstay. He’d gone to
sleep every night thinking about her, and every day he yearned for the evening hour when the
TV was switched on and there might be an Amma video-clip. They showed Amma clips a lot
then. But lately the group’s popularity had waned and people made jokes about them, as
though they’d been shown up as frauds or something. But Tait believed they had done their
bit to make the times bearable, and Astrid most of all. There was a poem there. He knew it
related to the QO and the Regime and their struggle for the soul of the world, but he wasn’t
sure how. It nagged at him, and he wanted to be settled somewhere so he could focus on it, and on other things in the back of his mind that needed fetching out.

He strained to see the photo more clearly. Yes, there was Astrid, on the right, looking out at him. He felt stirred by her look and wished he could go into the cabin and get the picture and take it with him. He had a sudden thought and tried the door, but it was firmly locked. Then he thought of forcing a window and knew he had better calm down. As he walked back down the driveway the breeze sighed through the grass of the adjoining block and the daisies dipped and waved. They looked so very fresh and lovely against the lush green. He thought: “If I lived here I would dedicate those flowers to Astrid.”

Back on the street he saw that the man from under the car was leaning in the doorway of the derelict shop, puffing on a cigarette.

“How’d you go, squire?” the man called.

“Good thanks,” Tait replied, beginning to walk towards the bus stop.

“Think ya might take the place?”

“No, not really,” Tait said, coming level with the shop.

“I would’ve sworn you was a bit interested.”

Tait was holding off in case the bloke was a yobbo, but there was no offence in his tone and Tait felt he owed him a civil word for his helpfulness earlier.

He crossed the road to the shop. The man was dressed like a run-down cowboy in grubby denims and high-heeled boots that were coming apart. He was older than Tait had realized, and very thin.

“I do like the place,” Tait said “but I think the rent would be too high, with the waterfront position and everything.”

“Fifty a week,” the man replied.

“Really?” said Tait.

“That’s what the last tenant was payin. They might’ve put it up to fifty-five, now, I s’pose.”

“Fifty-five, you think?”

“Yeah,” said the man, taking another puff on his thin hand-rolled cigarette. “That’s what I’d reckon.”

Tait was reflecting that fifty-five a week might just be manageable, and wondering if he dare get his hopes up.

“Well, thanks for that,” he said. “I’d better keep moving.”

“No worries, squire.”
Just then Tait realized the shop wasn’t derelict. It was open for business. Through the door he could see some groceries on a shelf and some ancient, blackened equipment for cooking chips and hamburgers.

“Yeah,” said the man, seeing his glance. “We run the shop here. If you was in the cabin we’d be handy for ya.”

“Yes,” Tait agreed.

“Well, might see ya again then, squire.”

“Yes, perhaps.”

Up close Tait saw that the big car was a Plymouth, a convertible with a cloth top. There were words painted in fancy but faded letters on the door. He could not quite make them out because of dents in the metal and scratches in the duco. As he walked away his eye followed a seam of rust that ran along the whole side of the car. The back tyre was completely flat and the rim of the rusted back wheel was on the ground.

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He didn’t mention the cabin to Jimmy that night. Jimmy, with his typical over-enthusiasm, would puff it up into more than it really was and maybe jinx the possibility of it. Not that that the puffing-up wouldn’t have been fun. The three of them had routines they’d been doing for years, and especially “Robin Rainbow and Beadle Brimstone.” It would start with Jimmy going off on some typical flight of fancy until he noticed the looks he was getting from the other two and would then start rhapsodizing to an absurd degree, sending himself up, being the super-optimist Robin Rainbow. That was Tait’s cue to become the Scottish puritan killjoy Beadle Brimstone and denounce the whole thing as “the Devil’s kettle o’ whistles” and suchlike. Then Lauren would peer solemnly over her clicking needles and pronounce one of the mixed-up proverbs they liked.

“Gentlemen,” she might say. “Allow me to pour oil on troubled feathers.”

“By all means, dearest.”

“Let’s not cross our bridges till we have one in the bush.”

“A luminous insight!”

“I’ll have nae truck with it!”

“Speak your piece, good Beadle.”

“Mark me well, ye sinners! A word to the wise canna make a horse drink!”

“Aha, a telling point. And what do you say to that, my dear?”
“Only this. A bird in the hand never boils.”
“A masterly riposte!”
“Aye, and I ken the stench o’ the faggots in it! The harridan’s a witch, I tell ye! A witch! A witch!”

Next morning Tait went to the office of Fair Deal Real Estate and told a glowering man at the counter that he wanted to ask about a rental. The man grunted that he would attend to him in just a sec, but then ignored him for half an hour while he had argumentative conversations on the phone. Tait heard the man identify himself as Garry Leggett. He would have left except that he kept thinking of the photo in the cabin and that he should persevere for Astrid’s sake. Then a woman came out of a back office and asked if she could be of help. She wore a name tag that said Bella and though it was only ten in the morning she seemed weary. She confirmed that the rent on the cabin was fifty-five a week and asked him if he wanted a viewing of the premises. His heart leapt at that. It might be a chance to swipe the photo, whether or not he obtained the cabin. But he replied that it was okay, that he’d been there and had checked it out through the windows. Then he worried that that might have been the wrong thing to say. But Bella seemed relieved that she wouldn’t be put to the trouble. She took his details and asked for the names and numbers of two referees. He cited Jimmy Sale for one, and his contact person at the Arts Board for the other. Bella said it would take a couple of days to put it through the channels and get an answer. He left, thinking he had little chance of securing the cabin, but that thanks to Bella the ordeal of applying hadn’t been quite as bad as he’d feared.

Returning two days later he sensed at once that his name had clicked and that they knew who he was. Bella had more vitality this time. She smiled when she saw him and came straight over. She said the owners had agreed to let him have the cabin on a six-month trial lease. If he chose to go ahead she could do the paperwork at once. Yes, he said, he would go ahead. She went to a desk and began to type the details on to a lease form.

All the while Leggett stomped about in the background. He pretended to be occupied with other things but Tait could feel the hostility. The years in custody had made him very skilled at picking up vibrations. Leggett came to glare over Bella’s shoulder at the lease form, his hands on his hips, his mouth pursed in disdain. He leaned over and jabbed at the form with his finger and hissed some remark. Bella hissed back at him and he stalked into the rear of the office again, but shot blazing looks across at Tait.

Having heard comments about himself on the radio, Tait knew what kind of thoughts and feelings Leggett might be fuming over.
First there had been the flurry of the MacLew Prize while he was still in custody, although the response to that had been pretty much in his favour. It was when he was released that it got more unpleasant, with some people affronted that a character like him had only been locked up for a mere piddling ten years, and declaring that a Life Sentence was a joke if it didn’t mean exactly what it said. The Arts Board grant coming straight after that had been a double-whammy for people of that mind. A question was asked in parliament, and the talk-back gurus like Ron Dodd played it up as an issue for a day or two. Tait had listened to several of Ron Dodd’s callers and had been shocked at the brutality of their opinions and the hatred in their tone. But then he felt that he was hearing wretched people wrestling with their own inner demons. For surely only the horribly driven would want to go on the airwaves to rant about matters they don’t understand and spit venom against someone they don’t know. They were trying to deal with the bad stuff inside themselves, but they didn’t have the insight to know that, so they thought it was all about the bad stuff in someone else. Leggett’s behaviour was the same kind of acting-out of his own misery. And Tait knew all about that kind of acting-out. It was what had got him into custody in the first place.

How ironic, he thought, that the situation here was just about the opposite of what Leggett was imagining. Like those talk-back callers, he no doubt saw himself as impeccably sane and decent, and saw Tait as a leering psychopath bent on mayhem and being ridiculously mollycoddled by authorities who should know better. “You fooled them, you bastard,” Tait could almost feel him thinking, “but you don’t fool me!” In fact of course it was Leggett who was the more likely menace to others, for he was a seething mass of feelings that did not know themselves for what they were.

Tait tried to think what means this man might have to harm him — not this minute, but next week or next month. If this was back in the institution and Leggett had been a screw, Tait would be alert to every nuance, every move, every avenue of attack. He’d had the gift of survival in that world. He knew it the way a forest creature knows the forest. But out here he often felt menaced in ways that were obscure to him, felt on the verge of panic sometimes, like some forest creature suddenly set down on open prairie.

He might even then have changed his mind about the cabin, but thoughts of Astrid sustained him. He signed the lease and paid four weeks rent and the equivalent of another four weeks as a bond. He’d just been to the bank and the notes were crisp and new. He laid them down on the counter and Bella made out a receipt and gave it to him, along with his copy of the lease and two keys on a key-ring. She urged him to see about the electricity at once. If he was quick he might even have the power on at the cabin that evening.
As he went out the door he felt Leggett’s eyes boring into his back. As he passed the front window he turned his head and saw a sinister face glaring back at him and realized with a shock that it was his own reflection in the glass.

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Jimmy and Lauren were delighted about the cabin and that evening they drank to the occasion with a couple of bottles of stout that Jimmy insisted on opening. They all loved stout. It was so Irish. Anything Irish tended to be QO in their value system.

As a community mental health nurse, Jimmy knew all kinds of private stuff about all sorts of people. When Tait mentioned Leggett’s hostile demeanour, Jimmy replied that the bloke was under a good deal of pressure.

“Of course,” he continued, “my ethics prevent me from discussing it.”

“You’re ethics are widely talked of.”

“It’s a question of rectitude.”

“Rectitude? That’s to do with rectums, isn’t it?”

“Yes. It means ‘always cover your arse.”

“Good policy.”

So Tait heard how a hypothetical real estate agent with Regimic tendencies had started bullying two young tenants, a hippie couple with an infant. They were broke, their baby was sickly and their relationship was in the pits. Then the hippie guy shot through and left the girl and the baby on their own. The agent took to going round there at all hours, playing the heavy and intimidating the girl. She was friendless and helpless, or so it seemed. One night the agent went there and barged in with his own key and started bullying her in the kitchen. It was then that Nemesis walked in from the other room, in the form of a detective-sergeant with a build like a cement truck and a glare that would kill a rotweiler. This was the girl’s father. They had been estranged and he’d only just found where she was. He had come to take her, and his grandchild, back to the bosom of the family. The hypothetical agent was then given a lesson in the true art of intimidation. After being reduced to a quivering jelly he was allowed to crawl away to reflect on the half-dozen criminal charges he was facing, from trespass to assault, not to mention the early cancellation of his real estate licence. The agent’s wife worked in the office with him, and their marriage, which had been in trouble for some time, was now at crisis point.
This hypothetical agent was unlikely to have gained any wisdom from the experience, Jimmy said. He was not only a bully but a grievance-monger, with little insight into himself. He was the type who demands to know: “Who shitted in my trousers?”

Jimmy and Lauren went to bed and Tait sat on the step of the caravan in the backyard, gazing at the stars. The power wouldn’t be on at the cabin till next day, so he was to have another night here. But even after the stout he had drunk he still didn’t feel sleepy. He began to think that he would go to the cabin. The more he thought about it the stronger the impulse became.

He crept back into the house and used the phone in the lounge-room to call a taxi, keeping his voice low. He jotted a note saying he’d gone to the cabin and left it on the kitchen counter. Then he got two candles and a box of matches from the kitchen cupboard and crept back out. He took the narrow mattress from the bed in the caravan and wrapped it around a pillow and a quilt and tied the bundle with twine.

The journey only took fifteen minutes and Tait asked the taxi driver to wait while he went and made sure the key worked in the door.

With the night so clear and starry it wasn’t hard to see his way along the driveway, even in the deep shadows of the trees. The cabin loomed up ahead, with the silver sheen of the water behind it. He went up the four steps to the little porch and carefully tried the key. The door opened into the dark of the kitchen and he saw something white on the floor just inside. It was an envelope and that gave him a flutter of apprehension. He stood there for a few moments, listening to the silence, then went and paid the taxi and got his roll of bedding and took it in inside.

He stood in the kitchen, holding a lighted candle that cast his own shadow on the wall. There was a musty smell but it wasn’t unpleasant. He looked through the doorways into the other two rooms, then came back into the centre of the kitchen.

He’d been saving the moment when he would go to the photo pinned on the wall behind the door. There it was. He held the candle close and Astrid was looking straight at him. He touched the photo with his fingertips, as if to establish that it was his now, then leant and kissed Astrid’s corner of it.

The flutter of apprehension came back as he bent to pick up the envelope and saw his name scrawled on the front. He opened it and held the candle close and saw that it was a note from Garry Leggett.
It said that when they’d counted the day’s takings that evening they were a hundred dollars short. Someone had underpaid them. It said the matter would be resolved if the underpayment was rectified. It said that Tait might want to examine his conscience.

He stood with his mind whirling, trying to think it through. It was ridiculous. He had paid what was required, had put the crisp new notes down on the counter one by one under Bella’s very eyes.

Then he understood. Bella knew nothing of this letter. It was Leggett’s malevolence at work, and Tait knew that kind of stuff like the back of his hand. This was like the test of nerve an inmate undergoes with a malevolent screw. The screw offers a provocation and waits to see what will happen. If the prey makes a wrong move, coil after coil will be thrown around it as if by a python.

The key thing was to not let the process get fully started. Once the python had got a coil or two around you there was little hope. You had to make it clear from the start that you aren’t rattled and your nerve will hold. Then most times the python will seek an easier mark. He began to regain composure, although it was creepy to think Leggett had been there only a short time ago and so full of ill-will. Then the thought came that the python could still be lurking about. Tait now found his own shadow on the wall a bit menacing. He went and closed the door and slid the bolt.

Going into the large room, the one he intended to work in, he blew out his candle and stood at the window and gazed at the starry sky and the silvery lake. The beauty began to take effect and after a while his mind was clear and calm.

He had a pledge to keep, and he would keep it right now as an act of commitment, as a proof that he meant to retain his nerve and his balance in this new life. He lit the candle again and went back into the kitchen and to the cupboard under the sink. By the candle’s light he found an old saucepan. He ran some water into it, and then went outside and stood among the blue and white flowers with the saucepan in one hand and the candle in the other. A full breeze was coming off the lake, but the little flame of the candle held. He took that for a good omen. He said the words he had formulated:

In the spirit of the QO
And by the light of star and candle
And through the quickening of water
I dedicate these flowers to Astrid.
As he poured the water out on the ground an inspiration came to him and he added:

And I name this ground Astrid’s Meadow.

It felt properly done. He went back inside and bolted the door and unrolled his mattress on the floor and slept soundly till morning. He was woken by a cheerful rapping on the door. It was Jimmy calling in on his way to work to enthuse over how well things had turned out.

* * * *

He needed household goods. He was willing to splurge on one or two brand-new items, like a really good desk-lamp and an electric jug, but otherwise he meant to live frugally and there was a big charity op-shop in Turrawong where he could get most of what he needed.

He found a sturdy old single bed. And there was solid old dining table that would do nicely for a desk. And he found an office chair to go with it, one that had good back support for all the hours he would be working. He needed an armchair and spent a long time testing the five that were there. The furniture was in the big back storage area of the shop and being alone there he was able to recline in each of the armchairs and close his eyes and get the feel of the contours. He finally chose the one with broadest and flattest arm-rests. Good arm-rests were important. You could set a mug of tea on them, or a book, or a note-pad if you needed to jot anything down. He also picked out a small set of bookshelves. He did not own many books yet, but he would buy more and get additional shelves as the need arose. Amongst the furniture he kept seeing old blue plastic milk crates, the kind that are almost indestructible. They were going for nearly nothing and he decided to buy half a dozen of them.

After the furniture section he went to where the sheets and towels and curtains were. He had to get coverings for all the cabin windows and he wanted ample thick material that would pull right across. He hated the idea of anyone being able to see into his dwelling, especially when the inside was lit and the outside was dark. If he was out on the street at night and found he could see into people’s houses he always thought how stupid those people were, and how they almost deserved to have something bad happen, to teach them the value of privacy. It always made him think of a line from Conrad’s Heart of Darkness: “the outrageous flauntlings of folly in the face of a danger it is unable to comprehend.”

A degree of trust in the goodness of the world was one thing, flaunting like a fool was quite another.
It took him a while to pick out a bundle of curtains. He had to make sure they were in colours and patterns he could live with. No colours too loud, and no aggressive geometric patterns that could induce a headache. He took the bundle to the counter, then pointed out to the lady on duty the items of furniture he had chosen. She went around attaching “Sold” tickets to the items and making conversation. She was tall and well-dressed and well-groomed and had a string of pearls round her neck.

She gave no sign of knowing who he was when she wrote his name and address on a delivery form. She had established that he was new in the district and he wondered if she would ask him what he did. He had an answer prepared. He would say he was studying research methodology. He thought that sounded sufficiently off-putting. You couldn’t say you were on a grant to write verse. That would be too embarrassing all round. You needed something to fend off the curious. The poet Auden used to tell inquisitive strangers on trains that he was a medieval historian and found they seldom wanted to probe any further. Research methodology might equally do the trick.

But the lady didn’t ask any questions. Instead she filled him in on the current doings of the town. He found out the Library had just been expanded and that funds had been approved for the upgrading of the swimming pool. The Turrawong Players had a show in rehearsal and the Golf Club Charity Ball was nearly upon them again this year. And soon the celebrations for the centenary of the railway line would need to be taken in hand. Tait picked up that she knew about all these activities because she was involved in them all, that she was one of those types who is always on all the committees for everything. But none of what the lady said was mere vacuous chatter. She spoke with a lucid economy of phrase that was bracing to hear. In fact she struck Tait as too impressive a person to be behind the counter of an op-shop and he wondered what she was doing there.

But the main news was that the Historical Society was moving to a new site out on the Valley road. They’d built a new Pioneer Museum. It had taken ten years of fund-raising, the lady said, and she didn’t mind admitting it had been an uphill struggle at times. Tait nodded gravely and remarked that he had always liked museums. The lady handed him a card with the name and phone number of the Society’s president on it. He read the name aloud: “Megan Marchant”

“That’s me,” said the lady. “Pleased to meet you. Do consider yourself cordially invited to the opening.”

“That’s very kind.”

“Not at all. We’d love to see you there.”
“Is it very far along the Valley road?”

“Just a hop and a step.”

“It’s just that I don’t have any transport of my own.”

“Oh, I’m sure we can organize a lift,” she said. “Phone me a day or two beforehand. Best time to reach me is before nine in the morning or between five and seven in the evening.”

“Thanks.”

“You wouldn’t ordinarily have caught me here today,” she went on. “I only do the occasional stint. As a rule I’d be at the River Reclamation Group now. Are you keen on restoring the inland waterways at all?”

He replied that he’d often meant to find out more about the inland waterways and she told him of the group working to clean up the Turrawong River.

He paid for his purchases and she told him they’d be delivered next afternoon, if Kelvin had surfaced. She didn’t say who Kelvin was or what kind of surfacing was meant. Just then several people came noisily into the shop and she had to attend to them.

“Do ring me about the lift,” she called as he went out the door.

He was relieved to be outside and on his own. He was glad to have met Megan Marchant and to have learnt so much about the life of the town, but he’d begun to feel depressed. He’d been finding it a strain to keep the Mask on his face.

The Mask was what he called that look you had to wear in social situations. It was meant to be polite, open, attentive and sympathetic. He occasionally practiced that look in the mirror, but in real situations it never felt secure. It always felt on the verge of turning into the Grimace — a sort of gargoyle face of impatience and worry. The Grimace was what he’d seen reflected in the real estate office window. It had shocked him because until then he hadn’t quite realized he could go from one face to the other completely without knowing.

It was a warm afternoon and there was no breeze in the town. He walked along the main street that was thundering with traffic and full of the flashing glare of sun on chromium and glass. The main highway ran through here and the long-haul semi-trailers roared through day and night, or groaned as they geared up again from a dead stop at the traffic lights opposite the railway station. Turrawong was a notorious bottleneck and a new freeway was being built a few miles to the west. Tait went past the railway station and turned to the left and headed for the bank of the river. He wanted shade and solitude.

The river was lovely once you got away from the big concrete bridge that carried all the road and rail traffic. He walked along the bank to where the river curved and the bridge went out of sight and the traffic noise faded. He found a little wooden jetty, shaded by trees that
leaned out from the bank. He went and sat down on it with his back against an upright. The town did not extend across the river and the far side was still mostly a flat expanse of paddocks with some cattle and horses grazing. But they were building something called an “industrial estate” over there, alongside the highway. He had seen a display about it outside the Shire Council chambers. The display said this region had the highest growth-figures in the state and that the future looked beyond imagining. That was the title of the display: *A Future Beyond Imagining*. From where Tait sat he could see two yellow bulldozers. From this distance they looked very small in the landscape and almost as inoffensive as the cattle and horses.

A breeze came along the river and ruffled the water and the long grass of the bank and the leaves overhead. The sound of rustling leaves reminded him of the idea of the institution being like a forest and the inmates being like small forest creatures and malignant screws being like pythons. There was a poem there, he knew. It was about survival skills, a constant subtle reading of small signs and making of small adjustments. Those with the gift of survival can live among pythons with the least fear and fuss. But of course not all have the gift, and there can be lapses of attention, or sheer bad luck, so there is always a certain amount of horror taking place. Not becoming too rattled by that is the very essence of the gift.

Tait then thought about the Astrid poem he wanted to work on. That had to come first. He must hurry and get himself installed in the cabin and set up in a proper work routine. He had to bring that poem into the workshop. That’s how he thought of it. A poem being properly worked on was “in the workshop,” laid out on the bench in this or that stage of completion. He always carried a bag with him, a leather satchel with a shoulder strap, and he mostly wore it slung round in the small of his back. It contained whatever book he happened to be reading, a thickish note-pad, a few different coloured biros, a folding umbrella, and some other small odds and ends. He now took the note-pad out and jotted down one or two thoughts about the forest habitat so he wouldn’t lose them. But he was aware that he needed to concentrate on Astrid. He needed to have Astrid on the work-bench.

The afternoon was beginning to wane. He could lose all track of time when he was thinking about his work and he must have been on the jetty for a couple of hours. He got up and walked back towards the main street.

* * *
All the local bus routes began and ended at Turrawong railway station, so he went to check his bus time on the noticeboard there. He needed a number 22, the one that ran alongside the lake, but they weren’t very frequent. He was hungry and the Athena milk bar and cafe was just over the road, but a 22 bus was due in five minutes and he felt he’d better catch it. He would find some food closer to home, either at the shop across from the cabin, or from the general store at the next stop along. There was a liquor shop up there as well.

The 22 bus route was picturesque. Coming into town that day he had enjoyed it in the clear sunlight, and now he saw it in terms of the dusky beauty of the evening. At first it followed the river out of town, then the river grew wider and you could sense the transition point. The fresh water coming down from the hills west of the town met the salt water that came in from the sea to the east. Along that stretch you became conscious of a larger sky and a freer wind, and of a salty tang in the air, the whole change from river to lake. There were jetties with little working boats moored alongside them. Prawning boats, mostly. And then the route turned right away from the river and went through a broad area of marsh with only a few isolated dwellings but many flood-depth markers along the roadside. Tait christened that area The Fens and amused himself by pretending it was full of dark secrets and lurking menaces. Then the route came on to the road that ran along the shore of the lake and past the cabin.

He stayed on the bus as it went past the cabin, looking to see if the shop over the road was open, but it didn’t seem to be. He got off at the general store further along. The general store was also a post office and packed so much into a small space that it was difficult to move around the aisles without bumping things. It was run by a balding, finicky sort of man who seemed to be called Errol. There was a girl of about ten or eleven behind the counter. She wore big round glasses and looked at you all wide-eyed through them. She was very polite and serious and it was like being attended to by a sweet little owl. Tait bought bread and cheese and a carton of milk.

He thought to walk back along the strip of reserve at the lake edge, but found there was only a vague foot track that went crookedly up and down the steep bank and amongst the rocks and patches of mud at the bottom. It was too dark now to try it, so he walked back along the road and then cut through to where the reserve began about three hundred metres or so from the cabin. There it was, his own little dwelling, and there were the flowers of Astrid’s Meadow, bobbing slightly in the breeze. It all had a different relation to the water when you saw it from this angle. Tomorrow, he thought, he would come along the reserve from the other side and get the feel of that.
He sat down under a tree at the top of the bank and gazed out over the lake for a long time. The lights were winking and glowing on the far shore. If you looked across and a bit to the left you saw the lights of Tuskett, where Jimmy and Lauren lived. If you looked away to the right you saw the lights of The Inlet, a holiday town famous for its New Year’s Eve revels. Straight across, in between the two, was a dark area, a long low strip of sandy scrubland that separated the lake from the sea. That strip had been made a heritage reserve because of its special ecology. There was a lighthouse over there too, facing out to sea, and every half-minute or so there’d be a huge vague flicker on the horizon as its beam turned.

There were lights everywhere really, except on that long dark strip of the heritage reserve. The whole region was being urbanized and the towns were becoming less and less separate entities and more just the commercial centres of suburbs, with semi-rural patches in between. Only in the hills and valleys to the west of Turrawong town was it still the old countryside. The local papers were always debating Development versus the Environment, but the pattern of the lights made it clear which side of the argument was winning.

The lights were beautiful, all the same.

The breeze freshened and the lights winked and Tait sat on. He remembered how hungry he was and began eating the bread and cheese and drinking the milk. No food had ever tasted so good. He looked up and saw the moon through the tree above him. The branches moved in the breeze and there was a growing choppyness out on the lake and you could hear the quickening lap of the water around the rocks at the foot of the bank.

He looked up through the rustling leaves again and it was as if the moon was inducing their movement and inducing all the other tremors of air and water and grass. Tait got a vivid sense of the oneness of all motion, from the trembling of a leaf to the tides of the ocean. He remembered two lines from a poem by Francis Thompson:

\[
\text{The innocent moon, that nothing does but shine,}
\]
\[
\text{Moves all the labouring surges of the world.}
\]

The words had only just then come fully alive for him. That’s how poetry was, he reflected: you can tell abstractly in your mind that a piece of language is beautiful, but you only receive the spirit of it through the actual breath and pulse of life. The beauty is like the shine, while the spirit is more in the surges of the world.

He was leant back on his arms, gazing up through the branches again. As he adjusted his posture he felt a sharp pain in his left hand and jerked it away from the grass, thinking
instantly of a snake. He jumped up and almost lost his footing at the edge of the bank, then moved a few paces off and peered intently back at the spot, aware of how pointless it was to look for a snake at night in long grass. He imagined his bitten hand already turning a deathly blue or something and the venom seeping through his whole body. He went shakily across to the cabin and with his good hand fumbled for his key and got the door open. Flicking the kitchen light on he saw that his hand was dripping blood. He hurried to the tap and washed the blood away so he could see the wound. It was a long cut, and nothing like a snake-bite. That calmed his fright somewhat. He left his hand under the running water for a minute, then wrapped it in a handkerchief. He got his torch and went back to where he’d been and found a litter of smashed beer bottles. He’d been cut by broken glass.

There was blood on his clothes and on the cabin floor. He felt shaky. He wrapped the hand again in a small towel and lay down on the mattress, wondering what the first signs of tetanus were. Then he stopped worrying. He thought instead about the innocent moon that nothing does but shine, and about the eternal surges of the world. Then he thought about Astrid who was part of it all, as he was himself. Then he was sound asleep.

* * * *

Next morning Tait decided to go into Turrawong. He was concerned about the cut on his hand. It was very painful now and crusted with dried blood and he wanted to get some antiseptic and a roll of bandage from the chemist so he could clean it up properly. He also felt famished and wanted a good hot breakfast and coffee. He was impatient to get organized so he could start to focus on his work. He needed a firm daily routine and settled arrangements, and to have his few possessions at his fingertips in a small secure space. In fact he needed something like his old life in his old cell in maximum security. Yes, and above all he needed the rubber tub in the corner!

He laughed out loud, remembering how he and Terry Dix used to joke about the effects of institutionalisation. He and Terry were the same age, had come into custody at nearly the same time, and had similar careers through the system. The only difference was that Tait had pleaded guilty and got the life sentence, while Terry was found innocent of his crime on the grounds of insanity and was thus being held at what they called “the Governor’s Pleasure.” In maximum security cells you only had a small rubber tub to do your business in. There was an art to using them, for they weren’t very big and you had to squat and direct your efforts the right way so as not to have a mess on the floor. And even if you avoided making a mess, there
was no lid on the tub and it might be reeking in the corner for many hours before you got the chance to empty it. They used to talk about visiting each other in thirty or forty years time, when they’d both been released and were living in rented rooms. The joke was that each would find the other’s room set up exactly like a cell, and with a rubber tub in pride of place in the corner.

“Ah, you can’t beat the old tub,” Terry would declare, like some old codger recalling the golden days. “When you’re squattin there and a big one drops. Now that’s what I call the Governor’s Pleasure!”

Tait was sitting on the steps of the little porch, waiting to go to the bus stop, when a flatbed truck turned into the driveway and came along and pulled up. A tall and very very fat man got out. He was about Tait’s age but had bright purple hair and ring through his nostril. He asked in a rather high-pitched voice if Tait’s name was Trott. Tait said that wasn’t actually his name but he would answer to it since it was his furniture on the back of the truck.

“Whatever,” the man shrugged, making an effeminate gesture with his wrist. He began untying the ropes.

“Would you be Kelvin?” Tait asked, going to help.

“Whatever,” the man piped and shrugged again.

Kelvin began lifting the armchair. Tait tried to assist but was scolded away and told to take the smaller items. The fat man was clearly very strong.

“I wasn’t expecting you till this afternoon,” Tait said.

“We could all be dead by then,” Kelvin replied flatly.

When everything had been taken inside, Kelvin turned to go and then noticed the picture of Amma.

“Oh, I adore Amma!” he cried, clutching his hands together. “You’re a fan too, are you?”

“Very much.”

“Which one do you like best? Magnus is lovely, isn’t he?”

“Yes,” Tait agreed.

“Your favourite would be, um….” Kelvin murmured, making an appraisal of the faces in the picture with his fingertip.

“They’re all good,” Tait said, not wanting to talk about Astrid.

Kelvin put his hands on his fat hips and looked around the room.

“Well, “ he said, “I love what you’ve done with the place. Amma on the wall and blood all over the floor.”

“I cut my hand...”
“So I see.”
“I haven’t had a chance to clean up. I need to buy a mop and stuff in town. I was just heading there when you came.”
“I can give you a lift right now.”

So Tait rode to town with Kelvin and they talked about the genius of Amma and the shittiness of the group’s detractors. Kelvin apologised for having been a bit abrupt. He said he had just driven back from the city after being up the last few nights with some friends on the razzle. Tait wondered how such a strange person came to be delivering goods for an op-shop. But he was getting used to the high-pitched voice and purple hair. They got into the centre of Turrawong and Kelvin stopped to let him off.

“You’re Whatsisname, aren’t you?”
“Yes.”
“The penny just dropped. I saw some stuff about you on the news a while back. You won a prize.”
“Yes,”
“And you served a Life Sentence.”
“Well, ten years of it, to be precise.”
“That’s plenty.”
“Yes.”
“Well, keep the faith.”
“The faith?”
“In our Danish Crumpets.”
“Absolutely.”
“Tell me though, is it Annabel you like best?”
“I like them all.”
“So it’s Astrid?”
“Yes.”
“She’s lovely.”
“So is Magnus.”

Kelvin did a little adoring kiss into the air at the mention of Magnus’s name, then made a campy gesture of goodbye and drove off.

Tait went to the chemist to get things for his hand. The woman there looked at the wound and told him he needed stitches and sent him to a Dr Pascoe nearby. The stitches hurt a lot
and the only consolation was that the doctor asked him what he did for a crust and he was able to use his line about research methodology.

He sat for a long while on a bench, getting over the queasy feeling from the doctor’s office, then went to the Athena cafe and ordered baked beans on toast and a strong coffee. After that he shopped for a mop and a broom and a few other minor items for the cabin and then caught a 22 bus and went home. He mopped the dried blood off the kitchen floor, then lay down on the mattress and slept intermittently until Jimmy and Lauren arrived.

It was late shopping night and they drove him to a big new mall over at The Inlet. Tait would normally have agonised for months over the purchase of a new kitchen appliance, but Lauren told him she wouldn’t let him leave the store until he’d bought what he needed.

“But everything’s expensive,” he protested. “Look at the price of this toaster.”

“What do you think the tax-payers gave you that grant money for?” she demanded.

“Champagne and call-girls and nights at the casino.”

“Yes, that’s what I assumed,” agreed Jimmy.

“No, to buy what you need to live like a human being.”

“Well I’m one of the taxpayers,” Jimmy said, “and my bit was given for champagne and hookers.”

“Well my bit wasn’t,” Lauren declared. “And you’ll get better value from a toaster than you will from a hooker, believe me.”

So Tait forced himself to be decisive. He bought a toaster, a frypan, an electric jug, a desk lamp and a portable record-player. At the manchester store he bought a nice doona to sleep under and the most sumptuous bath-towel he’d ever seen. It was royal blue in colour and so large you could wrap yourself in it from head to toe. He needed some other things too, but felt so rattled by his own impetuosity that he couldn’t bring himself to spend another penny. He had made sure, though, to buy a padlock. There was a sliding bolt on the outside of the cabin door and Tait intended to use it. Gary Leggett might have a key to the place.

When they got back to the cabin they sat outside on three of the old plastic milk crates, with a bottle of stout and a packet of cashew nuts.

A possum was peering at them from a low branch. They placed a cashew nut on the branch and the possum ate it with relish. Then they put out several cashews in a row and the possum ate them one after the other. It was very tame and they figured it must live there, that it came with the cabin and was no doubt mentioned in the lease. They agreed they should give it a name and not let it continue in dry legalese as “the said possum” or “the aforementioned marsupial.” They christened it Cashew, and drank its health in stout.
Next day Tait set his house in order.

First he put the curtains up, cutting the material to size where necessary and hanging it from strong twine which he tied to the metal fittings at the top of each window. It was only a rough job but for now it made all the difference just having curtains to pull across when he wanted to. It was the key to feeling in control of his own space. The solid old bed fitted nicely into the small room, with his new doona on it and an upturned milk crate as a bedside table. There wasn’t much to do in the kitchen, aside from placing the electric jug and toaster and frypan on the bench near the sink.

It was the work room that really mattered and he arranged that with care.

The big sturdy table went in front of the window, with the office chair. The desk-lamp he’d bought was a beauty. It had a heavy base to keep it stable and the light was at the end of a long metal arm that you could adjust in any direction or at any height or angle. He set the armchair beside the work table so he could use the desk-lamp when he was sitting back reading, and he put another of the milk crates with it as a foot-rest. The bookshelf went against the back wall so that the spines of the books would be easily visible in the daylight from the window or in the light of the desk-lamp. The record-player also went against the back wall, on the other side of the doorway. He made a secure stand for it by binding the remaining four milk crates together with twine, two on top of the other two.

On one of the end walls – the right hand one as he sat at the work table – there was a large picture hook already fitted, as though the room awaited its presiding image or icon. Tait had bought a frame the right size for the Amma picture, so now he trimmed off the edges and put it into the frame. It looked good. He hung it from the hook and stood back and considered. The picture was just too small for the amount of wall space. He took it down and placed it on the work table. It went much better there.

One thing Tait had meant to buy was a noticeboard, one of those cork ones you can stick drawing pins in. For as long as he’d been writing verse he had been in the habit of prompting himself with reminder notices. It might be anything that had struck a chord. It might be a quote he had found and wanted to keep handy, or it might be the key idea for a possible poem. At the moment, for example, he had a sheet of paper pinned up in the kitchen. Written on it in large letters were the words “Astrid is ordinary.” This was a key idea for the poem he was fretting to write, and having it focussed like that would help consolidate it. At least, he hoped
it would. This system of visible reminders was his main organizing principle, but it could get out of hand and result in bits of paper all over the place. He wanted a noticeboard that would serve as his focal point and impose a degree of order. It would get filled up and when he wanted to add a new piece of paper he’d have to remove one of the others. Not that he’d throw the old things away. He’d store them in a box or something. Tait didn’t like to discard anything he’d had for any length of time. It felt somehow like an act of betrayal.

He was out in the little shed that contained the toilet and laundry. There were bits of junk in the corners and under the washtub. Old glass jars, a tangle of coathangers, a car battery, a rusted hurricane lamp. He didn’t disturb any of that because he’d seen a lizard scuttling amongst it and was afraid it might dart out at him. Upright against the wall was an old wardrobe door. It was of softish wood that might take drawing pins. For some reason it had a scatter of small drill-holes in it and two of them caught his eye. They were on either side, near the top. He could loop wire through those two holes and the thing would hang level. He cleaned it off and took it inside and inserted the wire, then tested the strength of the hook and found it was secure. He hung the sheet of wood from it and stood back. It looked right, except that it would need to be painted. Then he had a sudden inspiration. Ten minutes later the wood had a cloth covering. The sumptuous new bath towel, drawn tightly across and secured at the back, made a beautiful rectangle of royal blue against the light blue of the wall. And the angle of the daylight from the window enhanced the effect. It was like a piece of art, he thought, and it was almost going to be a shame to pin things on it.

The cabin still looked rather bare, but he was now at last set up to work and that was all that mattered. He would begin the next day. He fetched the sheet of paper from the kitchen, the one with the key idea for the Astrid poem, on it and pinned it in the middle of the Blue Board. But he needed something to put at the top, some pledge of his intent to make a real go of the work here. And it had to be a salute to the spirit of the QO. After a moment of reflection he took a sheet of paper and wrote out three lines in large letters, then wrote a name underneath. He pinned it at the top of the Blue Board and stood back.

It was a haiku, by an old Japanese master named Kyorai, And even though it was now the end of March, the message seemed exactly right:

New Year’s Day;
I will gird on this sword,
Heirloom of my house.
Chapter Two

Tait was enchanted to wake up in his own quiet dwelling, to open the curtains and see the morning sun on Astrid’s Meadow, to open the door and feel the fresh breeze from the lake and hear the sounds of the birds. It was lovely to sit with a cup of coffee, with your mind rested and refreshed, the energy of your thoughts beginning to gather. It was lovely to know that your work table was waiting for you, and that you could spend all day there if you wanted.

His approach was methodical and he mostly worked in conventional verse forms. He agreed with whoever it was who said that writing without the constraint of those forms was like playing tennis with the net down. He liked rhyme and metre and clarity and craftsmanship. He seldom had great lightning flashes of inspiration, or perhaps he just didn’t recognize them as such. He believed his task was to follow up those insights and intuitions that one gained in the ordinary way of things, although of course there was always the delicate question of what one meant by “ordinary.” The word could mean merely mundane and shallow, or it could mean being of the common fabric of existence. Tait felt that William Blake had summed it up when he wrote of seeing “heaven in a wildflower” and “eternity in a grain of sand.” It was precisely because wildflowers and grains of sand were “ordinary” things that they partook of the eternal and the fabulous.

That was the essence of Tait’s notion that Astrid was “ordinary.” And it was also the key to Wordsworth’s poem “The Solitary Reaper,” which was Tait’s current ideal, what he called his Companion Piece. At any given time he had a poem that served as a kind of yardstick, a model of the beauty and craft and coherence that he loved and wanted to achieve in his own work. His Companion Piece was the touchstone or talisman that he always kept handy. He would read it before starting a session of work. And later, if he began to lose his thread, or felt his thoughts becoming fragmented, he would turn to it again to recover clarity.

The very term Companion Piece conveyed a view of the art and craft of poetry, called up the notion of a band of comrades from all times and places. Poets might have lived ages apart and spoken tongues unknown to each other, but their material was always essentially the same, for it was the common fabric of all their existences — things like wildflowers and grains of sand, intimations of heaven and apprehensions of eternity. And the project was always the same one: to show, to connect, to make coherent.

Take the Astrid thing. You could say the feelings he had about her were the pathetic yearnings of a lonely introvert. You could say it was pitiful and unhealthy to give your heart
to a distant celebrity who doesn’t even know you exist. Most people would see it that way and they’d be right, but only partly, for they would be missing the part about the common fabric of existence, the part Blake perceived with the wildflower, and that Wordsworth understands in “The Solitary Reaper.”

A traveller passes a young Highland woman at work in a field, and she is singing a plaintive Gaelic song. He doesn’t understand the words and she doesn’t seem aware of his presence. On one level it is a non-event, a non-connection between strangers and aliens. And yet they are both human beings and the whole human condition is in the song, just as eternity is in the grain of sand.

_Whate’er the theme, the Maiden sang_
_As if her song could have no ending..._

But the poet knows exactly what the great theme is. It is the whole poignancy of existence, the deep continuity of human woe, and the equal persistence of the songs that make it bearable and even beautiful. The traveller continues over the hill and out of earshot, but:

_The music in my heart I bore_
_Long after it was heard no more._

Tait believed his job was to say what Wordsworth was saying, and what many others had said before and since, but to say it in his own particular voice, and out of his own circumstances, and from his own given moment in time. The aim was to produce a piece of work that accorded with Alexander Pope’s description: “What oft was thought, but ne’er so well expressed.” And if you were dedicated enough, and lucky, you might truly achieve that aim once or twice in your life.

Instead of a Highland girl in a field around the year 1800, it was a Danish girl in a recording studio – or in a video-clip or magazine photo – nearly two hundred years later. In terms of the common fabric, though, and of the common project, these differences were trivial.

So Tait sat to work each morning, jotting and revising, correcting and crossing-out, filling page after page. He would try everything six or twenty-six different ways. The poem might seem to cohere, but then fall away to nothing. He was looking to catch that glint of the authentic, what he thought of the “silver key” that would open all the secret doors. When he
needed a break to think or stretch his legs he would go and put the jug on for another cup of tea and stand looking out the door at Astrid’s Meadow. When it was late afternoon and he could take no more of the grind he would stop and get out of the cabin altogether.

The poem gradually emerged out of chaos, like the shape of a boat becoming visible amid the debris of a boat-builder’s yard. And that was the very simile that set the work straight, the glint of the silver key that unlocked it. When that image first came into Tait’s mind he saw the boat shape as that of a Viking longship, and that reminded him of Astrid’s whole heritage as a Dane. That then conjured the harshness of the Scandinavian climate, and of its historical past. That in turn made him recollect those Dark Age elegies on the plight of homeless wanderers, seafaring exiles who have no respite from the storm of the world, or from the winter in their hearts. And then he thought of how the flame of the candle had held out in the breeze when he dedicated the flowers and named Astrid’s Meadow.

Wordsworth had used a song as his device, and Tait used a fire.

An exiled wanderer is plying his boat on an icy sea. The bitter night falls. On the shore he sees a fire winking and glowing. He pulls into an inlet and huddles in the freezing dark, gazing at the fire from a distance. There’s a settlement there with rest and shelter. There’s a chieftain’s convivial hall, with meat and drink and camaraderie. He can share none of it, any more than his shivering body can feel the warmth of the fire. It stands for everything that he is bereft of, and yet even so he is comforted, for that glow is thawing his chilled spirit. That fire is an “ordinary” thing, yet profound and beautiful. It is a sign that shelter and warmth and companionship go on in the world, regardless of this or that man’s fate. It is like the grain of sand that holds eternity. It is like the song that can have no ending. And the wanderer needed that sign even more than he craved a warm bed or a flowing cup of mead.

At dawn the inlet is empty. The wanderer has continued on his way without the people of that place ever knowing he was there. But the heart of the exile has been consoled, at least for a short while.

After four days the poem was finished. There were twenty-four lines in six four-line stanzas. He couldn’t think of anything more that needed saying, and he could find no jarring phrase or superfluous word anywhere. Although the poem kept a severely impersonal tone and was set about fourteen hundred years before either of them were born, it was completely about Astrid and his feelings for her. He was the lonely exile and she was that consoling glow in the distance.

For a day or so afterwards Tait had the inner peace that came from the completion of a good poem. Then he began fretting over the next one.
He’d been getting to know the run-down cowboy at the shop across the road. The man was out front most days, working on or underneath the Plymouth.

“Glad you took the place, squire,” the man said when Tait went over to buy some milk.

“You and that cabin was made for each other.”

“You reckon?”

“Yeah. I got a knack of readin people. Comes from all me years o’ performin.”

“Ah, of course,” Tait said, nodding.

The man looked exactly as you’d expect a clapped-out country and western singer to look, one who had travelled too many miles, with too many late nights in too many towns.

“Jade Mustang,” the man said.

“Sorry,” Tait said, not quite catching it.

“Jade Mustang,” the man said again, with a pleased look, obviously thinking the name had rung a faint bell with Tait.

“Nice to know you,” Tait said.

They shook hands.

“Yeah, I had a pretty good profile when I was on the show circuit,” Jade said.

Tait tried to look as though he had a clear recollection of Jade Mustang, country and western star. He pictured one of those old photos of Hank Williams, gaunt and folksy-looking but done up to the nines in a big white hat and a fancy white suit. He suddenly realized that Jade Mustang were the words he hadn’t quite been able to decipher on the battered door of the Plymouth.

“Yeah,” Jade went on. “And Bam’s wrapped that we’re gettin a new regular customer.”

“Bam?”

“The wife.”

“Well, I’m after a carton of milk to begin with.”

“Good on ya, squire,” Jade said, wiping his hands on an oil-stained rag. “That’ll make Bam’s day. The business is more hers than mine. I’m lookin to get a profile again.”

He led the way into the shop.

“Bam!” he called out, “Ya there, Bam?”

“What, Jadey?” came a woman’s voice from the back.

“Got a live one for ya, darlin!”
“Be there in a sec, Jadey,” the voice replied.

Tait glanced around the shop. There were a couple of shelves of soiled-looking groceries and an old glass-fronted fridge with some soft drinks in it. There was a fish-and-chip fryer and a hotplate for hamburgers, but these were switched off and forlorn-looking. A dustpan rested on the edge of the hotplate and appeared to have several dead cockroaches on it.

A woman came from the back of the shop. She was short and plump, with a round face and curly brown hair. She held a sleeping toddler in her arms.

“Pleased to meet you,” the woman said, giving Tait a smile. “I’m Bambi.”

She looked much younger than the man. If he was sixty-odd, she’d have been thirty-five.

“He’s after a carton o’ moo-juice,” Jade said.

“Yeah, no worries,” said Bambi, going across to the glass-fronted fridge. She opened the door awkwardly with her free hand and peered amongst the soft drinks. Then she turned back towards Jade.

“Here, take the bundle o’ joy for a sec.”

Jade held his arms out and Tait saw how stick-thin he was, and how he had to brace to take the weight. He stood with the toddler in his two arms, his head turned to keep the cigarette away from the small face.

Bambi was down on one knee, feeling along one of the lower shelves. She fished a carton out and held it aloft like a victory trophy.

“Bingo!” Jade cried. “Good on ya, darl!”

“Knew we had some,” Bambi said, getting to her feet and handing the carton over.

Tait glanced at the use-by date and saw it was many days past.

Bambi saw him checking it.

“I didn’t think to look,” she said anxiously. “Is it too old?”

“Um, it might be a tiny bit old,” he replied, not wanting to seem finicky.

She bit her lip in dismay and looked so downcast that Tait smiled and said the milk was fine and that he’d have a king-size bottle of lemonade as well. Bambi said she wouldn’t charge for the milk, but Tait insisted on paying for it. In the end they agreed on half-price.

“I was just tellin him about the days on the circuit,” Jade said, jumping in a bit too quickly, to ease the embarrassment.

“Must’ve been good times,” Taid said.

“You bet. Bam was with me, towards the end. Jade Mustang & Bambi Blain. We had a profile then, didn’t we, darlin?”

“Yeah,” Bambi said, taking the toddler back into her arms. “I was there, towards the end.”
She was biting her lip again.

They had moved to the front step of the shop. Jade gestured towards the Plymouth and the scatter of tools and parts and oily cloths around it, and his voice sounded older and tireder than before.

“One o’ these days I’ll get the old chariot goin again. And then who knows what might happen? Might start gettin a bit of a profile back.”

Just then the toddler stirred in Bambi’s arms and she spoke comfortingly: “There, there, baby,” she said, rocking the child. “There, there.”

But it was as though she was comforting Jade as well.

After that Tait got his milk at the general store up the road. He made a point, though, of going across each day to buy a king-size bottle of lemonade from Bambi, and to chat for a minute with Jade. Tait’s thirst for lemonade became a joke between the three of them.

He did not like lemonade, so he put the stuff aside for Jimmy to take home.

* * * *

Tait had been freed from custody on something called a “Licence to be at Large.” This was a kind of parchment that he had to carry with him and show on demand to any authorized person. It was couched in old-fashioned language and full of whereases and wherefores and you half-expected it to bear Queen Victoria’s insignia. It required him to remain within what it called the “Eastern Land Division.” Tait had never heard of the Eastern Land Division and didn’t know anyone else who had ever heard of it. He certainly hadn’t any idea of its actual dimensions. He assumed it must be pretty large, though, and that there probably wasn’t too much danger of him straying out of it some afternoon in a fit of carelessness. But just to be sure he phoned the State Surveyor’s Office one day and learned that he was reasonably safe — the thing was hundreds of miles wide.

This got him and Jimmy and Lauren joking of the cruelty of the confinement and repeating Oscar Wilde’s remark that if this was how Queen Victoria treated her prisoners, she didn’t deserve to have any.

Jimmy leered at Lauren and twirled an imaginary handlebar moustache:

“It’ll be the Eastern Land Division for you, wench, if you don’t submit to my wicked will.”

Lauren put on a distraught look and wrung her hands:
“Oh no, not the Eastern Land Division! Anyfing but that! Oh pleeeeezzze Mister, ‘ave mercy! I’ll give you my body, anyfing!”

“Well, luckily for you I feel compassion stirring in my loins...”

And sometimes when Tait was in a crowded public place it amused him that he was probably the only one who could instantly prove his entitlement to be there, right smack in the famous Eastern Land Division.

A Licence remained in force for five years and when it expired you were more or less back to the status of a normal citizen. But for those five years you were under the Probation Service, and had to report to a supervisor each fortnight. That was the part that could be very unfunny. A bad supervisor could blight your life.

Since his release Tait had reported to a man named Richard Bristol at an office in the regional city of Castleton, an hour north on the train. Now Bristol wanted to call at the cabin to sight the facilities. That was the phrase he used: “to sight the facilities.” He would be in the area on the Thursday and would call in at two o’clock. Tait knew he’d be on the dot because Punctilious was his middle name. That was Bristol’s own little joke, the only one he had. It was as though the Probation Service had circulated a memo: acquire one joke and impart it once to each client.

“Punctilious is my middle name,” he’d said at their first meeting. Then, after a three-beat pause, “And I’ll never forgive my parents for that.”

Tait took him for a deadpan comedian, but nothing else came. Fortnight after fortnight there was just the neat suit and tie, the earnest face, the serious voice, the hand making notes on a heavy pad on the desk. All the same, the fact that Bristol had told that particular joke indicated a strong ironic intelligence. It made Tait careful not to underestimate him.

He was worried that the cabin looked too bare. The day before the visit he went back to the op shop and bought a small square wooden table and two upright chairs for the kitchen, and also a bright blue and yellow tablecloth and a heavy glass vase to put flowers in. He was trying to accentuate the positive.

The things were supposed to be delivered by noon on the Thursday but by one o’clock they still hadn’t arrived. By then Tait was tense and angry about the visit. The Regime was coming to tramp its jackboot into his very home.

Kelvin turned up with the truck at a quarter past one. He brought the table and chairs into the kitchen and chatted while Tait spread the tablecloth and put water in the vase. Tait said he needed to gather a few flowers, and Kelvin said he’d help. They picked them from Astrid’s Meadow, then Kelvin suggested they augment the display with grass and leaves. He seemed
to know how to do it, so Tait let him. He just hoped he’d be quick and then go. He wasn’t sure what Bristol would make of an effeminate fat man with purple hair and a nose-ring.

“We really need some pine-cones for the proper effect,” Kelvin said, primping the display and then standing back with his head on one side and his wrist bent in one of those gestures.

It was five to two.

“Are you alright?” Kelvin asked. “You look like you’re about to be hung.”

“That’s how I feel. I’m expecting someone any minute.”

“Why didn’t you say so? I’ll get out of your hair then.”

“Okay, thanks.”

“Don’t worry. I guarantee she’ll love the display.”

“It’s a he,” Tait said.

Kelvin gave him a look from the doorway.

“My probation officer. He’s coming to check that I’m not living in degenerate squalor.”

“I think he’s here,” Kelvin said, looking towards the street. “Chin up, you’ll be fine!”

He disappeared and a moment later Tait heard him call a cheery hello to someone. Then there seemed to be a polite exchange about the weather. Tait heard the truck start up and then Bristol appeared in the doorway.

The inspection wasn’t quite as harrowing as Tait had feared. It was just a matter, Bristol said, of “ascertaining the general configuration of the premises.” He jotted things down as he was shown around: number of rooms; nature of cooking and washing-up facilities; presence of shower cubicle; toilet and laundry fixtures in outside shed. In the end he declared the facilities were “not inappropriate to the nature of the occupancy.”

Tait felt relieved enough to offer a cup of tea. Bristol looked at his watch and said he could just about fit one in. While the jug was boiling, Bristol went into the work room again and stood with his hands behind his back, looking across the work table and through the window at the lake.

Tait didn’t like him being in there. That room was meant to be an outpost of the QO and this man was the very eye and the note-pad of the Regime. That the Regimic powers had no quarrel with Tait at this precise moment was beside the point. He had earlier cleared the work table of everything but a few pens and blank sheets of paper. He had also put the Amma photo away and had taken the Blue Board down and put it under his bed. He wasn’t going to have these things looked at and contaminated. He had put the room into what he thought was a state of passive resistance.

“You’ve found yourself a good spot here,” Bristol called.
“Yes,” Tait called back, pouring the hot water.
“I know this lake very well. I grew up at The Inlet.”
“Really? Do you still have family there?”
“No. There was only my mother and I.”
“Tea’s ready.”
Bristol came back into the kitchen and sat at the little table with the blue and yellow cloth and the vase. Tait sat down too. They sipped their tea in silence.
“Nice arrangement,” Bristol said after a while, touching a stem of the flower display.
“A friend of mine did it,” Tait said.
It was good tactics, he thought, to mention having friends when you’re talking to an agent of the Regime. Shows you aren’t totally alone and vulnerable. But then Tait remembered the purple hair and the nose-ring and changed the subject.
“Do you go back to The Inlet much?” he asked.
“Not since my mother passed away. I had no reason to go back after that.”
They sipped their tea in silence again.
Then the jackboot showed itself. The python slithered into view.
“So what do you actually do here?” Bristol asked.
“In what sense do you mean?”
“How do you occupy your time?”
“I do my work.”
“Writing poems?”
“Yes.”
“But that can’t occupy much time, can it?”
“Yes, it does.”
“How much time per day, would you estimate?”
“It would vary, but say six hours.”
Bristol had taken his note pad out again and was jotting things down.
“Perhaps you should have a part-time job as well,” he said.
“Really?” Tait replied.
“To keep you fully stretched.”
“I’m reasonably well-stretched, I think.”
“I’m not completely sure that’s the case.”
“I see.”
“You object to my raising the issue?”
“I think perhaps you don’t quite realize the nature of literary work.”

“Explain it to me then.”

“Oh, I could explain till the cows come home.”

“Do you feel that what you do is above other people’s understanding? That would be somewhat grandiose, wouldn’t it?”

In the mouths of the helping and controlling professions, the word “grandiose” was always loaded with menace. It meant out of touch with reality. It meant potentially dangerous.

The python was ready to lunge. It all depended on how the prey behaved in the next ten seconds.

Tait spoke very carefully.

“As you know, I’m on an Arts Board grant to write verse. The Grant stipulates that the work is to be undertaken on a full-time basis. The recipient is not to have other substantial employment.”

“That’s an actual stipulation?”

“Yes. Would you like to see the wording?”

“Thank you.”

So Tait got his copy of the Grant agreement and pointed to where it said “Other Employment.”

Bristol read the clause carefully and jotted a couple of its key phrases on his pad.

“It allows you to take the equivalent of one day per week of other paid work,” he said, looking up.

“It allows the option, yes.”

“Well then, the option is there. That’s all I’m saying.”

But Tait knew he had stymied the python’s main lunge. It was set down in official black and white that writing poetry was a full-time occupation, and Punctilious would have to accept that.

Now he looked at his watch and said he had to get on. He thanked Tait for the tea and said he might call in again sometime.

“You’d need to notify me in advance,” Tait said in a flat voice. “So I can make a point of being home.”

“You’d be home most of the time, though, wouldn’t you? Doing your full-time work of writing poetry?”

“Except if I was out doing the equivalent of one day a week elsewhere.”

Bristol paused at the foot of the porch. They looked at each other for a moment.
“Well, good luck with your endeavours,” he said. “I’ll see you as usual in my office in a fortnight.”

“I’ll be there.”

“You really have found have a lovely spot,” he said, waving a hand at the water and the trees, then walking briskly away down the drive to where his car was parked on the street.

Tait understood the parting tone. Bristol was saying something like: ‘We both know these little tests of will and reflex are necessary from time to time, to keep us up to the mark. Let’s call this one a draw, with no hard feelings.’

“Yeah, you fucking prick,” he muttered. “Let’s be sporting — as long as you’ve got all the power and I’ve got all the vulnerability.”

It was the Regime in a nutshell.

Tait went back inside and restored the Amma photo and the Blue Board to their places. He threw the tablecloth and vase into the rubbish bin.

* * * *

He was busy with a poem about the small forest animals and how they cope with the pythons that prey on them. Or fail to cope, as the case may be. It was time this metaphor of the forest was properly worked through.

He was going to call the poem “Habitat.” He had got his initial handle on it when he picked up a copy of The Pilgrim’s Progress and read the opening words: “As I walked through the wilderness of this world...” That made him think how a small creature might begin an account of its tribulations with: “As I crept through the forest of this world...” He visualized some quick furry animal about the size of Cashew the possum, and then the twelve-foot-long pythons that moved in total silence and could climb anywhere. The forest world grew deep and vivid in his imagination and he could feel his skin prickling with alertness.

He’d been working on “Habitat” for a couple of days and it was going well.

Most days it was around three-thirty in the afternoon that he began to feel written out. It was no use grinding on with it when there was no more vitality, either in himself or in of the words and phrases on the paper in front of him. The work was an interaction, an exchange of energies between the person and the language, and when the exchange wasn’t happening any more you just had to leave it and let the batteries recharge for tomorrow. At that point he needed to get out of the cabin. Most afternoons his routine was the same. He would pop over to the shop, then check his mailbox, then take a walk along the lake shore. When he’d walked
enough, and had gazed enough at the water and sky, he would get the bus into Turrawong. Most times he’d end up in the Athena cafe, snug in the back-corner booth, lingering over a meal of sausages and eggs or baked beans on toast. And he’d always have a book to read.

This day he stopped work and went across to the shop.

Jade had one of the headlights out of the Plymouth and was doing something to it with a screwdriver. He wore a red bandana round his head and was singing “Ghost Riders in the Sky.” The toddler was sitting on the doorstep of the shop, tethered by a length of cord. He was often there and you’d have to step round him to enter the shop. He would just look up at you with a sort of mild interest as you towered above him. He was very placid and never cried or whined. Tait had no idea what his name was. Jade and Bambi only ever referred to him as the Bundle o’ Joy, or Bundle, or sometimes Bunny.

“You sing too, Bunny,” Jade was coaxing him. “Come on. Ghost Riders in the Skyyyyyyyyy...”

“Kyyyy,” the toddler murmured.

“That’s it, Bunny. Ghost Riders in the Skyyyyyyyyyyyyy!”

“Kyyyyyyyy,” the toddler repeated with a touch more conviction.

“That’s my boy! What a clever Bunny!”

“He’s a chip off the old block,” Tait said.

“Sure is, squire,” Jade replied. “And he’s gonna get a chance to see the old man perform.”

“Yeah?”

“I got a gig comin up.”

“That’s great.”

“Yeah. It’s just local, but it’s a start towards gettin the profile back.”

“Of course. So when is it?”

“Next week. There’s a big turn-out on in the Valley.”

“Not that Pioneer Museum thing?”

“That’s the one.”

“I was invited to that. I’m supposed to ring someone about getting a lift.”

“We’ll give ya a lift, squire. No worries.”

“Thanks. So then, I’ll be seeing the master in action”

“Too right ya will, squire.”

Tait went into the shop to buy his lemonade. Bambi was biting her lip again.

“Jade was telling me about the gig he’s got.”

Bambi just nodded.
“He said I could get a lift.”

“Yeah, of course you can,” Bambi said. “We’d be glad to have you.”

“He seems pretty keen.”

“Yeah,” she said quietly, and in a tone that Tait didn’t know quite how to interpret, “He’d be keen.”

He stopped at his letter box on the way back. As usual there were various leaflets and flyers. One familiar leaflet was from a firm of undertakers offering burial on the instalment-plan. There was also a proper letter, with the sender’s name on the back: Michael Kieslowski. It had been addressed care of Compact magazine and forwarded from there. Tait opened the envelope with great interest, and saw there was a full page of writing in a vigorous-looking hand. He slipped the letter into his shirt pocket. He would read it on his walk. He put the bottle of lemonade in the cabin, slung his satchel round him, and then set off.

A little way along the reserve, the screen of trees ended and the ground opened out on to well-tended grass. Tait walked briskly along for five minutes, then came to a big rock that he often sat on. It was right at the top of the bank and jutted out, so when you sat there you felt exhilarated at being high in the air, especially on a windy day when the waves were breaking and foaming among the rocks below. Tait called that place High Rock.

There was a brisk wind now, so he took the letter out carefully and held it firmly lest it blow out of his hands. It began: “This is mainly to say how much I enjoyed your poem in the current issue of Compact, and how much I admire your verse generally...”

It was a lovely letter, and Tait was delighted to have it. Michael Kieslowski was a poet whose work he’d admired for some time. They were the same age and they both published in Compact, a broadly conservative journal that favoured rhyme and metre.

All Kieslowski’s poems were excellent, but a certain piece of work in particular had bowled Tait over. It was a sequence of poems called “The Flame and the Dark.” It had appeared several months earlier and was one of the contenders for this year’s MacLew Prize. It told how the poet’s parents had met while taking part in the heroic and hopeless Warsaw Rising of 1944. They fell in love while the Germans pounded the city to rubble around them and the advancing Russians halted nearby and did nothing. But for all the pain and horror it evoked, the poem was not bitter in spirit. It carried an epigraph by the great Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz who had been in Warsaw at the time: The war years taught me that a man should not take a pen in his hands merely to communicate to others his own despair and defeat.
Chapter Two

Tait was enchanted to wake up in his own quiet dwelling, to open the curtains and see the morning sun on Astrid’s Meadow, to open the door and feel the fresh breeze from the lake and hear the sounds of the birds. It was lovely to sit with a cup of coffee, with your mind rested and refreshed, the energy of your thoughts beginning to gather. It was lovely to know that your work table was waiting for you, and that you could spend all day there if you wanted.

His approach was methodical and he mostly worked in conventional verse forms. He agreed with whoever it was who said that writing without the constraint of those forms was like playing tennis with the net down. He liked rhyme and metre and clarity and craftsmanship. He seldom had great lightning flashes of inspiration, or perhaps he just didn’t recognize them as such. He believed his task was to follow up those insights and intuitions that one gained in the ordinary way of things, although of course there was always the delicate question of what one meant by “ordinary.” The word could mean merely mundane and shallow, or it could mean being of the common fabric of existence. Tait felt that William Blake had summed it up when he wrote of seeing “heaven in a wildflower” and “eternity in a grain of sand.” It was precisely because wildflowers and grains of sand were “ordinary” things that they partook of the eternal and the fabulous.

That was the essence of Tait’s notion that Astrid was “ordinary.” And it was also the key to Wordsworth’s poem “The Solitary Reaper,” which was Tait’s current ideal, what he called his Companion Piece. At any given time he had a poem that served as a kind of yardstick, a model of the beauty and craft and coherence that he loved and wanted to achieve in his own work. His Companion Piece was the touchstone or talisman that he always kept handy. He would read it before starting a session of work. And later, if he began to lose his thread, or felt his thoughts becoming fragmented, he would turn to it again to recover clarity.

The very term Companion Piece conveyed a view of the art and craft of poetry, called up the notion of a band of comrades from all times and places. Poets might have lived ages apart and spoken tongues unknown to each other, but their material was always essentially the same, for it was the common fabric of all their existences — things like wildflowers and grains of sand, intimations of heaven and apprehensions of eternity. And the project was always the same one: to show, to connect, to make coherent.

Take the Astrid thing. You could say the feelings he had about her were the pathetic yearnings of a lonely introvert. You could say it was pitiful and unhealthy to give your heart
to a distant celebrity who doesn’t even know you exist. Most people would see it that way and they’d be right, but only partly, for they would be missing the part about the common fabric of existence, the part Blake perceived with the wildflower, and that Wordsworth understands in “The Solitary Reaper.”

A traveller passes a young Highland woman at work in a field, and she is singing a plaintive Gaelic song. He doesn’t understand the words and she doesn’t seem aware of his presence. On one level it is a non-event, a non-connection between strangers and aliens. And yet they are both human beings and the whole human condition is in the song, just as eternity is in the grain of sand.

\[
\text{Whate’er the theme, the Maiden sang} \\
\text{As if her song could have no ending...}
\]

But the poet knows exactly what the great theme is. It is the whole poignancy of existence, the deep continuity of human woe, and the equal persistence of the songs that make it bearable and even beautiful. The traveller continues over the hill and out of earshot, but:

\[
\text{The music in my heart I bore} \\
\text{Long after it was heard no more.}
\]

Tait believed his job was to say what Wordsworth was saying, and what many others had said before and since, but to say it in his own particular voice, and out of his own circumstances, and from his own given moment in time. The aim was to produce a piece of work that accorded with Alexander Pope’s description: “What oft was thought, but ne’er so well expressed.” And if you were dedicated enough, and lucky, you might truly achieve that aim once or twice in your life.

Instead of a Highland girl in a field around the year 1800, it was a Danish girl in a recording studio – or in a video-clip or magazine photo – nearly two hundred years later. In terms of the common fabric, though, and of the common project, these differences were trivial.

So Tait sat to work each morning, jotting and revising, correcting and crossing-out, filling page after page. He would try everything six or twenty-six different ways. The poem might seem to cohere, but then fall away to nothing. He was looking to catch that glint of the authentic, what he thought of the “silver key” that would open all the secret doors. When he
needed a break to think or stretch his legs he would go and put the jug on for another cup of tea and stand looking out the door at Astrid’s Meadow. When it was late afternoon and he could take no more of the grind he would stop and get out of the cabin altogether.

The poem gradually emerged out of chaos, like the shape of a boat becoming visible amid the debris of a boat-builder’s yard. And that was the very simile that set the work straight, the glint of the silver key that unlocked it. When that image first came into Tait’s mind he saw the boat shape as that of a Viking longship, and that reminded him of Astrid’s whole heritage as a Dane. That then conjured the harshness of the Scandinavian climate, and of its historical past. That in turn made him recollect those Dark Age elegies on the plight of homeless wanderers, seafaring exiles who have no respite from the storm of the world, or from the winter in their hearts. And then he thought of how the flame of the candle had held out in the breeze when he dedicated the flowers and named Astrid’s Meadow.

Wordsworth had used a song as his device, and Tait used a fire.

An exiled wanderer is plying his boat on an icy sea. The bitter night falls. On the shore he sees a fire winking and glowing. He pulls into an inlet and huddles in the freezing dark, gazing at the fire from a distance. There’s a settlement there with rest and shelter. There’s a chieftain’s convivial hall, with meat and drink and camaraderie. He can share none of it, any more than his shivering body can feel the warmth of the fire. It stands for everything that he is bereft of, and yet even so he is comforted, for that glow is thawing his chilled spirit. That fire is an “ordinary” thing, yet profound and beautiful. It is a sign that shelter and warmth and companionship go on in the world, regardless of this or that man’s fate. It is like the grain of sand that holds eternity. It is like the song that can have no ending. And the wanderer needed that sign even more than he craved a warm bed or a flowing cup of mead.

At dawn the inlet is empty. The wanderer has continued on his way without the people of that place ever knowing he was there. But the heart of the exile has been consoled, at least for a short while.

After four days the poem was finished. There were twenty-four lines in six four-line stanzas. He couldn’t think of anything more that needed saying, and he could find no jarring phrase or superfluous word anywhere. Although the poem kept a severely impersonal tone and was set about fourteen hundred years before either of them were born, it was completely about Astrid and his feelings for her. He was the lonely exile and she was that consoling glow in the distance.

For a day or so afterwards Tait had the inner peace that came from the completion of a good poem. Then he began fretting over the next one.
He’d been getting to know the run-down cowboy at the shop across the road. The man was out front most days, working on or underneath the Plymouth.

“Glad you took the place, squire,” the man said when Tait went over to buy some milk.

“You and that cabin was made for each other.”

“You reckon?”

“Yeah. I got a knack of readin people. Comes from all me years o’ performin.”

“Ah, of course,” Tait said, nodding.

The man looked exactly as you’d expect a clapped-out country and western singer to look, one who had travelled too many miles, with too many late nights in too many towns.

“Jade Mustang,” the man said.

“Sorry,” Tait said, not quite catching it.

“Jade Mustang,” the man said again, with a pleased look, obviously thinking the name had rung a faint bell with Tait.

“Nice to know you,” Tait said.

They shook hands.

“Yeah, I had a pretty good profile when I was on the show circuit,” Jade said.

Tait tried to look as though he had a clear recollection of Jade Mustang, country and western star. He pictured one of those old photos of Hank Williams, gaunt and folksy-looking but done up to the nines in a big white hat and a fancy white suit. He suddenly realized that Jade Mustang were the words he hadn’t quite been able to decipher on the battered door of the Plymouth.

“Yeah,” Jade went on. “And Bam’s wrapped that we’re gettin a new regular customer.”

“Bam?”

“The wife.”

“Well, I’m after a carton of milk to begin with.”

“Good on ya, squire,” Jade said, wiping his hands on an oil-stained rag. “That’ll make Bam’s day. The business is more hers than mine. I’m lookin to get a profile again.”

He led the way into the shop.

“Bam!” he called out, “Ya there, Bam?”

“What, Jadey?” came a woman’s voice from the back.

“Got a live one for ya, darlin!”
“Be there in a sec, Jadey,” the voice replied.

Tait glanced around the shop. There were a couple of shelves of soiled-looking groceries and an old glass-fronted fridge with some soft drinks in it. There was a fish-and-chip fryer and a hotplate for hamburgers, but these were switched off and forlorn-looking. A dustpan rested on the edge of the hotplate and appeared to have several dead cockroaches on it.

A woman came from the back of the shop. She was short and plump, with a round face and curly brown hair. She held a sleeping toddler in her arms.

“Pleased to meet you,” the woman said, giving Tait a smile. “I’m Bambi.”

She looked much younger than the man. If he was sixty-odd, she’d have been thirty-five.

“He’s after a carton o’ moo-juice,” Jade said.

“Yes, no worries,” said Bambi, going across to the glass-fronted fridge. She opened the door awkwardly with her free hand and peered amongst the soft drinks. Then she turned back towards Jade.

“Here, take the bundle o’ joy for a sec.”

Jade held his arms out and Tait saw how stick-thin he was, and how he had to brace to take the weight. He stood with the toddler in his two arms, his head turned to keep the cigarette away from the small face.

Bambi was down on one knee, feeling along one of the lower shelves. She fished a carton out and held it aloft like a victory trophy.

“Bingo!” Jade cried. “Good on ya, darlin’!”

“Knew we had some,” Bambi said, getting to her feet and handing the carton over.

Tait glanced at the use-by date and saw it was many days past.

Bambi saw him checking it.

“I didn’t think to look,” she said anxiously. “Is it too old?”

“Um, it might be a tiny bit old,” he replied, not wanting to seem finicky.

She bit her lip in dismay and looked so downcast that Tait smiled and said the milk was fine and that he’d have a king-size bottle of lemonade as well. Bambi said she wouldn’t charge for the milk, but Tait insisted on paying for it. In the end they agreed on half-price.

“I was just tellin him about the days on the circuit,” Jade said, jumping in a bit too quickly, to ease the embarrassment.

“Must’ve been good times,” Taid said.

“You bet. Bam was with me, towards the end. Jade Mustang & Bambi Blain. We had a profile then, didn’t we, darlin’?”

“Yeah,” Bambi said, taking the toddler back into her arms. “I was there, towards the end.”
She was biting her lip again.

They had moved to the front step of the shop. Jade gestured towards the Plymouth and the scatter of tools and parts and oily cloths around it, and his voice sounded older and tireder than before.

“One o’ these days I’ll get the old chariot goin again. And then who knows what might happen? Might start gettin a bit of a profile back.”

Just then the toddler stirred in Bambi’s arms and she spoke comfortingly: “There, there, baby,” she said, rocking the child. “There, there.”

But it was as though she was comforting Jade as well.

After that Tait got his milk at the general store up the road. He made a point, though, of going across each day to buy a king-size bottle of lemonade from Bambi, and to chat for a minute with Jade. Tait’s thirst for lemonade became a joke between the three of them.

He did not like lemonade, so he put the stuff aside for Jimmy to take home.

* * * *

Tait had been freed from custody on something called a “Licence to be at Large.” This was a kind of parchment that he had to carry with him and show on demand to any authorized person. It was couched in old-fashioned language and full of whereases and wherefores and you half-expected it to bear Queen Victoria’s insignia. It required him to remain within what it called the “Eastern Land Division.” Tait had never heard of the Eastern Land Division and didn’t know anyone else who had ever heard of it. He certainly hadn’t any idea of its actual dimensions. He assumed it must be pretty large, though, and that there probably wasn’t too much danger of him straying out of it some afternoon in a fit of carelessness. But just to be sure he phoned the State Surveyor’s Office one day and learned that he was reasonably safe — the thing was hundreds of miles wide.

This got him and Jimmy and Lauren joking of the cruelty of the confinement and repeating Oscar Wilde’s remark that if this was how Queen Victoria treated her prisoners, she didn’t deserve to have any.

Jimmy leered at Lauren and twirled an imaginary handlebar moustache:

“It’ll be the Eastern Land Division for you, wench, if you don’t submit to my wicked will.”

Lauren put on a distraught look and wrung her hands:
“Oh no, not the Eastern Land Division! Anyfing but that! Oh pleeeezzzzze Mister, ‘ave mercy! I’ll give you my body, anyfing!"

“Well, luckily for you I feel compassion stirring in my loins...”

And sometimes when Tait was in a crowded public place it amused him that he was probably the only one who could instantly prove his entitlement to be there, right smack in the famous Eastern Land Division.

A Licence remained in force for five years and when it expired you were more or less back to the status of a normal citizen. But for those five years you were under the Probation Service, and had to report to a supervisor each fortnight. That was the part that could be very unfunny. A bad supervisor could blight your life.

Since his release Tait had reported to a man named Richard Bristol at an office in the regional city of Castleton, an hour north on the train. Now Bristol wanted to call at the cabin to sight the facilities. That was the phrase he used: “to sight the facilities.” He would be in the area on the Thursday and would call in at two o’clock. Tait knew he’d be on the dot because Punctilious was his middle name. That was Bristol’s own little joke, the only one he had. It was as though the Probation Service had circulated a memo: acquire one joke and impart it once to each client.

“Punctilious is my middle name,” he’d said at their first meeting. Then, after a three-beat pause, “And I’ll never forgive my parents for that.”

Tait took him for a deadpan comedian, but nothing else came. Fortnight after fortnight there was just the neat suit and tie, the earnest face, the serious voice, the hand making notes on a heavy pad on the desk. All the same, the fact that Bristol had told that particular joke indicated a strong ironic intelligence. It made Tait careful not to underestimate him.

He was worried that the cabin looked too bare. The day before the visit he went back to the op shop and bought a small square wooden table and two upright chairs for the kitchen, and also a bright blue and yellow table-cloth and a heavy glass vase to put flowers in. He was trying to accentuate the positive.

The things were supposed to be delivered by noon on the Thursday but by one o’clock they still hadn’t arrived. By then Tait was tense and angry about the visit. The Regime was coming to tramp its jackboot into his very home.

Kelvin turned up with the truck at a quarter past one. He brought the table and chairs into the kitchen and chatted while Tait spread the tablecloth and put water in the vase. Tait said he needed to gather a few flowers, and Kelvin said he’d help. They picked them from Astrid’s Meadow, then Kelvin suggested they augment the display with grass and leaves. He seemed
to know how to do it, so Tait let him. He just hoped he’d be quick and then go. He wasn’t sure what Bristol would make of an effeminate fat man with purple hair and a nose-ring.

“We really need some pine-cones for the proper effect,” Kelvin said, primping the display and then standing back with his head on one side and his wrist bent in one of those gestures.

It was five to two.

“Are you alright?” Kelvin asked. “You look like you’re about to be hung.”

“That’s how I feel. I’m expecting someone any minute.”

“Why didn’t you say so? I’ll get out of your hair then.”

“Okay, thanks.”

“Don’t worry. I guarantee she’ll love the display.”

“It’s a he,” Tait said.

Kelvin gave him a look from the doorway.

“My probation officer. He’s coming to check that I’m not living in degenerate squalor.”

“I think he’s here,” Kelvin said, looking towards the street. “Chin up, you’ll be fine!”

He disappeared and a moment later Tait heard him call a cheery hello to someone. Then there seemed to be a polite exchange about the weather. Tait heard the truck start up and then Bristol appeared in the doorway.

The inspection wasn’t quite as harrowing as Tait had feared. It was just a matter, Bristol said, of “ascertaining the general configuration of the premises.” He jotted things down as he was shown around: number of rooms; nature of cooking and washing-up facilities; presence of shower cubicle; toilet and laundry fixtures in outside shed. In the end he declared the facilities were “not inappropriate to the nature of the occupancy.”

Tait felt relieved enough to offer a cup of tea. Bristol looked at his watch and said he could just about fit one in. While the jug was boiling, Bristol went into the work room again and stood with his hands behind his back, looking across the work table and through the window at the lake.

Tait didn’t like him being in there. That room was meant to be an outpost of the QO and this man was the very eye and the note-pad of the Regime. That the Regimic powers had no quarrel with Tait at this precise moment was beside the point. He had earlier cleared the work table of everything but a few pens and blank sheets of paper. He had also put the Amma photo away and had taken the Blue Board down and put it under his bed. He wasn’t going to have these things looked at and contaminated. He had put the room into what he thought was a state of passive resistance.

“You’ve found yourself a good spot here,” Bristol called.
“Yes,” Tait called back, pouring the hot water.
“I know this lake very well. I grew up at The Inlet.”
“Really? Do you still have family there?”
“No. There was only my mother and I.”
“Tea’s ready.”

Bristol came back into the kitchen and sat at the little table with the blue and yellow cloth and the vase. Tait sat down too. They sipped their tea in silence.

“Nice arrangement,” Bristol said after a while, touching a stem of the flower display.
“A friend of mine did it,” Tait said.

It was good tactics, he thought, to mention having friends when you’re talking to an agent of the Regime. Shows you aren’t totally alone and vulnerable. But then Tait remembered the purple hair and the nose-ring and changed the subject.

“Do you go back to The Inlet much?” he asked.
“Not since my mother passed away. I had no reason to go back after that.”

They sipped their tea in silence again.

Then the jackboot showed itself. The python slithered into view.

“So what do you actually do here?” Bristol asked.
“In what sense do you mean?”
“How do you occupy your time?”
“I do my work.”
“Writing poems?”
“Yes.”
“But that can’t occupy much time, can it?”
“Yes, it does.”
“How much time per day, would you estimate?”
“It would vary, but say six hours.”

Bristol had taken his note pad out again and was jotting things down.

“Perhaps you should have a part-time job as well,” he said.

“Really?” Tait replied.
“To keep you fully stretched.”
“I’m reasonably well-stretched, I think.”
“I’m not completely sure that’s the case.”
“I see.”
“You object to my raising the issue?”
“I think perhaps you don’t quite realize the nature of literary work.”
“Explain it to me then.”
“Oh, I could *explain* till the cows come home.”
“Do you feel that what you do is above other people’s understanding? That would be somewhat *grandiose*, wouldn’t it?”

In the mouths of the helping and controlling professions, the word “grandiose” was always loaded with menace. It meant out of touch with reality. It meant potentially dangerous.

The python was ready to lunge. It all depended on how the prey behaved in the next ten seconds.

Tait spoke very carefully.

“As you know, I’m on an Arts Board grant to write verse. The Grant stipulates that the work is to be undertaken on a full-time basis. The recipient is not to have other substantial employment.”
“That’s an actual stipulation?”
“Yes. Would you like to see the wording?”
“Thank you.”
So Tait got his copy of the Grant agreement and pointed to where it said “Other Employment.”

Bristol read the clause carefully and jotted a couple of its key phrases on his pad.

“It allows you to take the equivalent of one day per week of other paid work,” he said, looking up.

“It allows the option, yes.”
“Well then, the option is there. That’s all I’m saying.”

But Tait knew he had stymied the python’s main lunge. It was set down in official black and white that writing poetry was a full-time occupation, and Punctilious would have to accept that.

Now he looked at his watch and said he had to get on. He thanked Tait for the tea and said he might call in again sometime.

“You’d need to notify me in advance,” Tait said in a flat voice. “So I can make a point of being home.”

“You’d be home most of the time, though, wouldn’t you? Doing your full-time work of writing poetry?”

“Except if I was out doing the equivalent of one day a week elsewhere.”

Bristol paused at the foot of the porch. They looked at each other for a moment.
“Well, good luck with your endeavours,” he said. “I’ll see you as usual in my office in a fortnight.”

“I’ll be there.”

“You really have found have a lovely spot,” he said, waving a hand at the water and the trees, then walking briskly away down the drive to where his car was parked on the street.

Tait understood the parting tone. Bristol was saying something like: ‘We both know these little tests of will and reflex are necessary from time to time, to keep us up to the mark. Let’s call this one a draw, with no hard feelings.’

“Yeah, you fucking prick,” he muttered. “Let’s be sporting — as long as you’ve got all the power and I’ve got all the vulnerability.”

It was the Regime in a nutshell.

Tait went back inside and restored the Amma photo and the Blue Board to their places. He threw the tablecloth and vase into the rubbish bin.

* * * *

He was busy with a poem about the small forest animals and how they cope with the pythons that prey on them. Or fail to cope, as the case may be. It was time this metaphor of the forest was properly worked through.

He was going to call the poem “Habitat.” He had got his initial handle on it when he picked up a copy of The Pilgrim’s Progress and read the opening words: “As I walked through the wilderness of this world...” That made him think how a small creature might begin an account of its tribulations with: “As I crept through the forest of this world...” He visualized some quick furry animal about the size of Cashew the possum, and then the twelve-foot-long pythons that moved in total silence and could climb anywhere. The forest world grew deep and vivid in his imagination and he could feel his skin prickling with alertness.

He’d been working on “Habitat” for a couple of days and it was going well.

Most days it was around three-thirty in the afternoon that he began to feel written out. It was no use grinding on with it when there was no more vitality, either in himself or in of the words and phrases on the paper in front of him. The work was an interaction, an exchange of energies between the person and the language, and when the exchange wasn’t happening any more you just had to leave it and let the batteries recharge for tomorrow. At that point he needed to get out of the cabin. Most afternoons his routine was the same. He would pop over to the shop, then check his mailbox, then take a walk along the lake shore. When he’d walked
enough, and had gazed enough at the water and sky, he would get the bus into Turrawong. Most times he’d end up in the Athena cafe, snug in the back-corner booth, lingering over a meal of sausages and eggs or baked beans on toast. And he’d always have a book to read.

This day he stopped work and went across to the shop.

Jade had one of the headlights out of the Plymouth and was doing something to it with a screwdriver. He wore a red bandana round his head and was singing “Ghost Riders in the Sky.” The toddler was sitting on the doorstep of the shop, tethered by a length of cord. He was often there and you’d have to step round him to enter the shop. He would just look up at you with a sort of mild interest as you towered above him. He was very placid and never cried or whined. Tait had no idea what his name was. Jade and Bambi only ever referred to him as the Bundle o’ Joy, or Bundle, or sometimes Bunny.

“You sing too, Bunny,” Jade was coaxing him. “Come on. Ghost Riders in the Skyyyyyyyyy...”

“Kyyy,” the toddler murmured.

“That’s it, Bunny. Ghost Riders in the Skyyyyyyyyyyyy!”

“Kyyyyyy,” the toddler repeated with a touch more conviction.

“That’s my boy! What a clever Bunny!”

“He’s a chip off the old block,” Tait said.

“Sure is, squire,” Jade replied. “And he’s gonna get a chance to see the old man perform.”

“Yeah?”

“I got a gig comin up.”

“That’s great.”

“Yeah. It’s just local, but it’s a start towards gettin the profile back.”

“Of course. So when is it?”

“Next week. There’s a big turn-out on in the Valley.”

“Not that Pioneer Museum thing?”

“That’s the one.”

“I was invited to that. I’m supposed to ring someone about getting a lift.”

“We’ll give ya a lift, squire. No worries.”

“Thanks. So then, I’ll be seeing the master in action”

“Too right ya will, squire.”

Tait went into the shop to buy his lemonade. Bambi was biting her lip again.

“Jade was telling me about the gig he’s got.”

Bambi just nodded.
“He said I could get a lift.”
“Yeah, of course you can,” Bambi said. “We’d be glad to have you.”
“He seems pretty keen.”
“Yeah,” she said quietly, and in a tone that Tait didn’t know quite how to interpret, “He’d be keen.”

He stopped at his letter box on the way back. As usual there were various leaflets and flyers. One familiar leaflet was from a firm of undertakers offering burial on the instalment-plan. There was also a proper letter, with the sender’s name on the back: Michael Kieslowski. It had been addressed care of Compact magazine and forwarded from there. Tait opened the envelope with great interest, and saw there was a full page of writing in a vigorous-looking hand. He slipped the letter into his shirt pocket. He would read it on his walk. He put the bottle of lemonade in the cabin, slung his satchel round him, and then set off.

A little way along the reserve, the screen of trees ended and the ground opened out on to well-tended grass. Tait walked briskly along for five minutes, then came to a big rock that he often sat on. It was right at the top of the bank and jutted out, so when you sat there you felt exhilarated at being high in the air, especially on a windy day when the waves were breaking and foaming among the rocks below. Tait called that place High Rock.

There was a brisk wind now, so he took the letter out carefully and held it firmly lest it blow out of his hands. It began: “This is mainly to say how much I enjoyed your poem in the current issue of Compact, and how much I admire your verse generally...”

It was a lovely letter, and Tait was delighted to have it. Michael Kieslowski was a poet whose work he’d admired for some time. They were the same age and they both published in Compact, a broadly conservative journal that favoured rhyme and metre.

All Kieslowski’s poems were excellent, but a certain piece of work in particular had bowled Tait over. It was a sequence of poems called “The Flame and the Dark.” It had appeared several months earlier and was one of the contenders for this year’s MacLew Prize. It told how the poet’s parents had met while taking part in the heroic and hopeless Warsaw Rising of 1944. They fell in love while the Germans pounded the city to rubble around them and the advancing Russians halted nearby and did nothing. But for all the pain and horror it evoked, the poem was not bitter in spirit. It carried an epigraph by the great Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz who had been in Warsaw at the time: The war years taught me that a man should not take a pen in his hands merely to communicate to others his own despair and defeat.
The poem ends with the lovers in a transit camp at the war’s end. They are ill and exhausted and have no one in the world to belong to except each other, but they are burning with a steady flame, full of calm acceptance of all they have undergone, and determined to forge a new destiny in some place like Australia. The final image is of them being married in the camp, the bride’s dress sewn from the silk of an old Nazi parachute.

Tait stayed at High Rock for a long time, recalling passages from the poem, riding again the surge of emotional power that made it all so gripping. He felt full of wonder that the author of such a work would bother sending compliments to him.

When the sun began to go down Tait walked back past the cabin to where the reserve ended, then picked his way round the track at the water’s edge that led to the general store and the liquor shop. He bought a bottle of whisky. He intended to drink a toast to Michael Kieslowski, to Michael’s parents, and to all the heroes of Poland.

Chapter Three

The poem called “Habitat” was completed and Tait was working on yet another. In fact he had enough ideas lined up in his mind, and on the Blue Board, to keep him working steadily for a long way ahead. Whenever he got a firm idea for a new poem he wrote a phrase or sentence on a small square of paper and pinned it up. He knew, for example, that there was a good poem to be written about Jade’s old Plymouth and what it represented, so that square of paper said: “The Plymouth as a dream of resurrection.” The trick was to catch the essence of the matter in just a few words like that. If you could capture the gist of it like that you knew it was okay to go up on the Blue Board to await its turn to be worked on. Now there were half a dozen small squares of paper there, and his mind was alive with other hints and whispers and intuitions.

It was a sweet thing to be at work in the quiet of his own place, in his own routine, the flow going with him, the ideas stacking up. And to be living frugally.

He had decided to allow himself one regular treat. Each fortnight he would buy a book or a record. Mostly records to begin with, to build up a collection for his new record-player. There were book and record shops in Castleton and he could tie that in with his required fortnightly
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visits to Richard Bristol, or “Bristol Dick” as he thought of him now. His reporting time was two-thirty on alternate Friday afternoons, and he was usually out of there within fifteen minutes with the remainder of the afternoon and evening to spend as he liked. He could go to a movie if he wanted to. Tait loved movies and all the latest ones were on in Castleton. Yes, he could have a pleasant time those alternate Fridays.

But then he recalled the look and atmosphere of the Probation Service building, and what an ordeal it was to have to go in there, and how the knot of anxiety always formed in his stomach on the train and didn’t fully go away till hours after the reporting session. He thought of what Auden said in one of his essays, that a poet never enters a government building without being full of dread. Auden’s comment was consoling. It helped to know your feelings were shared by others, that not everything came out of your own personal weakness or weirdness. That was the great companionship of poetry again. You had a band of wise friends to keep you sane and connected. It was like in a haiku he’d read:

Warm knowing
That when I’m cold
You’re there to say “Me too.”

Tait knew how much he was always liable to undermine himself by being such a fretter and a brooder, an introvert to whom enjoyment did not come easily. That was another reason to try to give himself a nice time every so often. “Come on,” he sometimes told himself sternly, “a bit of pleasure won’t kill you.”

He was having second thoughts about the Pioneer Museum thing. He always liked having an outing on his agenda, but only as long as it wasn’t imminent. As soon as it got close he began to think of reasons not to bother. Now he was telling himself he couldn’t spare the time from his work, and that there wouldn’t really be room in the car. They’d be going in Bambi’s little yellow Mini and it would be an awful squeeze. The Mini was old and looked nearly as clapped-out as the Plymouth. It was very noisy and gave off clouds of smoke. Once when Tait was going into Turrawong on the bus he’d seen Bambi being stopped at the roadside by the police. She’d been told to get a new exhaust system fitted, and later, in the shop, she’d groaned how expensive that would be and that she didn’t know how they would manage if the Mini was taken off the road. Jade had looked dismal for a moment, but then put on a determined expression and declared that as soon as he started getting his profile back they’d be okay.
Jade had been out to the Valley once or twice to rehearse his act at the site. He’d got a mate with a utility to take his gear out there, he said. Tait didn’t know what gear he meant. He pictured a big amplifier or something.

By the Sunday morning Tait had resigned himself to going and went across to the shop. As always he had his satchel slung round his back and he told himself if he wasn’t enjoying the day he could sit under a tree and read his book. It turned out that it would just be him and Bambi and Bundle in the Mini. Jade had been picked up earlier by his mate and had gone ahead. It was nice autumn weather. The sky was clear and the sun shone, but the air was cool enough to be bracing. Bambi appeared relaxed and Bundle sat strapped in the back seat nibbling calmly on a biscuit. It was a bit difficult to talk because the Mini made so much noise.

“Well, Jade’s got nice weather for it,” he half-shouted.

“Yeah,” Bambi called back. “Every good sign helps.”

“Is he nervous?”

“He pretends not to be, but he always went through hell before a performance, even in the old days. I never did. I used to think how funny it was, when I first started helping in the act, that the old-timer got sick with nerves but the silly novice never worried.”

“Will you be helping today?”

“Nah. It’s different now. This is Jadey doing his own thing. We’ve talked it over and this is something he has to work out for his own peace of mind — one way or another.”

“Do you miss the singing, yourself?”

“The singing?”

“In the old act.”

“Oh we never sang,” she replied. “Heavens, with our voices, the audience would’ve run way screaming!”

Tait was taken aback. If it wasn’t a singing act, what was it? He couldn’t very well ask, at this juncture. It would show he’d been ignorant all along. He would just have to wait and see what it was when it happened.

They passed through Turrawong and crossed an old timber bridge over the river at the back end of the town. Once over the old bridge you were on the winding road into Turrawong Valley and in a whole different landscape. Tait hadn’t been there before and was immediately struck by it.

Now and then you’d get a long view between the hills, or glimpse an horizon from a crest of the road, but mostly you were conscious of how snugly enclosed the Valley seemed. It was
quite narrow and the creek ran along the middle of it and there were small paddocks and orchards and market gardens. At the sides rose the wild-looking slopes of the hills. There were tracts of state forest stretching away on both sides, so you got the sense of a surrounding wilderness, but with quaint little pockets of habitation down side roads. The Valley struck Tait as having a fairy-tale quality. Not in the sense of being cute or twee, but in the Brothers Grimm sense of stirring the folk-memory in you, and so connecting you to ancestral truths. Like the fact that the cottage is snug because the forest is dark and deep, that the bowl of porridge is a mercy because there is famine in the land, that attachment is life and that the wolves are watching for the lone straggler. Things like that.

He’d read an article on the Valley’s history. It had been settled in the 1830s, and several of the early families were still there — Potters and Dunns and Callenders and MacCaffreys. Those families had lasted because they had a native place here where they knew each blade of grass. Now, with so many of their forebears in the ground, they almost were each blade of grass. And they had stuck together across time. That was the key thing. They hadn’t left each other for the wolves to pick off. The Valley seemed to Tait about as QO as you could get. He sat immersed in his thoughts, dwelling on that fairy-tale thing, trying to see the whole gist of the idea so he could then scribble it down and secure it. There was nothing worse than having a good potential poem cross your mind and then disappear.

He became aware that the Mini was revving and smoking its way up a long slope. At the top was a sign that said “Honeysuckle Hill” and they saw their destination down below them in the distance. Cars were slowing to a stop, then turning through some gates into a paddock that was like a fairground.

Bambi turned in behind a vintage car that was all bright paintwork and brass. The driver and passenger were perched on high seats and dressed up as an Edwardian couple. The vintage car stalled in the gateway and the driver tried to re-start it. The Edwardian lady turned and grinned at them and gestured a wry little apology with upturned hands. They grinned and gestured back that it was okay. The lady was beautiful and her costume made her look very stylish and elegant. There was a row of other vintage cars parked nearby in the paddock and other people in period costumes. A bunch of the men came smiling and laughing to push the stalled vehicle through the gates and across to where it belonged in the row.

It was all delightful and Tait was glad he’d come.

* * * *
A short while later he had an apron on and was serving tea and coffee.

Bambi had gone off with Bundle to find Jade, and Tait had sat on a log and jotted six words on his note pad: “The valley of the Brothers Grimm.” That was just enough to give him a new square of paper for the Blue Board. He felt pleased, as he did whenever he secured a new idea, although there was always a faint revulsion in it too, a slight dread of the effort it might take to get the poem done.

Then he’d wandered around the paddock, taking in the fairground atmosphere. As well as the vintage cars, there were displays of pottery-making and leathercraft. There were tents with cakes and pies for sale. There were Devonshire Teas. There were hoopla booths. There were people selling hot-dogs and ice-cream and fairy floss. There was a Lucky Wheel game and a gypsy fortune-teller called Madam Zorinda. There was Big Bandicoot, an enormous inflated rubber slide in the shape of a friendly creature with crossed eyes and a dopey grin. There were pony rides and buggy rides and a model train just big enough for children to sit on and be taken round a loop of track.

A stage had been set up, with a board listing the schedule of events.

The board said that Jade Mustang – “The Master of Manipulation & Doyen of Daring” – would be on at three o’clock. Before that there’d be things like the Primary School choir, the High School athletics class, the Dance Academy ballet, a skit by the Turrawong Players, sheep-shearing, wood-chopping, a display of Survival Skills from the local Scouts and Guides, and a recitation by someone named Harry Dunn who was billed as the Bush Bard of Turrawong Shire.

At some point, too, the site would be Officially Opened by the local state Member and Minister for Irrigation.

The new home of the Pioneer Museum was off to the side. It was a low brick building with an entryway and an office and a central display area and toilets at the back. Nearby were sheds with old-time wagons and tractors and implements on view.

Tait was at one of the sheds, looking at the huge wheel of an old timber-dray, when Megan Marchant came up behind him to talk to a group of people. She was telling them the Minister had been delayed but that it didn’t matter in the least because the occasion was turning out so marvellously well. She took a step back and bumped into Tait and turned around to apologize.

“Ah, hello,” she said. “Lovely to see you. You were going to phone me about a lift.”

He thought how sharp she was to have remembered, with so much else to think about.

“Well,” she said, patting his arm, “you got here anyway, and I’m so pleased.”

Just then a stern-faced woman in jodhpurs came up to her and muttered something.
“Ah,” said Megan, and you could almost see her mind working, a list of possibilities being
flicked through in a rapid but orderly way. She turned back to Tait.

“We might have the solution right here,” she said with a smile. “Would you be able to help
in the tea and coffee tent? We’re a bit stuck. It’d be such a favour to us.”

So Tait was led away by the woman in jodhpurs and left alone behind a trestle table with a
big urn bubbling beside him. He was filled with panic, but told himself to keep the Grimace
off his face and just go with the flow. Someone appeared in front of him wanting tea, white
with two sugars, so he gave it to them and felt better after that.

Tait couldn’t see the stage from where he was but he could hear Megan over a microphone
making a presentation to someone named Emily Callender who had just turned eighty-eight
and was one of the “Living Links” of the district. There were little noises of the microphone
being passed, and then an old lady’s pert voice declaring that she didn’t mind being a Living
Link, as long as she wasn’t the Missing Link. There was laughter and applause and you could
tell it was fond, that the old lady was a favourite of everyone.

The Turrawong Players were next on stage and began a comedy skit called “The Deadly
Doom of Dartmoor.” It was funny to begin with, but soon became uproarious. There were
three horses in the paddock across the creek and every so often they became excited by the
fairground atmosphere and galloped around with their tails up. All the actors were putting on
exaggerated accents, and one of them was supposed to be the yokel servant. “Ohhh, I
wouldn’t go out on the moors tonight,” he had to say in tones of deep dread, “for them
animals be strangely restless.” Just then the horses began to whinny and gallop. The crowd
laughed and applauded. A minute later the Squire’s daughter had to plead, “No, Father, don’t
venture out on to the moor tonight. Heaven knows what might be out there!” The horses
whinnyed again and there were roars of mirth. A bit after that the Squire’s wife had to beg her
son, “Dudley, I implore you! Don’t go to the moor! I know some deathly doom is
approaching.” There was a pause and a complete silence as everyone waited to see if the
horses would oblige again. Instead there came a toot of the whistle from the miniature train.
The crowd applauded wildly. After that the actors ad-libbed, taking advantage of every
whinny or toot that came.

It was lovely being in the midst of all this. A profound feeling had welled up in Tait, and he
remembered something he had read, a term that Jung had used: “participation mystique.” This
referred to a certain sublime awareness that can come over you, a sense of utter connectedness
to all the life around you, to the human race, to the very nature of things. The feeling was one
of being deeply grounded and yet floating loose at the same time. It was like being more fully yourself, yet blessedly released from yourself.

Nearly everyone had been drawn to the stage area, so there were no customers for tea or coffee till the Players had finished amid wild cheers and clapping.

He looked up and saw purple hair. Kelvin was standing there in a set of whiskers. He had a leather apron on, his arms and shoulders were bare, and he had daubs of what looked like charcoal on his face.

“Well might you stare,” he said.
“What are you supposed to be?”
“Ye Olde Village Blacksmith. I’ve been down at the Forge, doing my thing.”
“I didn’t know there was a Forge.”

“Half your luck. It’s behind the sheds. I’ve been there all morning, banging away with a bloody great hammer. Got no idea what I’m doing, other than being incredibly manly and getting myself quite turned on by it. At first I bellowed ‘Yo Ho Ho’ a lot, then realized I sounded like Santa Claus.”
“What’s the beard in aid of?”
“I’m supposed to belong to the horse and buggy days.”
“What about the hair?”
“Oh I’ve got a wig to cover that,” he said, “one that matches this.”
He tugged at the beard and it came down on elastic.

“Well,” said Tait. “Seeing you in that get-up has made my day. Want a tea or coffee?”
“Coffee. Strong,” Kelvin said, coming behind the trestle table and flopping into a chair.
“But you’re in no position to gloat,” he went on. “You’ve been roped in as well. Megan, was it?”
“Yes.”
“So you’ve no more backbone than me.”
“I wouldn’t quite say that. She wanted me for the blacksmith at first.”
Kelvin grinned and took the coffee Tait handed him.

“How did you go with the probation officer that day?” he asked.
Tait told him how Bristol Dick was a stickler for the rule-book and only had the one joke in his repertoire.

“Sounds like my Ms Prunty, except she had no jokes at all.”
“Who was she?”
“Social worker I had to see, back in my wilder days, after I’d been busted a couple too many times for dope.”

“Not the sympathetic type?”

“‘Nuclear Winter,’ I called her. Not to her face though.”

He sipped his coffee, then continued:

“Getting back to your Bristol Dick. You know he’s as camp as a row of tents, don’t you?”

“Is he? How do you know?”

“He and I, shall we say, ‘exchanged glances’ in your driveway.” Kelvin did a wildly camp gesture with his wrist and pursed his lips. “Believe me, dearie, I can pick ’em.”

“Well, I guess it’s handy to know.”

“Just another factor in the equation — and there’s nothing like having your factors equated, I always say.”

Tait would’ve liked to hear some more about Kelvin’s brush with the law, but as the crowd dispersed from around the stage he was starting to get customers. Kelvin helped with a few of them, then said he’d better get back to doing manly things with his hammer. He declaimed a verse, pulling the beard up and down on its elastic as he did so:

_Beneath the spreading chestnut tree_  
The village blacksmith stands.  
_O what a mighty man is he_  
_With his huge tool in his hands!_

There was a girlish giggle. Errol from the general store was standing there, looking a bit dubious, and beside him was his daughter Narelle. She peered up at Kelvin through her round glasses, looking as ever like an owl-child.

“You’re funny,” she told him.

“Ah yes, my dear,” Kelvin replied, putting on a comical look of woe and rolling his eyes, “but there are tears behind the greasepaint.”

Narelle giggled again and Kelvin bowed to her as deeply as his fatness would allow and went off back to his forge.

Tait chatted with Errol and Narelle for a minute or two. Narelle had been enchanted with the Turrawong Players and “The Deadly Doom of Dartmoor” and the horses coming in on cue.
“She’s always wanted a horse,” Errol said in his unsmiling way. “And now she wants to act with horses.”

It got busy again and Errol and Narelle wandered off.

Tait was doing his best to pour tea and coffee at the same time with a pot in each hand. A young woman came to his side and said “Let me take that,” and took the coffee pot.

“Sorry you’ve had to hold the fort alone,” she said, when they’d seen off the customers.

“That’s okay. I’ve enjoyed it.”

“I would’ve come earlier, but I had to be on stage.”

“Of course,” said Tait, recognising her voice. “I didn’t see any of it, but I was listening. Were you the Under-maid who’s overworked, or the Over-maid who’s underpaid?”

“Both,” she smiled.

“And you foiled Sir Darkly Sinister.”

She put on the maid’s voice again:

“I knew it was ‘im what done it, cos I seen ‘im bein’ underhanded in an overcoat.”

“And overbearing in his undertakings.”

“You really were listening.”

“Every word.”

“It was all such utter nonsense, but the best fun we’ve had for yonks. And those horses!”

She began to make herself a cup of coffee and he was able to steal a good look at her. He figured she was about twenty-six or so. She had long raven hair and dark blue eyes and full sensuous lips. Tait felt suddenly shy of her, seeing how beautiful she was, but there was a hint of sadness that drew his sympathy.

“I’m Francesca, by the way.” she said, offering her hand.

They shook hands and he felt a surge of pleasure at the touch.

“So what’s your line of connection to all this?” she asked. “Are you one of the Museum people?”

“No. Megan Marchant just asked if I’d help out.”

“Same with all of us.”

“Do you know Kelvin?”

“Yes.”

“She’s got him being a Blacksmith.”

“Yes, I saw him in the costume.”

“That must’ve taken some arm-twisting.”
“I wouldn’t think so. Kelvin loves performing. Anyway, he’s used to fitting into Megan’s grand plans. He’s been doing it all his life. He’s her nephew. You probably knew that.

“No, I didn’t.”

“So where do you know Megan from?”

“The op-shop, in town.”

“Are you a volunteer there?”

“No, I was buying some furniture. I’ve only just moved to this area.”

“I see.”

“Are you a born-and-bred local?”

“No, we came here about five years ago. My father and me.”

“Did you already have connections here?”

“No, none. My father wanted to start a real estate agency and this was an up-and-coming area.”

What a pain in the arse it would be, Tait was thinking, if her father was Garry Leggett.

“Where’s his agency?” he asked.

“Oh, there never was one. Dad’s plans didn’t work out.”

“That’s a shame.”

“Dad’s plans had a habit of going bust. But we’d got used to that, him and me. I was brought up by my dad, you see, and we were very close.”

She was smiling, but the sorrowful look had become more pronounced.

“When things didn’t work out he’d get despondent for a day or two, but then it was Next year’s olives.”

“Next year’s olives?”

“That was an Italian saying he’d learned from his parents. He’d shrug and clap his hands together and say, Next year’s olives, my girl! Next year’s olives!

So that’s where her raven-haired beauty comes from, Tait was thinking. Italy.

“What does he do now?”

There was a moment’s pause and Francesca looked down at her hands in her lap.

“He died in December,” she said.

“Ah, I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” she said, looking up and smiling. “Today has been good. I feel as though I’m back in the land of the living. Dad would be happy to know that.”

“Next year’s olives?”

“Yes,” she replied, squaring her shoulders. “Exactly.”
They served another rush of customers. The lovely glow of the participation mystique was still on him and just being close to Francesca felt delicious. It made him tingle with a sense of being linked to all life and all beauty, past and present, and to whole generations of unknown people in the soil of Italy, as though Francesca’s ancestors were somehow also his own, and whenever he stole a glance at her face it gave him a deep conviction of the inherent loveliness of the human creature.

“How ya doin, squire?” came a voice.

Jade wore a big white cowboy hat and a costume of white silk with decorative whirls of silver-blue that caught the sunlight. He stood grinning across the trestle table. Bambi was beside him with Bundle in her arms.

“You look like a million dollars,” Tait said.

“Feel like it, too,” Jade declared, grinning harder and seeming to sway a little. “My oath. Never been better.”

“Have a coffee, darl,” Bambi urged him.

Tait began to pour one.

“Nah, mate,” Jade said, waving it away. “I’m right.”

“Go on, darl,” Bambi urged. “It’s poured for you.”

She looked across at Tait and seemed to be appealing to him for support.

“Here mate,” Tait said, holding the coffee out to him. “You get the special cup today.”

Jade ignored it and grinned at Francesca.

“How ya goin?”

Francesca smiled and said she was fine thanks.

Jade grinned harder and seemed to sway again.

“You look after this fella,” he said to her, indicating Tait. “He’s a mate o’ mine, but he spends too much time on his own.”

Francesca smiled again.

“He’s a bit of a intellekshual,” Jade went on. “But that’s alright in my book. Takes all types, don’t it?”

Francesca nodded.

“Drink your coffee, Jadey,” Bambi said. “Come on, darl.”

Tait held it out again.

“Better go,” Jade said abruptly, still grinning. “Got things ter do.”

He turned and walked away.

Bambi gave Tait a glum look and shrugged her shoulders and followed Jade.
Tait explained to Francesca who Jade and Bambi were, and how he always had a cabin full of unwanted lemonade from their shop, and about the Plymouth that was a dream of resurrection.

“I assume he doesn’t always dress like that,” Francesca said.

“No, he’s here to perform. According to the program he’s the Master of Manipulation and the Doyen of Daring.”

“What does he do?”

“Oddly enough, I don’t know. I guess we’ll find out around three o’clock.”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

“Me either.”

“Perhaps he’s one of those people who perform better when they’re half-pissed.”

“Let’s hope so,” said Tait, taking a sip of the coffee Jade hadn’t wanted.

* * * *

The schedule had been mucked up by the Minister’s late arrival and the delay of the opening ceremony, so it was just after four when Jade’s turn came. The crowd had thinned out a bit by then.

It began well. The announcer gave him a big intro as the Master of Manipulation etcetera, and Jade bounded up on the stage with a twirling rope and a wild cowboy yell of “Yeeaah-Haaaaa!” He whirled the rope around his body in various ways, stepping in and out of the circle of it and doing more yells.

Tait and Francesca had left the tea and coffee tent to come and watch. Tait could see Bambi standing quite a long way back, balancing Bundle on her hip and watching the stage as though reluctantly from the corner of her eye. She was biting her lip.

Tait was impressed by the rope tricks and there was only a faint inkling that Jade wasn’t quite in control. There was a moment also when he accidentally knocked his own hat off and then almost tripped over it, but he recovered and went into a final flourish and then bowed to the audience. It was a relief that it had come off so well.

Tait glanced back at Bambi but she did not look any happier than before.

Jade threw the rope down and picked up a stockwhip and began whirling and cracking it. The horses became excited again and milled in their paddock.

“Go, Mustang!” Jade yelled with each crack of the whip. “Go, Mustang! Yeahhh-Haaaaa!
Another man came up on stage carrying a long plank of wood with about a dozen balloons attached along it. He laid the plank on two uprights about waist-high. While he was placing it, Jade had turned away, directing the whip cracks out over the heads of the audience. People at the front hurriedly stepped back.

Jade turned round just as his helper finished placing the balloons and was about to get off the stage. With a yell of “Go, Mustang!” Jade whipped at the end balloon and the lash went close to the man’s head. The man leapt off the stage as if for dear life. Jade had missed the balloon and had to flick at it several more times before it burst. Then he went along the row. He burst three or four of the balloons at first go but had to whip at the others repeatedly.

When all the balloons were burst he turned to the audience and cracked the whip out towards them again. Everyone was a long way back now. The other man came up on stage again, but very cautiously and keeping his eye on Jade. He carried another plank and this time there were five lighted candles stuck upright on it. The man scurried away as soon as the candles were in place.

Jade wasn’t doing the yell so much now, and was getting slower and clumsier. You could see how very skinny he was and how the white silk clothes flapped loose around his body. He was obviously exhausted.

After half a dozen attempts he had not been able to whip the flame of the first candle out. He kept going too high, as if he wasn’t seeing the target quite where it really was. With each failure you could feel his effort to drag up a bit more bravado.

“And out she goes, folks!” he cried as he directed the lash. “And out she goes!” as the next attempt went high. “And yes, out she goes!” The candles burned more strongly the more Jade whipped away at them.

Tait would have turned to see Bambi’s reaction, but he didn’t want to take his eyes off Jade. There was a horrible fascination in what was happening. Somebody started to clap and others joined in. It was kindly clapping. It was meant to encourage Jade to call it quits and take a bow.

Instead it spurred him on. With a wild yell he severed the first candle right through its middle. The top half span through the air and the flame spluttered out. He yelled again and severed the second candle near its base. He went for the third candle but the whip curled around the length of timber and yanked it off the brackets. He tried to pull the whip free but it was tangled. He let go of it and turned to the audience, his arms raised in the air and a desperate look on his face.

“Ready!” he screeched.
From further down the paddock came the loud noise of a motor-bike being kicked into action. Jade stared wildly at the audience for another moment, then jumped from the stage and ran down the paddock to where the other man was revving the bike.

The whole audience hurried round past the stage to get a clear view. Tait felt Francesca take hold of his arm.

Two metal ramps had been set up on a level stretch down near the bottom fence. Midway between them was a hurdle about chest-high. Jade was now astride the bike, fastening his helmet. The other man ran to the hurdle and stood holding something up in his hand. The horses in the other paddock were spooked by the revving engine and were running about, their heads right up and their tails lashing.

“Yeeaahh-Haaaaaaa!” Jade yelled and gave a thumbs-up sign.

The other man flicked a cigarette lighter and touched it to the top of the hurdle and a line of flame shot up.

“Yeeaahhh-Haaaa!” Jade shrieked as he and the bike sprang forward. The other man went to run away from the fiery hurdle but tripped and fell on his face.

It only took a few seconds for Jade to reach the first ramp, but it seemed to Tait that everyone had a long time to think. He himself was thinking that they might be witnessing a death. He was also able to register that Francesca was clasping his arm with both hands, and to calculate the degree of her alarm by the pressure of her fingers.

“Yeeaahhh-Haaaaa!” Jade shrieked as he and the bike flew through the air separately. The bike hit the ground and slewed into the fence and went dead. Jade landed flat on his back and stayed very still and there was no sound other than the whinny of the horses.

* * * *

Jade was uninjured, but his pal had sprained an ankle falling over. When the flurry had died down, Bambi came to tell Tait that she was taking Jade home. He was sitting slumped in the Mini and refusing to speak.

Tait said he’d stay awhile and get a lift back with someone else.

By the time it was dark the crowd had all gone. The vintage cars had coughed and rattled up the road. The miniature train had been dismantled and taken away. Big Bandicoot was deflated and packed up. Tents and marquees had been untied and allowed to flop onto the ground to be folded. Tait helped dismantle the stage and load the sections onto Kelvin’s truck.

Megan declared they’d all done their bit and it was time to relax.
They gathered in the Museum building where food and drink was laid out. Megan had a tall glass of white wine in her hand and radiated satisfaction.

Tait heard someone remark to her that it was a shame about the motorbike thing, and the other fellow’s twisted ankle.

“Yes, absolutely marvellous!” she beamed back.

But Tait knew what she meant. After a ten-year campaign this day had been a famous victory, with the lightest of casualties.

He found himself sitting next to Madam Zorinda, the gypsy fortune teller, who turned out to be a chap named Ian. He learned that Ian was a keen amateur painter who lived nearby and did a lot of landscapes of the Valley. At first Tait wasn’t paying proper attention because his mind was on Francesca on the other side of the room. But then he became interested in what Ian was saying about the Valley scenery and the different qualities of light. Tait would have mentioned his thoughts about the Valley of the Brothers Grimm, except that once an idea for a poem had entered his mind he never discussed it. Discussing it was the quickest way to kill the impulse. So he just made one or two comments about the local atmosphere.

Ian asked him if he painted. Tait replied that he couldn’t paint or draw to save his life but that he admired painters and had just read a book about the French Impressionists. Ian mentioned Camille Pissarro and Tait praised a work of his called “Red Roofs.” Ian knew Pissarro’s work backwards and was glad of a chance to talk about it.

Tait’s attention had begun to wander to Francesca again when Ian said something that brought it sharply back.

“Zola said that ‘a work of art is a corner of creation seen through a temperament.’”

Tait repeated it under his breath, to fix it in his mind. It had given him the prickle of excitement that meant there was something in it for him — an insight, an angle, a lead, a clue. He would jot it down as soon as he had a moment.

“That’s very true of poems, too,” he said, thinking of Wordsworth and the Highland girl in the field.

“You write poems?”

“Yes, a bit.”

“And what do you do for a crust?”

He wondered whether to trot out the research methodology thing, but thought it would be too rude to fob Ian off like that after the friendly conversation.

“I’m on an Arts Board grant, at the moment,” he said.

“To do what?” Ian asked, looking at him with deep interest.
“To write.”

“To write.?”

“Yes.”

“Wow. Wonderful. Congratulations!” he said and shook Tait’s hand warmly.

Tait was wishing he’d used the research methodology.

“Wait a minute,” Ian said. “You’re, um...”

“Yes.”

“You won that prize, didn’t you?”

Tait nodded. *And I’m fresh out of the loony-bin, too,* he almost murmured.

But Ian’s look of goodwill had not changed.

“Well, it’s marvellous to meet you.”

“What’s marvellous?” came a voice beside them.

It was the Edwardian lady.

“This is Gillian,” Ian said.

Tait and Gillian exchanged nods and smiles.

“I thought you’d have chugged away on your vintage car,’ Tait said.

“Oh no,” Gillian replied. “I had no connection with that. I was just roped in to be in costume and ride here on the blasted thing from town. It nearly rattled my bones loose.”

Gillian had got out of the Edwardian clothes. Ian, although he had exchanged his red dress for a pair of shorts, still wore the blouse and bangles of a Gypsy woman and the garish remains of powder and lipstick and eye-shadow. Gillian had her hand on Ian’s head, idly stroking his hair, and Ian’s arm was round her waist. They were clearly a couple.

“So what’s marvellous?” Gillian asked again.

Ian told her about Tait being on the grant and about the prize and being new to the area.

“That is marvellous,” she said. “You and Harry Dunn should get together. Do you know Harry?”

“No, but I heard him reciting his bush ballads this afternoon.”

“He’s still here, I think. Yes, he’s over there behind Frannie.”

Harry Dunn was a stooped, melancholy-looking man. He was half-hidden behind Francesca who was talking to the woman in the jodhpurs.

“Frannie seems chirpy enough,” Ian remarked.

“It’s so good to see,” Gillian agreed.

She turned to Tait.

“Have you met Francesca?”
“Yes.”

“Oh, that’s right. I saw you doing teas together. Frannie was hit very hard by her father’s death a while back. This outing with the Players today is her first time back in the swing of things.”

“I thought she was excellent.”

“Oh, Francesca’s a brilliant actress. The best we’ve got.”

“Are you in the theatre group too?”

“I am. And Ian here claims to be a martyr to it.”

“I’m a stage widower,” Ian said. “The Players got my wife eight years ago and I’ve never had her properly back since.”

“You seem an awfully good actor yourself,” Tait said, “The way you played Madame Zorinda all day.”

“That wasn’t acting,” Gillian scoffed. “That was him living out his fantasies as a crossdresser.”

“Hey, I’m twice the actress you are!” Ian cried, striking a pose and pouting for all he was worth.

Megan interrupted the flow of chatter to announce there’d be a barbeque the following Sunday for all the helpers who’d made today a success. It was to be held at the Harvey’s place just over yonder.

“That’s us,” Ian whispered to Tait. “We’d be pleased to see you there.”

Megan spoke with a fine flourish of what the new Museum meant for the pioneer heritage of the district. Then the stern-faced woman in jodhpurs came forward. Her name was Marigold and it seemed she was Megan’s chief assistant in all matters great and small. She told of the ten-year struggle to accomplish this day. She had a strong, mannish voice, but it turned wobbly when she said what a privilege it was to have been Megan’s paladin through it all. She repeated the paladin bit, then burst into tears and had to be led away.

“What’s a paladin?” someone at the back was heard to ask in a dubious tone.

“Shoosh!”

Tait needed a minute by himself, to jot down the Zola quote. And after that he wanted to be with Francesca again. It seemed endless hours ago that the two of them had closed the tea and coffee tent and had gone their separate ways into other chores. But there had hardly been a moment since that he wasn’t thinking about her.

On his way outside he was stopped by Harry Dunn.

“Fine work of yours, that.”
“Sorry?”
“The MacLew poem.”
“Thanks.”
“Out of my league. Just a bushwacker. Do my best, such as it is.”
“I heard you this afternoon.”
“Had to step in. There was no-one else. Lance Lassiter almost came. Last minute pull-out. Had to fill the breach.”
Tait was trying to recall snippets of what he’d heard of the recitation.
“I loved your image of the sheep turning into lichen-covered rocks,” Tait said, hoping he’d heard that snippet correctly. Was it lichen-covered rocks? And was it sheep?
“I know my limits,” Harry sighed, stooping even lower and looking even more melancholy. “Never kid myself. But had to step in. Did what little I could. If we’d known you were here, would’ve been different. Lance Lassiter nearly came. Last minute pull-out. And why should he bother? Major figure like that? Same with you. Why waste your time? But I’m just a bushie. Fit in where I can. Plug the gap when there’s no-one else. Simple as that.”
“Well, it was good to hear your work, anyway,” Tait said, trying to move toward the door. “You’d know Lance Lassiter, I s’pose?”
“I know some of his work.”
“Major figure. There’s been monographs done at the universities. Same with you. MacLew prize. Major figures. He’s given me advice. You’d never guess, would you?”
“Sorry?”
“Lance Lassiter. He’s given me tips. Done his best. But the talent’s just not there. Just a bushwacker. Fill the breach when I can. That’s all.”
“I might just pop out outside...”
“I’ve got a copy of my book here. I’ll sign it for you.”
He reached inside his coat and drew out a booklet. It was called *Dreams and Gleams and Bullock Teams: Verses and Ditties of Turrawong Shire, by Harold (Harry) Augustus Dunn.* The cover was a bilious green and had a very bad pen-and-ink drawing of a swagman boiling a billy. The swagman had a particularly vacuous grin on his face.
“Sold over two thousand copies, so far,” Harry said as he signed the inside page. “Got my outlets all over the Shire, you see. Newsagents. Caravan parks. You name it.”
“That’s marvellous,” Tait said, again trying to ease toward the door.
Harry had fixed him with a sort of glare.

“The poetry market is very small,” Tait said.

“How many did your last book sell?” Harry asked, the glare intensifying.

“I’ve never had a book published,” Tait said. “Just individual poems in journals and anthologies.”

“Well, there you are. You’re a major figure. In a higher realm. Like Lance Lassiter. I’m just a bushwacker. Outsell Lance Lassiter four to one, but there you are. I’m not on that elevated level. Never claimed I was.”

Tait said he was desperate to pee and would be back shortly. He went outside into a shaft of light from a window and took his note pad from his satchel and jotted the Zola quote down. He looked in through the window for a glimpse of Francesca but couldn’t see her there. He felt a little stab of dismay. He walked out into the paddock and along the fence, away from the light.

It was calming to be out there, with the elemental feel of the earth and the bush-covered hills beneath the starry sky. There came a sound of children running and giggling behind the dark sheds where the old carts and implements were, and a snort from one of the horses across the creek.

Then he heard two other voices somewhere further along in the dark. One of them sounded like Francesca’s. There was a flick of a torch.

“Thanks, Neil, yes I’m fine,” he heard Francesca say. “Just getting a nice breath of air.”

There was a gruff male voice and a moment later a thickset youth strode past. Neil was about seventeen and a bit retarded, but a tremendously willing worker. He had done much of the heavy lifting to get the dismantled sections of the stage onto the truck earlier. Kelvin addressed him jovially as “Neil the Wheel,” meaning a person of consequence, for Neil was the self-appointed security guard of the Turrawong Players and always went about in heavy boots and camouflage-jacket and with a grave and watchful demeanour.

“Evenin,” he said in a sort of gruff official tone, flicking the torch again. “Just checkin security.”

“Good work,” Tait said.

Neil went on by.

Then Francesca was coming towards him out of the dark. Tait could hardly believe his luck.

“May I join you?” she asked.

“Of course. It’s so pleasant out here.”
“It’s divine,” she sighed.
Not half as divine as you, he wanted to say.
Their elbows brushed and he felt tingles go through him.
“I come out to escape from someone,” he said.
“No, there’s no escaping, I’m afraid. You’re now a cog in Megan’s machine.”
“It wasn’t her. It was the Bush Bard of Turrawong Shire.”
“Ah.”
“Do you know him?”
“Not really, but I’ve seen his dirty book cover.”
“His what?”
“The Masturbating Swaggie. On the cover of his book. Kelvin pointed it out to me. He points it out to everyone. The swaggie’s hand down in his lap, hidden by the billy in front, and the expression on the face.”
“Gosh, I’ve got a signed copy right here,” Tait said. “I can’t wait to check it again in the light.”
“Gillian tells me that you’re a writer too.”
“Oh yes, I’m a Major Figure, apparently. That’s what the Bard said.”
“What’s he like to talk to?”
“Well, Uriah Heep comes to mind.”
A gentle breeze arose. It was full of the lovely earthy smell of the Valley. The stars winked and shone. The feel of being so close to Francesca was wonderful. Tait would normally have flinched from this degree of closeness, but now he almost had to stop himself from putting his arm around her shoulder.
“The Valley is so beautiful,” he said, feeling a need to keep the talk going, to distract himself from the nearness. “I’d love to live out here, under these stars. There’s a quote from George Eliot that fits perfectly — it’s about looking up at the night sky and seeing a little lot of stars belonging to one’s own homestead.”
“That’s lovely,” Francesca whispered. “Is he one of your favourite poets?”
“He was a she, actually. Mary Anne Evans, one of the great Victorian novelists.”
“Ah, well, you’re dealing here with an illiterate. My best subject at school was Snogging-behind-the-bike-shed.”
“Snogging?”
“Oh yes, I was an awful little trollop. My glands got more stimulation than my mind ever did. Although, come to think of it, I won a prize for an English essay in Year 12.”
“What was it about?”
“Snogging behind the bike shed!” they said in unison.
They laughed and Francesca leaned in and patted his arm as she did so. Again Tait had to resist the urge to put his arm around her.
“But actually, since you mention it,” she went on. “I probably will be living out here one of these days, under the little stars of my own homestead.”
“How come?”
“My father bought a block of land,” she said, pointing. “Just over that way, not far from Gillian and Ian’s place. He bought it as an investment when we first came to the area, to stop himself blowing the money on some wild scheme or other — which he was always prone to do. So now it belongs to me. We plan to build a house.”
“Lovely,” said Tait.
But that word “we” was reverberating through him.
“Will you be at the barbeque next Sunday,” she asked.
“I’d like to be. It’s a matter of getting a lift.”
“We might be able to give you one,” she replied. “Where exactly do you live?”
He told her.
“That’d be on our way. Problem is, we mightn’t be going till quite late in the day.”
A doubtful tone had come into her voice, as if she regretted having mentioned the lift. He felt the little stab of dismay again, but more acutely.
“It’s okay,” he said, to let her off the hook. “I have some options.”
Just then a vehicle came swiftly along the road and turned in at the gates with a flash of headlights and a toot of the horn.
“There’s the lord-and-monster now,” Francesca said. “He won’t want to hang about, so I’d best go. But it’s been nice getting to know you.”
“Same here.”
“We made a good team.”
“Sure did. Tea and coffee has never been poured with such panache.”
“Sorry it didn’t go better for your friend Jade.”
“Well, it could’ve been worse.”
“Have you got a phone?” she asked.
“No,” he replied.
“So I can’t ring you. You’ll have to ring me then, say at the end of the week, and I’ll tell you what our movements will be on the Sunday. Ring me at work. I’m not hard to locate. Just call the Shire Council.”

“Will they put me through to you?” he asked, trying to keep the sheer relief out of his voice.

“They won’t have to. I’m their phone receptionist.”

There was a long moment of silence, with the breeze delicious on their faces.

He felt his hand being touched and the tingles went through him again. The touch was so light that it could almost have been accidental, but he was fairly sure it wasn’t.

“Night then,” she said softly and walked away.

He saw her greeting a man in the doorway of the Museum, and a minute later the two of them drove off.

Tait stood there, still tingling. At the same time he felt bereft and wounded, as though part of his own body had just been wrenched away.

* * * *

He got a lift home with Kelvin in the truck.

“Farewell to the Forge and the Anvil,” Kelvin declaimed as they went over Honeysuckle Hill. “Goodbye to the ring of the Hammer, the puff of the Bellows, the thunderous fart of the Drafthorse! I enjoyed my Blacksmithing, but now I just want to slip back into a pretty frock.”

Tait wanted to ask him about the bloke Francesca was with, but felt shy of raising the topic of Francesca at all. Instead he said what a nice couple Ian and Gillian seemed, and how he’d like to be at their barbeque.

“Well, I have other fish to fry that day,” Kelvin said. “But any number of people would give you a lift, now that you’ve insinuated yourself so cunningly into our midst.”

“I assume they all know, now, about my past?”

“Pretty much.”

“What did Megan say, when she found out?”

“Oh, Auntie knew who you were from the start.”

“Really? She gave no sign of it.”

“Listen, you can never tell what Auntie knows or doesn’t know. That’s part of her knack of managing people.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear nobody minds having a criminal nutcase around.”

“Oh, a few people might mind. Marigold, for instance.”
“Really?”
“Yeah. But then everyone gets a turn in Marigold’s bad books. Except Megan, of course.”
“What was all that ‘paladin’ stuff, and the bursting into tears?”
“Marigold’s been living a saga of unrequited love for Megan for thirty years. She gets a bit overwhelmed with it at times.”
“Sounds like a poignant story.”
“It is. All the same, don’t get too far on the wrong side of Marigold. It isn’t wise.”
“Okay, I won’t.”
They were silent for a minute or two.
“So, what about Francesca?” Kelvin asked.
“She seems very nice.”
“Is that all?”
“What do you mean?”
“You know what I mean. You’re a smitten kitten.”
“How would you know that?”
“Listen, you may not be aware of it, but at times you have the most expressive face. Just once in a while. It must be when you’re off your guard.”
“Go on.”
“I watched you when you were sitting with Ian and Gillian and gazing across at Frannie. I could almost see the little cupid arrows whizzing into you: flick, flick, flick. It was quite obvious to Gillian, too. She and I compared notes about it.”
“That’s great. It’s all over town.”
“Not quite yet, but admittedly Gillian doesn’t have my inscrutable reserve.”
“Who’s this bloke Francesca’s with?” Tait asked, relieved to be able to talk frankly.
“Craig? He’s a bit uptight. Doesn’t mix with any of us. We see him coming and going, picking her up, dropping her off. He’ll chat for a minute if he has to, but there isn’t any warmth in it. I’m sure he thinks all her friends are riff-raff.”
“What does she see in him, d’you think?”
“A shoulder to lean on, I guess, with her dad dying and all that.”
They saw a cow on the road ahead and slowed almost to a stop.
“Shoo! Shoo!” Kelvin shouted in his high-pitched voice, wagging his hand out the window. The creature peered stolidly into their headlights and then ambled aside.
“Want my advice?” Kelvin asked, as they picked up speed again.
“The ancient wisdom of the village blacksmith?”
“You bet. I haven’t been banging my anvil all these years for nothing.”
“I know I’ll regret this, but okay, let’s hear it.”
“Its this. Join the Players, quick smart. First, if you took up acting you could make use of
that expressive face of yours. Second, and more to the point, Craig hates the Players and
avoids them like poison. That means you’d have an open go at Frannie.
“How charming that sounds.”
“We’re talking about love here, aren’t we?”
“Possibly.”
“Well then, it isn’t meant to be charming. It’s meant to be got, and there’s only the quick
and the dead.”

Chapter Four

The day at the Valley had been the most vivid and delicious time he had ever had in other
people’s company, so the reaction, when it came, was a real jolt. That phrase from Heart of
Darkness ran in his mind: “the outrageous flaunting of folly.” His folly hadn’t been quite as
flaunted as poor Jade’s, but it was more culpable.

He felt he had betrayed his own people. In his mind’s eye he saw them that day, or any day,
back in the wards. He saw them rocking themselves to and fro in corners, or cringing under a
barrage of insult and contempt, or turned into zombies with pills and blasts of electricity
through the skull.

No festive sun or vibrant stars for them, no exquisite touch of Francesca’s hand, no swoon
of connectedness to the whole of life blowing like a sweet wind over Honeysuckle Hill.

That day had been utter QO. But it was so easy to misuse the QO, to treat it as your own
private windfall, something you grab for yourself if you get the chance. That whole day in the
Valley, Tait hadn’t once remembered his old comrades, hadn’t spared a thought for all those
back there under the Regime’s grinders. He was like some absconding rat who finds a chink
in the wall and pisses off without a qualm: So long, losers!

The QO wasn’t meant to be an escape. Nor was it just a pleasure principle. It only truly
meant something when it served as a spur to fortitude and solidarity. That was the meaning of
“You bet. I haven’t been banging my anvil all these years for nothing.”
“I know I’ll regret this, but okay, let’s hear it.”
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The QO wasn’t meant to be an escape. Nor was it just a pleasure principle. It only truly meant something when it served as a spur to fortitude and solidarity. That was the meaning of
Michael Kieslowski’s poem about the two young freedom-fighters who became his parents. When those two fell in love, amid the bullets and shells of the Rising, they found the QO in abundance. What they gained, though, was not an exemption from the fight, but a new power in the fight. And that fight continued long after the last shot had echoed in Warsaw, for it was the fight of memory against forgetting.

That was Tait’s bitter reproach to himself. He had forgotten so quickly and easily. As a sort of recompense to the wronged, he did not phone Francesca and he did not go to the barbeque at Ian and Gillian’s. He told himself that in future he would keep much more to the cabin, to his quiet walks along the lake shore, to his snug evening meals in the back booth at the Athena cafe. That was enough of a life. Above all, he would focus on his work.

He was full of a new idea, prompted by the force of the Kieslowski poem. It was about the dynamic of good and evil, the QO and the Regime. Imagining Warsaw, he’d suddenly visualized another and even more sublime combat going on in the skies above it. Bright and dark angels are contending for the soul of the world. Every now and then a little of the dust of their battles drifts down to the mortal earth. It is bright or dark dust, depending on which angels it falls from. The bright is compassion and fidelity and the dark is cruelty and contempt. And nobody can know on whom which dust has fallen, except as it is shown in behaviour.

What interested Tait was a question. Did the angels fight above Warsaw because that place was a crucible of struggle, or did that city’s glory and agony come from being under a crucial sector of the angelic battlefront?

But he never took it any further.

Jimmy Sale came over the next evening with a couple of bottles of stout and they made a little fire out under the trees and sat watching the wink of lights across the lake. Cashew the possum came along a low branch to peer at them. They put a row of bread pellets on the branch and then some stout in a saucer. They agreed the bread was important. They didn’t want Cashew boozing on an empty stomach.

Tait had told Jimmy about Jade’s debacle in the Valley.

“How’s he taking it,” Jimmy asked.

“Don’t really know. The shop’s been closed and I haven’t seen him or Bambi since. Jade hasn’t been working on the Plymouth, which I guess is a bad sign. The dream of resurrection may have been killed off.”

“I hope not,” Jimmy said. “If he gets too morose I might be sent in to counsel him. And I wouldn’t wish anyone into the clutches of the system if they can avoid it.”
Then he seemed to shrug off the negative and grinned and poured some more stout. 
Tait was sure he had something on his mind, some news to impart. 
“Well, James,” he prompted after a while, “what’s the occasion?”
“Must there be an occasion?”
“I think there must, the way you’re grinning like Robin Rainbow. You look as pleased as a cat with twelve tails.”
“Isn’t the expression ‘two tails’?”
“Twelve is how pleased you look.”
“Well, I’m going to be a Daddy!” he said.
He had thrown his head back and his arms wide, his palms turned upward, like someone receiving a benediction.
Tait shook his hand and slapped him on the shoulder and said how pleased he was. They filled their glasses again and poured some more for Cashew.
“How do we know whether we’re giving him too much?”
“If he falls off the branch we’ll know.”
Jimmy said how over-the-moon Lauren was about the baby, and how Tait would soon have to get used to a little person calling him Uncle, and other stuff like that.
Later the conversation got back to the day at the Valley. It turned out that Jimmy knew Ian Harvey because Ian was a physiotherapist with regional health and welfare. Ian’s office at work was full of his landscape paintings and Jimmy had been admiring them only the other week.
Tait mentioned Francesca, but cautiously and as if in passing. He wanted to check if Jimmy knew her, but felt shy of saying too much. Jimmy was vaguely aware of the sexy-voiced phone receptionist at the Shire Council, but that was all.
He seemed to pick up that Francesca had made an impression on Tait, and began to press for more details. Wanting to change the subject, Tait started telling him about that idea of the angels above Warsaw. As he talked of it he grew excited, and even eloquent, but then the effects of the stout cut in and they both became content to gaze into the embers of the fire.
By talking of it too soon, Tait had expended the impulse that should have gone into writing. It seemed a great pity. But then again, Jimmy’s news about becoming a Daddy put the loss in perspective.
It was a good reminder, Tait felt, that life ranks ahead of art.
He was on the train to Castleton.
To keep his mind off the session with Bristol Dick, Tait thought about the record he would buy afterwards. What he wanted most was a record of Polish folksongs. He would not fathom a word of it, but that didn’t matter. He just wanted to get the feel of the ancestral culture that lay behind Mike Kieslowski’s poem. Of course, finding a record like that would be pretty unlikely. Never mind, he would buy something nice to listen to. He didn’t use his record-player nearly enough, but now that he had decided to burrow deeper into his life in the cabin, it would serve him well.

Coming out of the main station, he had to walk up a steep hill for two blocks. The Probation Service was in a modern-looking building, all glass and cold metal. It was ten minutes before appointment time so Tait stood in a doorway across the street, his hands deep in the pockets of his jacket, half-shivering with reluctance. Then it occurred to him that Bristol Dick might be able to see him there, so he crossed the street and waited up against the wall for another few minutes. The shivery feeling persisted and he made an effort to relax his arm and face muscles. He knew he mustn’t give the python any encouragement.

He came out feeling violated, as he always did.
“‘How do you quantify your output?’ Bristol Dick had wanted to know.
“What do you mean?’
“As a poet. How do you determine what constitutes a good day’s work? Do aim to write a given number of lines per day?’

“One would hope to work in a reasonably methodical way,’’ Tait replied, keeping his voice and face as blank as he could.

“That’s good to hear. And one would expect a methodical approach to yield a consistent quantity of output. Yes?’

“Not necessarily.’

“Why not?’

The unblinking eyes of the python began to glitter.

“One might be working methodically on tasks of different magnitude from one day to the next.’

“For example?’

“As Oscar Wilde said, one might spend all morning putting a comma in, then all afternoon taking it out again. He was making a witticism, but also expressing a truth.’
“Yes, I’ve read that witticism somewhere. So, a poet might consider the placement of a comma a proper day’s work?”

“Occasionally, yes.”

“Occasionally, you say. So what about on the more typical days? On a typical day in my work, for example, I conduct ‘x’ number of appointments like this. Is there anything about your function as a poet that is quantifiable in the same way?”

“I think there’s a problem with the analogy.”

“May I know what it is?”

“Persons and poems are not the same thing. Nor are poets and probation officers.”

“Please continue. This is so informative.”

“Well, the two modes of interaction are like chalk and cheese.”

“How so?”

“It’s the difference between putting demands on others or on yourself. I don’t say to the poem: ‘Today I’ve scheduled you a fifteen-minute appointment, and in that fifteen minutes you’ll be required to justify yourself, and you must arrive with hair neatly combed and shoes polished.’”

“No?”

“No. For one thing, I wouldn’t assume that spit and polish was appropriate in every case. A given poem might need to come as a primitive beast, or as a fiery angel.”

“Are many of your poems primitive beasts and fiery angels? I’d be fascinated to read them.”

I’ll bet you would, Tait thought. Primitive beasts and fiery angels smack of the grandiose. Tait didn’t like the way it was going. He was starting to become angry and less in control of what he was saying. The glitter in the python’s eyes seemed to intensify.

“I’m speaking,” Tait said very carefully, “of the ways in which that given poem might present itself initially to one’s imagination, not necessarily of the finished piece of work.”

The python stare continued for another moment, then Bristol looked up at the clock on the wall.

“What a pity our time is up,” he said.

_saved by the bell_, thought Tait.

“Let’s remember where we were in the conversation, so we can continue it next time,” said Bristol. “In fact, I’ll jot it down, just to be sure. In the interim, though, do give some thought to how it might be possible to quantify what you do.”

As Tait left the office, Bristol was jotting a reminder on his heavy note-pad.
It had turned colder, and a wind was blowing through the streets. He was glad of the wind. It matched his inner state of mind. He needed a long, hard, angry walk, needed to curse and fume until he was rid of the worst of the violated feeling. As he strode along he searched his mind for a fitting quote, one that summed the situation up. He did this when he felt mauled by Regimic power. At those times he sought to equip himself from the armoury of the spirit, and all true eloquence was in that armoury.

Tait remembered the first time he’d really felt the power of it. It had been back in the early days in Maximum Security. It was one of those days when all the inmates felt their demons closing round them and were just trying to keep themselves together. It needed the screws to be calm, to have an iota of respect for the misery-level. But there were bullying shitheads on duty that day and they wouldn’t leave things alone. By afternoon there’d been endless aggravations. There’d been howls and shouting-matches and dire threats and hysterical defiance. Four inmates had been “biffed” and dragged off to the isolation cells. And of course by then all the screws were brimming over with rage and righteousness because of what the Report Book said. It said that several staff members had been assaulted by inmates. And the screws knew that what the Report Book said was correct because they had written it themselves and they were trained psychiatric nurses who had witnessed the events. If you as an inmate had seen the events a bit differently it meant you were delusional. And your delusional state would be duly noted in that same Report Book and could lead to the helpful attachment of electrodes to your head.

By late afternoon every inmate had been biffed or threatened or wearied into passivity and Tait overheard one screw say to another: “Peace at fuckin last!” Some words came to him then, something he must’ve read or heard and which he only later traced to the Roman writer Tacitus. Its total aptness was somehow beautiful and consoling, and it shone like a tiny ray of victory over what had happened: They make a desolation and call it peace.

That had been Tait’s true awakening to the sheer power of language and ideas. A few days later, still thinking about the desolation, he picked up a battered old novel in a corner of the dayroom. It did not look very interesting in itself, but it had a stanza of verse at the front. The lines were by Sir Walter Scott:

To aching eyes each landscape lowers,
To feverish pulse each gale blows chill;
And Araby’s or Eden’s bowers
Were barren as this moorland hill.

At that moment Tait knew all he wanted to do in life was to read poetry. And maybe even write some, if he could learn how.

He’d walked along several streets now and had crossed a little open park in the blustery wind. There was a salty tang in the air and a vast churning sound. He strode up a grassy rise and there beheld the ocean. Big ships lay at anchor a mile or two out, waiting their turn to load coal. There was a long beach that stretched away south to a distant headland. In the other direction he could see the big old facade of the Ocean Baths. They’d been built in the 1920’s in Art Deco style and were part of Castleton’s heritage. You saw them on postcards, along with photos of the cathedral on the hill and sunset over the steelworks.

He went across the road to the beach and down to the water’s edge and began to walk along towards the Baths. He felt his anger lessening, being put in proportion by the bluster of the wind and the crash and surge of the sea. As he reached the brightly-painted facade of the Baths a quote came to him. It was Yeats describing Whiggery —

A levelling, rancorous, rational sort of mind
That never looked out of the eye of a saint
Or out of a drunkard’s eye.

Yes, that was Bristol Dick, the nit-picking bureaucrat. A person like that would never fathom poetry because he could never take a saint’s or a drunkard’s viewpoint. That was the idea that Tait had been fumbling after when he’d spoken of “beasts” and “angels.” The Yeats quote would have served him better.

He stood against the front wall of the Baths to get a break from the wind. He was reflecting on how little he knew what Whiggery was. There were so many gaps in his general knowledge. It came, he supposed, from having left school at fourteen. He had made up a fair bit of ground by years of intense reading, but no one has time to read about everything. Were the Whigs the same as the Puritans? Did they want to close down the theatres and make dancing illegal? Were they the descendants of the Roundheads of the Civil War? He would need to check up on all that. But just now he wanted to gaze out over the heaving sea. The grandeur of that would drive away the last of his anger and resentment.

An hour and a half later he was back in the main shopping centre, feeling famished. He went into a cafe and ordered a hamburger and chips and a pot of tea and sat there reading the
book he’d had in his satchel. Then he went to a big record shop and browsed for a longish time. He looked in vain for anything Polish, but found something else that excited him.

It was an album of old Scottish songs and ballads and was called *The Storm on the Heather*. Tait felt stirred by the title and was deeply struck by a reproduction of a painting on the album cover. It showed a stark hillside and a long file of men going up the slope. One of them carries a vividly-coloured banner that is streaming out at an angle in the wind. The painter had used that detail of the streaming banner to communicate the wind’s force. You are seeing the men from behind and from quite far away, but you can tell they are kilted Highlanders and heavily armed. One of the things that made the picture fascinating was that you could read your own story into it. Tait dwelt on the cover for a long time before he turned it over to read the titles of the songs. One of them was called “Awa, Whigs, Awa!” He went straight to the counter and bought the record from a lovely red-haired girl who looked like the very model of a Highland sweetheart.

He headed to the station. He had twenty minutes before the next train so he took a stroll round the block and stumbled on a bookshop he hadn’t known was there. It was called Peppercorn’s. It looked untidy and relaxed and seemed to have a little coffee-lounge at the rear. He would have gone in to browse if there had been more time. Instead he looked at the flyers and posters in the window and saw Lance Lassiter’s name on one of them. There was to be a poetry evening there in the bookshop next month, with Lassiter the star turn. If it had been tonight, Tait reflected, he would’ve hung around and gone to it. Lassiter’s work was awfully good, full of vivid scenes of the knockabout life he’d had, and he was said to be quite charismatic in person. And he’d been one of the original Jumbywollamoks, a group of writers who tried to create what they saw as an authentic national literature by using a lot of Aboriginal myths and symbols.

On the train Tait felt worn out. He curled up in a corner seat and dozed. By the time he got home to the cabin after dark he felt better and sat till very late with his headphones on, playing his new record over and over again and drinking beer. The songs were of rending sorrow and savage defiance, and made you feel by turns heartbroken and enraged. Some of the words were hard to catch because of the broad accents, and because there were bits of Gaelic mixed in with the English, but the emotional tone was never anything but clear. “Awa, Whigs, Awa!” for instance, came through clenched teeth and laced with contempt.

* * * *
A few days after that Tait spoke to Bambi for the first time since Jade’s fiasco.

He was at his work table, fleshing out an idea for a poem. It was to do with the quote of Zola’s that Ian had mentioned that evening in the Valley — that a work of art was a corner of creation seen through a temperament, or whatever the exact wording was. Tait had lost the page of the notebook on which he had jotted it. Since he rarely mislaid things, especially things related to his work, this had annoyed him greatly. To make amends he’d brought that poem forward. There were actually seven ahead of it on the Blue Board, seven small squares of paper in a vertical row, but this one would get some early attention.

He was trying to get a fix on the central point, the idea that different people see the same thing and yet see the same thing differently. He had his book of Impressionist painters open in front of him and was looking again at Pissarro’s “Red Roofs.” He was imagining other painters working alongside Pissarro that day, Monet and Renoir and the rest of them, all seeing those same red roofs of the village and yet seeing them differently through their temperaments. The thought was even more striking if you imagined the others not only as fellow Impressionists but as other kinds of painters altogether, more contemporary ones. But of course it would then soon degenerate. You’d have charlatans daubing blobs no different than a chimpanzee would do, or riding paint-splattered bicycles over the canvas, or smearing it with their excrement, or leaving it blank.

Yeats’s point about saints and drunkards was important. You don’t want Whiggery, but you don’t want charlatans either. They have to be real saints and drunkards, otherwise the whole thing is crap. Blake was half-mad, so when he spoke of seeing eternity in a grain of sand it had the true vivid flash of the half-mad mind, the flash that sane minds concur with and are grateful for. Blake was a genuine case of seeing a corner of creation — or the whole of creation for that matter — through a temperament. But for every Blake you get a thousand bogus others: “Oh, aren’t I fascinating! I’m a crazy genius who sees bestiality in a tea-cup!” They had ruined the ancient good name of the arts. That’s what many people were reacting against. It made Tait squirm to have to admit that Bristol Dick’s dubious view of what a “poet” does might have some justification.

Just then Tait noticed the dog Roscoe run past on the reserve. It was a genial fox-terrier and belonged to a retired couple who lived along the lake shore. They took a stroll past the cabin most days and Tait had exchanged nods with them a couple of times. Having seen the dog, he expected to see the couple. But after a minute or so they still hadn’t crossed his view. Then he saw Roscoe run back the other way. Tait was glad of a distraction just then, so he went
outside and looked along the reserve. The elderly lady was sitting on the dirt path and the elderly chap was bending over her.

“She’s turned her ankle,” the chap called out as Tait approached.

“Anything I can do?” he asked.

“It’s my own silly fault,” the lady said. “Not taking enough care.”

“She’s in a bit of pain,” the chap said.

“Oh, I’ll be all right,” the lady said. “It’s just a matter of getting back home somehow.”

“How far along do you live?” Tait asked.

“Only about a quarter of a mile,” the chap said, “but there’s no way she can walk it. I’ve tried lifting her, but she can’t put any weight on that foot at all.”

They were silent a moment, thinking what to do. Roscoe sat on his hindquarters and looked gravely up at their faces, as though waiting to hear what the plan was.

“If we could get Mr Dragovic to come down…” the chap said.

“What a good idea,” said the lady.

“He’s our neighbour,” the chap explained to Tait. “Could you phone him for us?”

Tait replied that didn’t have a phone but would gladly deliver the message himself. Just then he noticed Bambi was outside the shop, looking across at them over the top of the Plymouth.

“Hang on, I can probably phone from there,” he said, pointing.

So the chap told him Mr Dragovic’s number and Tait wrote it on the back of his hand with the biro he always carried in his shirt pocket. He walked across the vacant block and over the road to Bambi.

“What’s wrong?” she asked. “Is someone hurt?”

Tait explained what was happening and Bambi led him through the shop to a passageway where the phone was. Tait rang the number on his hand and explained the situation.


After the phone call Bambi picked Bundle up off the floor of the shop and accompanied Tait back to the scene.

Mr Dragovic arrived in a Land Rover with roof-racks and a long radio aerial that swayed as the vehicle crossed the uneven ground. He wore khaki shorts and singlet and was barefoot and talked non-stop in the heavy accent, all the words emphasised at the same level. He said he’d driven all over Australia and this was the first time he’d ever had to rescue anyone — a quarter of a mile from home.
“No-matter-she’s-a-funny-old-world-mate!” he declared. “She’s-a-funny-old-world-for-
sure-no-worry!”

The lady groaned a little as they lifted her into the passenger seat. Her husband got in the
back with Roscoe in his lap. The aerial swayed majestically again as the vehicle moved off.
“Good-on-you-mate-no-worry-for-sure!” Mr Dragovic called back, waving a thumbs-up
sign.

Tait and Bambi walked back across to the shop, Bundle gazing placidly at the lake over his
mother’s shoulder. Tait wanted to ask about Jade but was hoping Bambi might mention him
first.

“Well,” Bambi said, “I hope my shutting down the business hasn’t put you out too much.”
“You’ve closed then?”
“Only thing to do.”
“I’m sorry.” Tait said.
“You can get everything up the road at Errol’s, anyway.”
“Yes,” Tait said, feeling uncomfortable.
“That was part of what killed us, of course. Being too close to the other shop. And
everybody knows Errol, whereas we were just nobodies who came along. Like Jadey says, it’s
all about having a profile.”
“How is Jade, by the way?”
“He’s alright. Jadey always kicks on. I’m the same. And so’s The Bundle. That’s why
nothing can ever break the three of us up. And nothing ever will!”

There was a tremor in her voice and she paused to regain her composure.
“Anyway, you’ll have to come over and have a chinwag with Jadey before we move.”
“You’re moving?”
“Yeah. We’ll be caretaking a bloke’s orchard down the Valley. Jade’s there now, fixing up
the cottage.”
“Sounds great,” Tait said. “What type of orchard?”
“Well, the actual orchard side of it went bust a while back. But we’ll be, like, caretaking
the property.”
“Sounds marvellous.”

They were standing beside the Plymouth and the phone began to ring inside the shop.
“That’ll be Jadey now,” Bambi said. “I’d better run and get it.”
“Bye then,” Tait said.
“See ya later,” Bambi replied and hurried in.
As she went through the door, The Bundle lifted his chubby hand and gave Tait a solemn wave.

* * * *

Mike Kieslowski had won the MacLew Prize. Tait heard it on the news one evening at Jimmy and Lauren’s and jumped up and shouted and punched the air in triumph.

The awarding of the MacLew was always mentioned in the media because it had a solid image going back to the days of Henry Lawson and Banjo Patterson. It was seen as traditional, and so the ordinary public didn’t feel rebuffed and slighted by it. For that reason it was ridiculed by the intellectuals. Among them it was known as the “Haven’t a Clue”.

The prize had been established back in the 1890s by the department-store tycoon. That was another thing that lent it reassuring associations. MacLew’s Emporium had once been part of everyone’s life. Lots of people could still remember their first pair of school shoes or their first long pants being bought there. Or how exciting it was as a kid to be taken to the vast gleaming cafeteria — the way you pushed your tray along rails past luscious rows of cakes and desserts and you could hardly make up your mind what to have.

Sir William MacLew was long gone of course. Tait had read up on his life and found it a poignant story. In his old age he was edged out by his grandsons who were keen on modern business methods and disapproved of his outworn paternalism. Willie MacLew had viewed his hundreds of employees as an extended family, as a kind of clan of which he was chief. They generally stayed with him all their working lives and he knew their names and their birthdays and whether they were getting married or had just had a bereavement. There were numerous anecdotes, like the one from the 1920s about him missing a luncheon with the Prince of Wales. His limousine was waiting at the door but he couldn’t be found. It turned out he was down in mail-order, listening to the woes of a junior assistant who was distraught because her brother had been put in prison. Much worse than that, he spent the firm’s money on things like the MacLew’s Christmas Box, a delicious package of sweets and treats that was distributed free by the thousands every year to orphanages and old folks homes and the haunts of the down-and-out. But the new business methods had pitfalls of their own and the firm had gone defunct just two decades after the old man died. It was swallowed up and then broken up by corporate types even keener on whizzbang ideas than the grandsons had been. The ornate building, covering a whole city block, was now a multi-level car park. But the Poetry Prize went on. It originally carried a cash award of a hundred pounds, a splendid sum back in the
1890s – the equivalent of a year’s wages for some people – but now there was just the popular prestige of it, and the public notice it gave to the winners.

A couple of days later a copy of the prize anthology came in the mail. It was from Mike and he had signed it with warm regards. Another copy came the next day, this time from the Prize committee, a complimentary one for him as a previous winner. He gave that copy to Jimmy and Lauren, warning that he’d disown them if they didn’t hail “The Flame and the Dark” as a masterpiece.

Now that Lauren was pregnant, she knitted with an additional fervent glee, turning out vests and booties and bassinet-covers at a frightening rate. They were all a nice pale yellow colour, to suit a baby of either sex.

Tait was sitting in his usual spot in the back booth of the Athena cafe one evening. He’d had his meal of sausages and eggs and was sipping a mug of tea and browsing again through the anthology.

“So this is where you hide, is it?” said a woman’s voice.

Francesca was standing there.

“Ah, hi,” Tait said, flustered.

“You didn’t turn up at Ian and Gillian’s, you naughty man.”

“No. Sorry.”

“That’s okay. I wasn’t there either.”

“Then how did you know I wasn’t?”

“I have my spies.”

“Um, can I order you a cup of tea, or anything?” he asked.

“No thanks,” she said. “But I’ll sit for a minute if you don’t mind the interruption.”

“Of course not.”

She slid into the seat opposite. She was wearing a plain skirt and blouse and her hair was fastened back and she didn’t have make-up on, so she looked less glamorous than she did that day in the Valley. She still looked awfully nice, though.

“I’ve just come from work,” she said. “I nicked in here to buy some cigarettes, and saw you. Is this one of your haunts?”

“I eat here most evenings. It’s good value for money.”

“Is that supposed to be the goddess Athena?” she asked, looking up at the helmeted female figure painted on the wall against a background scene of the Parthenon.

“I guess so.”

“She looks a bit intimidating.”
“Well, she’s a goddess of war, among other things.”
“And wisdom? Doesn’t she have a pet owl?”
“The owl is there, see.”
“It’s cross-eyed.”
“That’s what I always thought.”
“I wonder who painted it.”
“Who knows.”
“They’d better keep their day-job.”
“So what kept you from the barbecue?” Tait asked.
“Oh, Craig and I were having a fight,” she said, a depressed look coming on to her face.
She reached for a cigarette and started to light it, then hesitated. “I’m sorry. Does it bother you if I smoke?”
“Not at all.”
“You feel like a criminal nowadays, if you light up. Not that I smoke a lot, mind you.”
“I have one now and then,” Tait said, to show solidarity.
Francesca offered the packet and he took a cigarette and let her light it for him. It felt nice to be sharing this.
“Yeah,” she went on. “We had an all-day shouting-match and broke up.”
“I’m sorry.”
“That’s alright. We break up about every three weeks. It doesn’t necessarily mean anything. It’s just very wearing on the nerves.”
“Yes, I imagine so.”
There was a long pause.
“So what were you reading when I barged in on you?” Francesca asked.
Tait showed her the anthology and told her about Mike Kieslowski’s win.
“That’s the same prize you won, isn’t it?”
“Yes, the MacLew”
“Why is it called that?”
So he told her a bit of the background, the really poignant part. Willie MacLew had been a barefoot urchin in 1850s Glasgow. He had more or less taught himself to read and write while somehow staying alive in the streets. Blue with cold and pinched with hunger, he would console himself by reciting verses of Burns, lines that he had picked up from hearing them sung, or had slowly deciphered from a book. “In those days,” said the millionaire of decades
later, founding his poetry prize on the other side of the world, “Robbie Burns was my only friend and counsellor.”

Francesca was leaning forward, looking into Tait’s eyes as he spoke. It would have made him self-conscious, except that his imagination had been stirred and he was only half-seeing her there. He had a more vivid picture of a ragged waif in a bone-chilling wind of long ago, repeating words over and over: “The rank is but the guinea’s stamp. The man’s the gold for all that!”

“You have such deep feelings about things,” Francesca said quietly, wiping a drop of moisture from under his eye with the tip of her finger.

“I don’t know,” he muttered, thinking he’d made a fool of himself.

“Don’t try to back away from it now,” she said, putting her two hands on his. “It’s too late. I’ve learnt your dreadful secret. You’re a Sensitive Male.”

The feel of her hands was wonderful.

“Of course I knew that already,” she continued, “from being in the tea-tent with you that day. The typical bloke would’ve been trying to boss me around within two minutes. Either that or trying to feel me up. But you were just very sweet the whole time.”

“I think you might have a jaundiced view of most men’s behaviour.”

“That’s possible. I might be going too much on Craig’s example. But I’m right about you. I’ve kept thinking of what you said about the little bunch of stars that belong to your own homestead.”

“Well, I was only quoting, and the quote wasn’t all that original a thought anyway. I think it was a steal of Edmund Burke’s ‘little platoons’ idea”.

“Now you’re trying to show how tough and cynical you are.”

“I’m hard as nails. Been chucked out of every gin-joint between here and, um, Canberra.”

“Canberra?” she laughed. “Why Canberra?”

“I couldn’t think of that other place that starts with ‘C’. In the movie. What is it?”

“Casablanca?”

“That’s it.”

“What a dope,” she said, smiling, and giving him a little mock-punch on the chin.

Then she looked at her watch.

“I hate to go, but I must get to the Green Room for a minute and then be somewhere else by seven-thirty.”

“What’s the Green Room?”
“The Turrawong Players. We have our own space at the rear of the municipal hall. You should come and get involved, you really should.”

“Yes, I should.”

“Come down to the Green Room now, and I’ll show you around.”

“Okay.”

“Good,” she said, getting up. “But I’m not dragging you out against your will, am I?”

“No dame drags me anywhere, sister,” he replied in what he hoped was a Bogart voice, or a Cagney one.

He followed her to the front counter and paid for his meal, then she led the way to her car.

It was quite cold and spitting with rain. Francesca drew carefully out from the kerb, watching for the semi-trailers that were always roaring through, then drove down a couple of side streets and turned in at the rear of a big hall. There was a set of double doors with a sign on them that was lit by the headlights as they approached: Turrawong Players. Below the name were two painted masks, one laughing and one weeping.

Francesca fumbled with a key and pulled one of the doors open and reached in and flicked a switch. Flourescent lights came on and Tait saw a large open room with a high ceiling. There were racks of costumes right along the back wall, and a huge mirror along another wall, and a little kitchen area in one corner with a big shiny urn and rows of mugs dangling from hooks. There were framed photos, and a cabinet of trophies, and some noticeboards.

“It isn’t usually this tidy,” Francesca said. “They’ve had a clean-up for next week.”

“Next week?”

“The new show opens.”

“Oh, of course. I’ve been seeing the posters around town. Are you in it?”

“No, just helping with costumes, this time. I’ve been in four shows on the trot and felt like a rest.”

She began searching along the costume racks, dragging the coat-hangers back one by one.

“Ah, there it is,” she said when she’d come to the item she was after. “That’s okay then. We were worried the cape had gone missing.”

“I’ve found you,” Tait said, looking at one of the pictures on the wall. There was Francesca peering out of a cast photo, one obviously taken just moments after the final curtain. They were all sweat-soaked and dishevelled, but grinning and happy and pleased with each other. Francesca was in bra and panties and you could see the glisten of the sweat on her breasts. The bra cups were too small and the breasts were swelling out lusciously.
Tait hadn’t realized at first how naked she looked. The lewdness of it suddenly excited him. Then he felt embarrassed at having drawn her attention to the fact of him looking at it.

“Which one’s that?” Francesca asked, coming over. “Ah, yes, French Affairs, that was fun. I played the ambassador’s nympho daughter running amok. As you can see, I didn’t have to over-dress for the part.”

“There looks to be a lot of camaraderie.”

“Yeah, it was a happy cast. Romping farces are good like that because they’re fast and they’re physical. The irritations have less chance to fester.”

She looked at her watch.

“Do you want a quick look at the stage?” she asked. “The set is up.”

There was a flight of wooden steps going up to a door. Francesca led the way up and Tait followed, looking at her legs and feeling stirred again by the thought of her in the bra and panties. She unlocked the door and pushed it open.

It’s dark,” she said. “Give me your hand and I’ll guide you.”

She led him into a big dark space.

“The light switches are across here,” she said.

Tait’s eyes began to adjust and he could make out the shapes of things. There was a powerful smell of fresh paint and the mustiness of heavy curtain fabric.

She flicked several switches on a board and banks of lights began to come on above the stage and in the long bare hall.

The set was of the lounge room of an apartment, with some doorways and a stair leading off it.

“The set is still being dressed,” Francesca said.

“Dressed?”

“Having the detail put on it. Vases of flowers. Pictures on the walls.”

“Gosh those lights are hot.”

“Yes. In summer the heat on stage can be appalling. Like a sauna.”

Tait thought again of the glistening breasts in the photo.

“And when there’s heavy rain we get the noise of it on the roof. It’s corrugated iron, you see, and makes a dreadful din. And then on still nights we get the roar of the semi-trailers going through town, and the rattle of the trains.”

“Must be off-putting.”

“It’s all part of the adventure, as you’ll find out when you start doing parts.”
“Actually I’m not so sure about being on stage. I’m getting butterflies just imagining the hall full of people all looking at me.”

“You’d be fine. I know you would.”

He was acutely aware that she had kept hold of his hand. Now she led him to centre stage.

“I imagine we’re playing a scene together,” she said, looking into his eyes. “If we were, I’d look after you. I’d make sure nothing bad happened to you. Do you believe me?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Now let’s give each other a hug of reassurance. You’re allowed to be touchy-feely in the theatre, you know. It’s tradition.”

She put her arms around his waist and her face against his, and he wrapped his arms around her and they stood very still for a few moments. Tait could feel her heart beating and he was sure she could feel his. They began to sway gently back and forth together.

It seemed to Tait the sweetest thing he had ever experienced in his life.

“This is nice,” she murmured.

“Yes.”

“You’re nice.”

“So are you.”

They stayed in each other’s arms for another minute. Then she whispered:

“I hate to say this, but I have to go. Do you mind very much?”

“Yes I do, but I’ll survive.”

“Let’s promise to take up where we left off.”

“Absolutely.”

She dropped him at the railway station to catch his bus.

“So, what did you think of our first scene together on stage,” she asked, after he’d got out and gone round to the driver’s-side window.

“Loved it.”

“I told I’d look after you, didn’t I?”

“You did.”

“Bye for now then,” she said, squeezing his hand.

“Bye.”

“I’ll catch up with you soon, even if I have to search every gin-joint between here and Canberra.”

He watched her tail-lights till they went out of sight.
Chapter Five

Jimmy had become a total fan of Mike Kieslowski’s poetry. He was deeply moved by “The Flame and the Dark” and most inspired by the ending, the spirit in which the young couple set out for a new life across the world. Poland remains in torment, Stalin’s terror having replaced Hitler’s, one demon having seized the spoils of the other. In the last few lines, the young couple stand at dawn beside the wire fence of the transit camp. They have just learned that a fellow Pole has hanged himself during the night in utter despair of life and the world. There, beside the wire, with the sun rising, they pledge to go to a new land and live long lives together and tell the story of it all to their children, and so preserve the memory of all the people they knew who did not survive.

They swear to attest to the Flame and the Dark, to remember those consumed in the flame of so much valour, and those vanished in the dark of so many sorrows.

That final image of the couple, thin and ragged beside the wire, reminded Tait of another beautiful passage of George Eliot’s. It went something like: “In these frail vessels is borne onward through the ages the treasure of human affection.”

Jimmy reckoned the poem moved him so much because he was soon to be a parent.

“It brings it home to you,” he said gravely, “that you’re a link in the chain of generations.”

Lauren had begun to read the poem too, but it kept making her cry so she put it aside.

“No it isn’t,” Tait said. “It’s the poetry.”

It was Jimmy who saw the review in the weekend arts section of the newspaper. He brought it to the cabin, waving it angrily. Some academic, he said, had rubbished the work from start to finish. Tait declared like a tough old campaigner that shitty reviews were a fact of life, but when he read the piece he felt angry too.

The reviewer was somebody called Sabina Sharpe.

She started off by declaring that: “The MacLew Prize anthologies have often been a source of mirth in the genuine literary community, with their tub-thumping rhymes and mid-Victorian pieties, and this latest effort is no exception.” She went on to say that the winning poem this time was “an embarrassing tirade about one of history’s more bizarre incidents.” She said the so-called Warsaw Rising of 1944 could be seen as “the last gasp of a feudal reactionary clique that saw its nemesis approaching in the form of the victorious Red Army.” She said that one of the poem’s most glaring errors was to push “the tired old line that the Red Army should have rushed in to assist the so-called freedom-fighters against the Nazis.” She
said that there was “nothing in this distorted screed to refute the episode as a brawl between Polish and German fascists who were helpfully bumping each other off and saving others the trouble.” The poem’s most telling feature, she said, was the way it kept “unconsciously signalling its true ideological baggage.” She said the scene of the lovers being married “revealed the work’s misogynistic underpinnings.” Most repellent of all, she said, was the detail of the bride’s dress being made from a Nazi parachute, “a symbolism sadistic enough to require no further comment.” She concluded that while the poem was “not without an occasional striking phrase,” many readers “might find it disturbing that the MacLew Prize judges had lent credence to what might be seen as outworn political hatreds and gender prejudice which have no place in today’s climate of tolerance.”

“How could anyone say stuff like that?” Jimmy asked in an anguished voice. “It’s like spitting on the graves of the dead.”

“Yes,” Tait agreed. “It is.”

“What could make a person so rotten-hearted?”

“A lifetime of being allowed to play around with extreme ideas, but with no pain or risk ever attached.”

“You reckon?”

“That’s what Orwell thought: ‘So much that intellectuals say and do is like playing with fire by people who don’t even know that fire is hot.’”

“But he isn’t saying ignorance lets them off the hook?”

“No, he’s saying they’re grossly delinquent in their duty.”

They were standing outside, in Astrid’s Meadow. Jimmy had stopped being angry and was just sad and quiet. He gazed across the lake at the distant roofs of Tuskett on the far shore. Tait knew he was thinking of Lauren, and of the baby that was coming, and about the people and events in the poem, and about the way it flashes on you at some point that you are a link in the span of generations.

“The smugness of that review is what hurts,” he muttered.

“Yes,” said Tait. “The reduction of everything to smug little judgements. It’s like the opposite pole from Blake. It’s the mind of the anti-Blake.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, you know how Blake wrote about seeing heaven in a wildflower and eternity in a grain of sand. That’s the QO principle of seeing the sacred in the ordinary. This review is the opposite thing — Regimic reductionism. Not only can’t it see the sacred element, it doesn’t even appreciate the ordinary things for what they are.”
“Sabina Sharpe. What a name! The sharp sabre!”
“No, a sabre has connotations of valour and honour. She’d be more a toxic razorblade.”
They laughed.
“Can you imagine her enjoying a field of flowers?”
“No, she’d be afraid someone might pick some for a bridal bouquet, so she’d have the field exterminated.”
“Sown with salt!”
“Sent to Siberia!”
“Politically re-educated!”
“Even the Gary Leggett type isn’t that bad,” Tait said. “He’d never make a commissar. He’s as much a burden to himself as he is to others, so at least he knows what human misery feels like, even if he never accepts blame for any of it.”
“I meant to tell you,” Jimmy said. “Leggett’s gone.”
“Gone where?”
“Don’t know. Bella didn’t know either, when I spoke to her at the office.”
Because Tait hadn’t wanted to risk a confrontation with Leggett, he’d been getting Jimmy or Lauren to drop his rent-money in when it was due.
“They suspended his real-estate licence, Bella told me, and the marriage was over, so he left. Ranted and raved and then walked out. She hasn’t seen him since. She knows I’m with the regional mad squad, so she asked my opinion.”
“About his state of mind?”
“Whether he’s a suicide risk.”
“What do you reckon?”
“You never know.”
The dog Roscoe came running along the reserve. Tait looked to see if the old couple were following. He still didn’t know their names. He vaguely thought of them as Roscoe’s Parents. There was only the husband and he called out a greeting as he approached. His better half was indoors for the time being, he said, giving the ankle a complete rest. His name was Donald, he told them, and he and Mavis were the Ellicotts.
“You’re a writer, I hear?” said Donald Ellicott in a tone of hearty interest.
Tait recoiled a little, then replied in as clipped a voice as he could summon.
“No, I’m into research methodology.”
“Don’t mean to intrude,” said Ellicott, his tone becoming more diffident. “It’s just that I’m under orders to invite you to pop in for afternoon tea any weekday. Mavis likes to have a bit of an Open House on the back verandah about three in the afternoon.”

“Most kind,” Tait said in the clipped tone.

“Nothing much to it,” Ellicott went on. “Just a few scones and a bit of a natter.”

“I see.”

“We’re number 292, with the wattles and the yellow swing. You probably know the one. We see you strolling past most afternoons.”

He knew the one. The wattles were profuse, and there was a big tree with a child’s swing made of bright yellow ropes and an old yellow-painted car tyre. The back verandah was covered-in with dark shadecloth and you couldn’t see through it from outside, but Tait had often got the impression of people sitting there. That part of the reserve was wide and open, with a broad view of the lake, and the grass was always beautifully manicured.

“And of course the invitation includes your friend as well,” Ellicott added.

Jimmy began chatting to the man in his easygoing way and quickly learned that the Ellicotts had been in the dry-cleaning game, had retired up here from the city a couple of years back, and had several delightful grandchildren. The swing in the yard was for the grandkids when they visited.

“Seems a nice bloke,” Jimmy said, when Ellicott had departed with Roscoe. “He and his wife might be a good bit of social contact for you.”

“Yeah. Don’t want to get over-familiar, though.”

“You made that clear, the way you switched off like a light-bulb.”

“It’s a bit foolhardy.”

“What is?”

“Inviting a stranger to afternoon tea.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“I could be a doubtful character.”

“An ex-con with an Attitude.”

“Straight off the Funny Farm.”

“With a Licence to be At Large.”

“But cruelly confined to the Eastern Land Division.”

“Nah,” Jimmy scoffed. “That’s all too unlikely.”

* * *
Tait wrote to Mike Kieslowski to express his anger at the rotten review. Mike resplied that it was water off a duck’s back. He didn’t know anything of Sabina Sharpe, he said, but he didn’t need to. He analysed the text of the review, pointing out what he called the Signatures of the Enemy.

“Note for example how it wants to trivialize and demonize at the same time. The MacLew Prize is a laughing-stock that no thinking person can take seriously, but at the same time it promotes dangerous agendas that every thinking person ought to be alarmed at.”

Mike mentioned that his father was in poor health and a little out of things, but that his mother had read the review like a hawk reading a landscape.

“When she’d finished,” he went on, “she folded the paper, took her glasses off the tip of her nose, and said simply (in Polish): ‘Their hatred is praise.’”

Mike talked about a few other things, then, at the end of the letter, came back to the MacLew Prize and what it meant.

“It’s the only major literary award in this country that isn’t in the pocket of the commissars and that doesn’t lick the arse of the zeitgeist, and I think you and I have both upheld that. Willie MacLew’s good old Jacobite ancestors would approve!”

One afternoon a few days later Tait went to the public library in Turrawong. It was across the street from the hall where the Players performed and had their Green Room. It was also next door to the Shire Council chambers, and Tait felt a yearning awareness of being near Francesca. She was somewhere in that building, tending the phone, sending her lovely voice down the lines. At least the ratepayers were getting one bit of value for their money.

He was expecting to see her at the Athena cafe any evening now. She said she’d catch up with him soon. Any evening now he would look up from his book and find her standing there. He tingled with anticipation. At the same time, though, the introverted side of him was scared. This wasn’t like what he had with Astrid. This wasn’t from a safe distance. This was all too real.

He got a book from the reference section and took it to a seat at one of the tables. It was called Clans and Tartans of Scotland. He wanted to look up the MacLews and see what Mike had meant about the good old Jacobite ancestors.

At first he could find no mention of the MacLews. They weren’t in the main part of the book. But there was a section at the back, a long list of “septs.” It was explained that a “sept” came into being when distressed members of a “broken” clan appealed to another clan for
shelter and protection. In return they would pledge loyalty to their new friends, and over the
generations that loyalty would deepen into second-nature.

The MacLews had been a sept of the Stewarts of Appin, Tait discovered, and the Stewarts
of Appin had been Jacobite to a fault.

He still had only a vague idea of what the Jacobites were really all about, and much of that
was gained just from listening to *The Storm on the Heather* with its potent blend of heartbreak
and defiance. All he knew for sure was that the Jacobites were foes of Whigs and of
Whiggery, and Whiggery was like the Regime. That put the Jacobites on the side of the QO
and made them Tait’s kind of people.

And there was something else as well, something that had begun to niggle at him,
something he’d once heard or known or been told but could not quite call up. It was a half-
memory at the far back of his mind, as elusive as a wisp of wind in the heather of long ago.

He meant to keep researching till the library closed, but he came across a copy of Harry
Dunn’s *Dreams and Gleams and Bullock Teams* and that spoiled his serious mood. He looked
again at the cover drawing of the swaggie, the hand down in the crotch area, hidden behind
the billy, and the rapture on the face. He almost laughed aloud, remembering what Francesca
had said about it that night in the Valley.

He’d been intending to join the library so he could borrow books to take home, and he
thought to ask about it now on his way out. He was at the counter before he realized the
woman behind it was Marigold. Her eyes were lowered and her mouth tightly pressed and she
was looking through a card index as if deeply preoccupied. He stood awkwardly for a minute,
staring at her name-tag: Marigold Fyffe - Head Librarian. He left the counter and headed to
the exit and when he glanced back he found her looking directly at him. He knew it had been
a deliberate rebuff.

He would have brooded on this, except that something had occurred to him. It was knock-
off time now and the Council employees would be coming out of the chambers. He left the
library and hung about within sight of the Council doorway. People came out in twos and
threes. The air was turning chilly as the sun went down behind the hills. He started to shiver.
He was trying to look as though he was just idly passing, but it was hard not to feel
conspicuous. He pretended to be admiring the blaze of sunset in the sky. After half an hour he
gave it up and went to the Athena café and sat in the back booth and ate his meal and read his
book for a long time. But he kept hoping he’d hear her voice at some point and she’d standing
there smiling down at him like the time before.
This became his routine. When he’d done his proper stint of work at the cabin he’d catch the bus into town, take a brisk walk beside the river to uncramp his limbs, then go to the library. The counter was mostly tended by the two junior librarians, but if Marigold was there Tait kept his distance and avoided eye contact without giving any sign of unease. He was very skilled at doing that if he had to, and this was like being back in custody with a hostile charge nurse. He figured it was just as well to be keeping in practice. There’d been twenty-four wards at the institution and he now began to think sardonically of the library as “Ward 25.”

Each evening he hung about in the vain hope of catching sight of Francesca. The yearning to see her became more intense. He began to find it harder to focus on his work. By midday he’d be restless, feeling the need to head into town to be near the Council building. The only thing that took his mind off the yearning was reading more about the Jacobites. The library had a book called *Culloden* by John Prebble. When Tait saw that it was about the final battle of the Jacobite cause, he checked the index for references to the Appin Stewarts. He turned to page 67 and found Prebble describing the array of Bonnie Prince Charlie’s forces:

*The Stewarts, on the Camerons’ left, were Appin men from that sweet and green peninsula in Loch Linnhe to the west. Among them were some MacLarens, who were their ancient allies from Balquhidder. These Stewarts were gentle men, or were said to have been, but they had been drawn into the Rebellion as much by a bloody hatred of the Campbells as by their old attachment to the Kings of their name. Their chief was a child still, and at home in Appin, and the clan was led by his tutor, Charles Stewart of Ardshiel, a tall, pretty man with a great reputation as a swordsman... They wore a sprig of oak in their bonnets. Above them flapped and snapped their standard, a yellow saltire on a blue field, and their Piper played a pibroch that had been composed a hundred years before by the great Patrick Mor MacCrimmon.*

The book was like that all the way through, strangely calm and measured, yet vividly-detailed and richly-coloured and poignant beyond words. He lingered over each paragraph, rationing himself to just a few pages a day, and pausing often to stare hauntedly through the window at the sky for minutes at a time.

When Francesca finally did emerge one evening, Tait had wandered some distance off and at first didn’t notice her. She was with another woman and the two of them were talking and Tait didn’t want to interrupt, so he followed them at a distance as they walked along the
footpath to the corner. They stood there talking for another minute or two. Francesca had a long leather coat on, and high black boots. Her hair was done in a single long plait down her back and she wore a kind of black beret. She looked incredibly stylish and severe, and Tait knew that if she hadn’t already given him plenty of signs of friendliness he would hardly have the nerve to speak to her.

There came an abrupt toot of a car horn. Francesca looked along the street and waved her hand in acknowledgement. After a short while the toot came again, and then again after that. Francesca made a motion with her hand that said, “Yes, I’ll be there in a moment.” She and the other woman were trying to wind up their conversation, taking little steps away from each other, then thinking of something else and coming back.

The abrupt toot sounded again, followed by a harsh male voice calling, “Come on, for Christ’s sake!”

The two women parted. The other one crossed the street and walked on, while Francesca went straight out of sight past the corner.

A minute later the panel-van came round the corner and began to accelerate away. Tait glimpsed the two of them for a moment, just long enough to see Craig frowning at the road ahead and Francesca stroking the back of his neck and obviously trying to coax him into a better mood.

That night Tait sipped the last of the whisky and gazed for a long time at Astrid’s picture, thinking how sweet and easy it had been when she was his only love, and wishing he knew how to return to that.

He stopped loitering outside the Council chambers in the evenings.

He continued to go to “Ward 25” each afternoon though. He went on reading Culloden, lowering his ration to even fewer pages a day in order spin it out as long as possible. The poignancy was so intense it was like a medication that took the edge off any private anguish.

* * * *

Going home to the cabin one evening he found a note from Kelvin under the door:

_You’re a hard man to get hold of — if you’ll pardon the expression. I’ve called by a couple of times this week. Could you phone me? It’s about a project of Megan’s — but don’t let that put you off!_

Tait tried phoning but there was no answer.
A new shopping plaza was planned for the town centre and they’d begun knocking down the old buildings on the site. The old moth-eaten Regent cinema had to go and there’d been a lot of feeling about it in the local papers. Old-timers remembered being kids at the Saturday matinees, and then later holding hands with their sweethearts, and later still taking their own kids to see *Snow White* or *Fantasia*. Old Mrs Callander from the Valley, the one who was a Living Link, wrote a spirited letter. She’d earned “a few bob a week” in the 1920s, “tinkling the ivories for the silent films,” and that few bob had got the family through tough times. She had never ceased to bless her mother for “insisting on those piano lessons that I so often resented as a tomboy who only ever wanted to be out climbing trees.” With a sick husband and a young son to think of, Mrs Callender rode a horse in from the Valley each evening, rain or storm, then back after the show. “I remember times riding home, the Valley bathed in moonlight, and my heart still fluttery because there’d been a John Gilbert film on.” And during World War Two, she recalled, the whole town hung on the newsreels that connected them with friends and loved-ones overseas. The old lady didn’t mention it, but her son had been killed at Tobruk.

“Can’t something be done to save the dear old Regent and other cherished landmarks?” Mrs Callander had asked. And she ended: “It’s an unhappy thing to find that instead of the town outlasting you, you’re beginning to outlast the town you’ve known.”

The letter attracted a lot of sympathy and the Shire President was stung into declaring that:

“My Council has gone into bat for economic diversity and lifestyle choice in our region of magnificent scenic advantages. We are leading the charge of a people-centred prioritising that won’t be fobbed-off by outworn syndromes of nostalgia for the cosy certainties of the dark ages. And rest assured we are always happy to debate the concerns people may have.”

Now the wrecking ball was lurching through the air. Tait stood behind the barrier with a knot of other people, watching the Regent’s walls collapse. He was thinking of the poem to be got out of this, out of the sixty years of flickering images and disembodied voices that had meant so much to people.

“Bit of a bummer, eh?” said Kelvin, sadly, coming up beside him.

“Yes.”

“I grew up in that old fleapit.”

“Must’ve had some pivotal moments.”

“That’s where I found out that I wanted to be Audrey Hepburn.”

“Why her?”

“She was thin.”
“Of course.”
The dust from the demolition was becoming thicker and they moved away.
“I got your note,” Tait said. “Haven’t been able to catch you on the phone, though.”
“No, sorry, I’ve been a bit frazzled.”
“What was it about?”
“Breaking up with my lover,” Kelvin replied grimly. “But I don’t want to bore you with it.”
“You wouldn’t be boring me. But actually I was asking about the message you left.”
“Ah, sorry. Yeah, I was gonna give you your Big Break in Show Biz.”
“Keep talking.”
They had begun to walk away from the demolition site.
“Were you on your way somewhere?” Kelvin asked.
“Not especially.”
“I was down at the Green Room. I just came up the street to get more milk for the coffee.”
“Let’s head back there then,” said Tait.
The urn in the Green Room was boiling and Kelvin made two cups of coffee.
“Sure yours is strong enough?” Tait asked. “You only put in three table-spoons.”
“The caffeine-hits are all that’s keeping me going,” Kelvin replied. “I haven’t slept for three nights.”
“Because of the break-up?”
“Yeah. It came like a ton of bricks. I’d expected it to be more gradual.”
“You knew something was wrong?”
“Yeah, I knew, although the little shit kept denying it.”
“I don’t know what to say. I don’t know much about these things.”
“Gay love-life?”
“Any love-life.”
“You had ten years out of circulation.”
“I’ve had a lifetime out of circulation.”
“How’s it developing with Frannie?”
“She’s back with Whatisname.”
“Craig? Ah, that’s a pain in the arse.”
“Yeah.”
“Does it feel like hell?”
“Somewhat.”
“Welcome to the club. Want a few more table-spoons in your cup?”
“I’ll try to manage.”
They sipped their coffee in silence for a minute.
“So, what’s this Big Break you were thinking of giving me?”
“Your chance to be on the stage, my boy.”
“Is that the first stage out of town, or what?”
“Megan wants to produce a panto for the August school holidays. She only has about nine projects on at the moment, you see, so she feels at a loose end. As usual I’ve been roped in on the spurious grounds that blood is thicker than water. I’ve agreed to help stage *Cinderella*, with myself as one of the Ugly Sisters, and you, hopefully, as the other.”
“You’re joking.”
“Not at all. If ever I visualized someone with a frustrated thespian inside them, its you.”
“Are you trying to be obscene?”
“No, it comes naturally.”
“Why an Ugly Sister? Why not the part of the Handsome Prince?”
“If I can’t have it, you’re certainly not getting it.”
“What makes you think I could act my way out of a paper bag in any case?”
“Because you’re intelligent. That’s always the key to doing comedy or character roles.”
“It’s a scary thought.”
“We’d always be on stage together, and I’d carry the main load. And Gillian’s agreed to be the Stepmother, and she’d be very supportive. I told her I was hoping to rope you in, and she’s all in favour.”
There was a long pause.
“I don’t know whether it’s an inducement to you or not, now, but I’m pretty sure Francesca will do the Fairy Godmother.”
“Okay then,” said Tait on impulse, feeling his stomach go watery.
“Great!” said Kelvin, going back to the bubbling urn. “This calls for another hit of the Infernal Bean.”
“Not for me,” Tait groaned. “I need heavy sedation after what I’ve just agreed to.”
“Listen, you were born to be an Ugly Sister — and I don’t lavish that kind of praise on everyone I meet. Actually, Megan wanted a panto about trains, to tie in with the Centenary of the railway line, but we couldn’t find one.”
“Why didn’t you write one?”
“We aren’t all Enid Blyton, dearie.”
“Well then, why not fiddle with *Cinderella*, if you’ll pardon the expression.”
“Are you offering?”

“It wouldn’t need much. Let’s see. Imagine that the Fairy Godmother’s wand is playing up…”

“How come?”

“She washed it yesterday, and now she can’t do a thing with it. Or because, being a wand, its mind keeps wandering.”

“So this is how genius works!”

“Impressive, eh?”

“Okay, the wand is malfunctioning…”

“So the Fairy Godmother can’t get it to turn mice into horses and a pumpkin into a carriage…”

“No?”

“But it will turn a mouse into a train ticket.”

“Of course.”

“So one intrepid mouse steps forward…”

“What’s its name?”

“That’s beside the point.”

“Stupid of me. I’m sorry.”

“So the mouse insists on being a First Class ticket. No, wait, it demands to be a Sleeping Compartment ticket…”

“Why?”

“Because its tired! Do try to keep up.”

“Forgive me.”

“So Cinderella goes to the Ball by train, and afterwards leaves a glass slipper on the luggage rack and it ends up in the railway Lost Property office, amongst a thousand umbrellas and old packets of sandwiches.”

“And that’s how the Prince eventually tracks her down.”

“Although he’s almost been driven loco.”

“And raises her to her proper station.”

“Because he holds her in high esteem.”

“I’ll do anything if you’ll stop.”

“It’s your fault. You ignored my appeal for a sedative. I could’ve been snoring by now.”

They went on talking about different things, lounging in two old armchairs that Kelvin said had been in more shows than he’d had hot dinners. It began to get dark outside.
Headlights approached the open door of the Green Room and a car stopped outside and Gillian and Ian came in.

Tait hadn’t realized it was the night of the Players’ monthly committee meeting.

Gillian laid out cake and buttered scones for the after-meeting supper while Kelvin told her about roping Tait in as an Ugly Sister. She was delighted and said the three of them would have such fun being horrible to that goody-two-shoes of a Cinderella. Ian shook his head in mock-dismay and declared that Tait’s ruination was now almost assured.

“Flee for your life,” he urged. “You might still have a chance.”

“You stay put!” cried Gillian in a cracked voice like a witch, and pointing a long snaky finger, “Your soul now belongs to us! Lock that door, Kelvin, and swallow the key!”

About fifteen people turned up. Megan chaired the meeting but said she’d have to leave early to officially open the Watercolour Society’s exhibition. She had on a long elegant dress and a sparkling necklace and her hair was piled high on her head. Marigold sat gravely alongside her at the committee table. Marigold was treasurer and gave an intense report about the need for more liability insurance. The Players had no idea, she said, of the scale of the financial disaster that could overtake them.

“We’d be gutted!” she declared, “simply gutted! And we’re due for some bad luck. We’ve never really had a serious mishap, so we’re due!”

The secretary was a gentle, dreamy lady named Vivien who had trouble keeping the minutes. She hunched right over the page, her tongue out in concentration but her biro moving far too slowly to be getting much of what was being said. She kept up a plaintive murmer of “Hang on... hang on... hang on...”

“Just the gist of it will do, dear,” Megan said soothingly. “The overall thrust.”

“What was the thrust, again?” Vivien asked.

“We’re Due to be Gutted.” Kelvin called out helpfully.

Marigold gave him a long narrow look.

Megan gave him a warning look too, then turned to Marigold and thanked her for a typically outstanding treasurer’s report which was “a wake-up call to all of us.”

Marigold looked back at Megan with the melting expression of someone who’s just been told that they are good and beautiful and cherished.

When Megan had gone, Gillian took the chair and there was an interminable discussion about whether to buy a bulk order of paper cups.

After a quarter of an hour of it he and Kelvin exchanged looks.
“Oh if only the Gutting would start!” Kelvin muttered, slumping further into his seat in despair.

Actually Tait had begun to relax now. Francesca hadn’t shown up and he could stop being on tenterhooks about it. Instead he rested his head on the back of the armchair and gazed up at her in that cast photo on the wall, the one where she was half-naked and glistening with sweat and spilling out of her bra. If only she’d play the Fairy Godmother that way, he was thinking to himself.

At the end of the meeting he braced himself to approach Marigold while she still sat at the committee table with her treasurer’s petty-cash box and her receipt book. He paid her the $10 dollar annual membership fee and she handed him a receipt. She did not speak a word to him and there was no eye contact.

But he was now officially a Player.

* * * *

There was a blue and white bus with “Allandale” painted on its sides. Tait had sometimes noticed it heading towards the old timber bridge and the Valley road, or heading back into the town from that direction. One day it dawned on him to recall that Allandale was the area to the west where the new freeway was being put through. He made enquiries and was told the Allandale bus went up and down the Valley a few times a day.

It worried Tait that he was often slow on the uptake like that. It made him nervous that he wasn’t sharper about things. He knew that when he got focussed on a situation he could read it more acutely than most people, could become the forest creature in the forest, but so much of his perception was unfocussed it was frightening. If you could miss the meaning of a blue and white bus right in front of you, you could miss the meaning of other things that were just as obvious. Being dense about the bus didn’t matter too much. But being dense about other things might get you chopped-off at the waist before you knew it.

On the positive side, he might now have some access to the Valley. That Friday afternoon he did not go to ‘Ward 25’ but caught the blue and white bus instead. The driver was a middle-aged woman with wild grey hair and no teeth. She wore grubby overalls and scuffed old elastic-sided boots with striped football socks.

“Can you put me down at Honeysuckle Hill?” Tait had asked.

“Put yer down like an old dog!” she’d shouted back with a manic grin.

Tait was slightly startled.
“And you can pick me up again two hours later?” he asked.

“Pick yer up like the crabs!”

The bus was empty aside from the two of them. It was older and shabbier than it looked from the outside, and the seats were very hard and upright. The driver turned the radio up full blast when a song called “Vampire Lover” came on. The song had a lot of wild howling in it and the driver howled along at the top of her voice, shaking the steering wheel as if trying to wrench it off its column. For a few moments Tait actually wondered if she was an escaped madwoman who had just commandeered the vehicle. If so, he reflected, it was karma that the only person who’d got on for the death-ride had a Licence to be At Large in his pocket.

There’d been bouts of heavy rain and the sky darkened again as they drove along. There were puddles on the road and all the ground looked soggy.

The bus stopped at the top of Honeysuckle Hill and the front doors folded open with a clank. Tait got out and looked back at the driver and thanked her. She gave him the mad toothless grin and then the doors clanked shut. As the bus moved off he heard her doing the vampire howl again.

A damp wind was blowing. He gazed around at the wintry panorama of the Valley and the sky. He looked down at the Pioneer Museum, then began walking briskly down the hill towards it, afraid there’d be drenching rain before he got to cover. He had his little folding umbrella in the satchel but it wasn’t adequate in a teeming downpour and only really protected one’s head and shoulders.

The Museum building was closed and there was nobody about. He stood under the side verandah and looked out over the paddock where the festivities had been. He tried to pick the exact location of the tea and coffee tent. The thought of Francesca sent a chill of unhappy yearning through him. He looked across the creek to the neighbouring paddock where the horses had been that day. It appeared soggy and dreary and the horses weren’t there. He went around to the front of the building, facing the road. A car went by every now and then. It was now twenty past four and the bus was due back around six. If the day had been fine Tait would’ve gone for a good long walk, would’ve gone up along that road where he knew Ian and Gillian’s place was and where Francesca said she had the block of land. Instead he would just hang about under cover. He would read Mike Kieslowski’s latest letter. He had got it from the letter box on his way out and still hadn’t had a chance to look at it. Today’s trip was only a test-run to try out the Allandale bus. He was pleased just to have got out here, and if he could make it back to town in one piece he’d chalk the whole thing up as a big success.
Looking along the road to his right, he saw something on the upper slope of the corner where it curved away. He peered harder and saw it was a graveyard. He left the verandah and walked along the road and began to see the headstones more clearly. He went up a slippery dirt path to the set of old iron gates and into the scrappily cemetery that extended up the hill to where it met thick bushland. The headstones were worn and weathered and most were half-hidden in long grass. Tait read the inscriptions on some of the nearest ones, or at least those that weren’t too illegible or obscured with moss. The most recent date he found was for someone’s *Darling Boy who Fell Asleep* in 1912. He fancied there might be more recent graves further up the slope but didn’t want to tramp through the moist grass. He would come back here another day and spend a good long time exploring. This was a QO spot that needed to be lingered over.

He leant on the fence near the old rusty gates and took out Mike’s letter, wanting to read it before the light got too dull. The pages flapped in his hand as the cold wind blew and he kept a tight hold on them.

“Yes, Prebble is marvellous,” it began. “He gives the battle of Culloden a haunting Homeric quality. That bleak moor near Inverness could almost be the plain of Troy, with the gods and fates looking on and at moments taking a hand. There’s that same mingling of the mythic dimension with the small human details that wrench your heart.”

That was exactly right, Tait thought. The Homeric thing had not occurred to him before, but now he saw it.

“On the debit side, however,” Mike went on, “I’m sorry to say the book ultimately toes a Whiggish line. It takes too much of a carping, debunking tone towards the Jacobite cause, and there’s an ingrained assumption that those who adhered to the Prince had been dragged into a tragic folly against their own best interest.”

Again exactly right, thought Tait. He had begun to be a bit irritated by that himself.

“For example,” Mike continued, “he keeps calling the Jacobites the ‘rebels,’ a term that they would not have accepted. In their own eyes they were the very opposite of rebels. They were the legitimate ones, the *loyalists*, fighting to win their world back from renegades and usurpers who had seized it. Any writer engaging with this topic has to be aware that the choice of such words is no trivial matter but signals an entire perspective. It’s different if people choose to accept that label of ‘rebel’ and to wear it as a badge of honour. That’s what the Irish have always tended to do. But it was never the case with those who came out for the Prince in the Forty-Five.”

Again Tait saw the validity of the point.
Prebble might not have meant to view the Jacobites quite so much through the lens of their opponents, but that just illustrates the power of the zeitgeist to shape an outlook. It’s an example of what I’ve come to call ‘Butterfield’s Magnet.’ As you would be aware, Herbert Butterfield published a landmark book in 1930 called The Whig Interpretation of History, about the way we’ve all been induced for many generations now to take a particular view of life and the world — the Whig view. He called this ‘a magnet forever pulling at our minds, unless we have found the way to counteract it.’”

Tait had not heard of Butterfield before.

“We are all trained to see the Whig view as being by definition fair and sensible and benign,” Mike explained, “and to overlook the iron fist and the moral righteousness. The Whig came out of the Puritan and carried on the Puritan zealot’s conviction that only the wicked or misguided could ever oppose them, so the very fact that you oppose them means you must be one or the other. They are therefore entitled to punish you as one of the wicked, or ‘re-educate’ you as one of the misguided. In their eyes you are indeed a rebel, not just against their army or regime but against their unassailable virtue.”

A damp gust of wind whirled through the long grass of the cemetery and nearly snatched the letter. The light was fading and the clouds were banking up.

“Their way with opponents is summed up for all time in their show-trial verdict on King Charles after the Civil War: ‘Tyrant, Traitor, Murderer and Public Enemy.’ He’d had the gall to fight the bastards, you see! I can never think of it without recalling the cadence of that line of Chesterton’s poem ‘The Secret People’: We saw the King as they killed him, and his face was proud and pale.”

A few light sprinkles of rain fell and wetted the paper. Tait dabbed the page against his sleeve to dry it but only made the ink smudgy. He groaned with annoyance and read on, deciphering through the smudges.

“King Charles the Martyr is to me the great shining symbol of resistance to the commissars. I conceive of Western modernity, you see, as the Great Commissariat, a thing of lethal intent, an entity made up of deadly pathological types — from Luther to Lenin, as one might put it for the sake of the alliteration, or from Puritans to Pol Pot. Or, in that brilliant phrase of Les Murray’s, ‘the Calvin SS.’ And James McAuley has depicted the true face of the monster for us:

_Suddenly this one huge glaring visage, this enormous mask of blood and lies,
starts up above the horizon and dominates the landscape, a figure of judgement_
speaking to each person in a different tone or tongue: And what do you think about me?

That’s the collective face of the commissars who have been waging war on us for five hundred years. Of course they adapt their demeanour over time – changing from religious to secular modes of fanaticism, for example, or turning feminist or multiculturalist or whatever – but they never abate their rage to wreck human society and put its broken remnants under the lash. They are what Solzhenitsyn called them: ‘The enemies of the human race.’ And their method is ever the same: to sever people from the very structures and values and loyalties that make life viable in the first place. They call this Progress. They call it Freedom. In actual fact it is the abyss that Edmund Burke described as ‘The antagonist world of madness, discord, vice, confusion and unavailing sorrow.’”

Yes, Tait understood perfectly. They make a desolation and call it peace.

“No doubt that kind of evil always existed in the world, but modernity unleashed it in a radical new way, and increased it by whole orders of magnitude. The modern mindset began in the Renaissance, and you can see it clearly in the writings of Machiavelli, for example, when he advocates fear and cruelty as proper tools of power, and when he declares that people should fit their behaviour to the spirit of the times. There you have the pincer-jaws of Modernity: Terror and Fashion. But foisting that sort of regime on the world required a whole new kind of armed fanaticism. It needed a type like the Puritan, a type relentless in the war of culture no less than the war of the sword, and above all a type who despised the world enough not to feel any qualms about doing it grievous harm. That’s what the so-called Reformation provided. That mentality is summed up in the words of a leading Puritan who said of his conversion: ‘It made the world seem to me as a carcase that had neither life nor loveliness.’ How could such creatures ever be good stewards or trusty guardians of what they hold in such contempt? Is it any wonder their mindset leads always to mass-murder? Why should they be averse to carnage, when the world itself is but a lump of carrion? They spin the rhetoric of social improvement, but they are never anything other than the mavens of death.

“It was Burke who made the definitive statement of what our stance ought to be towards these enemies. (He’d been a Whig in politics, but of course he redeemed himself mightily.) He was writing of the commissars of the French Revolution, but the words apply to the entire conflict of the modern age:

I conceived that the contest, once begun, could not be laid down again,
to be resumed at our discretion, but that our first struggle with this evil would also be our last.

“And that’s where the Stuarts come in with their Cavaliers and their Jacobites. For fully a hundred years – from the 1640s to the 1740s, through all those dreadful battles from Edgehill to Culloden – the house of Stuart and its loyal adherents were the front-line fighters on behalf of the human race. And of all the Stuarts, it was King Charles the Martyr who understood best what was at stake.

“Of course others had defied the emerging Commissariat before that. Right at the start there were heroes like Thomas More, for instance, and all those common people who took part in the great rising called the Pilgrimage of Grace. But Charles gave the resistance the whole authority of his kingship as well as the mystique of his martyrdom. If Henry the Eighth is the villain-king in this fable of all our lives, Charles the First is the hero-king.”

King Charles the Martyr. Tait had never heard that formulation before. He found it sombre and moving.

“The Enemy claimed to be opposing the despotism of Divine Right. Well, yes, Divine Right was the issue, and is always the issue, but not in the sense they pretended. What they were really out to break was the Divine Right of every human being to be a human being in a valued world and not a lump of dumb clay twisted to the will of modernity’s maniacs, or hurled into the dust-bin of history if it isn’t pliant enough. In that real sense the King stood trial on behalf of all his subjects, and all human beings everywhere. No truer words were ever spoken than when he told that kangaroo-court of 1649: ‘It is not my case alone.’

“The Jacobite movement began historically in 1688 with the exile of King James, but in my opinion it was born in spirit forty years earlier. Its white rose first flowered on that January day when the King walked to the scaffold wearing an extra shirt, lest he shiver from the cold and gratify his enemies and ours by seeming afraid. Anyone like me with a Polish heritage would claim the Jacobites among their spiritual ancestors, just as they would claim the French of the Vendee, for instance. But in addition there’s the splendid fact that Bonnie Prince Charlie’s mother was a Polish princess — the granddaughter of the great King John Sobieski who saved Europe from the Turks at the Battle of Vienna in 1683.”

Tait hadn’t known about that. He would read up on it at the library, and also about the French of the Vendee, and would check to see if they had the Herbert Butterfield book. And he would see what they had on the life and times of Thomas More. And on the Pilgrimage of
Grace. And on the show-trial of King Charles. There was so many things he just didn’t know about, it was criminal.

There was another paragraph to read, but heavier sprinkles of rain began, so he put the letter away in an inside pocket of his satchel and left the cemetery.

Looking back he saw the gravestones fading into the gloom. There’d been something about that place that felt familiar, as if he had been there before. He hadn’t got a proper focus on the feeling because of being engrossed in Mike’s letter and so it had stayed elusive, like a déjà vu. But he would focus on it next time. He had a feeling it was related to a whole other niggle at the far back of his mind, something that wouldn’t come clear and yet wouldn’t go away, that elusive thought that was like a wisp of wind in the heather.

Back under cover of the Museum verandah, he gazed out at the Valley growing darker beneath the heavy sky, and at the occasional car going past in the dim with its headlights on. Inwardly though he was full of vivid impressions of all the things Mike had mentioned and of the way those things fitted together and added up to the fable of all our lives.

A light flicked on above his head, worked by some kind of automatic timer. With enough light to see by now, he read the final bit of the letter.

“I’ve never forgotten what Solzhenitsyn said in a speech in 1975. He was talking about the dissidents in the Soviet Union, but the full meaning of his words was larger. Just insert ‘half-millennium’ in place of ‘half-century’ and the quote sums up the plight of ordinary human beings under modernity’s regime. It conveys both the vast imbalance of forces and the peculiar persistence of the weaker party:

We have no tanks, no weapons, no organization. We have nothing.
Our hands are empty. We have only our hearts and what we have lived through in the half-century under this regime.

At ten to six Tait trudged up the long slope of Honeysuckle Hill and stood at the top and watched the road below for the bus. By nearly seven o’clock it still hadn’t come and he had been cursing the Madwoman solidly for half an hour, but was now too forlorn to bother.
He was in the middle of nowhere, in the dark, and in a cold drizzle of rain. His shoes and socks were sopping wet and cold and squelched with every step. He pulled his floppy cloth hat down on his head and flung his satchel round his back and began to walk.

He felt he’d never make it back to town. It was too far. He might twist his ankle in a pothole, or be hit by a car coming round a bend. Or there might be savage dogs. He’d heard a ferocious deep-throated barking nearby and wondered if the brute was securely chained. He remembered that this was the Valley of the Brothers Grimm where the wolves wait for the lone straggler. And then he began to think about the Fable of All Our Lives, and then of the Solzhenitsyn quote, the words about being weaponless, of having “only our hearts and what we have lived through.”

All of a sudden it came to him about the cemetery.

The way it extended up the slope of the hill was very like the old cemetery at Korumbeena. And those rusty iron gates were similar too. Korumbeena was a dairy-farming town in the far south of another state. Tait’s mother was born there and her people had been scraping a living around the place ever since they’d come out from Lancashire in the mid-1850s with barely two pennies to rub together. Tait didn’t really know much about the family’s history in the town, but there was one poignant detail he did know. His great-grandfather had been the town drunk and had died in the street one day while his son, Tait’s grandfather, was away at the First World War. Tait had been taken to Korumbeena once or twice as a young child when his mother went back from the city to visit. Now he could clearly remember them walking in the old cemetery there.

His mother’s Auntie Annie had been with them and she’d bent down at some graves where flowers were stuck in old jam jars. She’d been replacing the withered flowers with fresh ones that she picked from round about. Tait had picked some too. He could remember handing them to her and being told what a good and helpful boy he was. He must’ve been about five. Now in his mind’s eye he could see Auntie Annie’s hands as she took the dandelions from him, and then as she leant over a grave to refresh the jam jar. They were old, gnarled hands and the image of them suddenly brought other things clear.

They were at a house and Auntie Annie was minding him while his mother went to visit someone else. They were at a kitchen table and he was eating bread and butter with honey and Auntie Annie was telling him about the winnjamah. He had not really understood, so Auntie Annie explained that the winnjamah was a boat, the boat that brought our people over the sea in the 1850s.

“Over the sea to sky?” the child had asked.
The littlies had sung those words at school, led by a sweet-voiced girl teacher who’d also got them warbling along with “Greensleeves” and “Barbara Allen.” But he had liked the Skye Boat Song best.

“That’s about Bonnie Prince Charlie,” Auntie Annie said, and she sang a line of it: *Speed, bonnie boat, like a bird on the wing, over the sea to Skye.*

In his mind’s eye he now saw the old woman’s face vividly in front of him, and in his mind’s ear he heard her speak. The child had not understood, had got a confused notion of someone going in a *winnjamah,* a boat that sailed up into the sky. But the child had retained the words precisely as Auntie Annie spoke them, and now handed them on to the grown-up self: “An ancestor of yours joined Bonnie Prince Charlie. Did you know that? Robert Connell, his name was, and he went from Preston one bitter cold December day and was never seen again.”

That was all she said, because just then he wiped his honey-covered fingers on his pants and she scolded him and told him to fetch a damp dishcloth from the sink. Tait could see Auntie Annie’s gnarled hands with perfect clarity, rubbing the child’s hands clean with that damp cloth…

The rain eased off and patches of starry sky came out between the blowing clouds. Tait fell into a good rhythmic stride and was back in town before too long.

He felt profoundly calm.

Years of built-up misery had washed away when he’d sobbed by the side of the road, weeping for the pathos of the human past.

* * * *

It was a Sunday afternoon and Tait had just come out Errol’s general store with bread and milk and was heading back down the street towards the cabin.

Narelle the owl-child had served him and he told her about the plans for *Cinderella.* She asked if they needed anyone her age to be in it, and Tait replied that they certainly did. He felt able to say that because he had the go-ahead to rewrite the script any way he wanted, as long as he got trains into it. Narelle excitedly asked Errol if she could try out for a part. Errol clicked his tongue and declared there’d be no peace till she’d made an exhibition of herself, so she might as well. Narelle’s eyes grew wider in her round glasses as she imagined being on stage.
As he walked along, Tait pictured her done up as an owl in the panto. He had thought of a way to fit her in. Cinderella is on the train, and the train’s whistle is an owl with a string attached to it. Whenever the string is pulled the owl goes “Woo Woo.”

He could write a little dialogue.

“It must be a very interesting job,” Cinderella would say, “being a train’s whistle.”

“Yes it is,” the owl would answer. “But I’m scared I might get the sack.”

“Why?”

“Well, everyone who had the job before me got the sack.”

“Really?”

“Yes, there was a big handsome rooster who used to call out ‘Cock-a-doodle-doo’ whenever the string was pulled, and he got the sack.”

“You don’t say.”

“Yes, and there was a very nice goose that said ‘Gobble-gobble-gobble’ every time they pulled the string, and she got sacked.”

“Fancy that.”

“And there was a perfectly charming parrot who used to ask ‘Polly want a cracker? Polly want a cracker?’ every single time they pulled the string. And he got the sack after only one day on the job!”

“Gosh!”

“So you see why I’m so worried.”

“I don’t think you’ll get the sack.”

“Really?”

“I think you’ll be in this job for a long, long time.”

“Thank you. I’m so relieved. I do like the job, even if it does get a bit monotonous saying ‘Woo Woo’ all the time. Actually, I’m thinking I might change it to ‘Cock-a-gobble-cracker!’”

He was chuckling to himself when a voice came from so close that he was startled.

“Told you I’d track you down, didn’t I!”

Francesca was on a pushbike right at his elbow. She dismounted and stood smiling at him. His heart fluttered in confusion.

“What was tickling your fancy?” she asked. “You were obviously thinking of something hilarious.”

“Oh, not really,” he mumbled. “Just an idea for the pantomime.”

“Tell me.”

“It wasn’t anything.”
“Tell me.”
“No, I’d be revealing how easily amused I am.”
“I’m entitled to know stuff about the panto. I’ll be playing the Fairy Godmother.”
Tait felt a rush of relief at having it confirmed. It made him realize how much he’d been depending on it.
“That’s excellent,” he managed to say.
Francesca took her helmet off and swept her hair back. She looked very beautiful. She had on shorts and sneakers and a red singlet that left her neck and arms and shoulders bare.
“And you, my spies tell me, are to be an Ugly Sister.”
“A suicidal gesture.”
“No, you’ll be great. And I’ll look after you, like I promised.”
“Thanks.”
“And I’ll winkle the secret out sooner or later.”
“Secret?”
“Of what you were grinning to yourself about.”
“Okay.”
“In the meantime, are you going to invite me home for a cup of tea?”
“Of course.”
They walked along, Francesca wheeling the bike.
Tait felt that he hadn’t greeted her warmly enough, that he must’ve seemed a bit standoffish.
“I’m so pleased you’re in the panto,” he said.
“Me too,” she answered. “Although Craig and I have broken up over it.”
“That’s a shame,” Tait said cautiously. “He doesn’t approve of the Players then?”
“He calls them the Wankers.”
Tait would’ve gently encouraged her to go on about Craig, in the hope of finding out what she ever saw in him, but they came to the driveway of the cabin.
“This is lovely,” Francesca said. “Just lovely.”
They walked along the driveway, under the trees, a fresh salt breeze from the lake against their faces. At the cabin steps they paused so that Francesca could park her bike and admire the scene. Tait left her there while he went inside and switched the jug on and had a quick glance to check if the place was presentable. When he went out she had her head slightly back and her eyes closed and was breathing deeply. He didn’t want to break in, so he stood watching the slight rise and fall of her shoulders as she breathed.
“I needed this,” she said, without opening her eyes. “To be in a calm place with a calm person.”

“I’m glad I can oblige.”

“You can’t imagine the flak I get on the phone all week at work. Everybody’s got a reason to hate the Council and I’m the first line of abuse. I reckon they should have a robot to do the job, something without human feelings. And speaking of the non-human, I’ve had Phizzgig to put up with as well.”

“Would that be Craig by any chance?”

“It would.”

“Jug’s boiling. How d’you take your tea?”

“White no sugar,” she replied without opening her eyes.

He made two teas and brought them out and they sat on the steps. The steps weren’t very wide and their knees touched a little.

“I wonder what you’d make of him, if you knew him.” Francesca said.

“Who?”

“Phizzgig.”

“That’s none of my business.”

“Of course it’s your business,” she said, turning to look him in the face. “You and I like each other a lot, and we’re going to be friends for years. Don’t you think?”

He nodded.

“I certainly like you. And since the world might get blown up tomorrow, there’s no point being all coy about things. I’ve always had that attitude. Even at school.”

“Your legendary days behind the bike shed?”

“In my modest way – or rather my immodest way – I made a few boys happy. At least I hope I did.”

Tait wasn’t sure he wanted any further details.

“I’ve been spending time at the Library,” he said, to change the subject.

“I know. My friend Melissa works there. She told me you’re forever poring over some obscure tome. And how remote you always are.”

“She knows me?”

“She was at the Valley that day. We served her a couple of coffees.”

“She says I’m remote?”

“Yes. She’s afraid to say hello to you. She thinks you might bite her head off.”

“I’m just trying to keep out of Marigold’s way.”
“Good thinking. So what are you reading up on?”
“The Jacobites, mainly.”
“What are they?”
“Eighteenth-century adherents of the exiled royal house of Stuart. Sounds incredibly dry and boring, doesn’t it?”
“Maybe not. Expand on it a bit.”
“The Jacobite period was the last phase of the English Civil Wars that really continued in one way or another for a hundred years — from the 1640s to the 1740s.”
“Oliver Cromwell and all that?”
“Yes, except that this is a good while later. This is more the era of Bonnie Prince Charlie, who was the great-grandson of the King Charles that fought against Cromwell.”
“And got beheaded?
“That’s right. We saw the King as they killed him, and his face was proud and pale.”
“Is that from a poem?”
“Yes.”
“One of yours?”
“No.”
“So why do you like these Jacobites?”
“Because they were counter-revolutionaries.”
“Against who?”
“The forces that create a desolation and call it progress.”
“Meaning who?”
“Well, in the immediate sense, the Whig establishment that had carried out the so-called Glorious Revolution of 1688, deposing the rightful Stuart king and putting a Dutch usurper on the throne.”
“And?”
“In the broader sense, the whole regime of modernity, the whole trend of the modern world itself. What my friend Mike Kieslowski calls the Great Commissariat. The Jacobites were trying to fight the whirlwind.”
“Jousting with windmills, like Whatsit?”
“Don Quixote. Yes, except that the Jacobites weren’t deluded about the nature of the enemy.”
“Were they right to oppose the modern world?”
“That depends on your point of view.”
“Are you opposed to the modern world?”

“Well I wouldn’t argue against penicillin, and flush-toilets, and not having people drawn-and-quartered.”

“What would you argue against?”

“The withering of the sacred tree and the cheapening of hearts.”

“What a striking way to put it.”

“I’m quoting, as usual. The death of the sacred tree is something that Black Elk spoke of. He was a Sioux Indian whose memoirs were made into a book: Black Elk Speaks. And the cheapening of hearts is from the great French poet Baudelaire.”

“How do you know so much?”

“Sheer genius.”

“I’ll go along with that.”

“You’d be the only one.”

“Come on, I’ll bet you have legions of fans.”

“Yes, they’re having a convention soon. They’re booking a phone booth for the venue.”

“Surely the back seat of a Volkswagen, at the very least.”

“Fraid not.”

“Well, for what its worth, your Jacobites don’t sound dry and boring at all. They sound interesting. And so does what you said about the ‘regime of the modern world?’ I’d love to know more about all that.”

“I’m still only just getting the gist it myself, partly from my pal Mike, who’s full of brilliant insights. For example, he talks about ‘the clash of paradigms.’”

“Remind me of what a paradigm is.”

“A framework of understanding. Mike says the modern West is the first epoch in human history in which people who belong to the same society and culture can have utterly opposing paradigms, fundamentally different concepts of how things are and what things mean. He cites the clash between Descartes and Pascal, for example. And the upshot, in Mike’s opinion, is the abyss which is now looking back into us.”

“Sorry, you’re losing me,” Francesca said, touching him on the knee.

“I’m a bit lost with it all too,” Tait said. “I left school at fourteen, whereas Mike has a Master’s degree in political philosophy. But apparently Nietzsche said: Beware of looking into the abyss, lest the abyss look back into you.

“Gosh, that’s creepy. What does it mean?”

“I’m still figuring it out. Along with Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft.”
“And what are they when they’re at home?”
“I might not be pronouncing them correctly.”
“You could say them backwards for all I’d know.”
“Well, Gemeinschaft means ‘community’ I think. And the other one means... something else. I’ll tell you when Mike tells me.”
“I won’t be able to rest until you do.”
“I’m aware of that. It was cruel of me to awaken the yearning in you.”
“Yes,” Francesca said, smiling even more, but her tone changing from jokey to half-serious. “It was.”

She had turned her body and was looking him directly in the eyes, and he went weak with longing to put his arms around her. He thought he should keep up the conversation but couldn’t remember what they’d been talking about. He saw the half-empty cups.

“Can I get you some more tea?”
“Yes, and let’s go inside. That breeze is quite nippy and I’m not exactly rugged-up.”
They went in and Tait put the jug back on.

“It’s so interesting,” she called from the work-room. “All these bits of paper pinned up, with cryptic messages on them.”
“I generate bits of paper,” he called back. “That’s who I am.”
He would have hated anyone else poking about, but her being there seemed wholly good and right. He felt an erotic charge at the thought of her touching his belongings.

“My god, what’s this?” she cried. “A framed photo of Amma!”
She came out grinning, brandishing the photo.

“Never seen it before,” he declared. “That’s my story and I’m sticking to it.”
“You’re a funny fellow,” she said. “I can never quite work you out. Fancy you having this on your desk.”

“Caught red-handed. What can I say?”
“I think it’s very sweet,” she said. “I think you’re very sweet.”
She kissed him lightly on the lips.

“Would you have a spare jumper?” she asked. “I’m quite cold.”
He fetched her a jumper and watched her put it on. It was lovely seeing her in a piece of his clothing, her body snug inside it. It was a delicious blend of eroticism and practical

“Looking-after.

“It feels just right,” she murmured, smoothing the jumper down over her chest and stomach.
“It never looked as good as that on me,” Tait said.

They stood in the work-room and sipped their mugs of tea and looked through the window at the late afternoon sky over the lake. They decided to have a brisk walk along the shore.

As they went along the dirt path of the reserve, Francesca took him by the arm. A little further on they began to hold hands.

They went as far as High Rock and sat down and Francesca stared across the lake. “Are you okay?” Tait asked.

“Yes,” she replied. “Just thinking of my Dad. He loved vistas of open water like this. There were lakes where he came from in Italy.”

“Was that up in the north?”

“Yes.”

“Near Switzerland?”

“Not quite that far north. Why?”

“Just thinking of Hemingway. That part in A Farewell to Arms when they’re escaping to Switzerland for the ‘winter sports’ and they row on the lake all night, dodging the patrol boats.”

“I’ve never read that one. What does the ‘winter sports’ mean?”

Tait outlined how the lovers escape from the war in Italy, and how they agree that when they are questioned by the Swiss they will say they have come to enjoy the ‘winter sports’ and will stick to that story no matter what.

“What about your parents?” Francesca asked. “Are they around?”

“There’s only my mother. But we’ve got pretty distant over the past few years. Nowadays we really only exchange Christmas and birthday cards. She moved back interstate last year, back to live with her sister.”

“It’s sad that the two of you have grown apart.”

“Well, there’s a lot of unresolved stuff.”

“About your childhood?”

“Yes.”

“About what happened to you? Getting a life sentence and all that?”

“Yes.”

“Is it stuff you want to talk about?”

“Not really. Besides, you have people bellyaching down the phone-lines all week.”

“All the better to be a sounding board for you, if you need one. I’ve developed cast-iron ears.”
“I thought you said it required a robot.”
“T’im on the way to being a robot, believe me. But anyway, it’d be nice to think you could reconnect with your mother at some point.”
“I’ve been thinking of dropping her a line, actually. To ask her something about family history. Something that a relative said to me when I was a kid and that I only recalled recently.”
“Sounds like a good thing to do. I’ve been thinking about my ancestral roots lately, too. Losing a parent brings all that to your mind.”
They stayed silent for a few moments, each thinking their own thoughts.
“Tell me,” Tait asked. “Did you ever sing the Skye Boat Song at school?”
“The Skye Boat Song?”
“Speed, bonnie boat, like a bird on the wing, over the sea to Skye.”
“Yes, I know the song you mean. I think we might’ve sung it at school. Why?”
“No reason. I just feel glad, somehow, that you know it.”
“Well, you funny fellow,” she said, touching the point of his chin with her finger, “I’m glad that you’re glad.”
They started walking back and were passing the Ellicott’s house, with the wattles and the yellow-painted swing and the veranda closed in with dark shade-cloth. Roscoe the dog came to the fence for a pat. Mrs Ellicott saw them and opened the verandah door and called hello. Tait asked about her twisted ankle and she replied that it was fine. She reminded him of the standing invitation to call in for afternoon tea and chinwag sometime soon. Tait said he’d make a point of it.
Mr Dragovic was out in his yard next door. He waved at the sky and called out:
“She’s-gonna-be-storm-tonight-for-sure-no-worry-mate!”
As they walked on, Tait told about Mrs Ellicott’s mishap that day on the path, and Mr Dragovic coming down to collect her.
“You’re getting to know a few people then,” Francesca said.
“I guess so, although I don’t want to become too chummy and have their noses in my business. That can turn unpleasant, especially if you have unsavoury things in your past. I’ll bet Mrs Ellicott is wondering about us right now.”
“We’re just here for the winter sports.”
“Precisely.”
Tait was starting to dread the moment when Francesca would say she had to go. He knew he’d be left with the same bereft feeling as when they’d parted that night in the Valley — as if a piece of himself had been ripped away.

“What’s in your cupboard, Mother Hubbard?” she asked as they got back to the cabin.

“I’m starving. I could eat a horse.”

“Ah heck, I finished my last one yesterday.”

“May I look?”

“Of course,” Tait replied, filled with relief that she wasn’t in any hurry to leave.

“You’re right,” she said, peering into the cupboard. “You haven’t the skerrick of a horse left. But you do have lots of lovely sardines and oodles of baked beans and some eggs.”

“And there’s bread for toast.”

“Shall we make gluttons of ourselves?”

“Absolutely.”

It was lovely preparing a meal together, working side by side at the frypan and the toaster, boiling the jug, setting the little table. It was the kind of everyday thing most people took for granted but that Tait had never had before.

The evening came on and the sky filled with heavy cloud. The wind built up off the lake and the trees began to thrash. Tait went outside and put the pushbike round in the shed to keep it dry. He knew Mr Dragovic was right about a heck of a storm coming. A bit later they heard big splashes of rain on the tin roof and the downpour began in earnest.

Francesca said she felt cold with her legs bare and Tait found her a pair of his trousers to go with the jumper. She stood in the middle of the kitchen and pulled the trousers on over her shorts and then bent and rolled the legs up a bit.

“That’s better,” she said, straightening up.

He had never seen anyone look so adorable.

The storm got wilder as they took their plates of food and mugs of tea to the table. The wind whooshed more emphatically in the trees.

“We need not fear the hordes of hell...” Tait intoned.

“That’s good to know. Is that from the Bible?”

He told her about the 9th century Irish poem giving thanks for the storm that will keep the Viking raiders at least briefly away.

_Since tonight the wind is high,

The sea’s white mane a fury,_
I need not fear the hordes of hell
Coursing the Irish Channel.

“It’s anonymous. Probably written by a monk. Monk-slaying was one of the Vikings’ favourite things.”

“Poor people,” Francesca murmured. “But at least we’re snug.”
She reached over and touched his hand.
“Yes,” he replied, returning the touch.

In fact he was wondering whether tree branches might blow down on the cabin. He got a vision of a big jagged limb suddenly shattering in through a window.

They ate hungrily and talked, sometimes having to raise their voices over the bluster outside.

He was telling her how he had bought the little table to make the place look better for Bristol Dick’s visit, and how he had to report at Castleton each fortnight. That reminded him of the Lance Lassiter reading coming up at Peppercorn’s bookshop. He told Francesca he was thinking of going to it.

“May I come?”

“Of course, if you’d be interested. Do you know Lassiter’s work at all.”

“No, but I’ve met him. He gave a talk at Turrawong high school one time. Gillian’s a teacher there and she and Ian had him out at their place for dinner.”

“What was he like?”

“Very impressive. Piercing blue eyes. Long mane of hair. Hypnotic voice. Breaks into poetry at the drop of a hat — not unlike someone else I know. And he’s got this huge dog that he says is half dingo.”

“Sounds fascinating.”

“And if you’re female he has you mentally undressed in about four seconds flat.”

“Did you find it offensive?”

“Only mildly. The charisma is pretty powerful. It’d be interesting to see him again. You’ll have to keep me close to you, though, in case he tries to race me off by whispering sonnets in my ear.”

“Are you a sucker for poets?”

“I’m putty in their hands.”

When they’d finished their meal they began to wash up. They’d put some music on the record-player and it wafted through from the other room, mingling with the sound of the rain
and wind. Tait wondered how Cashew was faring in the tempest. He told Francesca about the possum and how they’d plied it with stout. She asked if there was anything to drink in the place now.

“Alas, no,” he replied. “I didn’t know that I’d be having your company like this.”

“Well then,” she said. “Just as well I’m a good little Girl Scout and came prepared. If you look in the saddlebag of my trusty bike, you’ll find a tiny bottle of Johnny Walker. Just enough to warm our cockles.”

“And there’s nothing like warm cockles,” they said together, and laughed.

He put his jacket over his head and braved the tempest to get the whisky from the saddlebag.

They had just taken a couple of sips and were feeling the lovely warmth of it flowing through them when the electricity blacked-out.

They stood in the darkness for a few moments. Then there was a lighting flash and an eerie blink of illumination, then pitch dark again.

“Where are you?” she said from right beside him.

“Here.”

“Where?”

“Here.”

“We’ll have to work by touch.”

“I’m afraid so.”

She pressed against him and they put their arms around each other.

“The black-out might only last a minute,” Tait said.

“Heaven knows.”

They kissed deeply. Then again even more lingeringly.

“Bedtime,” she whispered.

He remained still, his heart thumping.

“What on earth could we do to occupy the time?”

“Or it might be hours. It might be all night.”

“Yes it might.”

“They kissed deeply. Then again even more lingeringly.

“Bedtime,” she whispered.

He remained still, his heart thumping.

“Come on,” she whispered again. “It’s okay. I’ve got a condom in my shorts pocket. I came here with every intention of making love. Didn’t you sense that?”

“I wasn’t sure.”

“Poor sweetie. You’ve had a deprived life, haven’t you?”

“I don’t know,” he murmured against her hair.
“Do you want to go to bed with me?”
He could only nod yes against her hair.
She kissed him again, deeply, with her tongue.
When they were naked under the doona and wriggling and snuggling to get each other warm, a tremendous whoosh of wind sounded outside and they felt the buffet of it.
“Well,” Francesca said as Tait’s passion rose and he gripped her tighter. “The hordes of hell won’t be getting us tonight.”

END OF PART ONE
Chapter Six

It was three years later, and Tait was looking into the eyes of a bunyip. Or at least that’s how it seemed.

He was standing in thick bush on the hillside up behind Francesca’s block of land in the Valley. The afternoon sunlight came down unevenly through the trees and made bright patches on the ground and those bright patches made the shadowed areas look darker. One of the shadowed areas was a little gully with a pond of stagnant water in it. An old truck lay there and you could tell it had been there for a long time. The back wheels were in the water and there were clumps of reeds around the doors and around the front mudguards. The glass of the two windscreen panels had gone and the blank spaces were squares of deep shadow, like big fathomless eyes. The stubby bonnet was like a flat nose, and the broken grille was like a mouth with a set of snaggly teeth. It looked like a bunyip or some other kind of weird creature that had heaved itself out of the still depths to lie among the reeds in contemplation. It could seem sinister, depending on the angle of the light, but mostly it had an unhappy look.

Ever since he’d first discovered it he had thought of it as the Melancholy Monster, and had shortened that to “MM.” Now he decided it should have a proper name. He would call it Emmet.

“Bye, Emmet,” he said. “See you next time.”

But the bunyip seemed lost in meditation.

Tait made his way back down the hill. He went carefully, watching the ground in front of him for snakes. It was still summer and you had to be aware.

He got to the wire fence of Francesca’s block and bent and stepped through. Most of the block was cleared and grassy, with just a few big shade trees. His motorbike was underneath one of them, leaning on its rest. It was a little 100cc model that he’d bought from a woman in the Players. She’d got it new and then found she was afraid to ride it in traffic and was willing to flog it off dirt-cheap to be rid of it. Tait had agonized over spending so much of his money in one go, even for such a bargain, but now he was glad he’d screwed up the courage. The bike had freed him up tremendously, had given him options he’d never had before.
Tait always felt easier when he came back down the hill to Francesca’s land, for he had permission to be there any time he liked. On Francesca’s land no one would come along and query him. On Francesca’s land he knew what his rights were.

He still thought of it as Francesca’s land, though now that she and Craig were married it was only half hers. *With all my worldly goods I thee endow.* That was how the marriage vows went.

Not that Tait had been at the wedding. They’d invited him, along with Francesca’s other friends from the Players, and he and Francesca had tried to talk about the pros and cons of him being there, the way they’d earlier tried to talk about the other stuff – about her being pregnant to Craig and all of that. But there were so many painful silences that it wasn’t a real conversation and in the end Francesca just looked at him sadly and said, “Do what you think best, my love, and what you feel you can cope with. And so will I.”

So Tait stayed away. He told people he had an important appointment in the city that day, a meeting with his publisher that he couldn’t get out of. To back up this pretence and to be out of the area he took the train to the city and spent the time seeing three movies one after the other to keep from having to think.

But afterwards he’d questioned Kelvin about it.

“Do you *really* want to know?” Kelvin had asked.

“No, but I want you to tell me anyway.”

It had been very simple. The little weatherboard church up a side street, and the half-dozen or so people from the Players, and some vague acquaintance of Craig’s who’d been roped in as Best Man. Francesca had looked pale but ravishing, even waddling up the aisle with what Kelvin called a “rampant” belly.

Kelvin had taken photos and Tait insisted on seeing them. There was one in particular. It was after they’d come out of the church and was of Francesca alone. She was standing with her back to a wall, a wall covered with some sort of creeper that had vivid red flowers like roses. It was a close-up shot that emphasized her pale skin and the curve of her jet black hair sweeping down against the flowery daubs of red. She was looking downwards at that instant, her eyelids half closed, her lips slightly parted. *The Lady of the Roses,* Tait called it. He wished he knew how to say it in Italian. It would sound even lovelier, and sadder. He had a strong feeling that Francesca had been thinking of her father at that moment.

“Can I have a copy of this?” Tait had asked.

“Really?”

“Yes, really. What’s the problem?”
“I’m normally not into supplying my friends with tools of masochism.”
“I would for you.”
“Well, I guess that’s handy to know,” Kelvin said reflectively “One can never tell what appetites one might develop. So what could you supply? Chains? Whips?”
“Clamps.”
“Clamps?”
“Genital clamps of every kind.”
“How soon do you want the photo, and how many copies?” Kelvin cried, pretending to pant with excitement.

So Tait obtained a copy of the photo and put it into a solid metal frame and kept it in a cupboard out of sight, except now and then when he would place it in front of him when he was writing and wanted an image of beauty and sorrow to unfreeze his deepest emotions.

Francesca’s land rose steeply from the level of the road and it gave you the feeling of being up higher than you really were. Opposite, across the road, was another wooded hillside. The view to the right was mostly cut off by big outcrops of rock, but when you looked away to the left you always felt your heart pick up a little, for you could see the long rise of Honeysuckle Hill, and the open expanse of the main valley, and the distant range of hills going hazy, and the sky stretching over it all.

The afternoon had worn on and the sun had gone over the hilltop. The bushland where Tait had meandered was now starting to loom darker and colder and he was glad he’d come down from there. No wonder poor old Emmet was dejected, with all those nights in the cold dark of the gully. But the sun was still on the open areas in the distance, spreading that lovely reddish-gold tinge that you get on landscapes in the latter part of a summer day.

Tait wasn’t sure what to do. He had a rehearsal tonight and Francesca would be there and hopefully they’d get the odd moment by themselves. But he wanted to turn up reasonably fresh and cheerful so as to keep things okay. He hadn’t slept very well the previous night and when he’d got up he had felt no impulse to work. He had forced himself to stay at his desk for an hour or two and then headed to the Valley with a book and some sandwiches and a bottle of water in his satchel. Having the motorbike had made things like that possible. Times when he felt seedy and uninspired, or oppressed by the four walls of the cabin, he could ride out to Francesca’s block of land to read and daydream and idle about. It was an opportunity to woolgather, to catch up with various odds and ends of thought. And woolgathering was part of a writer’s job, so he wasn’t being altogether slack.
Most of today, for example, he’d been reflecting on the book he had just read, R.H. Tawney’s *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*. Tait’s people were never church-goers and he had never had any religious affiliation, and since he’d never thought about it he had never missed it. In that sense he was very different from Mike Kieslowski whose Polish heritage was profoundly Catholic. But Tawney’s book was packed with insights from any point of view. Tait had copied out one particular quote and pinned it on the Blue Board at the cabin. It encapsulated a lot of what he had come to believe about life: “Common sense and a respect for realities are not less graces of the spirit than moral zeal.” Among other things, the book gave a vivid sense of the opposing outlooks in the English Civil War, that struggle for the soul of the world, that contest that was central to what Mike had called “the fable of all our lives.” The Cavalier type was willing to credit common existence with value and meaning and beauty, and therefore, said Tawney, he “found comfort in a sacrament.” The Puritan type, on the other hand, was prone to spurn the common lot as worthless and alien, as “a snare set to entrap his soul.” To such a person, Tawney wrote,

> the entire world of human relations, the whole fabric of social institutions… reveal themselves in a new and wintry light. He looks on a landscape touched by no breath of spring. What he sees is a forbidding and frost-bound wilderness, rolling its snow-clad leagues towards the grave.

Yes, the Puritan makes the world a desolation by his very way of looking at it. And being so adept at war and power, he can enforce that bleak vision on everyone, can make it seem like the plain truth, can make it seem as though his opponents are the ones out of step with reality. Tait now understood what Mike meant about the Great Commissariat and its death-grip on the modern world. The controllers of modernity were the Puritans and their various ideological descendants, most of whom had turned anti-religious but had retained the old sense of the vileness of the world. To their sort the world was, as one Puritan expressed it, “a carcase that had neither life nor loveliness.” So for centuries now the world had been under the stewardship of people who despised the very thing they were supposed to be safeguarding. How could the modern world be other than a disaster area? Tait had been thinking about Mike’s concept of modernity as the “paradigm wars” and he saw that you could designate the two sides, the two paradigms, as the Party of the Sacrament and the Party of the Snare. Tait
and Mike might differ in terms of the role religion played in their thinking, but they were both of the Party of the Sacrament, and the commissars of today were the old enemy, were the Party of the Snare in its current guise.

But he had dwelt on it enough, for now, and was feeling weary.

He decided to stretch out on the Picnic Table for a nap. It was long enough to lie full length on, and very sturdy. Craig had built it, so they’d have something to sit at when they came out for a picnic. Tait had helped with preparing the timber planks, and then with holding things in place while Craig drilled and bolted. And when they’d done the table Craig had decided to cover it with a structure of poles and corrugated iron so that there’d be shade and shelter. Tait helped with that too, over a few weekends. Craig was a jack-of-all-trades and although he didn’t have much of a knack with human beings he was very focused when he worked. And Tait could go for long periods without needing to talk. So they got on quite well when there was a job to do.

What Craig wanted more than anything was to build a house on the block. He thought of little else, Francesca said, except to accumulate the funds and he worked all the hours he could get. He had this idea that if they could only build in the Valley a new life would blossom for them, and the marriage would prosper.

That was why the Picnic Table and the Shelter were important symbols to Craig. They were a kind of pledge to the future.

Tait tried to relax his body as he lay there, using his satchel as a pillow. He heard birdcalls, and a slight sigh of the breeze in the grass, and he put his mind into the flow and cadence of his current Companion Piece, the poem that was now his ideal and his inspiration. It was Yeats’s “An Irish Airman Foresees His Death” with its oddly peaceful and timeless effect:

I know that I shall meet my fate
Somewhere among the clouds above;
Those that I fight I do not hate,
Those that I guard I do not love.
My country is Kiltartan Cross,
My countrymen Kiltartan’s poor,
No likely end could bring them loss
Or leave them happier than before…
He felt himself beginning to float away, but then he shivered from the chill that was seeping down from the hillside and he was afraid he might catch a cold if he stayed there. He got off the Picnic Table and slung his satchel over his back and put his helmet on. He half-thought of riding the two kilometers further along to Ian and Gillian’s. They were probably home from work now. He did occasionally pop in for a cup of tea and to look at Ian’s latest paintings. But then he remembered the rehearsal and that Gillian would be there and maybe Ian too. Mostly Gillian came to rehearsals by herself while Ian minded the kids, but sometimes they both came and brought the kids and put them down on blankets and pillows in a corner of the Green Room. That was the sort of thing that gave the Players such a friendly atmosphere and made it feel like one big family.

He kick-started the bike, then eased it down the steep incline to the gate and out on to the road. As he began to head away he heard a raucous noise from the hillside. It was made by some kind of bird, but he imagined it as a bunyip’s plaint, as Emmet’s evening cry of melancholy.

* * * *

He approached Honeysuckle Hill and slowed down for the turn on to the main Valley road. Whenever he came to Honeysuckle Hill he thought of the Jacobites and of his ancestor Robert Connell. He had learned from his reading that honeysuckle was a Jacobite symbol of fidelity. And there were many other symbols. There were oak-leaves and wild roses, butterflies and daffodils, blackbirds and forget-me-nots, a whole range of emblems that stood for spring and for summer, for the promise of renewal and fruition. Like their Cavalier forerunners, the Jacobites were of the Party of the Sacrament and believed that even with all its unavoidable sorrows the world was a good place — or at least that it had been good and might be good again if the commissars could be thwarted. There’d been a whole secret culture of poetic images, each one a silver key that opened larger meanings. It was a code understood by those loyal to the King Over the Water and to the true order of things. And the ranks of the loyal had covered the whole social spectrum at home in addition to those in exile, from high aristocrats to artisans and weavers and farmers and peasants, from clergymen of delicate conscience to the toughest of smugglers and highwaymen.

A couple of years back Tait had written to his mother interstate to ask if she knew anything about what Auntie Annie had told him long ago, about an ancestor joining Prince Charlie at Preston. She replied that she didn’t.
“But,” she added, “whatever you heard from Auntie Annie would have been right. She always knew the family stuff backwards.”

Tait hadn’t mentioned it to anyone else, not even to Mike Kieslowski. He’d found out there was a word for what had happened, the way he had suddenly remembered that scene with Auntie Annie and what she had said. It was called “anamnesis,” the bringing to consciousness of forgotten things. Now he’d got used to having it as his own bit of secret Jacobite lore, although he still didn’t know exactly what it added up to. It was as if he had the elements of a new poem vaguely in mind – a blurred image, a scrap of detail, the lilt of a line – but one he knew was unique and that might be the best thing he would ever comprehend. He had one or two silver keys but he knew he mustn’t force it. He knew he must let it gain enough solid form to bear the handling. This was all about a connection across two and half centuries. It wasn’t to be rushed and you had to have some faith in the process. That’s what Tait told himself nowadays, that there was an ultimate power of rightness operating, the power that ensures the sun will rise, that the rain will fall, that the seasons of the earth will follow as they should. A good Jacobite has faith in the wisdom of the honeysuckle and the rose, and in the profundity of the Cause itself and its beautiful codes of meaning, its deep symbolic language of the heart. As Solzhenitsyn said, “we have only our hearts and what we have lived through,” whether in our own brief lifetimes or collectively across the generations.

And that wasn’t so very different, Tait figured, from what Tawney meant by “common sense and a respect for realities,” those things which were no less “graces of the spirit.”

He looked along to his left and saw Megan Marchant’s big white station-wagon parked at the Pioneer Museum. The vehicle had colourful writing all over it. Election posters. Megan had been on the Shire Council for the past couple of years and there was another election coming up. She had been begged to stand for Council by a group called the Heritage Alliance that wanted to oppose the relentless pro-development forces. Megan was a prize acquisition for them because everybody knew she was honest, and that she didn’t get personal or bear grudges, and that she wasn’t dogmatic. She was the Heritage Alliance’s only councilor but she had a lot of pull because nobody wanted to have Megan Marchant seriously disappointed in them.

Tait rode up the long slope of Honeysuckle Hill and down the other side and was halfway to town when he heard a toot of greeting behind him. Megan drove past with a vigorous wave. Marigold Fyffe was in the passenger seat and gave him the ghost of a nod. After three years he had worn her down that far.
As the station-wagon drew ahead, Tait saw the slogan in the back window: DON’T LET THE RURAL VIRTUES LEAVE THE LAND!

That was partly his doing. It was a line from Oliver Goldsmith’s great poem of 1770, “The Deserted Village.” Back when Megan was first going for a seat on Council, Mike Kieslowski had been extolling the poem to Tait in his letters. Tait had never read it, and had known very little about Goldsmith — just that he’d been a friend of some famous figures like Edmund Burke and Samuel Johnson, and that like many writers back then he had known the desperate poverty of Grub Street.

“The poem appeared twenty-four years after Culloden,” Mike had written, “when the logic of the Puritan-Whig supremacy was becoming brutally clear. It was open slather for the power of Money and Politics, and the age-old claims of community could go hang.”

Tait had looked the poem up in one of his anthologies. It ran over several pages and he was quickly immersed in the doom of that village, wiped off the map for someone’s profit and convenience. One evening at the Players he’d mentioned it to Megan, saying how much it tied in with the concerns of the Heritage Alliance. She had asked to see it. After that she often quoted the poem in public. Four lines in particular summed up a lot of what she wanted to say, and she would declaim them with a piercing eloquence and a far-off gaze, as if she could see a spreading field of ruin:

\[
\begin{align*}
E’en now the devastation is begun,
And half the business of destruction done;
E’en now, methinks, as pondering here I stand,
I see the rural virtues leave the land.
\end{align*}
\]

The quaint old timber bridge at the back of Turrawong had been replaced by an ugly concrete structure. Tait crossed it and rode into the town. It was a bit after five o’clock and there was the flurry of the knocking-off time traffic. He still wanted to lie down for a nap somewhere. He rode along to the Green Room to see if it looked as if anyone was there. If he could get in, he could stretch out on the lovely old sofa that had been in more shows than any of the actors had. But there was no sign of anyone. He wished he had a key. The Hall and the Green Room were Council property and the Council insisted that the Players restrict the number of keys in circulation, because of insurance liability and stuff like that. So keys were only to be issued to the group’s office-holders, and whoever was directing the current production, and a few others who had to be able to come and go, like the wardrobe lady, and
the lighting-and-sound guy, and the chief set-builder. Tait would have loved a key of his own. The Green Room was closed and deserted most of the time, especially through the day, and it seemed a shame that he couldn’t use it for a quiet snooze now and then, or just as a place to be. It was important to have a few set places, places other than where you lived. Francesca’s block of land was one, and the Green Room would be ideal for another.

Tait had written a couple of one-act comedies that’d gone over extremely well and had got good notices in the local press. He was now starting to be thought of as the group’s resident playwright. That ought to entitle him to a key to the door, he felt. What if he had an urgent inspiration? They didn’t lock Shakespeare out of the Green Room at the Globe, did they?

He left the motorbike on its stand and walked to the Athena café and sat in his usual corner booth and had fried eggs on toast with chips, then settled in to read his book until rehearsal time.

There came a voice he knew, but it sounded slurred. Tait looked up and saw Jade Mustang buying cigarettes at the front counter and saying something to the girl about the change. Jade looked spindlier than ever in his cowboy denims and with his big hat pushed back on his head. He was also a bit unsteady on his feet and lurched a couple of times. He held the change on his upturned palm and then the coins fell down amongst the lollies and chocolates. Jade and the girl fished awkwardly for them, their hands getting in each other’s way.

“I’ll do it, thank you!” the girl said.

Jade stepped back with a lurch of elaborate ironic courtesy.

“Whatever you think is a fair thing,” he slurred. “I’m easy.”

He peered vaguely down to the back of the café.

Tait lowered his eyes to his book.

He’d seen Jade many times around the town, and a couple of times they’d come face to face. Once Jade had come into the barber-shop while Tait was waiting for a haircut. Another time, they’d been in the same queue at the bank. Jade had cut him dead on each occasion. Twice Tait had met Jade and Bambi and Bundle all together in an aisle of the supermarket. Bambi had nodded and said hello, but Jade had just walked on pretending to look at the shelves. Tait did not know the reason for any of this, and didn’t especially care. It was just that if there’d been any hint of friendliness he would have let Jade know that he had one of the hubcaps of the Plymouth in safekeeping.

Three years ago Tait had come home on the bus one evening and had seen the Plymouth disappearing up the road on the back of a flatbed truck. And Jade was just pulling away in Bambi’s clapped-out yellow Mini. Next day Tait found one of the Plymouth’s hubcaps in the
gutter and picked it up and put it away in the cabin. He was glad that Jade had got the splendid old bomb safely away. They’d only been gone from the shop for a couple of days and the car had already begun to be vandalized.

When he glanced up again Jade had left the cafe.

* * * *

Light spilled from the open door of the Green Room along with the sound of familiar voices and laughter. It was always nice to go in and be enveloped in the atmosphere, especially after several days of being alone and hardly speaking to a soul. Tait made himself a cup of tea at the urn and chatted with one or two people as they waited for the full cast to gather. Then he sat down a bit apart to sip his tea and watch and listen. That’s what he most liked — to be part of it all and yet still be a bit detached. And the others were used to him now. They knew that he’d be pleasantly conversational if that was called for, but if he seemed a bit remote it didn’t mean he was hostile or depressed or anything.

Of course they’d all known of his past, and for the first year or so they’d sized him up, watching for signs of him being weird or dangerous. It was what he called, from his institutional days, the Presenting Ordeal. When you went to a new ward of the institution they would watch how you “presented” in your behaviour. It was always a tricky time because you were looming abnormally large in their minds and any little thing you did could strike them oddly. But gradually they’d get used to you and you could recede into the background and not be quite so much on guard.

The Presenting Ordeal with the Players was made a lot easier by the fact that he’d come in under Megan’s mantle, and was already pals with Kelvin and Gillian and Ian. And the fact that there was something vaguely going on between him and Francesca. But the biggest factor was that he was hurled so quickly into a show. Nowhere do you get as true a measure of people as in the seeming artificiality of the theatre. A production normally took about three months, from first auditions to closing night, and in that time you learned the temperament of every other person involved. You found out exactly how intelligent they were, and how stable, and how flexible. You saw them half-naked, or sick with nerves, or goaded to distraction, or riding waves of laughter and applause. You noted how punctual they were, or how quick to sew a missing button on, or how calmly they balanced on a ladder to adjust a bank of spotlights. Above all there was the shared knowledge of mutual dependence in the actual show. Everyone was at everyone else’s mercy. There was always someone who could
destroy you in the next thirty seconds by not coming in on cue, or not prompting when you
needed it, or by not having the prop in place, or the sound-effect ready, or the change of
costume waiting in the wings.

That’s what built the camaraderie — the fear of having to trust each other so much, and the
relief that it mostly turned out well.

So when Tait played an Ugly Sister in that production of *Cinderella*, he gave the Players a
crash-course in seeing what he was really like. And the fact that he showed a flair for the
stage was an added recommendation. This surprised Tait himself as much as anyone, since
he’d had never done any performing and had nearly fainted with anxiety when the moment
came.

Waiting in the wings to go on that first time, he had thought his nerves were okay, especially
after the weeks of rehearsal when everyone kept telling him he was a natural. Francesca had
given his hand a squeeze and whispered “Break a leg!” and suddenly he was out there under
the lights with a real audience looking at him. He croaked out his first line, then froze. He had
no voice, no power in his limbs, no recollection of what he was supposed to do. He became
aware of a ludicrous bewigged figure skittling about, of a pompous face caked with powder
and lipstick, of a shrewish voice rattling on. He comprehended that Kelvin was covering for
him, giving him time to snap out of it. He remembered that he himself was ridiculously
powdered and bewigged, that he was wearing a hooped dress of purple and orange stripes and
that he had enormous false bosoms on. He wasn’t out there to be himself, but to live up to the
role he was playing. He took a gulp of air and somehow found enough of a voice to screech:
“Where is that lazy, worthless, good-for-nothing girl? Cinderellllaaa!”

Kelvin took up the cry and the two Ugly Sisters were in full flow.

Tait had no idea how long he’d been frozen. All he knew was that it must’ve been horribly
drawn out and obvious.

But at interval Kelvin slapped him on the back and said how marvelously he was doing.
“Did you lose it, though, for a moment or two at the start?” he asked.
And Francesca told him it had been more like a dramatic pause than a freeze.
And Megan praised his quick recovery.

By the end of that matinee Tait was a wreck, his voice almost gone from trying to project
above the din from the audience. The others had warned him that playing to kids was murder.
Panto might’ve been an enchanted realm back in Edwardian days when middle-class children
were taught to sit still and listen and be polite and sweet, but now it was mostly noise,
confusion and ill-will. The turmoil had begun straight away, with kids running up and down
the aisles and encroaching on the stage and shouting rudely at the actors. The traditional by-play with the audience didn’t work any more. There was too much distraction and too little interest in the unfolding of the story. Most disconcerting of all, there was no moral framework to rely on. The children were supposed to side with the weak and humble against the persecutors, but there was little sign that they did.

“Do you know where Cinderella is hiding?” the Ugly Sisters had to demand of the audience at one point, with the ill-treated girl cowering behind a pumpkin at one end of the stage. The Sisters were supposed to go on coaxing and cajoling in vain while the children denied any knowledge of the matter. But in fact poor Cinderella was betrayed at once: “There she is! There she is!”

And if a performer ventured into the audience, he or she was liable to get hurt. Gillian was back and blue in the legs from being kicked.

The feeling in the Players was that kids had been ruined by television. But Tait was glad he’d been thrown in at the deep end. After pantomime he knew he could cope with anything.

And he’d done a lot in the three years.

He glanced around at the photos on the walls and saw himself in a number of them. There he was, pouting as the Ugly Sister. And there he was, smirking as the Vacuum Cleaner Salesman with the over-active glands in the sex-farce. And there he was again, glaring evilly out as the Blackmailer in the whodunit. And there were the photos of the two one-act comedies he’d written and appeared in. In the first he was done up as the fatuous dandy Egmont Spruce, and in the second he peered from under a pith-helmet as Dame Phyllis Grandly-Pilfer, the famous lady archaeologist who triggers the mummy’s curse. The second one was his favourite because he’d been able to write parts especially for Kelvin and Francesca. Kelvin was Dame Phyllis’s twelve-year-old grand-nephew who’d been expelled from Eton for monstrous lack of restraint at the tuck-shop. And Francesca was the demented Irish governess employed to tutor him.

All three of them agreed it was the best fun they’d ever had.

The cast had nearly all arrived now, but Tait was still watching for Francesca. Therese, the director, came and squatted beside his chair and talked to him about his accent as the Yorkshire police inspector. She wanted it stronger.

“We can always pull it back if we need to,” she said. “But for now you can lay it on with a trowel.”

That suited Tait.

When he looked up he saw Francesca in the doorway.
They were sitting together outside in the dark, their backs against the brick wall. The coffee-break had finished and the others had gone back to rehearsing. But neither of them was needed straight away so they stayed outside where it was cool.

Neil the Wheel was slowly circling the outside of the building with his torch.
“Just checkin secuidy,” he explained as he went past.
“Thank you, Neil,” Francesca said. “We appreciate it.”
You could almost see his chest swell with pride. Then he was gone around the corner of the building.

Holding hands was allowed under their Agreement, so Tait was clasping Francesca’s hand in his lap and tenderly caressing it. After a while they changed over and she took his hand into her lap. The touch against her thigh and belly sent shivers through him and he wanted to push his hand further down between her legs. She must have felt the impulse, or heard the little groan he made under his breath.
“It’s hard, isn’t it?” she said.
“As a rolling-pin.”
She gave him a mock punch.
“I wasn’t talking about that.”
“I know.”
“I’m sorry, though.”
“That’s okay.”
“If it’s any consolation, we’re in the same boat.”
“Have you got a rolling-pin in your trousers too?”
“No, but I’m pretty wet.”
“I’m sorry.”
“That’s okay.”
“What a sorry pair we are.”
“Pitiful.”
“So, are you okay, really?”
“I think so. Are you?”
“I think so.”
“I worry about you being alone.”
“I worry about you being under so much pressure.”
“Well, it’s what we get for being too pathetic to organize our lives the way we’d want them.”
“You’re not pathetic.”
“Neither are you.”
“Why are we in such a mixed-up state then?”
“Anyone might ask the same question. It’s to do with whether you think it all comes down to Structure or Agency.”
“Oh yes, that stuff you and Mike discuss.”
“Are we put into situations by the impetus of society, or through our own choices.”
“What’s your verdict?”
“Haven’t the faintest.”
“What does Mike say?”
“Shall we talk about Mike?”
“Yes, let’s. It might settle us down and help solve certain problems of hardness and wetness.”
“Well, the latest from Mike is that he’s back at university doing a PhD in Political Science. Not that he has much respect for Political Science as such. He defines it as the science of getting away with murder, and sometimes mass-murder.”
“How does he like becoming a student again at such an advanced age?”
“He’s the same age as me!”
“That’s what I meant — at the adorable peak of good-looks and virility.”
“I knew that’s what you meant.”
“You’re so perceptive.”
“He hates it. He reckons there are only two kinds of people in a university — lickspittles and totalitarians. He keeps quoting Burke to me: ‘In the groves of their academy, at the end of every vista, you see nothing but the gallows.’”
“This is really working. I’m a dry little bunny again. How about you.”
“I’m a soft little bunny.”
“This Political Science talk is marvelous.”
“I’ll say.”
“You’ll have to let Mike know how helpful it’s been to us.”
“I will.”
Francesca’s voice grew a little more serious.
“Do you talk to him about us, in your letters?”
“No.
“To Kelvin?”
“Now and then.”
“What does he think of it all?”
“He’s sympathetic. Do you talk to him about us?”
“Now and then.”
“And?”
“As you say, he’s sympathetic.”
“He feels for anyone who’s unlucky in love.”
“Because he’s so like that himself?”
“Yes.”
“One day he’ll find Mr Right.”
Tait chuckled.
“What?” Francesca asked.
“It reminded me of something Philip Larkin says somewhere, in his misanthropic mode: ‘A million women are looking for Mr Right. The one who finds him will be Miss Wrong.’”
“That’s much too cynical.”
“I think so too.”
“So I suppose you talk mostly to Jimmy Sale, do you?”
“Well, I have known him longest.”
“I’m glad you’ve got someone to confide in, the way I’ve got Gillian.”
“We’ve got each other, first and foremost.”
“Yes, but we each need other people to bounce off. Otherwise we could never see the You-and-Me thing from the outside. I’ve begun to be able to do that, so I don’t feel quite as angry at you nowadays. Do you feel any less angry with me?”
“I hardly ever feel angry towards you.”
“But we were both incredibly angry at one point, weren’t we?”
“Yes.”
“Like when we made the Agreement that there’d be no sex. I know we made the Agreement because it was commonsense, and because it gave us a vestige of moral decency to cling to, but we also made it to express the anger. Don’t you think?”
“Yes.”
“I was so angry because I felt you should have taken charge of us and organized us to be together and have a happy life.”

“I know.”

“Now I can see more clearly where you were coming from, the kind of life you’d had. Being on your own from the age of fourteen, never having a home, or money, or any lovingness around you. No wonder you weren’t ready to be the Knight on the White Horse and rescue me from my own folly.”

“You had some hard times too.”

“Yes, but I could always rely on my Dad. I was never one-out against the world, like you were. Shall I tell you what Gillian said once, when I was badmouthing you? She said: ‘Given his past, it’s a wonder he’s as normal as he is.’ It’s that Structure and Agency thing, isn’t it?”

Tait felt emotion welling up. He wanted to put his arms around her. And he could’ve done. Fond embraces were allowed under the Agreement. But he knew they would have to go inside shortly and be normal in front of other people. Besides, Neil the Wheel was coming around again, his torch flashing ahead of him.

“I was out at the block today,” Tait said, to change the subject.

“Good. I love the thought of you being there. Did you visit our Melancholy Monster?”

“Yes, Emmet send his regards.”

“Emmet?”

“That’s his name?”

“How do you know.”

“I guessed it.”

“Really?”

“He said if I guessed his name I wouldn’t have to go on being his captive and spinning straw into gold.”

“I see. In that case, why didn’t his name turn out to be Rumplestiltskin?”

“Yeah, I’m mystified by that, too.”

“We’ll go and see Emmet together next time.”

“I was wishing you were there with me today.”

“I wish I’d been there too, instead of washing putrid nappies, or whatever it was I was doing.”

Tait said nothing. It always made him feel guilty and weak and worthless when she mentioned the drudgery of her life. Francesca knew that and didn’t mention it very often.

“That wasn’t a reproach to you,” she said. “So don’t take it that way.”
“I didn’t,” he said. But they felt awkward with each other now. They felt a breath of the old heat of the anger they’d gone through.

“Speaking of the Valley,” she said, “Craig is brooding over some kind of plan, studying building magazines and things. He won’t say what he’s got in mind, and we haven’t enough money saved in any case, but he’s hatching something out.

“How about you, these days? Are you keen to build out there?”

“Christ, I don’t know!” she said sharply, then continued in a lower voice. “I partly dread it. Craig’s put so many high hopes into it that there’ll be a godawful crash when they fall. Then again, I dread things going on as they are.”

“I wish I could help.”

“You’ll probably get your wish. Craig intends to get some free labour out of you, one way or another. He says you’re a steady worker.”

“Does he?”

“Yes, after you helped him with the Picnic Table and the Shelter he said to me: ‘I have to admit Romeo’s a pretty steady worker.’ That’s what you calls you, Romeo, as in ‘Had a pash with Romeo lately?’”

“What do you answer to that?”

“I say we had shrieking orgasmic sex on the kitchen table, then licked ice-cream off each other’s bodies.”

“And his reply?”

“Well, the one time I actually did say that, his reply was: ‘Good, then the bastard owes me something.’”

They heard Francesca’s name being called from inside. She was wanted for a scene. They got up and went in and Tait was painfully aware that they hadn’t made a point of touching hands again.

Francesca’s character was on for the whole of the last forty minutes of the play, while Tait’s only re-appeared briefly at the end. This meant he was able to sit and watch her work. They were doing one scene over and over, trying to get it to come right. It was the bit where Francesca’s character is beginning to guess the murderer’s true identity but doesn’t dare let on. She is inwardly reeling with shock because the man she suspects is the man she’s been falling in love with. It was brilliant, the way Francesca could expose the inner turmoil with just a tightening of the lips or a sudden guarded look in the eyes. But it needed some extra little thing and you could see her fishing for it. Then she found it: a little gesture of nervously
flicking non-existent lint off the front of her cardigan. You hardly noticed it and yet it spoke volumes.

“Yes!” cried Therese, the director. The scene had clicked.

Everyone was nodding and smiling in agreement and Tait realized they’d all been fascinated, watching Francesca fish for that extra thin g.

Tait had thought a lot about acting during his time with the Players, and often in relation to Francesca and himself. He’d figured out they were two different types. One type is looking to escape from the self, while the other is looking to find it. He called this his Room Theory because he reckoned the self was like a single room. There are those who spend too much time in there, counting the fly-specks on the walls. If they have any insight they perceive how crucial it is to get out now and then. On the other hand there are those who don’t spend enough time in the room. They are frazzled from the stresses of relating and they need to go inside and re-centre themselves.

“I feel as if I’m going to pieces!” Francesca had cried distractedly at various times in the past. He had learned the best thing to do was to coax her into his arms and then rock her gently until she was calm. That’s what she was doing for herself when she acted, putting herself into a kind of motion or rhythm at the centre of which was a still point of balance.

The other Players found them both interesting to watch, Tait because he was out of his Room and relating to others, and Francesca because she was in her Room and relating to herself.

The rehearsal went till nearly eleven and as soon as it was over people hurried away. It was a week-night and no one wanted to be up till all hours. Neil the Wheel stood out on the parking area, and when people came out the door he’d point with his torch to where their car was standing safe and sound thanks to his constant patrols. Cars were starting up all around him and backing and edging out with their headlight beams flashing as though to return the farewell salute of his torch.

Tait had been waiting to snatch another few minutes with Francesca, but he’d been drawn into a discussion about religion. Gillian’s upbringing had been fiercely Catholic and there was a chap named Frank Baxter who was a born-again Protestant and they loved wrangling over theology. Tait had no religion, but found the issues interesting and was good at putting his finger impartially on the nub of an argument, and so they roped him in whenever they could.

He felt a hand on his elbow.

“Just going,” Francesca murmured. “See me off?”

Gillian and Frank were embroiled in their point and didn’t notice him go out the door.
“Are you okay?” Francesca asked as they approached her car.

“Yes. Why?”

“I was a bit stand-offish before.”

“No, you weren’t. Don’t worry.”

They were at the car. The parking area was quiet now and Neil the Wheel nowhere to be seen. They stood with their bodies touching, holding hands.

“I do worry,” she said. “I worry about what impression I’ve left you with. I worry that we might’ve parted on the wrong note, and that you’re unhappy, or angry with me, but I can’t contact you. That’s the hardest part of not being able to see each other anytime we want. I wish you had the frigging phone on at your place.”

He squeezed her hand, but said nothing. The thing about the phone was an issue between them and he didn’t want to them to get started on it.

“I know you’re as poor as a church-mouse, and how scared you are of having bills to pay, but still…”

“Oh for the affluent lifestyle of a church-mouse!”

“Yes, alright,” she said. “I won’t go on about the phone.”

“You can if you want.”

“Another time.”

“Okay.”

“I’d better go. It’s after eleven. He’ll ask if we slunk off somewhere to have a pash.”

“What’ll you say?”

“I’ll say we didn’t need to slink off. I’ll say you threw me down and ravished me on the Green Room floor, with the others clapping time.”

“If only.”

“Yes, if only.”

“But we could probably do without the others clapping.”

“At a pinch, we could.”

They squeezed each other’s hands and she got into the car and started the engine.

“Love you,” she said, looking up.

“Love you,” he replied, bending to the window.

They kissed deeply and Tait’s knees went weak and he couldn’t bear the thought of her going. She took his hand and guided it to her breast. They stayed for as long as they could with their mouths together and his hand cupping her breast, but then came the flash of Neil’s torch at the other side of the car and they drew apart.
He watched her tail-lights disappear.
“Good job tonight,” Neal pronounced in a gruffly satisfied voice. “So far, anyhow.” He meant the security. Neil only lived a block away and wouldn’t head home till the Green Room was empty and dark and locked. And Gillian and Frank were still going on the finer points of Original Sin.

* * * *

Tait got on the motorbike and headed for home. There was hardly any traffic once he was out of the town and he went at an easy pace, enjoying having the whole road to himself and being able to let his eyes wander from the headlight beam. He looked at the dark choppy water of the river as he rode alongside it. Now and then there were patches of broken light on the water from street lamps or from the porch lights of houses on the opposite bank. He saw the little boats at their moorings. One of them was lit up and two men were working on the engine and they had a radio going quite softly. Tait heard a faint snatch of song. It sounded nice. He drew to a stop a little further along and let the bike idle and took his helmet off and cupped his ear to catch the song. It was Fred Astaire doing “Let’s Face the Music and Dance” from way back in the 1930s. The tune was trying to be upbeat but the words were stoical and sad and they flowed into the dark air and out over the water. Tait imagined all the people for whom that song would’ve meant something, people who were dead now, or on their last legs. The song ended and Tait rode on. He took a big breath of the salt air that was freshening from the lake up ahead, then turned away from the river and went through the flat swampy area he called The Fens. He looked up at the dark sky through the trees. A bird broke suddenly from the branches above him and that reminded him to keep an eye on the road. On two occasions, riding along here late at night, he’d found an enormous owl sitting in the middle of the road. He’d slowed and then stopped and held it in the headlight beam. It was snowy white, with a brown speckled pattern on it. The first time he had wondered if it was hurt, but after a minute it spread its big wings and flew off low across the flat ground. He needed to be careful. He didn’t want to come around a curve one night and run over it. And he didn’t relish finding it already squashed and dead, as he kept half-expecting. Then again, that owl had something uncanny about it and he didn’t really believe it could die of anything as mundane as being run over. He reached the lakeside road and turned left into it towards the cabin.

As he turned in at his gate the headlight beam flashed across the long grass of Astrid’s Meadow and threw eerie shadows against the cabin wall. His heart always missed a beat at
that moment because he always imagined the beam would reveal something awful waiting for him. A zombie, or a maniac with an axe, or a killer elephant. The elephant gave him the worst creeps. Such imaginings were the price you paid for living alone in a cabin and for having an imagination at all. He got off the bike and left it propped where it was and fumbled for his door key, wanting only to get inside and collapse on the bed. It came to his mind that it was three days to the next rehearsal and seeing Francesca again. It also came to his mind that it was a good thing he was tranquilized by tiredness just now, otherwise he might be very depressed about his life.

Chapter Seven

It was lovely, having the rehearsals to go to for those couple of months, being able to sit back and watch Francesca do her scenes, to have an excuse to dwell intently on her face and voice and body. Above all they had that half-hour or so after the coffee break when neither of them was needed and they could be alone together. Mostly they sat outside with their backs against the brick wall, but sometimes if it was rainy or windy, or if Neil the Wheel was being overzealous with his torch, they’d sit in her car. They’d sit in the back because it was easier to be close and hold hands, and they had a running joke about what the others must be thinking of the Goings On in the Back Seat. It was a nervous joke though, because they didn’t want to seem too blatant, and being in the back seat did put a strain on the Agreement. It was too easy for a cuddle to lead to other things. But they were as good as they could be and the Agreement never got altogether broken. It just got a bit bent.

But the matter of the phone was an issue between them, even though it was hardly ever mentioned. They both knew it symbolized a lot of angry feelings that were better left alone.

One morning Tait was thinking again about the whole phone thing.

He was at his work table, looking through the window at the lake, trying to ignore the whine of the buzz-saw from the building site across the road. Houses were going up all over the place. He turned to look at the Blue Board on the wall. There were five little squares of coloured paper in a row, ideas for poems, waiting their turn to be worked on. And he had bits and pieces of revision to do. And he also had a short story to carry on with, about the
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coloured paper in a row, ideas for poems, waiting their turn to be worked on. And he had bits
and pieces of revision to do. And he also had a short story to carry on with, about the
bushfires that raged around the walls of the maximum security ward one summer. But just now he felt no impetus to write and it was too sultry to go to the Valley.

He looked around the room. There were more books now, and more records, and dozens of old faded pieces of paper lying about, notes and messages to himself that were long out of date but which he hadn’t thrown away because it seemed ungrateful to get rid of things that had once been of use. But it needed a clean-up. He decided to “do the Nellie Housefrau.” That was an expression of Lauren’s. It meant dealing with accumulated housework, attacking it with cold Germanic efficiency.

He looked for a record to put on. It had to be full-blooded, to counter the noise from across the road, so he chose a Rod Stewart album. He turned it up loud, but then felt uncomfortable that it would attract the attention of anyone walking past on the strip of reserve. He hated drawing attention like that, so he turned it down quite low. It no longer drowned out the buzz-saw, but it counteracted it somewhat.

On the floor beside the record player was a stack of copies of the local rag, the Coast Chronicle. The Chronicle was delivered free, hurled onto the driveway every week like a paper baton with an elastic band around it. The edition on top of the pile was a recent one about the Council elections. Megan had been voted in again for the Heritage Alliance and there was a big photo of her on the front page, posing alongside old Mrs Callender, now into her nineties. Both were smiling broadly, and Mrs Callander was doing a Churchillian victory sign with her fingers.

Tait had meant to cut the picture out. He got the scissors and carefully cut around the photo and laid it down on the table. Then he recalled an article in another edition that he’d meant to save, so he began searching for that, but his mind wasn’t really on it.

His thoughts had returned again to the phone thing.

The very notion of having another regular bill to pay gave him a feeling of panic. Francesca stressed how moderate the cost was, and Tait agreed that for a normal person with a proper income it would be okay. But he had lived so much of his life at the edge of destitution that he was never free of the dread that he would soon be on the street with nowhere to go and nothing to eat. The only time the dread had eased off was when he was in custody and the basics were automatically provided. Of course the Regime came up with other reasons to make you worry, but you couldn’t deny that it kept you fed and housed. And that security couldn’t run out. It was unfailing for as long as you were there.

For those ten years he’d been shielded from certain kinds of reality, and he suspected it was only that that had given him the nerve to think of renting the cabin and maintaining a life
there. In a way he’d been lulled into complacency. With the MacLew Prize and the Arts Council grant, it had been possible to imagine that he’d somehow crossed over into the proper world where people get by okay and have plans and projects and futures.

The complacency had worn off in proportion to his money running out. Determined to make the grant last as long as possible, he had lived frugally, with only the one extravagance each fortnight when he bought a book or a record in Castleton after seeing Bristol Dick. He never bought clothes except at the op-shop, and then only when Francesca nagged him to get a presentable shirt or a decent pair of shoes because he was starting to look like something the cat dragged in. It became a running joke.

“Did you know that some men actually possess more than one shirt?”

“No!”

“Yes, and the shirts even have elbows in them and several buttons remaining on the front.”

“Oh ye temptress of Gomorrah!” Tait would cry in the voice of Beadle Brimstone, the crazed Puritan. “What shapely baubles ye dangle before the eyes of men!”

“We’ll discuss my shapely baubles another time, thank you. Right now you need to invest in another shirt, even if you have lash out a whole dollar.”

“Spare us, woman! A whole dollar?”

“Or even two!”

Tait pretended to cower and gibber.

At another level, of course, it wasn’t funny. He hated looking shabby around Francesca, but just couldn’t get into the habit of keeping himself neat and presentable. Not when it cost money.

By the end of the second year at the cabin things were very tight and he had to focus on just covering the rent and electricity. He had enough left in his account to do that for a while longer, providing he lived on three dollars a day for everything else. Sometimes twenty dollars would come in as payment for a poem. He’d also had his first short story accepted for a radio broadcast, and that had paid a windfall of a hundred and fifty dollars. But the economics of writing were hopeless. You would soon be a pile of bones if you depended on it.

He’d stopped buying books and records of course. The last book he’d allowed himself was a good second-hand copy of the selected prose and poems of Samuel Johnson, with a long and fascinating introduction by some scholar. That book conveyed a lot about Grub Street and the woes of the literary life, and Tait felt he was close to the spirit of those people in their time. It felt right to have the link of poverty with them, though he wished he had their ultimate
resilience as well. In his mind’s eye he could see all their classic works lined up in deluxe editions and that set off a poem that kept him focused for a while:

**ON SEEING A FINE LIBRARY OF 18th CENTURY LITERATURE**

How grand and elevated they appear,  
The rows of classics lined along the shelves.  
You’d never guess the authors lived in fear,  
Or pawned their shirts, or tried to hang themselves.

The grandeur makes it easy to forget  
What quaint old-fashioned handicaps they had  
– Like starving in a garret under threat  
Of prison, or the pox, or going mad.

And even if they battled through to fame,  
Were settled with a pension or a place,  
Their wracked imaginations preyed the same  
On penury, damnation and disgrace.

How odd that these editions now define  
The notion of a dull, complacent age,  
When misery’s implicit in each line  
And desperation dogs every page –

But even more remarkably we find,  
In any work of sweated labour there,  
The breadth and tenor of an easy mind  
That never knew the meaning of despair.

He’d long given up the Athena café and lived on cans of baked beans or spaghetti, together with bread and milk. The baked beans and spaghetti were among the cheapest items at the supermarket, so he didn’t need to stint all that much, and bread was very filling and a glass of milk gave good nourishment.
The cutbacks that hurt were beer and bus fares.

A drink late at night was the highlight of Tait’s routine. He loved to open a bottle of beer or stout and sit late in his work room with his earphones on, listening to records, knowing he could get as tipsy and emotional as he liked because he was snugly alone in his own place and could lurch off to bed when he wanted. Late at night with the beer and the records he could let a lot of stuff out. He could play the angry, embattled songs of *The Storm On the Heather* over and over again and live them in his deepest feelings.

Having to cut back on the beer meant more than just a lack of beer. It meant not being able to let himself go the way he needed to in those late night sessions. He decided to change over to very cheap wine. That way he’d be saving money but still having the sessions, at least while the time at the cabin lasted.

Bus fares hadn’t seemed like much when he’d always had a pocketful of spare change, but when he got broke he saw how they added up. He had gone to Turrawong and back most days, and over to Jimmy and Lauren’s pretty often, and those fares alone would’ve blown his three-dollar-day budget to pieces. So he stayed around the cabin more and worked off the restricted feeling by taking many long walks beside the lake and watching the endless panorama of the water and the sky. The walks meant that he saw more of the Ellicotts. The penny had finally dropped for them. They understood his being a writer was his own business and not something to chatter about with every passer-by. He grew more willing to talk to them and even stop in for a cup of tea once or twice. Their house was full of quaint knickknacks and family photos and Mrs Ellicott made a very nice chocolate mud-cake. Roscoe the dog sat with every hair alert, watching for a crumb to fall.

Existing on three dollars a day wasn’t so bad. There was a certain satisfaction in it, and it didn’t seem to do one’s writing any harm. *Here’s to plain living and high thinking*, Tait often said to himself during that time.

But it was as if he was two different people. One of them went on functioning calmly, while the other was sinking in despair. The despairing self gradually took over. All he could think about was that he would soon be back to square one, back to where he was in the old days before he went into custody. But now it was going to be ten times worse because he’d already had his chance, his one big go at climbing out of the abyss. This time he’d be back there for keeps.

It was like that old recurring nightmare he used to have in maximum security.

In the nightmare he wakes and finds he is back in custody for the second time – and this time forever – having been freed only to commit the same crime again. What made it more
harrowing was that after he had genuinely woken up he had to lie there in the bleak cell, his heart thumping, trying to be absolutely sure that it had just been a nightmare and not the truth.

In what he assumed were his final weeks at the cabin, the despairing self tried to think what to do when the time ran out. You can’t take a whole cabin of belongings with you onto the street. He’d have to get rid of everything, have it all taken to the Council tip. And there’d be no goodbyes to anyone. He would use his last money to buy a train ticket. He would disappear. If he had to go back to being a derelict he would do it in a distant city.

The only thing that helped were those late-night sessions with the cheap wine and the records. They beat back the despair for a while, or at least honed it to a defiant edge. The song he played again and again was “Bonnie Dundee,” about the first Jacobite revolt, the first refusal to knuckle under:

*Its awa to the hills, to the caves, to the rocks –
Ere I own a usurper I’ll crouch wi’ the fox!*

Yes, Tait thought, he’d go and live on the streets of a distant city. That would be his way of crouching with the fox.

As for going away from Francesca, that didn’t bear thinking about. He pushed it deep into the far back of his mind and kept it there. No doubt that was what Dundee and his men had to do. They had to push back the thought of the women they were leaving, otherwise they couldn’t have gone through with it.

And once he had left he would have to elude the law. Bristol Dick wouldn’t waste any time reporting that he’d absconded.

Seeing the probation officer had begun to be an ordeal again. By the end of the first year or so they had reached a kind of stand-off. Tait had neither cracked-up nor screwed-up, so Bristol Dick lost a certain amount of interest and the meetings only went for ten minutes and consisted mostly of a few platitudes about the weather. But by the end of the second year it occurred to the bored bureaucrat to wonder about Tait’s finances. The fixed gleam of the python came back into his eyes and he started to probe for a weakness.

“So, let’s talk about the cost of living.”

“If you like.”

“People struggle.”

“Certainly.”

“It’s the way of the world.”
“Very true.”
“How does a poet manage, I wonder? It can’t be easy.”
“As you say, people struggle.”
“But take your situation.”
“Yes?”
“Outline it for me, in a general way.”
“Well, as you know, I’m on an Arts Board grant.”
“Ah, yes. I seem to recall noting down one or two of its provisions.”
“Yes, you did.”
“And you’re still receiving quarterly installments of the grant?”
“No, they’ve ended now.”
“Aha, I see.” He leaned forward over the desk, the python’s gleam intensifying. “So you’re not actually still on the grant?”
“Yes, I am.”
“But the formal grant period is over, is it not?”
“I’m spreading the funds out over a longish period.”
“But there is a specific period of the grant, is there not? And that period has now expired?”
Tait was concentrating hard.
“In the view of the Arts Board,” he said, “what matters isn’t the specific period of funding, but the literary work you produce with the aid of those funds. And that work might not eventuate for some time.”
“I see.”
“It is mentioned in the written guidelines.”
The written guidelines had stymied Bristol Dick once before, and Tait was hoping the mention of them would help now.
The python’s forward slither had been checked for a moment. Then it began another move.
“So, the full amount of the grant has been paid to you, and you are continuing to maintain yourself on those funds.”
“Yes.”
“And how long would you anticipate that you can continue in that way?”
This was where the python would start getting its coils around him. He felt panic.
“I’m not sure,” he said. “It depends.”
“On what?”
“On whether my new grant application is successful,” he said.
Tait hadn’t the slightest expectation of another grant, not now that his despairing self had recognized the whole venture at the cabin was a fool’s dream. The one grant had been a cruel fluke. There couldn’t be another.

“So, you’ve made a new application?”

“Yes,” Tait lied. He had obtained the forms a while back, in an optimistic moment, but they were still in a drawer at home, and applications closed at the end of the week.

“And when will you hear the outcome?”

“In due course,” Tait said flatly. He yearned to look at the clock on the wall, to see how much longer he would need to stall, but he was afraid of giving away that he was rattled.

“Ah,” said Bristol Dick, glancing at the clock, “I see our time has flown. But let’s continue this next time. I’ll make a note of the question I was asking.”

He jotted on his pad and then leant heavily back into his seat. He knew there was no hurry. The python’s gleam faded from his eyes again for the time being.

In his box that night Tait found a letter from Canopy Press. His collection of poems had been doing the rounds of the publishers and Canopy were the third ones he’d sent it to, and that was really only at Mike Kieslowski’s urging. Mike was looking to get his own first collection into print and declared how terrific it would if they could both crack it together. They were the Two Musketeers, Mike said, the star proteges of good old Willie MacLew, the only pair of poets fit to be mentioned in the same breath as each other. He had kept suggesting new avenues to try, and kept wanting to know what feedback Tait had had.

Tait had opened the cabin door and turned the light on, then he’d stood on the little porch to get the lake breeze. He had a dull headache and his vision was slightly blurry. He found it hard at first to focus on the brief text of the letter. Then he saw what it was. Canopy was going to publish his book. They stressed he would only receive a token payment, but Tait didn’t mind that. They were going to publish it!

He went out and stood in the long grass of Astrid’s Meadow. He listened to the sigh of the breeze and gazed at the starry sky. He thought how far he had fallen away from his own creed of keeping it together, of not letting the bastards rattle you, of trusting the QO. The creed had preserved him for ten whole years under the naked power of the Regime. It was criminal that he hadn’t had more faith in it. He had let the Jacobite spirit waver and had only been saved by Mike remaining staunch. It was a lesson. It was all very well to talk of crouching with the fox. Yes, that was part of it. But the other part of it was being willing to come out and fight. The great Dundee didn’t just go and skulk in the hills. He took the commissar bastards on and thrashed them!
Robbie Burns had summed up in a Whig lamentation:

\[ I \text{ met the Devil and Dundee} \\
O \text{n the Braes o' Killiecrankie, O!} \]

That was the start of Tait’s comeback from the doldrums.

He filled out the Arts Board application and took it to the city on the train and lodged it by hand the day before the closing date. His chances had been vastly improved by Canopy’s acceptance of his book. The sooner you had a book coming out from a serious publisher, the more the Arts Board liked you. A book coming out was evidence that you had what it took, that the Board’s money wasn’t being chucked away on a dud or a dilettante. Then came word his grant application had been successful. He had lived to fight another day.

And Canopy took Mike’s book too.

The fly in the ointment of all the good news was that there would be a period between Tait’s last money running out and the start of the new grant payments. He wracked his brains about how to keep the rent paid over those extra weeks.

Jimmy and Lauren would lend him the three hundred out of friendship, if they had it, but Tait knew they’d been struggling lately. Francesca would lend it to him out of love, but it would have to come from the special account, from the untouchable building-fund that Craig watched like a hawk. That would stir up more trouble than it was worth. Mike Kieslowski would lend it to him out of comradeship, but he knew that Mike only worked part-time, because of his writing, and had little to spare. Tait felt stirred and somewhat amazed to realize there were people who cared about him and would help if they could. How strange that seemed. He had travelled further from his old life than he’d imagined.

He went to Bella at Fair Deal Real Estate and laid the facts out. He showed her the letter from the Arts Board and the letter from Canopy Press. He said he was moving forward in life and would soon be solvent again and could go on being a satisfactory tenant. He just couldn’t cover the rent for those few awkward weeks. Bella had been sympathetic. She’d always found it interesting to have someone so unusual on her list. She also happened to think that Tait was a comic genius. She had seen his one-act plays and told him later that she’d nearly peed herself with laughter. Bella took photocopies of the letters and said she would plead his case to the owners.
So he’d been allowed to let the rent go into arrears, and that had got him through, just. The first grant payment hadn’t come precisely on the due date and the several extra days of watching for the postman had been a bit of a strain.

Tait’s mind came back to the present. One side of the Rod Stewart record had ended and he turned it over. The buzz-saw across the road had stopped for the moment. He began picking up the old copies of the *Coast Chronicle* and stuffing them in a plastic garbage bag. Then he thought again about that crisis time.

What he’d learned from it was something he’d long known anyway: that survival turned on narrow margins. Having one more regular bill to pay could sink you, like having one more bit of weight in the lifeboat. That’s what a phone bill would be. Especially now he had the expenses of the motorbike, like the cost of the rego to scrape up each year. Why didn’t Francesca understand that? He allowed himself a moment of righteous irritation.

But in his heart he knew the truth. The phone issue was really about Structure and Agency and the arguments and excuses people use. Tait’s unspoken assertion was that he couldn’t be a proper partner to anyone because of Structure, because he was just too poor and too unqualified and too socially marginal. Francesca’s unspoken assertion was that human beings have Agency, that they are not mere leaves blown by the wind, that if he really wanted to be someone’s partner he would find a way.

* * * *

Jade and Bambi’s old shop across the road had had several different tenants. Now it was brightly painted and there were shrubs and pot-plants out on the footpath, with a sign that said: POTTERY, PLANTS AND ART WORK. COME IN AND BROWSE! The shop was run by a middle-aged lady named Hester who lived up the street near the Ellicotts and was a friend of theirs. She always wore a flowing caftan and sandals made of straw.

Tait was at his letterbox and Hester came out with a watering-can to refresh the plants. She gestured a greeting to Tait and he returned it. There were seldom any customers at the shop and he always felt awkward when he and Hester saw each other because he knew there was little hope for the business.

There was a letter from Mike Kieslowski. Tait opened it as he walked back up the driveway and sat down on the steps of the little porch to read it. Doing his doctorate, Mike had many anecdotes of university life and wrote satirical four-liners about things that especially irked
him. He was building up a whole sequence of these under the title *Campus Notes*. A new one was enclosed.

Tait had heard of the female separatists who refused to be known by a word that had “men” in it, and so called themselves “wimmin” instead of “women.” Mike reckoned they were the sorts of girls who’d never in their lives picked their clothes up off the floor because they figured that’s what their mothers existed for. And they had much the same outlook when they hung about endlessly bellyaching in the Student Union cafeteria. The four-liner was called “Sisterhood Is Powerful” —

*The angry Wimmin lounge about all day*

*With endless Wimmin’s grievances to press.*

*But only the cleaning women have to stay*

*Afterwards on their knees to clear the mess.*

Mike often stressed the need to see the “psychodrama” people were engaged in, and the fact that it was seldom the one they advertised to the world or even admitted to themselves.

“These middle-class Wimmin,” he wrote, “aren’t raging against oppression, but against the fact that the cosmos won’t let them be the Little Princess for ever and ever, with Daddy as doting provider and Mummy as round-the-clock servant. They’ve glimpsed the existential horror that they are just routine organisms in an indifferent world. So they engage in a grandiose bid to reinstate themselves at the centre of attention, but this time as the Tortured Victim rather than the Pampered Darling. If the universe doesn’t exist to please and flatter them, then it must exist to ravage and torment them. Like all modern ideologies, this Wimminism is a racket of the ego.”

Mike’s thing about identifying the psychodrama was a bit like the method Jimmy Sale used in his counselling work. Jimmy believed that people mostly follow their own inner “scripts” which require that certain roles be allotted – roles like Betrayer and Rescuer – and that certain scenarios be played out. Jimmy was drawn to that view partly because the Robin Rainbow side of him always wanted to believe the best of people. The idea of the “scripts” was a way of being compassionate. If people behaved badly it wasn’t because they were bad people but because they were following bad scripts.

Not that Mike Kieslowski ever really had much time for what he called “psychobabble.” He reckoned psychiatry was just another of modernity’s ploys to kill Poetry, to destroy what
Black Elk meant by “the people’s hoop” and “the sacred tree.” It was part of the five-
hundred-year drive to replace the greater with the lesser.

“You could find the whole of Freud in Shakespeare,” he said, “but never vice versa.”

Now and then it was Tait who provided Mike with insights. Like when he discovered a
quote by a scholar called McGilchrist: “Art exists precisely to transcend those patterns of
thought which criticism imposes on it.” That gave them a fresh angle on the essential issue.

Modernity was the war of criticism against art.

Another example was getting Mike to see the merits of Jung, especially Jung’s assertion that
myths and symbols are beyond intellectual analysis, and that that was the whole value of
them. Tait sent Mike a few well-chosen Jungian aphorisms, like one which was really a
statement about the redemptive power of the QO: “You will find yourself again only in the
simple and forgotten things.” So Mike began to cotton on, and the fact that Jung had broken
with Freud was an extra recommendation.

At the end of his letter, Mike made mention of their books being due out in the next few
weeks.

Tait grinned to himself. They’d consulted each other about titles and had agreed the main
thing was to avoid being arty-farty and “poetical.” They had then had great fun dreaming up
the worst possible examples. Their patron spirit in this was a Welshman who’d proved how
even good writers could get it horribly wrong. He’d written the classic novel How Green Was
My Valley, but then went on to name a subsequent book, Up Into My Singing Mountains!

Mike announced that his book would be called: Down Into My Ripe Underwear! Tait, on
the other hand, had favoured: Soon Will Come My Lagging Behind!

But in the end they had to get serious.

Tait settled on Good Neighbours, from the observation by Robert Frost: “Good fences make
good neighbours.” Most of the poems in the book related to institutional life, and the title was
meant to be sardonic. If Frost was right, the imprisoned ought to be good neighbours indeed.
But there was a sombre meaning in it too. People who are put behind walls have typically had
shocking and peculiar things happen to them. They have been terrified or maybe illuminated
in ways unknown to the average person and this might mean they really are better neighbours
than you’d imagine — more careful, more aware of how thin a gap it is between the
manageable world and the other one.

Mike’s title, Double Or Nothing, came from the image of his young parents in 1945,
standing in the sunrise beside the wire of that transit camp, resolving to seek a future in
Australia. They’d learnt that existence was a gamble and that you had to have audacity:
double-or-nothing. And they would win or lose their gamble together. In that sense too it had to be double or nothing.

It was pleasant, sitting on the step of the porch, feeling a salty breeze on the back of his neck. He would have stayed there, except that a car stopped in front of Hester’s shop and a couple got out to look at the plants displayed on the footpath. You could tell from their listless body-language that they’d only just barely bothered to stop. They got back in the car and went away without buying anything. Hester came to the door and looked wistfully after them.

Tait had no desire to watch the slow death of the business, so he went inside.

* * * *

He showed Mike’s four-liner to Jimmy Sale the next time he saw him.

It was one afternoon and Tait was bending down peering into the space under the cabin. He had just seen a small greenish-coloured snake go under there from the long grass of Astrid’s Meadow. There was daylight under the cabin, and the ground was pretty bare, but he couldn’t see the snake and he thought it must’ve gone across into the undergrowth of the vacant block next door. The snake had been small enough not to seem especially worrying, but it reminded Tait that there could be bigger ones about and his skin crawled at the thought of one finding its way into the cabin. There came a little toot of greeting and Jimmy was turning in at the gate in his white work car with the regional health logo.

“Howdy, man,” Jimmy said in a tired voice as he got out. “I was seeing someone up the road, so I thought I’d call in.”

“Hard day?”

“It’s had its moments.”

“Come inside and I’ll put the jug on.”

“Let’s stay in the fresh air. I’ve just spent an hour in a closed room with years of cat faeces trodden into the carpet… at least I hope they were all just cat faeces.”

“And things are even worse in the houses of some of your patients.”

But Jimmy didn’t have a smile in him just then.

“It’s a poor old biddy who’s become incapable. Lives alone, except for several cats. No relatives. Neighbours up in arms. And by the way, its clients, not patients. You’d be drummed out of the service for that.”

“A thousand apologies. Grovel, grovel. Clients, then.”

“I’ve heard it’ll soon be ‘stakeholder.’”
“Stakeholder in what? Health?”

“Actually, the word ‘health’ is on its way out too. I gather ‘wellness’ is the upcoming concept.”

Tait reflected for a moment.

“That’d be right,” he said. “‘Stakeholder in wellness’ — it has a ring that’s both fatuous and menacing, so I’m sure they’ll adopt it. And one can imagine the mass-graves of the future, full of people the Regime has reclassified as ‘non-stakeholders in aliveness.’”

“The old biddy was quite lucid today and I found out what’s been happening. She goes babbling to the neighbours about ‘imps’ tormenting her in the night, and they get freaked out. To them she’s an aggressive old whacko who stinks to high heaven and sees goblins. But in actual fact it’s the local kids creeping round after dark, egging each other to defy the ‘old Witch.’ They tap on windows and break pot-plants and throw stones at the cats. ‘Imps’ is a common word to someone of her vintage. Misbehaving children are ‘little imps.’ She’s telling the neighbours about something real, but all they hear is craziness.”

“Can you set them straight?”

“It’s gone beyond that,” Jimmy said, running his hands wearily across his face. “She’s bound for an institution. It’s the only thing, really, but sad all the same.”

Over the last two or three years Jimmy had had ever-increasing case-loads and ever-expanding duties, made more grueling by his tendency to get emotionally involved. Robin Rainbow appeared less often now. Jimmy’s dream was to get out of health-and-welfare altogether and set himself up in a bookshop cum coffee-lounge, something like Peppercorn’s in Castleton where they’d gone a few times to hear poetry readings. In some versions of this fantasy, Tait and Francesca were a happy couple and partners in the venture with him and Lauren.

Jimmy had another set of worries at home. His son Toby was a nervous, clinging child and easily upset. And Lauren had strained her back in the strenuous home-nursing work and had been forced to cut her hours down, and this was a blow to their finances. And Lauren’s mother was an endless anxiety. A hopeless alcoholic, she was always having another binge crisis and being carted off to hospital, or wandering off in a daze, or being ill-used by one of her sleazy pickups from the pub.

Jimmy decided to have a cup of tea after all. He had one more patient to see for the day and needed to spark himself up a little. He didn’t want to seem to be “discounting” the person by arriving too frazzled. Jimmy was always on his guard against “discounting” anyone. It was a big no-no in his book.
Apart from the brute necessity of breadwinning, Tait often wondered why Jimmy battled on in such a soul-wrenching profession. But he knew the answer. It was feeling the need to stick up for decency and common sense, those quaint and outmoded things. There were still a few unreconstructed human beings in regional health and welfare, but the Regime pressed harder and harder. Jimmy could see the QO being relentlessly driven back, and as he once expressed it: “You can’t just piss off when your side’s having the shit kicked out of it.”

Tait thought of this as the Maldon Rule, after the Anglo-Saxon poem about the lost battle of Maldon:

*Mind the firmer, heart the bolder,*

*Courage the greater, as our strength wanes.*

Jimmy enjoyed reading Mike’s little poem, having had his own encounters with the Wimmin. There were lots of them in the health and welfare system and he’d fallen foul of them by running a counseling group for men accused of domestic violence. The Wimmin hissed that to run such a group was to condone the violence itself and that anything short of public flogging of those men was a misogynist cop-out. It was ironic, Jimmy reckoned, that his righteous and fuming colleagues were as much in need of an Anger Management Plan as any of the uptight men he counseled, and sobering to think that they could harm a far greater number of lives without ever being called to account.

“Ah, well,” Jimmy sighed, draining the last of his tea. “I’d better get on. No rest for the wicked.”

“Every dog has its day.”

“Too many cooks spoil the broth.”

“Too many cocks spoil the brothel.”

“Good lord!” Jimmy cried. “You’ve put your finger on the essential point of it all!”

“I was told it by a Voice.”

“If only this enlightenment had come sooner. We could’ve been stakeholders in wellness!”

Jimmy waved as he drove off to spend another long hour being lacerated by a client’s woes. He seemed like a Don Quixote figure, cantering off to skirmish again for the honour of the QO.
Chapter Eight

Lance Lassiter was listening for the Getcha Man, waiting to hear the warning snap of a dry twig in the silence of the bush, the crunch of a dead leaf under a sneaking, bestial foot. He stood very still, his eyes wide, and the spotlight above the podium glowed on his mane of white hair. Fifty or so people were packed into the little coffee-lounge area at Peppercorn’s Bookshop, but there was complete silence. They were all listening for the Getcha Man. The old Lassiter spell had worked again. This was one of his best-known poems, a parable of being stalked by horror while camping in the bush. He’d written it as a young man, back in the heyday of the Jumbywollamoks, the band of poets who wanted to exchange their European heritage for that of the Aborigines. Only then, they argued, could they be truly native to the land they lived in.

Lassiter broke his listening pose and went on, making use of various faces and gestures. He never read his poems off the page. He did them from memory and performed them. The protagonist in the poem stumbles back to his tent and sits quaking inside, convinced the Getcha Man is drawing near. But then he has a profound insight. Could that horror be the projection of his own fear of the bush? Is he being stalked by the figment of his own alienation?

He screws up courage and walks back into the bush. He has begun to see that the point isn’t to be safe from the Getcha Man – nobody ever can be – but rather to be at one with him, to accept that you and he are part of each other and belong to the same Dreaming. And if the Getcha Man does get you it only means he is taking you back to where you came from and where you should be, back into a thousand generations of Aboriginal belief.

It ends with the protagonist a changed man, holding his arms out to the bush in a gesture of total acceptance, recognizing that he stands, as the final line puts it, “in the eucalyptus temple of his fate.”

It was a poem about time and terror and sacredness and belonging, and it occurred to Tait that Lassiter could connect to the power of these things only because they’d come down in the pipeline of his European heritage from the ancient Greeks and others, the very pipeline the Jumbys were so keen to cut. Jumby works were often like that: you could see the unaddressed issues hanging out of them like loose wires. All the Jumbys had been sincere, and some were gifted, but you wouldn’t exactly call them giants of intellect.

All the same, Tait had long admired that poem for its vividness and atmosphere and wasn’t going to discount it now for having a flawed logic. In such matters it was a case of people in
glass houses. He applauded with the rest while Lassiter held his final dramatic pose — arms flung out, mane of hair thrown wildly back, eyes blazing with the vision of it all.

It was a hard act to follow and Tait braced himself.

He was supposed to be the feature turn of the evening and read selections from *Good Neighbours*. The MC gave him a glowing intro and there was a round of applause as he blinked his way into the spotlight. He heard someone clap louder than the rest and knew it must be Jimmy. He opened his book at the first of the pages he had marked. He began the first poem slowly, adjusting his voice to the microphone.

The book had been out for a few weeks and had gained a couple of good early reviews. There’d also been a tabloid article in the national press: “From Violence to Verse: Insane gunman hits target with poetry.” Tait’s response when he first saw it was to snarl, “Hey, its *Mister* Insane Gunman to you!” But it had drawn attention to the book, and that, one supposed, was the main thing.

The first poem went over quite well, and he did the next few with a bit more flourish, trying to recite from memory so he could keep his head up and gaze far off into bardic realms of inspiration the way Lassiter did. But he lost his thread a couple of times and had to pause to look down at the page, so he gave up most of the flourish.

Nobody but Lance had the pipes to play Lance’s tune. You needed the magnificent mane of hair. You needed the husky, lilting voice that sounded the way Irish whiskey would sound if it could talk. You needed the bodily poise that Lance had picked up as a young man when he got a job as a stagehand with a ballet company and learned to pull on the tights and do the odd leap and pirouette when required.

All Tait had in the way of showmanship was what he’d picked up from the Players. He pictured himself switching into the Ugly Sister, or Dame Phyllis Grandly-Pilfer. That’d get their attention.

Towards the end he felt pretty relaxed and his eyes had adjusted to the dimness beyond the circle of spotlight and he could see the faces of the people nearest to him. He was doing a little talking in between the poems, and at that moment he was telling them about Mike Kieslowski’s book and urging them to seek it out.

That’s when he thought he saw Bristol Dick.

A chill went through him and he peered into the dimness again and saw an outline of head and shoulders against the background of the shop window and the street outside. The outline was a lot like that of Bristol Dick sitting in his chair in his office. Tait shook off the chill and continued reading and there was very good applause at the end. When the normal lights came
back on he looked for the figure again but people were now up and milling about and a number of them gathered round him. Tim Niblett, the MC, came to shake his hand, and Jimmy hurried up to say how well it had gone, and then someone else led him to a table to sign copies of his book. There was something very large and alive under the table. It was Lance’s dog, Chieftain, waiting with infinite patience to go home.

The usual thing was for a few people to go round to Clive and Marian’s house to have a drink after the poetry readings. They lived only a five-minute walk away. A close couple in their forties, they referred to themselves in the singular as “Clarion.” Tait was strolling beside Lance, who seemed lost in thought. Ahead of them Jimmy chatted to Marian and behind them Clive was gossiping with Tim Niblett about the Conservatorium. Clive was a jazz saxophonist, a music teacher and chief reviewer of music for the Castleton paper. Niblett was from the English Department of the university and a noted expert on the Post-Concrete Minimalist Anti-Poets. He wrote opera librettos for a hobby and knew the local music scene.

It felt good to be strolling in the night air, and this was a pleasant part of the city. Not so long ago it had been a working-class area of run-down terraces and peeling weatherboard cottages, but now it was trendy and you weren’t too likely to be living next door to steelworkers.

He heard Marian remarking to Jimmy how troubled she felt about this gentrification of the inner-suburbs, the wholesale banishing of lower-paid people to the margins. But at least Awareness was growing, she said, and that was the main thing. Then she told Jimmy about the upstairs renovations they were having done, and how they’d nearly died when they saw the builder’s estimate, but how in a rising market the odd few thousand was money well-spent.

Lance hadn’t said a word since they’d left the bookshop, but that wasn’t unusual after a performance. He spent all his nervous energy on the podium and then became oddly tongue-tied and diffident for a while afterwards.

“That was a most interesting poem of yours,” he suddenly said.

“Which one?”

“The flock of wild ducks rising off the swamp.”

“Ah, that one.”

“I think I saw it in the copy of your book that you gave me, but it didn’t really strike me until you read it tonight. The power of the living voice, you see.”

“I’m pleased it struck a chord.”

“It reminded me of an experience long ago, at the shack at Bindaroo, with my long-haired mate.”
“Long-haired mate” was an outback term for a girlfriend.

“It comes to me now,” he said, his husky voice gaining resonance, “the uncanny portent of a dark, primitive power. With a cry I tear from her embrace, stumble out under the blood-gold river of the sky, and there in the sunset the wild ducks pass over, and it seems to me that I must take their timeless multitude upon my shoulders like a holy cloak of benediction…”

He had stopped and thrown his head back and was miming the action of drawing a great heavy garment around himself, one that was a fulfilment and yet at the same time an anguish. He was putting on the burden of the bardic mantle. The others had stopped when they heard him getting into the flow, and Chieftain was gazing up in dumb admiration. It was hard to resist the impression that Lance had suddenly been inspired with eloquence out of thin air, even when you knew he was speaking the lines of one of his old poems.

But as he started on the next bit, he was cut off by the blast of a ship’s foghorn from the harbour. An instant sooner it would have been a great effect, a majestic underscoring of Lance’s dramatic pause. Instead it came like a vast bellow of SSSSSSSHHHHHUUU UUUTTTTTUUUUUPPPP!!!

They walked on.

Clarion’s place was one of a row of restored terraces with wrought-iron balconies. It was small inside but very cosy and well-appointed. From the bottom of the stairs you could see bits of timber and other stuff on the landing where the renovations were being done. There was a quaint little kitchen with burnished copper utensils hanging up, and a tiny enclosed backyard that smelled of jasmine or something. In the room off the kitchen was a beautifully polished round table that Clarion said was teak.

“To speak of the unique, its antique teak,” said Clive.

“Is it Greek?” asked Marian on cue.

“No, but its awfully chic.”

Clarion had a whole repertoire. When you got to know the repertoire you learnt to come in on cue yourself. “Is it Greek?” you’d ask, or whatever. At times there’d be two or three people responding in unison. Clive was given to flatulence and if there was any little noise, it was: “Hark to the creak of the teak!” Then would come the next bit: “But let none speak of the reek of the teak.”

They sat around the table sipping wine and playing Pick the Poet. That was the custom. You always played Pick the Poet at Clarion’s. Each player in turn selected a few lines to read out from a massive anthology called Nine Hundred Years of English Verse and the others had to guess the author. There was a scoring system. For example you got three points for correctly
naming the poet, or two points for what Clarion called an “ish.” That meant at least getting
the style and the period right. If for instance it was Mathew Arnold and you said Tennyson
you received the two points, for Arnold was Tennyson-ish, just as Tennyson was Arnold-ish.
If you could offer no answer at all, or gave a totally wrong answer, you got the Pity point.
When noting down a Pity point, the scorekeeper was required to put on a look of Caring
Contempt. At first it had been plain Contempt, but that was considered too cruel.

Tait loved playing Pick the Poet and on a previous visit he’d been able to add a whole new
wrinkle to the game. This was the Lying Hound award of five points if you could invent a
poet on the spur of the moment, complete with a set of biographical details and a list of key
works. Stymied on that occasion, Tait had stroked his chin and then muttered to himself as if
thinking aloud: “Hmm, this is very much in the manner of Jocelyn Stoat, especially those late
sonnets in Shards of Moonshine.” He saw a furtive look on Clarion’s face and read the
thought. Why have we never heard of Jocelyn Stoat? Here is one of those peculiar gaps in
one’s erudition. Best to say nothing and hope he’ll tell us enough for us to bluff it out.

“Actually,” said Tait, “I read a new biography of Jocelyn Stoat just a while back. It was
fascinating. Did you know…” and he was able to rattle on for a good fifteen seconds until he
overdid it with the Shetland pony.

“Oh, you lying hound!” Marian had cried, hurling a scrunched-up ball of tissue at him.

So the Lying Hound award was made part of the game. Of course it was impossible to get
away with another Jocelyn Stoat because everyone was on the alert. Mostly you’d signal what
you were doing by citing Jocelyn at the start and the others would help to elaborate as you
went along:

“Thanks to Jocelyn Stoat’s tireless advocacy,” you might say, “the world now agrees that
Orville Spudbarrow was one of the finest poets ever to be born cross-eyed in Moose Balls,
Montana, in 1912.”

Then someone might interject:

“Ah, Spudbarrow! How his poems haunted my adolescence! The exquisite anguish of lyrics
like: ‘I Bring You the Woeful Waggle of my Fourteen Toes.’”

And so it would expand until it collapsed under its own weight of silliness.

Oddly enough, Lance Lassiter didn’t care much for the game. After a round or so he’d move
to an armchair and put his head back and gaze at the ceiling and only rejoin the conversation
if it caught his interest. Even in repose he was a dynamic presence, but when he wasn’t in the
actual bardic flow there was something lost and sad about him. He made you feel he needed
looking after, like some old noble figure fallen on hard times but still charismatic enough for
that looking after to be seen as its own reward. Lance always had a string of lonely middle-aged women attending to his needs, but each of them always imagined – until the moment of disillusion came – that she was the only one.

It was after eleven o’clock and Jimmy reckoned it was time to go. They had a fifty-minute drive ahead.

Just then, Chieftain pricked his ears and looked down the hallway to the front door. There came the thud of the knocker.

“Bit late for callers,” Marian said as she went to answer it. Then they heard her asking “Can I help you?”

There was a muffled female voice.

“Just a moment then,” they heard Marian reply in what sounded like a dubious tone.

“It’s for you, Lance,” she said, coming back into the room.

“What? Who is it?” he asked, looking up from the armchair.

“I’ve no idea.”

He roused himself from the chair and went hesitantly down the hallway. Chieftain went with him.

Marion began making coffee to fortify the travellers for the road. While she did so they totted up the scores in the game and put *Nine Hundred Years of English Poetry* back in its permanent place on a large white lace doily in the centre of the teak table.

They could hear the two voices in muffled conversation. The female voice grew louder and became plaintive and emotional. They heard Lance telling Chieftain to “go back, go back” and then the sound of the front door closing and they could not hear the voices any more.

The dog didn’t like being cut-off and started to whine and to scratch at the door. It grew more excited and then they could hear the woman shouting. Chieftain began to bark at full-pitch and the din of it was deafening in the hallway. Clive hurried to see what was wrong outside.

The dog was too strong to be held back when the door was opened. There were shrieks and growls and shouts of command. Marian ran to the doorstep, crying out with anxiety.

“Bloody hell!” Jimmy muttered to himself, starting down the hallway, thinking he was about to be back on duty as a nurse.

“Oh dear,” said Tim Niblett, nervously wiping his glasses on a big handkerchief. “Oh dearie me.”

Lance and Clive dragged Chieftain in by the collar and back up the hallway.

“Did it bite her?” Jimmy asked.
“Didn’t touch her,” Clive replied.

Jimmy was on the doorstep beside Marian and called out:

“Are you hurt?”

“Ask him!” the woman cried back from the footpath. “Ask him! He’s killed my soul! That’s what he’s done, killed my soul!”

For a few moments she was wracked with sobbing.

“Dear oh dear oh dear,” said Tim Niblett, wiping his glasses harder.

“Stop that now, please,” Marian said to the woman in the clipped tone of a schoolteacher.

“You aren’t hurt?” Jimmy asked again. “You weren’t bitten?”

“What?” the woman snuffled.

“Did the dog bite you?”

“No.”

“You should go home then,” Marian urged. “Do you live far? Shall I phone you a cab?”

“Where is he?’ the woman snuffled.

“Who?”

“You know.”

“He’s inside and he isn’t coming out again. He wants you to go home. Do you need a cab?”

“No,” came the snuffled reply.

“You can manage?”

“Yes.”

“All right then. That’s good. Go and have a good night’s rest.”

“Where is he?”

“Who?”

“Him.”

“He’s gone. Gone home.”

“Has he gone home?”

“That’s right. He’s gone home. You go home too. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Okay then.”

“He’s gone home?”

“Yes. You go home too. Do you live far?”

“No.”

“Where do you live?”

“Hedley Street.”
“Ah, well, that’s not far.”
“No.”
“Well, we’ll let you go then, so you can get back home.”
“Alright.”
“Goodnight.”
“Sorry.”
“That’s okay. No harm done. Have a good rest.”
“Sorry.”
“That’s okay. We’ll close the door now because it’s very late.”
“Okay. Sorry.”
“Off you go then.”
“Alright.”
“Door’s closing now…”
“I’m sorry.”
“Closing now. Goodnight.”
Marian closed the last few inches of the door and it clicked shut.
“The whole street heard that!” she said disgustedly.
Lance Lassiter was back slumped in the armchair, his mane of hair disheveled and a look of amazed hurt on his face. He looked like someone who has just been mugged and can’t fathom the cosmic injustice of it. Chieftain was beside the chair and still tense.
“Is she going?” Clive asked.
“Yes, she’s dragging off towards Hedley Street. She’ll be home in five minutes,” said Marian.
“Perhaps we ought to call someone,” said Niblett, giving his glasses another anxious wipe.
“Like who?” Clive asked.
“The authorities.”
“What authorities?” cut in Jimmy with an impatient edge.
“I don’t know. The police?”
“Why?”
“Well, that woman was pretty emotional.”
“So we call the Emotion Police?”
“Who knows what she might do?”
“Who knows what anyone might do?” Jimmy snapped. “You seem a bit emotional yourself. Shall we phone the cops about you?”
Niblett caught on that he’d touched some kind of nerve.

“Anyway,” Jimmy went on, “the real ruckus was created by the dog. Shall we phone the dog-catcher and have it put down?”

Niblett blinked up through his glasses.

“Jimmy’s a psychiatric nurse,” Tait murmured to him.

“Ah, well,” Niblett said meekly. “He knows what’s best then.”

“Did we do the right thing?” Marian asked Jimmy.

“She’d calmed down, she hadn’t been bitten, and she was close to home. What did she need from us, except to be allowed to go away and forget what a horrible fool she made of herself? I can tell you what she didn’t need. She didn’t need to have a bad moment set in concrete and compounded ten times over. She didn’t need people rushing to medicalize it, or criminalize it, or theorize it, or institutionalize it.”

Tait had never seen Jimmy so sternly eloquent. The others were impressed too.

All except Lance. He hadn’t been listening. He’d been mentally rummaging through his Collected Poems. Now he’d found the passage he was after. He sighed heavily several times and then spoke, his voice gaining an anguished resonance:

“I can’t understand it. We were having a normal conversation and then… Suddenly she was a bat’s breath of dark wind, the unholy hiss of the Gorgon’s writhing locks, Hecate’s howl at the bone-strewn crossroads, the feathered fire of the fast-following Furies, pursuing me for sins I hardly knew…”

It went on for some time.

Tait and Jimmy walked back to Peppercorn’s where they’d left the car.

“Well,” said Jimmy as they drove home, “let’s hope the poor bitch doesn’t kill herself tonight, after my speech about leaving well enough alone.”

“Even if she did, you’d still be right in what you said.”

“I know.”

Tait put on a Niblett voice and whined:

“Oh dearie me, we must inform the Regime at once!”

“We must ask it to take charge of us.”

“To control us for our own good.”

“To put lovely big handcuffs on us.”

“And wrap us in a lovely straitjacket.”

“And we must beg it to Re-Educate us.

“And take us to a lovely Camp.”
“With electrified wire.”
“And shoot us if we try to escape.”
“Or even if we don’t.”
They drove in silence for a while.
“I was chatting to Lance earlier in the night, at the bookshop,” said Jimmy. “He asked about Fiona.”
“Who’s Fiona?”
“He meant Francesca. He was asking why you don’t bring her to the readings anymore.”
“I only brought her the once, a long time ago. Oh, and she’d met him a time before that, she told me.”
“Well, he hasn’t forgotten her.”
“Just her name.”
“Oh, ‘Fiona’ is pretty close.”
“How about when he started up with the Bat’s Breath and the Hissing Heads and all the rest of it? All I could think of was…”
“Wait. Let me guess. You thought: “Where are the fucking foghorns when you really need them?”
“You must be psychic.”

* * * *

Tait had been working a lot on the short stories of institutional life and had completed half a dozen. He was writing one now about a grotesquely fat girl he had known in Ward 17. Like the others it had started out as a poem but soon showed that it needed a broader canvas. In this case he had to include some dialogue and he wanted to depict the girl in three separate scenes that were vivid in his memory and which he hoped would add up to a rounded picture.

He thought of the first of these as the Judgement Scene.
There are five inmates seated around a table in the day-room. They are the so-called Ward Committee and have been told to recommend a punishment for someone the staff say is a troublemaker. Tait is among the five at the table and is inwardly seething because the whole thing is a toxic manipulation, a Regimic ploy to knock over a number of birds with one stone. It undercuts inmate solidarity (or it would if any such thing existed); it rubs the committee’s nose in the fact of its own lickspittling; and most of all it creates a show of “inmate autonomy,” which happens to be the fashion now in Regimic circles. Tait has lately come
across the term “Potemkin Village” in his reading of Solzhenitsyn and now is able to apply it in a context. This meeting is a Potemkin Village, an empty front put up for propaganda. Look how much we encourage the poor creatures to think for themselves and assume responsibility.

But the committee is a bit stalled. Tait isn’t speaking because that would implicate him in the vileness. Two of the others are in catatonic states of detachment and another is a touch manic and keeps disappearing under the table. Only the fat girl, Christine, is doing her best.

Nurses go past and bark at them to hurry up and make a decision and not sit there all bloody day. This is mostly aimed at Christine because she is supposed to be chairing the committee and because she is a butt of contempt in any case.

Her thighs droop down in folds beside her chair. Her arms rest on the table and the flab sags around them. Her eyes are sunk deep in the folds of her face, but they’re fixated with the effort of trying to think. It’s all up to her. She knows the punishment has to be severe enough to satisfy the staff. She sighs deeply. Her mouth wobbles and she finally speaks: “What if he wasn’t allowed to have any chocolates or lollies?”

Tait feels a pang go through him, and for an instant he feels the anguish of her dim and hungry soul. He agrees, gently suggesting they frame it as “loss of canteen privileges.” The staff accept this recommendation and chalk up another credit for fostering inmate autonomy.

And then there was what he thought of as the Love Scene.

It is a few months later and Christine has found a sort of boyfriend. His name is Rick and he is a timid young chap with a huge red birthmark on his face. When he gets upset he sobs wildly and kicks the walls, but mostly he is passive. They spend a lot of time sitting beside each other in the day-room, holding hands and talking. Or rather Christine talks and he appears to listen. She shares her packet of Fan-Tales with him. You’ll see her carefully unwrap one with her pudgy fingers and hand it across like a rare and precious item, then read him the little bio of the film star on the wrapper, then fold the wrapper and put it away in her purse. She has probably never known anyone so willing to have their hand held and be talked to.

On a bleak Sunday afternoon in winter a storm is approaching over the lake and the first big dollops of rain are plopping against the windows of the crowded day-room. Tait is glad of the storm. He thinks he will leave the stuffy atmosphere and go out and feel the vitality of the elements. There are several staff members in the day-room and they are bored and looking for any matter to stick their beaks into. They themselves might not be aware of this, but Tait knows it. The ironic joke that they are supposedly the ones with all the insight.
The storm arrives very quickly. There is sudden thunder and lighting and the afternoon turns as dark as if it were evening. Rain beats heavily on the glass. Suddenly all the lights go out. There is a moment of complete silence and then comes Christine’s anxious voice calling:

“Ricky? Are you alright, darling?”

Hoots of laughter and derision come from all over the room.

“Oh for Christ’s sake, Christine!”

“Don’t make us all puke!”

“What, d’you think he’s five?”

“Oh, poor Ricky! Is poor Ricky okay?”

“Hey, I’m scared, Christine! Can ya look after me?”

The blackout only lasts a minute, but the joke goes on and becomes the banter of the place. If anyone happens to sneeze, you hear, “Don’t be scared, Ricky.” Or if a door should slam, someone is sure to call out, “Don’t cry, Ricky, Christine’s here.” Or if a pantry-maid gets a smear of porridge on her apron, they’ll be all solicitude, “You alright, Ricky?” It quickly stales, of course, and the fat girl would have got through it okay, except that the other thing happens. An inmate can mostly cope with the staff being dickheads and supercilious bitches. It was when they decided to be skilled psychiatric nurses that you had to worry. These professionals were trained to be aware of the pathological nature of inmate behaviour, so it followed that any inmate behaviour they happened to become aware of must be pathological. And now they were thoroughly aware of the fat girl’s romantic dalliance. Anyone else might have said two inmates were holding hands and sharing Fan-Tales, but to those at the cutting-edge of psychiatric sophistication they are “presenting in a symptomatic way” and therefore need “extra support.” This takes the form of stamping out the relationship, and Christine and Rick are not allowed to sit together any more.

Rick responds with one brief episode of sobbing and wall-kicking, then reverts to sitting alone even more passively than before. He gives disappointingly little sign of the benefit of the “extra support” that’s been lavished on him. The benefit is much more observable in Christine’s case, and what is clinically interesting is the precise form of its outward manifestation. It makes her look just like someone who’s copped a shitload of misery from a pack of fatuous creeps.

The third and final scene was the one Tait thought of as the Death Scene.

It is an afternoon in the following summer and Tait is walking down the steep hill from Ward 17. He can see the fat girl in the distance, coming towards him. She’s been to the canteen. She only ever leaves the ward to go and buy her ration of lollies every few days,
waddling down the hill with intense effort and then doggedly inching her way back up with many exhausted halts. It is only ever a small ration because she only has a couple of dollars a week to spend and in any case the canteen people have been told to keep track of what she buys.

Tait feels this is an example of how the plain truth of a thing can differ from everyone’s idea of it. Everyone takes it for granted that Christine’s life is a never-ending feast of sweets. It is on that basis that she is daily scolded as a glutton. But in fact even a large packet or two of lollies will stretch pretty thin over several days and nights. To make them spin out you have to refrain for hours at a time. And suppose those lollies are the only thing you have to give yourself an ounce of consolation? Aside from the lollies, Christine has nothing else to eat but the official meals doled out in the dining room, and doled out, in her case, in meagre portions.

It hardly adds up to piggish indulgence. More like a constant gnawing of deprivation. The fat girl isn’t fat from gluttony but because of some kink in her metabolism. It only takes a moment of reflection to work that out, yet no one ever bothers to work it out. And Tait wouldn’t have bothered either if he hadn’t focused on her as potential poem-fodder. He thinks about how the whole world must be teeming with bland assumptions that have actual consequences but just aren’t true.

As he continues down the hill he is musing on Samuel Johnson and the Paris Opera girls. Somebody told Johnson that every well-to-do man in Paris kept a girl from the chorus of the Opera as his full-time mistress, sets her up in a lavish apartment and all that. It was the done thing.

They all do this?
Absolutely. Ask anyone.
And how many Opera girls are there?
He was told the number.
Then surely no more than that number of men can avail themselves of them in that way?
This had never occurred to the other person.
It was scary that it could need an intellect as powerful as Johnson’s to see and state the bleeding obvious in this world. A silly notion about Opera girls might not matter much, but what about ideas that can get people seriously harmed? Tait recalls another bit where Johnson talks about the mentality of witch-hunts. He is trying to visualize the paragraph on the page when he comes to the fat girl. She is standing very still in the middle of the roadway.

“Hi, Christine,” he says.
She stares straight ahead and doesn’t answer or even seem aware of him. She must be knackered, he thinks, and trying to summon up the will to push on again. He goes past, but then feels there is something odd and turns and looks back. She seems to be in a kind of trance. He is about to ask if she’s alright when he sees that she has messed herself. It is oozing down the backs of her legs and plopping on the road. He can’t think what help to offer, and anyhow it’d be wrong to show that he’s noticed anything. So he walks on. Near the bottom of the hill he turns and sees that she has begun to move on again with infinite slow effort.

That isn’t the last time he sees her alive, just his last vivid memory of her. She is found dead in bed a week later. She is 19 years old.

He was going to call the story “A Life in Three Scenes,” but that was a bit tooarty and pretentious. Then he considered “Who Gets Cut by the Cutting Edge?” but that was too didactic. In the end he knew that “Fat Girl” was all it needed.

* * * *

Tait was in the lake, a hundred metres from the shore, standing in water that came up to his chin. It was the afternoon of a sunny and cloudless day. He hardly ever swam in the lake, but now and then felt it was a shame to let it go to waste. It was an ordeal, though, because he worried the whole time about sharks. The sand-bar over at The Inlet was said to prevent them coming in from the ocean, but Tait wasn’t sure you’d want to bet your life on that.

Right now he was feeling panicky at being in deep water. He preferred the shallows where he could lie with his body just below the surface and support himself with hands and elbows on the sandy bottom. If he could let himself relax enough he could enjoy the feeling of being gently moved by the ebb and flow. It was like getting an inkling of the vast primal energies of existence. He would look around at the sweep of the shoreline, and up at the sky, and across thewater. He found it interesting to view it all from the lake’s perspective once in a while.

But whenever he looked across the surface of the water he expected to see a dorsal fin coming towards him, no doubt that of the only man-eater to have got over the sand-bar in fifty years.

Yeah, he thought, that’d give you an inkling of primal energies.

He’d come out this far because he was curious to see what the bottom looked like further from the shore. He had a set of goggles that Narelle gave him after he mentioned wanting some to use in the lake. She’d offered him her flippers too, but he didn’t need those. The last thing he wanted to do was kick and splash and make vibrations. Stay quiet in the water was Tait’s motto. Narelle had been a keen swimmer, but now all she cared about was being in
theatre and doing stuff with the Players. She saw Tait as a mentor because he’d written her into that production of Cinderella three years ago. He had also created parts for her in his one-act comedies, and in the skits he’d written for when the Players did variety nights.

At fifteen she was no longer the owl-child. She was more like a studious young falcon, with long tawny hair and stylish gold-rimmed glasses. Tait found it secretly exciting to have the gratitude of this blossoming girl.

The goggles didn’t fit very snugly and salt water seeped in and made his eyes hurt unless he kept putting his head up and adjusting the fit.

As he was adjusting the goggles he looked up over the high grassy bank of the shore and thought he saw the heads and shoulders of two men standing in Astrid’s Meadow. He rubbed the water out of his eyes and looked harder. He felt tense, the way he always did when he thought anything untoward might be happening.

That tension had taken his mind momentarily off his fear of the deep water, but then something touched the back of his neck. He turned with a cry, ready to fend desperately with his hands. It was a floating stick. He made for the shore, trembling.

He sat on a rock with his towel around his shoulders until he regained his composure. He realized he had lost the goggles in his panic. He picked his way along the water’s edge to where the steep bank gave way to a few metres of beach heaped with sea-weed. Then he started up the path that led along the reserve.

Yes, there were two men in Astrid’s Meadow, and a utility was parked inside the gate. Tait had his shoes in his hand and had to pick his way carefully so as not to hurt his feet, and his wet swimming trunks felt clammy against his skin. As he drew level with Astrid’s Meadow he looked at the two men out of the corner of his eye. One was short and bald and pot-bellied and wore baggy pants and an old khaki shirt. The other man was taller and younger and efficient-looking and carried a clip-board. The door of the old shack stood open.

Tait turned off the path and picked his way over to the cabin. He was aware of the two men looking at him. He felt vulnerable. He wanted to get inside and out of sight. He wanted to have a shower and get dry and dressed. He had left his door key under a stone beside the bottom step of the little porch. He fetched it out and went to unlock the door. He glanced across at the two men.

“How ya goin’?” the shorter man called.

“Good, said Tait.

“How was it?”

“Sorry?”
“The water.”
“Yeah, not bad.”
“Its handy, ain’t it?”
“Sorry?”
“The lake.”
“Yes, very.”
Tait went inside and watched them through a chink of the curtain. The shorter man kept gesturing at the shack and the other man paced out distances around it and made notes on his clip-board. Tait could not hear their conversation but it was clear they were discussing some kind of structural work. After another few minutes they appeared to have finished. The short man cast a lingering look across at the cabin, then they both went down to the utility and got in and drove away.
Tait showered and dressed, then stood in the doorway of the cabin and stared out. Astrid’s Meadow had taken on a different aspect. It looked more separate, no longer like his own familiar patch. He felt tense and was getting a headache. The fright in the water still hadn’t quite worn off, but that wasn’t so bad. He had options in relation to the water. He could simply not go in the lake ever again, or just not venture so far out again. But the business of the two men, whatever it was, would unfold on its own terms and there was nothing he could do.
He stepped out on the porch. The afternoon had turned cloudy and a fresh wind blew and the surface of the lake was now slate-grey with a chop of white foam on it. Tait turned his face to the breeze and tried to let his mind float free so as to lessen the throb of the headache. He murmured the last few lines of the Irish Airman poem to himself and that helped a little:

_Alonely impulse of delight_  
_Drove to this tumult in the clouds;_  
_I balanced all, brought all to mind,_  
_The years ahead seemed waste of breath,_  
_A waste of breath the years behind_  
_In balance with this life, this death._

The Airman had been Robert Gregory, the son of Yeats’s friend Lady Gregory, and he had flown in the skies of Italy during the First World War. And because it was a foreign theatre of war he could feel a certain detachment, like Hemingway in _A Farewell to Arms_.

But was “detachment” the right word? Perhaps it was more like being *bereft*, more like the outlook of those who have never been held and caressed enough, or heard enough whispered endearments, and so have never been drawn into the warm circle where normal life truly matters and doesn’t seem like a waste of breath. It might be the outlook of those who tell themselves they are cool and appraising and self-contained, when in fact they are just awfully unhappy.

By showing us those individuals, writers like Yeats and Hemingway had shown the plight of multitudes and the state of the modern world. There can be whole populations of the bereft and the unloved, like in the First World War, or the Great Depression, like in *The Grapes of Wrath*. And there have been whole generations of them stretching across time, exiles and fugitives and remnants, like the “Wild Geese” who fled Ireland, like the Highlanders after Culloden, like the Apache and the Sioux and a thousand other tribes.

What did Black Elk say? “*The people’s hoop is broken, and the sacred tree is dead.*” The hoop had been the circle of the spirit and the tree had been the shelter of each other. If Black Elk had spoken in the voice of Blake he’d have said that heaven had gone out of the wildflower and eternity had fled from the grain of sand. If he’d been Wordsworth he would have told how the song without end had ended after all.

But at least those tribes and clans knew that something terrible had happened to them, as did the people of Goldsmith’s deserted village. They couldn’t avoid knowing it even if they had wanted to. They’d been “cleared.” That was the word for it in Scotland. And Thomas Hardy’s great novels were piercing laments for the same process in the south — for the clearing of his own tribe and kind, the peasantry of Wessex, and the abolition of the old rooted life of the soil. In the personal plight of characters like Jude the Obscure or Tess of the D’Urbervilles he showed the doom of all they were and all they had come from.

It was worse to think of the millions being disinherited right now in every street and town and city of the world, but without ever quite knowing it. Untold millions feel the dull pain but only a few can see through all the hype and recognise it for what it is. And fewer still can put it into words the way those great writers did, or the way a troubadour of the people could. Back in Depression times Woody Guthrie had expressed it all in one song title: “*Ain’t Got No Home in this World Anymore.*”

But who was writing the great lament for the “clearances” that were happening right now? There was a poem in all this and he had to get hold of it before it slipped away. He knew was all to do with the difference between knowing or not knowing what has befallen you in history. It was about knowing what caused the ruination of your people, and the way this
might determine how you feel afterwards, even many generations afterwards. And it was about whether your people had snatched a moral victory out of the doom, had made an epic of it, a ballad, a song, a tale to be handed down. He thought of Willie MacLew, a waif of the Glasgow streets a hundred years after his clan had been half wiped-out at Culloden. But that waif wasn’t utterly alone, for he had Robbie Burns and those bits of songs and poems, those bits of the Jacobite story that were in them. That was it. Some people can never be totally bereft because they have a *Story*. They might be hungry in the snow, with no place of welcome in the world, but they can never be utterly dispossessed. They have an epic tale, and in that tale is kith and kin and hearth and homeland. What had Mike Kieslowski called it in the eloquent letter Tate had read that time in the old graveyard in the Valley? It was “the fable of all our lives.”

And when you saw it that way you saw that even Robert Gregory wasn’t wholly bereft, at least in Yeats’s view, for there were those earlier lines that you finally recognize are really the most important ones in the poem:

> My country is Kiltaratan Cross,
> My countrymen Kiltaratan’s poor,
> No likely end could bring them loss
> Or leave them happier than before.

They are beyond the ups and downs of ordinary existence because they are the people of a *fable*, and when Robert Gregory was killed in Italy he had that fable and that story to return to and become part of.

Tait slumped in relief. He had got hold of it and he knew it wouldn’t slip away now. Writing the poem would just be a matter spending the time on it, of wrestling through the process. He’d secured it by stating a whole train of thought as a neat formulation: *Our true home is in a Story.*

The salt wind grew stronger. It made Tait think of the wind in the rigging of the *winjammah*, the bonnie boat that was like a bird on the wing, the ship that went over the sea and then somehow up into the sky. He straightened once more, for he could see Auntie Annie again in his mind’s eye, could hear her telling of their ancestor and that distant day at Preston.

* * *
Bristol Dick hunched heavily in his chair, toying with his gold biro. Tait had had two sessions with him since the reading at Peppercorn’s and there’d been no mention of it. Tait had begun to think he was mistaken about the figure he’d seen outlined in the back row.

He was being quizzed about the sales of his book.

“I won’t know any numbers till I get the first of the half-yearly statements from the publisher,” Tait said.

“What would be considered respectable numbers?”

“For a book like mine, a few hundred, maybe.”

“That doesn’t seem many.”

“There isn’t exactly a mass market for poetry.”

“Clearly not. Does that ever make you wonder about the ultimate worth of what you do?”

“That’s a question that could be asked of anyone. I could ask it of you, for instance.”

“But the motivations of a poet are of particular interest, surely?”

“That’s arguable.”

“Humour me.”

“Alright. No, I don’t often doubt the value of what I do. One’s sense of vocation doesn’t depend on sales figures.”

“Why not?”

“For reasons that are obvious, having to do with issues of quantity versus quality. The works of Aristotle don’t exactly stampede out of the bookshops, but that wouldn’t lead one to think any less of their inherent value.”

“I take your point,” was the reply.

Once upon a time Tait would have been cautious about using an example like that. It could easily be twisted to sound as if he was comparing himself to Aristotle and therefore showing symptoms of being “grandiose.” But after so long, he and Bristol Dick were like fencers who know each other too well to waste energy on moves that won’t get anywhere.

Bristol Dick tried another tack.

“I gather your book has gained a number of press notices?”

“Yes.”

“And how have you felt about them?”

“It isn’t so much a matter of feeling anything about them. One assesses them in terms of their helpfulness or otherwise.”

“Even that rather unflattering piece in, um… which paper was it?”

“I know the one you mean.”
“I imagine it could be distressing to have one’s mental aberrations raked up out of the past. Is that what you’d call them? Aberrations?”

“It sounds like quite an appropriate term.”

“I daresay an article like that could bring a lot of things rushing back in all their dreadful intensity.”

“I don’t find it so. My focus is always on the positive aspects of the future.”

They were just going through the motions, and Tait hadn’t seen the real python glitter in the eyes.

But now it began to appear.

“Your presentation at the book shop that evening went very well.”

“Thank you. I had no idea you were there.”

“I saw it advertised and decided go along and get a rare glimpse into your world of the artistic.”

“To have a bit of a change?”

“Exactly.”

“Not that I’d particularly call it ‘the world of the artistic.’ It isn’t meant to be that cut off from ordinary life.”

“No? Well, of course I’m uninformed in these matters. But you seemed quite at ease in that sort of company.”

“I did?”

“Yes, I thought you retained your composure very well at the podium.”

“Thank you.”

“Especially coming on after Mr Lassister.”

“Yes, he’s a powerful presence.”

“And very artistic.”

“He’s an artist, yes.”

“You know him well?”

“Reasonably well.”

“To socialize with?”

“On occasion.”

“He’s had an checkered life, hasn’t he?”

“Yes.”

“How much do you know about that?”

“About his checkered life?”
“Yes.”
“I’ve read his autobiography.”

“Ah, yes, I’ve acquired a copy of that myself. But I’ve also been doing some reading through more official channels.”

“Yes?” said Tait, trying to pick what move the python was making.

“How aware are you of his past involvements?”

“Involvements?” Tait asked, vaguely thinking this was a reference to Lassiter’s womanizing.

“In an extreme political movement.”

For a moment Tait was at a loss.

“You don’t mean the Jumbywollomoks?” he said. “That was a literary movement fifty years ago, and it was a bit of a joke even then.”

“It was a somewhat subversive movement, even so.”

“It wanted to subvert certain cultural conventions, yes.”

“Is culture not a crucial part of any social order?”

Tait felt rattled. He was being got into a corner.

“Yes it is,” he said, not knowing how else to reply.

“How about the so-called ‘Australia Alone’ movement? That was entirely political in nature.”

Tait knew only what he’d read in the Lance’s autobiography. Australia Alone had been a loose group of workers and artists and intellectuals who had Jumby-ish ideas about the need to adapt fully to this continent. At the start of the Second World War it had agitated for Australia to be neutral and it had then been banned. Its leader had been the wharfie poet Patrick Duhig, who’d also been the founder of the Jumby movement. Duhig had been gaoled under harsh wartime laws and after the war sued several newspapers that referred to him as having been a “traitor.” He won the case and a sizable sum in damages, which he gave straight to charity. Soon after that he was drowned in a boating accident. Lance had been one of the last to see Duhig alive in the boat that day and had actually warned him that his life-jacket was in poor condition and needed replacing.

The Duhig verdict had been a bit of a landmark in defamation law, but the Australia Alone movement itself was nearly forgotten. It had only lasted a couple of years, and its integrity was damaged when Hitler attacked Russia, for it turned out that many of the Australia Alone people weren’t so opposed to the war after all, not if it was a war that would help Stalin.

Bristol Dick leant forward intently over his desk.
“Did you know that Mr Lassiter refused to comply with his military call-up during the war and was arrested.”
“Yes, that’s in his autobiography.”
“He was finally allowed to do non-combatant work in the Civil Construction Service.”
“Yes, that’s in the book.”
“He was posted to Central Australia.”
“Yes.”
“Working alongside Italian POWs.”
“Yes, he wrote poems about their predicament.”
“Indeed he did, and no-one read them with more interest that the wartime security authorities. They were touched by his concern for the personnel of an enemy power.”
“I don’t recall anything about that in the book.”
“As I said, I’ve been reading other sources.”
“All of this was a very long time ago.”
“Oh, the record covers a longish period. There was an arrest in the 1950s during a waterfront strike.”
“Yes, he was a wharfie then.”
“And no less than four arrests in the 1960s for activities relating to so-called Aboriginal Rights.”
“He regards those as badges of honour.”
“What about active involvement in anti-Vietnam demonstrations.”
“No arrests for that? The cops must’ve been slipping.”
“There was an arrest, yes. For being in possession of a bucket of blood.”
“A bucket of blood?”
“For throwing, presumably, over the returning servicemen who were marching only a few metres away.”
“Well, half the population was anti-Vietnam. I’m not sure that in itself counts too heavily against anyone.”
“What about an arrest for the alleged assault of a de facto wife? Does that count? That was in the early 70s.”
Tait felt the coils around him.
“May I ask a question?” he said.
“Of course,” said the python politely.
“Is there a point to all this?”
“I feel there is.”
“May I know what it might be? Why are we discussing Lassiter? Not that it isn’t interesting, mind you.”
“Actually, I have no interest in the colourful career of Mr Lassiter, *per se*, since I don’t happen to be his supervisor in the matter of a Licence to be at Large. But I do happen to be yours. And the fact is that the conditions of a Licence require the holder to exercise care in respect of the company they keep.”
The python’s eyes glittered in triumph.
“I appreciate you reminding me of that,” Tait said.
“I thought you would.”
“Thank you.”
“You’re welcome. I’m here to be of help.”
They were silent for several moments, both aware that the python had won today’s contest. But they both also knew that it wouldn’t gain anything by pushing the thing too far. To push it would start to be counter-productive, would reveal that the implied threat against Tait was pretty empty in practical terms. Lassiter was a famous writer, not some petty-villain or lowlife. The rules against consorting with bad characters obviously didn’t apply, except in what you might call symbolic terms. But it was the symbolic victory that the python wanted and was now savouring.
Time was up by the clock.
“Remember,” said Bristol Dick in an unbearably smug tone, “we are judged by the company we keep.”
“Yeah,” Tait wanted to reply as he made for the door, “that’s why I’d rather not have to see *you* again!”
He went for a walk along the main city beach, but the demoralized feeling wouldn’t go away. He found a high grassy bank overlooking the sand and lay down and hoped the ocean wind and the sound of the breakers would have a soothing effect. He had thought of staying in town until the evening and then calling in at Clarion’s place for a game of Pick the Poet. He had a standing invitation to go there. But now that was the last thing he felt like doing. The rhythmic sounds of the breakers were having an effect and he began to feel dozy.
He was vaguely thinking of all that stuff about Lassiter. He was hardly the one to judge anybody else’s past, and he already knew that Lance’s politics weren’t his. He’d found that out when they’d argued about Solzhenitsyn. But he didn’t really care. For a person with so
much charisma, there was something oddly *ineffectual* about Lance. You could never quite believe his ideas mattered outside his poetry. No, Tait didn’t give two hoots about any of it. Except maybe the bucket of blood. That seemed a bit over the top.

**Chapter Nine**

Thursdays had become the highlight of each week, for now Tait and Francesca could spend a few hours together every Thursday afternoon, being just like an actual couple.

It came about because Craig and Francesca had wrangled over the weekly shopping. Craig took the car to work every day and that meant he had to help Francesca do the shopping on Saturday afternoon or Sunday. But Craig hated shopping and became like a bear with a sore head after ten minutes. Then for a while they tried another system. Craig minded the kids at home on Sunday while Francesca took the car to shop by herself. The drawback in that for Craig was that Francesca made the most of it and didn’t return for ages. After the shopping she went for a drive and always ended up at the cabin with Tait.

There were several occasions like that and it was lovely to be together in complete privacy. They’d mostly stayed inside in the kitchen, holding each other and smooching, moving almost imperceptibly in a kind of slow dance, as if they were the last couple in a nightclub in the wee small hours. But of course the bed was right there, and the longer they smooched and the more unbuttoned her blouse became the harder it was not to gravitate to it.

“I think,” Francesca had said, “that we either have to go to bed and fuck like ferrets, or go for a nice walk.”

“We should do the sensible thing,” Tait had muttered as he went on gently biting the lobe of her ear.

“I know,” she groaned, “but we’d better go for the walk instead.”

So they’d done their buttons up and gone out and along the shore as far as High Rock. They’d sat on the rock holding hands and both looking out across the water.

“True love isn’t two people gazing into each other’s eyes,” Tait said. “It’s two people gazing off in the same direction.”

“That’s a lovely notion,” she had replied. “Did you think it up?”
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“That’s a lovely notion,” she had replied. “Did you think it up?”
“No. I read it somewhere.”
“Do you think we’re looking in the same direction, in the larger sense?”
“Do you?”
“I asked first.”
“My answer is that I don’t know.”
“Me either.”
“It’s best to be honest.”
“Yes.”
“I know there are times when I literally ache for you.”
“And there are times when I nearly scream out loud with missing you.”
“That’s how it is.”
“That’s what we’re stuck with.”
“Nothing we can do.”
“Not a thing.”
“I wish we were back there fucking.”
“Me too. Like ferrets.”
“We’re hopeless, aren’t we?”
“Fraid so.”

They’d stayed at High Rock until it was time for her to go. They knew if they went back to the cabin with time to spare they would go to bed.

Then Craig suggested a new plan. He would leave the car at home on Thursdays and get a lift to work. Francesca could take the two kids and shop for as long as she liked. At the cost of one day’s use of the car, Craig would be free of both shopping and child-minding. It wasn’t much of a deal, but Francesca saw the potential in it and went along, merely remarking that she only had one pair of hands.

“Take your boyfriend with you,” he said.
“Which one?” she asked.
“Whichever one is free on Thursdays,” he replied.

So Francesca collected Tait from the cabin around one o’clock every Thursday and they drove over to The Inlet. If the weather was fine they would park on the esplanade at the beachfront and sit for a while on a bench, enjoying the fresh air and the town’s holiday atmosphere. There was a small amusement park near the beach, with a merry-go-round and hooplæs. Often there were street-performers doing little shows.
When they felt relaxed enough they’d walk the few hundred metres up to the shopping complex. They had a stroller for Jesse, the three-year-old, and Francesca toted baby Emma in a papoose harness. With her lovely strong way of walking, and her raven-black hair in long plaits, she looked like a Red Indian woman, like some superb woman of the Cheyenne or the Sioux. Tait told her that, one day.

“So I’m the Squaw, am I?”

“Yes, you’re my Squaw.”

“And who are you?”

“My Indian name is Horse Feathers.

“No, that isn’t it.”

“You think it should Horse’s Arse?”

“No, that’s already taken.”

“By whom?”

“By He-Whom-the-Palefaces-Call-Craig.”

“What then?”

“Let me see… You’re Hawk Feather, the Medicine Man, the Poet of the tribe. Yep, Hawk Feather.”

“And you’re Prairie Flower, loveliest of all women.”

“You think?”

“Oh Prairie Flower, more graceful than the summer grasses bending in the breeze, brighter than the sparkle of the swiftly-running stream…”

“You can call me ‘PF’ for short.”

“And ‘HF’ will do for me.”

They had stopped and were looking at each other and suddenly they both felt more intense than they’d meant. She leant over, with Emma between them, and whispered huskily against his ear: “I want to be your squaw. And my secret name is Wet Between the Legs.”

Tait felt a rush of arousal that nearly made him faint. They couldn’t embrace with Emma between them, even if they hadn’t cared about being in a public street, so they stood looking into each other’s eyes and clutching each other’s fingers until the intensity began to subside.

They walked on to the shopping plaza, happily inventing Indian names for the two kids. They always dawdled around the plaza, enjoying the sense of being together like a family. They’d begin at the coffee lounge just inside the main entrance. There was a chatty middle-aged waitress named Leanne who assumed they were a family and gave them advice about potty-training and teething and stuff. They always ordered two slices of cheese-cake, both of
which Francesca ate. Cheese-cake was her great weakness and she normally kept off it, but when they were together she felt she could indulge. Them being together made her happy, she said, and if she was happy it was okay to eat cheese-cake. It was elementary logic.

“I see,” said Tait in a doubtful tone.

“No, really. Being with you assuages my neediness – isn’t ‘assuages’ a lovely word? – and therefore I can eat cheese-cake in happy moderation.”

“Two big slices is moderation?”

“Absolutely. You should see me when I get going on it. Or rather, you shouldn’t see me when I get going. Would you still love me if I got enormous?”

“Pleasantly plump, you mean?”

“It might happen one day, you know, even without cheese-cake. It’s what happens to Italian women.”

“But not to Cheyenne women, my Rose of the Dakotas.”

“Oh good, I’d forgotten that. But hang on, that doesn’t mean I have to exist on raw buffalo, does it?”

“No, you’re allowed to cook it, slightly.”

“You know,” she said. “Getting back to the original point, the same logic applies to you too. You could have a special indulgence when we’re together.”

“Can I?”

“Yes. What do you have a craving for?”

“Lie on the table and I’ll show you.”

“Oh I would, my sweet Hawk Feather, my Hawkie Walkie,” she crooned tenderly, stroking his face, “but Leanne might phone the cops.”

“Ah for the days when a man could ride the prairie to his heart’s content.”

“Ride the Prairie Flower, you mean.”

“Yes.”

“I wish you could, right here, this minute.”

Suddenly they didn’t feel jokey at all, but choked with longing.

Their favourite shop in the plaza was called The Karmic Flow. It was hippie and arty and disorganized and lit by coloured lights that kept changing the ambience from evening violet to sunflower yellow to forest green. It was heady with the aromas of peppermint soaps and lavender candles and sandalwood ornaments and lots of other things. And it sounded lovely, too, with tinkling chimes and little brass gongs and uncanny Eastern music in the background. Tait and Francesca called it their Unguent shop because the fragrant ointments were labelled
“Unguents” and they fell in love with the word. They always spoke it with a long-drawn out emphasis on the first syllable.

“Do we need *unnnng*-guents today, my dear?” one would ask.

“*Unnnng*-guents, my love?”

“Yes, *unnnng*-guents, my sweet.”

“One can never have too many *unnnng*-guents, my darling.”

Tait loved her saying the word, not only for the sound of it, but because she would look at him with a sultry droop of the eyelids and move her lips and tongue in a way that sent shivers of desire through him. They agreed that “unguents” was the perhaps most obscene word in the language, or at least the way Francesca said it.

The Karmic Flow had one drawback. They couldn’t take the stroller in because the aisles were narrow and the stock was all over the place. It was too easy for Jesse to grab things or knock things over. So they took turns waiting outside the shop with Jesse while the other browsed. The displays in the front windows were a treasure trove in themselves, a marvellous jumble of crystals, brooches, necklaces, rings, lockets, candlesticks, and every kind of bric a brac.

Tait preferred to be the one waiting outside, knowing she was a few metres away and that in two or three minutes at most she would come out the door and he would see her again freshly, with a little tremor of delight at her beauty and a little flutter of amazement that such an adorable creature loved him.

There was a major department store in the plaza and they always wandered through it, playing the game of “What if we were furnishing our house?” They looked at everything from fridges and patio-furniture to cutlery and prints for the walls.

But they had a special thing for the bedding section. They would linger there, full of lewd thoughts.

“What about this bed?” she might ask, leaning close to him. “Fancy having me on this every night?”

“We should test it right now.”

“They’ll come running. Leanne’s probably phoned ahead to warn them about us.”

“Damn it.”

“Yes, damn it. You know what this means, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“You’ll have to have me up against a wall…”

“I intend to, right now…”
“Tell me what you’ll do to me…”
So they’d stand there in the middle of the bedding department, whispering, getting each other frantic, then slowly letting it subside until they felt halfway normal again and could move on.

They had a joke about how ill-timed it would be if a salesperson bustled up to them while they were in these throes of whispered excitement. But they might turn it to advantage.

“We’ll say we’re both suddenly feeling faint, and is there a private room we could go to.”
“And could they move one of the beds in.”
“And mind the kids till we come out.”
“A long time later.”
“Weary but smiling.”

But no one ever approached them, and as they left the bedding department they would mutter to each other about the poor service and how you couldn’t get good help anymore.

It was highly calculated. They used their frustration to get so intense a focus on each other that after a while they felt exhausted by it, almost as if they’d really had sex. They understood that it was a game of trust in addition to self-control. Each trusted the other to do a difficult thing — to convey a boundless hunger for each other’s bodies while keeping to their no-sex Agreement.

They’d understood the implications back when they’d made the Agreement. They knew how much anger there was under the surface, and that physical yearning was a way of keeping it submerged. But it was also a potential source of anger in itself. They had to stay horny for each other without it turning into the resentment that comes of too much frustration.

The awkward thing was, of course, that one of them had another partner and the other didn’t. Francesca had worried a lot about this.

“I know it’s harder for you,” she had said. “At least I’ll be sleeping with someone.”

The bald statement of it sent a shock of unhappiness through both of them and they became careful with their words.

“You have to put up with such a lot,” she sighed. “How can you even like me?”

“It’s thankless work, but it has to be done.”

Then Francesca had got very serious and came over to him and stood beside his chair and held his head against her chest.

“Listen,” she said. “I know I don’t have any right to stop you going with other women to get your needs met.”

“I won’t.”
“Don’t make promises that might be hard to keep, darling.”
“I won’t go with anyone.”
“Really?”
“I promise.”
“Thank you,” she said, her voice wobbling a little as she held him tenderly. “I don’t want you to be with anyone else.”
“I won’t be.
“I know I’m selfish.”
“No you’re not.”
“I’ll promise you something in return.”
“You don’t have to.”
“I do have to, and I want to. I promise I’ll always try to satisfy you in any way short of actual screwing.”
It was Tait’s turn to feel wobbly then, for the sweetness of it.
“Was that a nice promise?” Francesca asked, lifting his face and smiling down at him.
“Best I’ve ever had.”
“Does it make up for things a tiny bit?”
“Everything.”
“Does it make up for me being a gross, awful, selfish cow?”
“That’s my kind of dame.”
“I love you.”
“And I you.”
By the time they left the bedding department they’d find the afternoon slipping away and would have to hurry through the actual shopping as an afterthought. They’d stow the shopping in the car and then get an ice-cream and sit again on a bench on the esplanade and talk. By then, mostly, their lewd feelings had subsided into a warm glow and they could talk sensibly about other stuff, like what was happening with the Players or with various friends. Tait told her all about the poetry-reading at Peppercorn’s, and being at Clarion’s place, and the emotional scene with one of Lance Lassiter’s cast-off women out on the street. And also what Jimmy had told him — that Lance had asked after her, albeit by the wrong name.
“Really? I’m amazed he remembers me at all.”
“You’re hard to forget, Fiona.”
“Do you think he’s got the hots for me?”
“Of course.”
“Poor wretch. Another victim of my fatal allure. You’ll have to break it to him gently that there’s no hope. Tell him my heart belongs to another.”

“I think his interest might be lower down on your anatomy.”

“Like someone else we know, eh, you naughty Hawk Feather,” she said, tickling him under the chin.

Tait also kept her up to date with news of Mike Kieslowski. Mike had now begun a relationship with a woman named Caroline who was also doing a Ph.D. in Political Science. They’d met through having the same academic supervisor. Caroline was a decade younger, but remarkably sensible. That was the initial attraction, according to Mike. It was rare to encounter anyone who’d had six years of university and was still prone to intelligent thought.

“You’ve never actually met Mike, have you?” Francesca asked one day.

“No.”

“I hope I’m there when you do.”

“That’d be nice. But why, particularly.”

“Well, don’t ask me to explain, because I can’t exactly, but sometimes I feel that Mike and I are rivals.”

“Rivals for what?”

“I don’t know. Your soul, maybe?”

They always stayed at The Inlet until the pelicans were fed in late afternoon. Feeding them was a tradition and a tourist-attraction. The logo of the Shire featured a pelican with a fish in its beak, the pelican looking very friendly and the fish looking overjoyed at being eaten. Dozens of the big birds would gather at the same time each day and a Shire Council employee would arrive with buckets of fish pieces to throw. And of course there’d be hordes of squawking gulls trying to get their share. Jesse loved the feeding-frenzy and would point and clap and squeal with delight. Then, as soon as the last lump of fish had been thrown, they’d hurry away.

Tait and Francesca would hold hands and stroke each other as much as possible on the way back to the cabin, to console themselves and each other for the parting. There was always an element of anguish when they got to the cabin. Francesca would go just inside the door with him, just to where they’d be out of sight but she could see and hear the kids in the car easily. She always whispered a question: “Can I do anything for you, darling?” That was when Tait felt the anguish most, because of the utter tenderness in her voice. He would hug her in reply and whisper that he was okay. Then they’d cuddle for a couple of minutes, and kiss very softly. The final caresses had to be gentle so they would stay calm enough to bear the parting.
“My Queen of the Prairie.”
“My beautiful Hawk Man.”
Then she’d drive away without looking back.
When Tait really thought about it, he knew those Thursdays at The Inlet weren’t quite as idyllic as they seemed. Sometimes the weather was bad, sometimes the kids were a pain in the neck, there were nappies to change and snotty noses to wipe, and there were even times when he knew that Francesca didn’t look like the Rose of the Cheyenne but like a harassed housewife who never got enough sleep.
But it didn’t matter. There was some power that kept the mundane dreariness at bay. Love, presumably.
He wondered if that was what Francesca meant when she said about her and Mike being rivals for his soul.
And if Francesca represented Love, what did Mike stand for?

* * * *

Yet another new house was going up just across the road and there was always a lot of noise. Today as usual the workmen had a radio turned up full-blast on Ron Dodd’s talk-back program and the wrangling, carping voices went on and on. Tait had balls of cotton-wool in his ears and his head-phones on over them. That at least took some of the edge off it.
He was trying to feel his way into the opening of a new one-act comedy for the Players. They had decided to put on a “Bush Bash.” There’d be a catered dinner, then the one-act comedy to put people into a jolly mood, and then a professional Bush Band would take over for the rest of the night to play the music and call the dances. People were to come dressed as cowboys and cowgirls and rollick till all hours. The Players were hoping to sell three hundred tickets and attract a lot people who didn’t normally come to the shows.
If it went well they’d make it an annual event.
Tait loved writing for the Players, but he saw it as part of his social life and felt guilty if he let it encroach too much on his proper working time. Right now there were several poems lined up on the Blue Board, waiting to be attended to, and he had a pressing idea for another short story. The new play had to be knocked off quickly. It had to be kept down to a cast of no more than half a dozen and a running time around thirty minutes.
He would use the same approach as before: think of a broad scenario, then simply get characters talking and see how it unfolds. The hope was to quickly tap into the inherent logic
of the thing. And of course absurdity has as much inherent logic as anything else. More, in a way.

A send-up is useful when it’s a one-act piece and you don’t have time for a lot of exposition. When it’s a send-up, the audience already has the big picture, and you can leap straight into playing havoc with it.

This would be called The Maltese Mouse. A Bogart-like figure walks into the spotlight. He wears a hat pulled low and a trenchcoat and a cigarette dangles from his lips. He looks at the audience for a long moment, then speaks in a hard-bitten Bogart voice.

*My name is Joe Sleazy, and I’m a dick. A private dick. They say talk is cheap, so I won’t make any big speeches. I’ll just lay it on the line. You got a problem, you come to me. You want a tail put on your wife, you come to me. You want to know what your old man’s doin at 3am in a crummy hotel with a cheap blonde, you come to me – although if you ain’t already figured out what he’s doin you must be pretty dumb. And if it’s a rough assignment, one that needs a quick trigger finger and where the chances of walkin out of it in one piece are about as good as a snowball in hell’s… well, call the cops. After all you’re a citizen. You got rights. But don’t get me wrong. I don’t wear no suit o’ shinin armour. I used to, but I found it slowed me down a lot. You ever tried chasin a suspect twenty-nine floors up a New York fire-escape dressed in two hundred pounds of solid steel? It ain’t easy. But that’s another story. You wanted to hear about the Polkinghorne case. It began one cold day in my office. I was just wrapping up some business with a hot little number called Bubbles. Bubbles had come to me because she’d been getting a lot of obscene phone calls. You know the kinda thing — heavy breathing, lewd suggestions. The poor kid couldn’t take it any more. So I agreed to stop phoning her. Besides, my phone bill was gettin outa hand and I had to economize. Bubbles had just left when this other dame walked in. She was built like a brick chimney and she had ‘Class’ written all over her.

That was where the femme fatal would slink on, dressed to the nines and with the word “Class” actually written all over her clothes and body.

Tait rolled back giggling in his chair. Yes, he’d got a sense of where the whole thing could go.

“Are you Mr Joe Filthy?”

“Sleazy. The name is Sleazy.”

“Oh I beg your pardon. I’m terrible with names. I just knew that yours was something disgusting.”

“What’s your problem, toots?”
“I’m not sure where to start.”
“Yeah, that’s a problem.”
“No, I mean I’m not sure where to start telling you about the problem.”
“Try the beginning.”
“These are delicate matters, Mr Slimy.”
“Sleazy. The name is sleazy.”
“I’m sorry.”
“Don’t be. Just lay it on the line, sister. What’s eating you?”
“I’ve come all the way from England and there’s something I need to know.”
“So what is it?”
“Do you mind if I smoke?”
“You came all the way from England to ask me that?”
“No, I wanted to ask whether you’re discreet.”
“Am I discreet? Listen, toots, I deal with eight million secrets in the naked city. I walk the twilight zone of the neon jungle, and I step over a pile of broken dreams on the sidewalk of life. That answer your question?”
“No, I want to know if you’re discreet.”
“This dame was startin to get under my skin. But I was putting two and two together and I had a strong hunch that she was an idiot. Then again, maybe she just had jet-lag. Okay, sister, let me ask you a question.”
“Yes?”
“Do you need a dick?”
“Pardon?”
“A gumshoe, a shamus, a private eye.”
“Oh yes, that’s why I came from England, to hire the best private detective in New York.”
“I see. And you came straight to me.”
“No, I went to the best private detective in New York, but he wouldn’t take the case.”
“So then you headed straight to the second-best private eye in New York?”
“Yes, but he wouldn’t take the case either.”
“How many private-eyes you been to, sister?”
“Forty-seven! Oh you must help me, Mr Putrid!”
“Sleazy. The name is Sleazy.”
“I’m sorry. I just can’t think straight anymore. You see, I’m being blackmailed! Yes, blackmailed! Blackmailed, do understand! Do you know how sordid blackmail is? How
blackmail eats away at the very nerve-centre of one’s being? Do you have any idea of what its like when all you can hear pounding in your head day and night is that terrible word blackmail, blackmail, blackmail?”

“The dame wasn’t makin much sense, but in my business you develop an instinct and I had a strong hunch that this case involved blackmail…”

Time had sped away, as it always did when he was in the flow of his work.

He was leaning back in his chair, re-reading what he’d done so far and giggling over it yet again. Tait liked what he thought of as “shameless” comedy, the comic mode that isn’t afraid to be corny and vulgar and trot out the hoary old gags for the umpteenth time. That’s why he always loved the Carry On films and that wonderful team of comic actors who put them over.

A quick thought came to him and he suddenly straightened in his chair to focus on it: the Carry On people were true counter-revolutionaries because they dared to mock the one thing that was held sacred in the modern world — the claim to sophistication. The Regime of modernity had been that of intellectuals – from Luther to Lenin, as Mike Kieslowski always put it, and from Puritans to Pol Pot – and in the end its claim to power was the intellectual’s claim to have a more subtle and complex understanding than that of the common herd. It was this pretension that underpinned the Dictatorship of the Enlightened and sowed the killing fields with corpses.

“Low” comedy was a challenge to that claim. It asserted a whole teeming reality that didn’t depend on sophistication and didn’t give a stuff about it. It held some part of the line against the Great Commissariat, and it did so with winks and nudges and with its trousers falling down. It must have been that way since Aristophanes, Tait realized. The only thing that was new in the modern age was the fact that the commissars’ power to do mayhem had grown out of all proportion.

He felt the excited tingling that meant there was a poem to be got out of this. He quickly got the key formulation down on paper: Pratfalls are counter-revolutionary. In that form it was ready to be pinned on the Blue Board to await its turn to be worked on.

There came a knock at the side of the cabin and a voice called out:

“Hoy, are you fornicating with the Muse in there?”

Kelvin was always wary of interrupting Tait’s work time.

“Fancy a cuppa?” Tait asked as he unlatched the flyscreen door and held it open.

“I’ll just have a quickie.” Kelvin said.

“There’s always a quickie here for you.” Tait replied.
“Here’s your whatsit,” Kelvin said, putting a small item on the kitchen table and sinking into a chair with a groan. He had got fatter and was now in a constant struggle with his weight. His hair was no longer purple but a lurid green and he now had a ring through his eyebrow as well as the one through his nostril.

The item on the table was a bulb for the brake-light on Tait’s little motor bike. The old bulb had fused and Tait had been reluctant to ride to town for a replacement in case he was noticed by the cops. And the motor-cycle place was on the industrial estate on the other side of the river and a bit inconvenient to get to on the bus.

“So, now I can ride forth without fear of the fuzz.”

“You could’ve risked it before,” Kelvin said. “You’re excessively law-abiding.”

“That’s from knowing the Regime. You thwart it by not giving it any openings.”

“In other words, by being a kiss-arse.”

“We’re all kiss-arises now. That’s what modernity has done to us.”

“Don’t get on your trolley about all that, puhleeeze.”

“What’s the matter? You look a bit down. How’s the shop going?”

“Just paying its way.”

For the past year Kelvin had owned a record shop in the Turrawong Plaza complex. He took a gloomy pleasure in the fact that his shop was directly over where the front stalls of the old cinema had been. The ghost of his lost young self was down there somewhere.

“And how’s Anthony?”

“Rude.”

“That’s nice for you.”

“No, I mean rude in a bad way. Rude to customers. It’s because he’s getting fed-up.”

Anthony was Kelvin’s lover, and his employee at the shop.

“Why’s he fed-up? Have you been rubbing him the wrong way?”

But Kelvin looked genuinely sad.

“Why is he fed-up?” Tait asked in a serious tone.

“Well, I’m only guessing, but maybe he’s sick of being tied to a mountain of whale blubber.”

“But you’ve always been like that, though I wouldn’t have put it so cruelly myself.”

“No, you’d have said walrus blubber.”

“I’d have said porpoise blubber. That’s blubber that’s high-toned and rather dashing.”

“Not beautiful sensitive dolphin blubber?”

“Let’s not get carried away.”
“My soul is crushed.”
“But Anthony has only ever known you well-upholstered. Why should your weight put him off now?”

“Who can tell what goes on in the minds of these poofs?” Kelvin sighed.
“Bring back the lash, I say.”
“String ‘em up.”
“Six months in the army is what they need.”
“That’s too good for them.”
“What do you suggest?”
“Hand them over to me. I’ll take them into a sound-proof room where no one can hear them moan.”
“You’ll give them a good going-over?”
“I think I can guarantee that.”
“I salute your moral fibre.”

They sipped their tea and Tait told him about The Maltese Mouse.
“Let me read you what I’ve done so far,” Tait said, going to fetch the pages. He would never have read an unfinished poem or short story to anyone, but a comedy piece for the Players was a mere piece of frivolity.

He read it through, doing the hard-bitten Bogart voice and the breathy whisper of the woman.
“Its classic Tait,” Kelvin pronounced.
“Oh dear, I’d hoped it was better than that.”
“Will you play the detective?”
“Depends who’d playing the femme fatale.”
“Don’t worry, it’ll be Frannie.”
“You think she’ll fancy it?”

“She’s married to a hostile moron and has two squawking brats hanging off her. She’d fancy swimming backwards up the Limpopo if it got her out of the house.”

“She’ll get the usual flak from Electro.”

Electro was their name for Craig. They called him that because of him being an electrician, and because Kelvin reckoned he was more like an electronic robot than a real person. He reckoned that if you threw a bucket of water on Craig he would crackle and spark and then blow up.

“So, between us girls,” Kelvin asked, “how are the old heart-strings, Francesca-wise?”
“It only hurts when I laugh.”
“Well, it could be worse.”
“Yeah?”
“Yeah, Francesca and Anthony could run off together.”
Kelvin had to go then. He still did deliveries and stuff with the truck. Tait went out to the driveway with him. The noise from the building-site had abated. There was just one workman banging on a piece of metal.
“I think that guy called out to me as I drove in,” Kelvin said from the cab of the truck.
“What did he say?”
“I didn’t catch it – which is always a relief to be able to say – but I’m wondering if he knows my proclivities.”
“Have you ever shown them to him?”
“Do you think I should?”
“He’d be beneath you.”
“Well, I’d have to negotiate the physical arrangements with him. But I do need some form of consolation, since you’ve wounded me so deeply.”
“You aren’t brooding over the porpoises?”
“No, the fact that you haven’t mentioned a part for moi in your new masterpiece. Have I deserved this at your hands?”
“I’m sorry. I’ll handle you more gently in future.”
“But not too gently.”
“No.”
“Have a hint of leather.”
“I’ll wear a belt.”
“Riding boots would be good, and a matador’s hat.”
“Will it take a part in the play to get rid of you?”
“I won’t budge otherwise.”
“You can be Sidney Greenback, the villain of the piece.”
“What can I say? This is so unexpected.”
“Please get off the premises.”
“Give Frannie a hug and a peck from me.”
“I will.”
“Whatever else you give her is on your own account.”
The truck lumbered away, with Kelvin and the workman giving each other a long look as it turned out of the gate.

Tait went down to check his letterbox and the workman nodded a greeting from across the way. He looked young and fit and had tousled hair. Tait returned the nod. He took the one item of mail and walked back up the driveway and round to the lake side of the cabin out of sight.

It was a letter was from Canopy Press and contained the first sales figures on his book. Total sales for the first half-year had been two hundred and twelve copies. They’d been hoping for several times that number. And of course there was no cheque enclosed. The advance they’d paid him had been a mere token sum, but even that pittance hadn’t yet been covered by sales. He leant against the wall of the cabin and closed his eyes and concentrated on the touch of the breeze on his face. He had to take things in the right spirit. Poetry was a mug’s game. He’d known that.

He saw the dog Roscoe coming and went inside. He didn’t feel like being chatty with the Ellicotts just now.

* * * *

Tait was on the train to Castleton, to have his reporting session with Bristol Dick and then go to see the play *Equus* that night with Clarion and Lance Lassiter and one or two other people. He was very keen to see that play. He’d heard that it was beautifully written and from what he knew of the plot – a disturbed youth commits a bizarre crime and lands in a mental institution – he thought it might illustrate aspects of his own experience. He sat staring blankly at the landscape, hoping the play would be as good as he’d heard. He hoped he’d get some kind of charge or lift or input from it, something to counteract his glumness about the poor sales of his book.

In his pocket was the latest note from Mike Kieslowski. Mike had also had his sales figures from Canopy Press and his book had sold over a thousand copies. Tait was pleased for him, pleased that at least one of them had something the public wanted. Of course Mike had been far more energetic in promoting his work. He had targeted the Polish clubs and organizations in particular, sending them flyers and explaining about discounts on bulk purchases of the book, pointing out that it contained his prize-winning sequence about the Warsaw Rising. Stuff like that. His parents, too, had networked on his behalf.
What was touching was that Mike always mentioned Tait’s book to these Polish groups when he was plugging his own. It didn’t help the sales, but Tait was grateful for the gesture. Even if Tait had had an ethnic community of his own to fall back on, he was a total twerp at self-promotion. It even embarrassed him when a couple of people at the Players said they liked his book and asked him to sign their copies. He wished he was more like Mike. Of course the key factor was that Mike saw himself and his work as part of a much larger agenda. In that sense he could be quite impersonal about it. He could plug his own book so hard because he saw it in the context of the Cause that was always there to be served.

Mike was like that, Tait supposed, because he’d had loving parents who had taught him from the cradle that he was heir to an heroic legacy. For Mike the Cause had always been incarnated in flesh-and-blood as well as in song and story, in daily life and actual people as well as in patriotic legend. Tait had a sense of the Cause too, but he had come to it so late and along so many roads of loneliness and self-doubt that there was always some-thing maudlin and ghostly in it. With Tait it was too much a matter of being alone in the night, two-thirds pissed, listening to laments on a record-player.

At the Probation Service a woman told him that Bristol Dick wasn’t there. She led him into another office and motioned him to a chair, then sat down at her desk facing him. Her name was Deirdre, and she seemed to have an Irish accent.

“Richard is just a bit unwell,” she said. “He’ll be back on deck very soon, I’m sure. Certainly by next month.”

“It sounds fairly serious.”

“Not that I’m aware of.”

“You said he could be away for a month.”

“No, I meant he’ll be here for your next reporting date, in a month. You see Richard monthly, don’t you?”

“No, fortnightly.”

“Ah,” she said, sounding slightly surprised.

“What?”

“Normally, by this time, you’d be on a monthly reporting basis. You’re a long way into your five-year Licence period, aren’t you?”

“Yes, one year to go.”

“Do you and Richard prefer the fortnightly chat?”

“Not especially. I wasn’t aware that it could be monthly.”
Deirdre looked slightly awkward, as though she’d unintentionally meddled in matters that weren’t her business.

“Ah well, you can ask him about it, if you like,” she said, the Irish accent more obvious now in the way the stresses fell.

“Do you know him well?” Tait asked.

“Not well at all,” she said. “I’ve not been all that long in Castleton. But you’ve been seeing him for a long time?”

“The whole four years.”

“Ah well, you’ll have settled into an easy way of things, the two of you.”

“We’ve learnt to cope with one another.”

“Good.”

“He’s very correct.”

“So I’m led to believe.”

“Punctilious is his middle name.”

“Is it now?”

“Yes, and he’ll never forgive his parents for that.”

“Won’t he now?” said Deirdre, smiling.

“That’s his joke, not mine,” Tait said.

“It’s a grand thing to have a joke once in a while.”

“Yes, and I’m hoping there might be another one before the five years is up.”

“I’ll keep my fingers crossed for you.”

Deirdre and he understood each other.

Tait asked her what part of Ireland she came from and she said Ballybunton in County Limerick. It seemed, though, that there was an age-old controversy as to whether the town belonged in County Limerick or in County Kerry.

“But sure I’ll be a Limerick girl to me dyin day,” she declared, laying the accent on with a trowel. “No matter what them Kerry idjuts blather!”

They chatted on about various things.

She was a type he knew, the type who made Regimic systems almost bearable. He had known a few psychiatric nurses like her and had always thought of such people as having an “Irish” quality, and here was one who really was Irish. The type came out of a history of wars and famines and evictions, out of an endless tragi-comedy of rebels and martyrs and of poets and drunkards and holy fools. That “Irish” type knew how to be pleasantly conversational without necessarily saying anything, how to be quick as a flash on the uptake and yet not
appear to take much notice, how to bend to the force of prevailing power and yet somehow make you feel there was a point at which they would turn and fight to a finish.

Tait remembered moments back in the institution when vile things were happening, and he had seen in the eyes of nurses of that “Irish” type a measureless disdain for the bullies and the bootlicks of this world.

It emerged fully in a young nurse named Erica.

Tait had reported one of the male nurses for bashing a patient. He wasn’t trying to be righteous. It was just that the assault had happened in front of his eyes, and in the very act of punching the victim in the face the male nurse had shot Tait a glance of contempt, a look that said: *Well, what do think you can do about it?* So Tait went to the house of one of the doctors who lived on the grounds and reported the matter. Four other nurses had witnessed the event, but only Erica had corroborated Tait’s account. Of course that made her a marked woman and she had to transfer to another region. But she conducted herself with a sort of gallant fatalism, looking her enemies in the eye when she had to, and never wavering.

Yes, Erica was “Irish” all right. She was like someone who had always known that being a halfway decent human being could bring you to the gallows, and that then there’d be nothing for it but to cut as brave a figure as you could so as not to shame your friends and ancestors. It was the spirit of people like John MacBride, who was one of the leaders of the 1916 Easter Rising. He had refused a blindfold in front of the firing-squad, and had said to the priest who was there: “*It’s not the first time I’ve looked down their guns, Father.*”

Tait had seen Erica on her last day before leaving. She was walking down a corridor past several hostile staff members. He saw her from behind, slim and neat in her uniform, and heard the brisk sound of her shoes on the polished floor. She had a beautiful way of walking and Tait had often felt stirred by it. She went past the hostile staff-members with faultless poise. That image of Erica in the corridor had remained vivid for him, an image of bravery and eroticism together. For reasons he didn’t altogether fathom at the time, it struck him as a classic “Jacobite” image. Then years later he had read a book about what some scholar called “the strange world of Jacobite minstrelsy.” One feature of that world was, “the thoroughness with which the power of Eros has been diverted into a political channel,” the way in which “legitimist sentiment adopts the language of the love lyric.”

Reading that had brought the image of Erica back with renewed force, and Tait had felt the satisfaction that comes when something you had comprehended by pure instinct turns out to be right.
That “Irish” quality was the Jacobite outlook that knows the world is falling away in disaster and yet equally knows that if given half a chance it will blossom back into life. The “bravery” is in facing the disaster, and the “eroticism” is all that inherent power of renewal.

Yes, Deirdre and Tait understood each other.

“I’ve read your book,” she said, towards the end of their chat.

“Really? Then you belong to a very exclusive group.”

“I’m glad to have had a chance to meet you.”

“I’m glad too.”

They looked at each other.

“And what did you think of it, the book I mean?” Tait asked.

He wouldn’t normally have asked anyone’s opinion of his work, but he knew Deirdre’s response would be worth having.

“Loved it,” she said quietly, in a way that conveyed a whole considered assessment. “Just loved it.”

* * * *

By the evening the air was cold and stars winked in the sky. Clarion’s house felt snug and warm. Lance Lassiter was there with one of his current lady-friends, Leah. They were coming to see Equus too. Leah was a buxom woman with unruly red hair and blazing red lipstick and big flashy ear-rings. She was a chatterer and seized on Tait to talk to, but she seemed a bit ill at ease. Lassiter sat silently with Chieftain beside him. He was idly stroking the dog’s ears and staring blankly. No one dared speak to him in case the Bard was in the misty realms of inspiration. Leah kept glancing across at him as if to read his mood. Clive and Marian were mostly out in the little kitchen, talking softly about their own matters while they prepared to serve up the lasagne.

It was a tight squeeze with five of them in Clarion’s small sedan. Leah was in the middle of the back seat, with Tait and Lassiter on either side. Leah’s thigh was pressed against Tait’s and whenever the car turned a corner their upper bodies touched a little also. It felt pleasant. The same contact must have been occurring with Lassiter on her other side. Tait noticed that she put her hand on Lassiter’s knee two or three times, then took it away when there was no responsive touch in return.

They parked on the campus and walked to the Student Union building. They were to meet Tim Niblett in the bar for a quick drink before the show. There was someone with him. She
was slightly-built, had crew-cut hair, and wore black jeans and a leather jacket. She looked like a juvenile delinquent from a 1950s movie. Niblett introduced her as the new Senior Lecturer in the English Department. She had only just arrived from interstate.

It was the Toxic Razorblade herself, Sabina Sharpe.

Well, thought Tait, this’ll be something to tell Mike, and Jimmy too.

He briefly shook hands with her when his turn came.

She hardly spoke as they had their drink. Clarion and Tim Niblett kept the conversation going, with Leah trying to be sociable whenever she could chime in with a comment.

When it was time for the show the seven of them strolled up the path towards the Drama Department theatre and Tait found himself between Leah and Sabina Sharpe. Leah asked the new arrival about her first impressions of Castleton and Tait listened carefully for the reply, wanting to get a sense of the creature’s tone and manner so he could give both Mike and Jimmy a full report. Sabina praised the city’s beachfront and the famous Art Deco baths.

He had expected her to sound the way a scorpion would if it was human-sized and spoke English. But her voice was surprisingly normal.

When they took their seats in the theatre, Tait again found he was between Leah and Sabina. He didn’t mind brushing elbows with Leah, but it was off-putting to think he’d have to be that close to the enemy all evening. She had a copy of the program and when she’d glanced over it she politely offered it to Tait. He didn’t want to read it in case there were comments that would spoil the play for him. This was a university production and the program was likely to be full of academic jargon and political crap. But he took it and pretended to glance at the contents.

“Have you seen this play before?” she asked.

“No,” he said. “Have you?”

“I saw it in New York,” she said. “Or half-saw it, I should say.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, I was actually quite ill that night and couldn’t concentrate on it. I shouldn’t have gone. They had to rush me home at the end.”

“What was wrong?”

“Pleurisy, basically, from being constantly wet and cold for about a fortnight.”

Tait would’ve asked why she’d been wet and cold for a fortnight, but the theatre began to darken.

*Equus* was the most rivetting thing he’d ever seen or heard on a stage. When they came out into the lobby at interval he stood apart from the others because he wanted to brood on what
there’d been so far. The pretentious comments he was hearing grated on him, so he went outside into the cold night and stood looking up at the stars, full of that humility that comes from encountering talent much greater than your own. It was like the first time he’d read Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and was filled with gratitude that such art and insight existed in the world.

“The stars are so bright,” Sabina said, behind him, then broke into a hacking smoker’s cough.

He wanted to feel hostile at her intrusion, but somehow didn’t. He turned and faced her. Her slight build, her outfit, and the rather defiant way she held her cigarette made her look about sixteen, like the 1950s delinquent trying to seem tougher than she felt. And because Tait’s mind and heart were full of compassion for the plight of the youth in *Equus*, some of that feeling spilled over.

“So,” he asked. “Why had you been cold and wet for a fortnight in New York?”

“Oh,” she said, trying to get her breath fully back after the coughing. “An episode of unrequited love.”

“Yes?”

“The sort of thing that, when you look back on it, you can hardly credit how bizarre your behaviour was, that you were virtually certifiable.”

“I think I know what you mean,” Tait said.

“Yes, you would,” she replied.

“Sorry?” Tait said, wondering if he’d heard correctly.

“You’d know about that sort of distress.”

“Would I?”

“I think so.”

“Why would you think so?”

“Because of your history, and the preoccupations that surface in your work.”

“You know my work, do you?”

“Contemporary Australian poetry is my field. Besides, I’m interested in poetries of resistance.”

“Resistance to what?”

“To whatever needs to be resisted.”

Tait was confused. She was talking like a sensible person. He was about to plunge in and ask her about her toxic review of Mike Kieslowski’s poem on the Warsaw Rising. That was the poetry of resistance if ever anything was.
But just then the bell sounded in the lobby.

When they came out at the end Tait was too moved and shaken by the play to want to talk to anyone or do anything except go home to the cabin.

As they all walked towards the car-park, loosely strung out, he became aware of a whispered argument behind him between Lassiter and Leah. Lassiter had a peevish, accusative tone and Leah was telling him not to be ridiculous. The whispers got louder and he could hear Leah defending herself. “I didn’t choose the seating arrangements in the theatre,” she was saying. And then it was: “Its only a small car. How can I avoid pressing against him?”

Tait realized that Lassiter was accusing Leah of flirting with him, or making a play for him, or something. How paltry a concern that was, Tait thought in a kind of wonderment, after the play they had all just watched.

At the car-park, Niblett and Sabina Sharpe said goodnight and went off to their separate vehicles. The rest of them squeezed into Clarion’s small sedan. There was a cold silence in the back seat as they drove and Tait asked to be let out at the first railway station they came to.

Clarion and Leah bade him goodnight, but Lassiter looked the other way and said nothing. Tait had a long wait for his train, but he didn’t care. He sat out under the glimmering stars, not minding the chill of the air. It had been one of those days when too much had happened. Typical, he thought. A hundred days go by with too little stimulation, then it all comes at once and you struggle to take it in.

He brooded on *Equus*. It seemed to him that it had made a profound point about the disenchantment of the world, and about how the harm of that comes to each person in their own way. One way was shown in Alan Strang, the isolated youth driven to invent his own dangerous delirium of the sacred. Another was shown in the rational psychiatrist Dysart, stripped of the sacred by modern intellectualism. The shrink is bound by his job to render Alan Strang as bereft as he is himself, and he can see the cruel dilemma. For his own good the youth has to be “cured,” has to be made puerile, has to be turned into that empty modern thing, a stakeholder in wellness. Aware that he must carry out a kind of maiming, the doctor asks in anguish: “Can you think of anything worse one can do to anybody than take away their worship?”

The task in life, Tait saw, was to pick the narrow path between Alan’s uncontrolled passion on the one hand and Dysart’s passionless control on the other. *Passionate poise*, you might call it.
He had an intense flash of what passionate poise looked like. It was Erica walking down that corridor and then merging into another figure and becoming a sort of androgynous John MacBride, looking with superb disdain down the guns of the firing-squad.

Chapter Ten

Francesca enjoyed hearing about Equus, and about Deirdre from Ballybunton, and about Lance Lassiter having a fit of jealousy, and about the Toxic Razorblade being the slightly built 1950s delinquent with crew-cut hair and leather jacket.

It was their Thursday shopping afternoon and they were sitting on their bench on the esplanade at The Inlet.

“How do you know her jacket was leather and not vinyl?” Francesca asked with a lifted eyebrow.

“Because I ran my hands over every part of it.”
“And her blouse underneath? What was that made of?”
“Cotton, definitely, same as her bra and panties.”
“You’re positive?”
“I took my time making sure.”
“So you could let me know?”
“I felt I owed you that.”
“You were a busy boy that day. Let’s see, there was the buxom Leah…”
“The lean and mean Sabina.”
“Deirdre with the Irish eyes.”
“They were the pick of that day’s bunch. The other half-dozen aren’t worth mentioning.”
“What do you think Sabina meant about the ‘unrequited love’ thing in New York?”
“And being cold and wet and getting pleurisy?”
“Yes.”
“This is the picture I get,” Tait said. “She’s an intense lesbian and falls madly for this New York woman. The woman doesn’t respond, being repelled by Sabina’s visible edge of craziness…”
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“They were the pick of that day’s bunch. The other half-dozen aren’t worth mentioning.”

“What do you think Sabina meant about the ‘unrequited love’ thing in New York?”

“And being cold and wet and getting pleurisy?”

“Yes.”

“This is the picture I get,” Tait said. “She’s an intense lesbian and falls madly for this New York woman. The woman doesn’t respond, being repelled by Sabina’s visible edge of craziness…”
“Sabina begins to fixate.”
“Stalks the woman in all weathers.”
“Keeps vigil outside her apartment.”
“Not eating.”
“Not sleeping.”
“Getting loonier by the day.”
“Plotting desperate measures.”
“You don’t mean…?”
“Yes. There she stands in the alley across from the apartment building, six inches of snow piled on her head and shoulders. Her teeth chatter but a mad glow burns in her eyes…”
“As she compulsively fingers something in the pocket of her jacket.”
“Pray god it isn’t what I think it is!”
“Yes, a cut-throat razor!”
“Tragic, just tragic.”
“And the murder was never solved.”
“The New York police still have the remains in a body-bag.”
“A hundred small bags, actually.”
“Should we notify them?”
“We owe it to the victim.”
“But then again, did she really deserve to live?”
“Spurning our friend Sabina like that.”
“Stuck-up cow.”
“I’d have done her in myself.”
“Let’s tell Sabina we know all about it, share the burden of this terrible knowledge.”
“Good idea.”
“Except…”
“What?”
“Sabina would then know that we could destroy her at any time.”
“Of course. There’s only one way she could ever be safe…”
“She’d have to silence us for good.”
“With that same razor.”
“Which she keeps exquisitely honed.”
“I think, honey-pie, that we need to keep this whole matter under our hats.”
“I agree, my sweet.”
They headed up to the plaza after that. The joking had taken the edge off it, but they still felt miserable about all the things they weren’t able to do together.

He knew that seeing *Equus* would’ve been even better with his true love beside him.

* * * *

Mike was interested to hear that he’d met the dreaded Sabina Sharpe, but sounded a bit impatient with Tait’s comment that she’d seemed surprisingly normal.

“Of course she’d seem normal,” he wrote back in a long letter. “Did you expect her to have fangs and gnaw at the woodwork? The Enemy *is* normal, that’s the dreadfulness of it. Those whom Solzhenitsyn calls ‘the enemies of the human race’ happen to *belong* to the human race. Do you know the quote?

*During my time in the camps I had got to know the enemies of the human race quite well: they respect the big fist and nothing else; the harder you slug them, the safer you will be.*

“He was talking about the commissars who *create* the camp systems, who would make the whole world into a concentration camp, would set up what Czeslaw Milosz calls the ‘concentration universe.’ Or else would make a vast hive of individual prison cells. I’ve just re-read Milosz’s *The Captive Mind* for my thesis. What you tend to call the Regime he calls the Imperium, and what the Imperium would really prefer, he says, is to have the entire population locked in cells and only let out to go to work and to attend re-education classes.

“It’d be easy if the Sabina Sharpes of this world appeared as freaks and maniacs, and if liars’ noses grew longer when they told a fib, like in *Pinocchio*. But that isn’t the way of it. The commissars are aligned with the zeitgeist, and the power of the zeitgeist is to make its acolytes look good by definition, to look stylish and sexy and insightful and sincere. And it has an equal power to make its opponents look bad by definition, to look brutal or dumb or frumpish or unwholesome. And the total effect is that of Butterfield’s Magnet that keeps *forever pulling at our minds, unless we have found the way to counteract it.*

“Modernity is a swindle and it works like any flim-flam that tricks people out of their life savings. There’s a sucker born every minute and they fall into broad categories. At the bottom are the dills who’ll swallow whatever crap they’re fed as a matter of course. They always
remind me of an O. Henry story about two gifted con-men who agree that selling gold-bricks in Kansas is unethical because its too easy and degrades the swindling profession.

“It’s the higher-order dupes who matter. These are the ones who can be made use of – as in Lenin’s phrase useful idiots. And the more dangerous higher-order type is the one whose moral vanity can be tapped into. That’s the artistic and intellectual sort, the kind you and I have to contend with, the kind we could easily become if we don’t watch out.

“Now that I’m back around a campus I’ve been reflecting on it. The purpose of any modern university is to produce higher-order dupes in large numbers. The Imperium needs people who can ‘talk the talk’ and get degrees and have careers, but who aren’t acute enough to know what’s really going on. It requires the kind of men, for example, who applaud their own vilification by feminists, to show how stylishly ‘unthreatened’ they are. And it needs the kind of women who are too dim to grasp – even after the lessons of the 20th century – that marrying an ideology will demean them a whole lot more than marrying a man ever could. The nub of these people is that they can never see the full implications of anything, not even when the system finally turns its grinders on them. Then they’re like all the ‘good Communists’ in the Gulag — whining that they shouldn’t be there, that there’s been a dreadful error.

“And then there’s the elite group, the small proportion of students who have the true flair of the sociopath. These are the poisonous cream of the crop, the flowers of evil, the new recruits to the Commissariat itself, the ones who do see all the implications and are appalled by nothing. These aren’t mere dupes but the fresh young enemies of the human race. Your nice Sabina Sharpe would have been one of these.

“Their whole mentality is illustrated by the figure named Oreste in Sartre’s play Les Mouches. This figure is arguing with the god Jupiter, whom Sartre has taken care to depict in a very poor light. Jupiter points out the need to have some respect for the forces that keep the world functioning, that keep the very tides and stars and generations going in their cycles. Oreste replies with a declaration which is I reckon is absolutely the credo of the Great Commissariat. (And who would know that credo better than a specimen like Sartre?) Oreste replies: ‘The whole of your universe is not enough to tell me I’m in the wrong.’”

Tait stopped reading for a minute, to let it sink in. Yes, you could feel the infinities of arrogance in those words, and see in them the death-camps and the killing-fields. He took up the letter again.

“Christopher Lasch writes of ‘disillusionment as the characteristic form of modern pride.’ In our time you finesse the dupes by appealing to that pride of disillusionment, which is
connected to the need to appear ‘sophisticated’ and superior. You encourage them to think they’ve seen through all the falsehoods of tradition and convention, that they are among the handful who have what it takes to free themselves from the common herd. That’s the whole agenda of so-called ‘consciousness raising’ — to get people into the hall of smoke and mirrors where there’s no clarity or proportion but only myriad images of one’s own endlessly fascinating self.

“Now here’s where it gets a bit tricky. In actual fact, people should be disillusioned with the world we now inhabit, the world that is being turned to ashes around us. We should all be livid with rage and ablaze with counter-revolutionary zeal. The last thing we need is to go about full of dopey optimism. In that sense, then, the more disillusionment the better, providing it’s the right kind. And the right kind is like the pain that lets you know you are sick or hurt and need to get attended to, so that at some point you can be happy and normal again. That’s a positive thing. What we are up against is the negative brand of disillusionment, the Great Negation itself, the death-creed of an Imperium that doesn’t recognize any such thing as ‘happy’ or ‘normal’ in the first place. That’s the nihilism the commissars use to compound the harm they’ve already done and to keep the destruction going.

“Telling the difference between the two modes of disillusion is actually not too hard. We get our clue from Lasch. In the evil mode it comes as pride, as he said. And I suggest that in the good mode it comes as grief. Also, the evil mode is contemptuous of precisely those things that still somehow manage to survive as our saving graces — things like love and fellowship and honour. The good mode endorses those values and tries to defend them. The good mode is that of Gandalf in The Lord of the Rings when he says to the corrupt and defeatist Steward of Gondor: ‘All worthy things that are in peril as the world now stands, those are my care, for I also am a steward.’

“The full extent of the destructive agenda, by the way, has been described by various people who’ve had the eyes to see it and the heart to be appalled by it. Even way back at the start of the 17th century John Donne wrote:

*The sun is lost, and the earth, and no man’s wit*

*Can well direct him where to look for it.*

*'Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone;*

*All just supply, and all relation.*
And in the 19th century Nietzsche asked: ‘How were we able to drink up the sea? Wipe away the horizon? Unchain this earth from its sun?’

“The fact is, the enemies of the human race will not be content until this earth is a dead black star whirling through an empty cosmos. They are not only murderous but in the long run suicidal as well.

“But to return to the manipulation of moral vanity. What the system aims for is to turn someone first into a deserter and then into a collaborator. Pride of disillusionment first induces the person to shirk his or her natural obligations. Why should I take my turn at sentry-duty, I who have seen through the sham of all such requirements? Why should I defend the city, I who know that the city deserves to be chastised? Then the second part kicks in, the collaborationist logic. Being so far above the fear and ignorance and squalid prejudice of my fellows, I am among the few who could talk intelligently with the other side. I am one of the few who is even capable of grasping what the real issues are. And indeed the other side makes it clear that dialogue with people of my quality is the best hope we all have.

“But by about the end of third year, the student has come to despise his or her own heritage and to admire the forces of chastisement. Moral vanity has made another glib little traitor, another egotistical dimwit hooked on totalitarian chic.’”

Tait paused from reading the letter. The comments about collaboration had touched a nerve. He cast his mind back to that evening of seeing Equus at the campus, and his own surprise at finding Sabina Sharpe not uncongenial. He’d been gratified that she knew his work. He recalled how he had almost brought up the issue of her toxic review of Mike’s poem. He knew what the tone of the discussion would have been like. By that point she had already won him over to some extent. Her approval of his work, in contrast with her dislike of Mike’s, had put them on a certain mutual wavelength, had left Mike outside the loop. He would have defended Mike staunchly, of course. But he would also have tried to be reasonable and meet Sabina halfway. He could imagine himself conceding that, well, perhaps Mike was a touch fanatical in some of his views, that maybe there was a brutal edge to some of his images, that possibly he was not as sensitive to certain nuances as he might be. And even while he was betraying his friend his moral vanity would assert that he was doing his friend a favour by explaining him to the enemy in terms the enemy would appreciate.

Yes, it sidles up to you like an expert swindler, and it knows your vanities like the back of its hand.
Tait had sent Mike the story about the fat girl and had mentioned that one of the titles he’d had in mind for it was “Who Gets Cut by the Cutting Edge?” Mike praised the story but actually seemed more taken with the unused title.

“It could almost be the title of my thesis,” he wrote. “The thesis will set out to examine (or ‘interrogate’ as they like to say now) what I reckon is the essence of the Great Lie or Great Swindle of modernity — the idea of progress. There’s a quote that sums it up, from a writer that Caroline drew my attention to, Simone Weil:

\[
\text{The dogma of progress brings dishonour upon goodness by turning it into a question of fashion.}
\]

And fashion is all about the vanity of sophistication, of being at the cutting-edge. Modernity is the criminal racket by which a relative few manipulate the cutting-edge for their own purposes while the majority are shredded by it in one way or another. And the dogma of progress, of fashion, is so powerful that even when people are bleeding and dying from those cuts they often don’t have a clear sense of what has been done to them.

“The technique of the ‘Big Lie’ is often attributed to Hitler or Goebbels, but it’s been the operating principle of the modern world for 500 years. And the Big Lie is the Big Swindle, the process of taking away what people have and leaving them bereft yet somehow imagining that they’ve gained by the transaction. Goldsmith conveyed it all in ‘The Deserted Village.’ An age-old community is erased so that some Whig oligarch can landscape an estate, or create an artificial lake, or whatever. And the evicted wretches end up starving ten-to-a-room in some city slum. And even then, as often as not, they still half-imagine they’ve been ‘liberated’ from their rural backwater into the excitement and promise of the big world. And if they do have the gumption to take offence at the way they’ve been had, there’s a whole apparatus of police and prisons and hangmen to deal with them.

“The literary critic Lionel Trilling is another one I’ve been reading. Trilling summed a lot of things up when he wrote in respect of Dickens:

\[
\text{The greatness of Great Expectations begins in its title: modern society bases itself on great expectations which, if they are ever realized, are found to exist by reason of a sordid, hidden reality. The real thing is not the gentility of Pip’s life but the hulks and the murder and the rats and decay in the cellarage of the novel.}
\]
That’s what the Great Swindle of modernity is all about. It robs people of *gemeinschaft*, their birthright of genuine human connection, and leaves most of them with little but the hulks and the murder and the rats and decay. And to say that isn’t to unduly idealize the old order of things. It was often harsh to the point of misery, but it was a harshness which bore some relation to the actual nature of human beings. As often as not that can’t be said of the cruelties of today’s existence.

“A simple illustration. Imagine a ‘battler’ couple with six kids. Every day of their lives they do it tough because of the mouths they have to feed. You could give that couple a greatly improved ‘lifestyle’ by taking their kids away. But no couple who still had their proper human instincts would agree to such an ‘improvement’ in their circumstances. Modernity is the deathly process of persuading human beings to accept that kind of deal and to think they’ve gained by it.”

Mike then started talking about “the Pretended Judges” whose court is eternally rigged. Tait knew the reference. It was a quote from King Charles, speaking to the kangaroo-court which condemned him: “I stand more for the liberties of my people than any here who come to be my pretended judges.”

One of the things that made Mike’s letters so stimulating was that you got to know the references and symbols that all his thoughts revolved around. From a single reference you’d pick up on a whole train of ideas and a whole set of connections. It was integrated. It linked King Charles and Solzhenitsyn, for example, in a completely understandable way.

At a certain point the King saw that his enemies could not be appeased, for in the end they had a pathological grievance against the universe itself. They could only be fought. Those Puritan and Roundhead zealots were the early version of Solzhenitsyn’s ‘enemies of the human race.’ When the King accepted their challenge to civil war he was acting on the Solzhenitsyn principle of using the ‘big fist’ because it was the only argument that could impress them. But his military power wasn’t sufficient to bring it off. And because Britain led the way into modernity, Charles’s defeat had consequences for the whole world. Three hundred years later, in far-off Russia, Solzhenitsyn found himself in the kind of world – the modern world of ideological warfare and systematized hatred and murder – that King Charles and his Cavaliers had fought to hold back.

The Jacobites inherited that fight in an era when the odds were so stacked against them that the struggle was as much for the honour of their cause as for its worldly success. And that in itself gave them the moral victory. One side knew that honour mattered in this world, if the
world was to be a tolerable place, while the other side believed only in raw power and that every other value belonged in history’s rubbish-bin.

When Tait viewed it like that, when he saw the bigger picture in the way that Mike helped him to do, he felt he understood how his ancestor fitted in. When Robert Connell stepped forward that day in Preston, to join the cause of King Charles’s great-grandson, he was weighing into the whole 500-year combat of the “modernity wars” — into a vaster struggle than he could’ve realized, although he must’ve had an inkling of it. And next to him that day stood the ghost of the yet unborn Solzhenitsyn, and many others besides.

Tait thought how haphazardly he and Jimmy had taken up those terms QO and Regime back at the institution, and he was struck again by the way it all fitted together. They hadn’t realized they were naming the opposing forces and opposing spirits of the whole modern age. “We were wiser than we knew,” he thought to himself, “which really means there is a wisdom in the world and in the nature of things, an understanding that we tap into without being aware of it.”

That was a thought he clung to increasingly.

But right now he wished Mike would say more about Caroline. He was very curious, but there were only ever brief mentions of her in passing, as in the bit about her drawing his attention to Simone Weil. Tait tallied up what he’d been able to piece together from previous letters.

She was doing a Political Science doctorate on the treatment of civilian populations in modern warfare. They’d met through having the same supervisor, and there was an overlap between their two subject areas. Caroline had made the first romantic moves. They’d first got together one evening in the campus bar to share their views about the systematic destruction of the clan system after Culloden and had found themselves to be of one mind on that. The next night they met again and discussed the American Civil War and Mike knew for certain that she was his kind of girl. It was when she said what utter bastards the Union generals were in their atrocities against Confederate civilians. “We will leave them nothing but their eyes to weep with,” Sherman had said. It was Caroline’s view that Sherman and Grant and others ought to have been hanged as war criminals. And even the sainted Lincoln himself deserved to be strung up for starting a war of aggression that killed over 600,000 people.

Tait read the current letter through to the end.

The last part mostly expanded on the topic of Mike’s thesis, and how he wanted to illuminate the way modernity has been a constant choice between Freedom and Security — with the former almost always winning out over the latter.
“In other words,” Mike said, “the freedom of the predator has almost always been put before the security of the prey. Which ought to tell us something about the predatory nature of the decision-making elites. And when ordinary people are made the helpless prey of more powerful forces, they are debased into mere fodder. And that’s just what we find when we look at the history of modernity — people being made into cannon fodder, factory fodder, ideology fodder, social-work fodder, consumption fodder.”

Yes, Tait could see the whole thrust of the idea. But it was right at the end that he was really bowled over.

Mike was saying how the worst folly was to think that one can ever opt out of the modernity wars.

“Neutrality is never an option,” he wrote, “because the enemies of the human race won’t allow it to be. Trotsky made the point with brutal concision, and coming from the founder of the Red Army and its first Supreme Commissar, it ought to be carved in marble in our minds.”

Tait read Trotsky’s words, then wrote them out in capital letters on a sheet of paper and pinned the paper on the Blue Board. He wanted to see those words every day so there’d be no chance of forgetting them. Here was the voice of the Great Malignancy that will leave you nothing but your eyes to weep with:

YOU MAY NOT BE INTERESTED IN WAR, BUT WAR IS INTERESTED IN YOU.

* * *

Tait was across the road at Hester’s plant and pottery shop. He’d gone to ask if she’d put a flyer in her window for the upcoming Bush Bash.

For the evening’s one-act play – slotted in between the dinner and the start of the music and dancing – Tait was to direct his comedy “The Maltese Mouse.” He’d cast himself as the private-eye Joe Sleazy and Francesca as the femme fatale, with Kelvin as the hulking urbane villain Sidney Greenback. And he had put Narelle into a good part as the busty housemaid who’d been raised on the moor by wolves. He was still looking to fill the other roles. He wanted Megan Marchant to play the imperious eccentric Dame Gertrude Polkinghorne, and everyone was hoping she’d do it. She had a marvellous presence on stage and would be perfect, but nowadays she only acted once in a blue moon and there were rumours that she
wasn’t very well. If Megan wasn’t available, Gillian would step in. That only left the part of Jaundice the butler, and Tait was still tossing up a couple of alternatives.

He felt a tiny bit awkward about asking Hester to put a flyer up, because of the failure of the shop. She had told him a while back that she wouldn’t be renewing the lease. She had sighed that it was all rather a sad flop and money down the drain but there it was. She lived opposite the Ellicotts and told him they’d had their house broken into and were feeling vulnerable. Tait said he should wander down and say hello to them sometime soon.

He was going back across the road from the shop when a utility came along and turned in and parked on Astrid’s Meadow. It looked like the same one he had seen that day when the two men were looking at the shack and taking measurements. Now there were two other men. They were in work-gear and the back of the ute was filled with tools and things.

Tait exchanged nods with the two men as he went up his driveway. He went inside and watched them through the window.

He’d intended to work hard that day on another short story. It was another one about institutional life and he’d been full of vivid mental pictures of the real events it dealt with. But now there was a knot of anxiety in his stomach because of the workmen.

They were marking out a rectangular area around the shack. One of them leant in at the open door of the ute and flicked the radio on and turned it up very loud. It was Ron Dodd’s morning talk-back program and the famous deep voice spread like a fuzzy fog over the whole area. There came the carps and whines of the callers, and the groveling tones of those who just wanted to tell Ron how great he was. It was hard not to have an opinion about Ron Dodd. To some he was the voice of the people and a hero of grass-roots democracy, to others he was an unctuous fraud and a demagogue who incited the rednecks on a daily basis, and by “rednecks” they meant the majority of the population.

Tait felt trapped inside the cabin. Then he remembered that he had a key to the Green Room. He’d been given it for these few weeks because he was directing the play and needed to have access. He would go and get some peace and quiet there. Perhaps he could even get on with his writing, though he knew that was unlikely. His peace of mind was gone. At the very least he could lie down on the Green Room sofa and try to untense himself a bit. He felt exposed as he got the motorbike out of the little shed, then relieved as he sped away down the road.

As he passed the Ellicotts’ house he remembered about it having been broken into, and that made him focus on whether he’d locked the cabin door behind him. He knew he had. He knew he had made especially sure of it. Still he couldn’t rid himself of the idea that it was standing wide open. He had to force himself not to turn and go back. He knew that when he
was feeling unsettled like this he could go back and check the door ten times and it still wouldn’t seem conclusive.

The Green Room was cool and quiet and dim, and full of the familiar smells of paint and make-up and old musty costumes on racks and battered volumes of obsolete plays on the bookshelves. The casts of past productions grinned from the photos around the walls. Tait switched the urn on for a cup of tea and then stood and gazed at Francesca all sexy and tousled and glistening with sweat in her panties and bra in the photo from *French Affairs*. That made him feel somewhat less tense. Then he remembered that they’d be rehearsing the Bush Bash play together for six weeks. That eased more of the tension. Thinking of Francesca helped him feel connected again, reminded him that he wasn’t alone in the world the way he’d been as a teenager. There was a line from the *Desiderata* that he often thought of: “*Many fears are born of fatigue and loneliness.*” How true that was. And the fact that he was aware of that truth, could remind himself of it at crucial moments, showed that he was on a sounder basis now.

He made his cup of tea and stood at the open door sipping it and looking out across the carpark. It was a very large area, a whole vacant lot. The Shire Council staff parked their cars there. The sky had turned grey and a strong wind came up and swirled across the open ground and blew dust against the parked cars. Tait felt dust in his eyes and turned away to wipe them and blink the irritation away.

When he looked again, Megan Marchant was coming across the street from the Council Chambers. She was heading for her car, awkwardly clutching a briefcase and a cardboard box full of files or something. Tait went to give her a hand. He also wanted to ask if she’d made a decision yet about playing the Dame Gertrude part.

“Oh thanks,” she said, letting him take the cardboard box from her. “I didn’t realize how heavy it’d be to bring across.”

She looked a bit drawn and tired.

They went to her station wagon and Tait slid the box into the back.

“The urn’s just boiled,” Tait said. “Fancy a cuppa tea?”

“It would save my life,” Megan replied, relocking her car.

She sat in one of the Green Room arm-chairs while Tait made two fresh teas.

“Such a wealth of memories,” she said rather wistfully, looking around at the photos on the wall. “Some of my happiest times have been in this room and this hall. I was here at the beginning. I was sixteen and played Peter Pan in our first production.”

“I wish there was a picture of that,” Tait said, handing her the cup of tea.
“So do I, but we only started putting the photos up a few years back. We ought to have done it from the start, though where we’d have found space for them all I don’t know. I’m only in one or two of these. I did most of my acting in the early years – all through my twenties and thirties – when I still the time and energy for it.”

“Dare one ask whether you’ll be in the ‘Maltese Mouse’ photo when it goes up?”

“Ah, I’m afraid I’ll have to cry off. It’s a shame, because I’d love to be in a play of yours. But as I said, it’s a matter having the time and energy, and I just don’t have either at the moment. I do apologize.”

“I understand. Anyway, I’ve roped Kelvin in, so you are sort of represented in the cast.”

“I think I’d be right in saying he didn’t need much roping in?”

“Not overmuch, no.”

“That boy’s a born exhibitionist.”

“And Gillian can do Lady Gertrude.”

“She’ll be excellent, as always.”

“Yes.”

“And you’ve secured Francesca?”

“Yes, for the femme fatal.”

“I’m pleased,” Megan said, giving him a look that told him she wasn’t just referring to Francesca’s part in the play. The look meant something like, “I’m pleased the two of you will be having time together, doing stuff together.”

Of course all the Players were aware of the relationship, but it was never mentioned out loud. All theatre groups are full of erotic vibes and romantic attachments, some of them illicit, and there was a sort of etiquette of discretion.

They sipped their tea for a few pensive moments.

“I’ve long meant to tell you something,” Megan said, “so I’ll say it now. You’ve been a real success story here with us, with your acting and writing, the way you’ve settled into the group. It’s been a real satisfaction to me to see it.”

“That’s kind of you to say.”

“As you may or may not know, one or two of the members weren’t exactly thrilled at the idea of you at the start. No names need be mentioned, but you were under a certain amount of scrutiny for a while.”

“Especially at full moon.”

“Something like that. But you’ve answered your critics extremely well.”
“I figured I must’ve done alright. Even Marigold now occasionally gives me the time of day.”

Megan smiled.

“Don’t let Marigold’s manner throw you. She always means well, always. People don’t understand that her slightly forbidding manner comes from being shy and therefore not communicating the goodwill she actually feels.”

“That’s interesting to know.”

“You two have that in common, I think.”

“Not always communicating the goodwill?”

“Yes.”

“You’re probably right.”

“But of course you’ve come out of that shell to a large extent, especially when you perform. I remember our first meeting in the op-shop at day. You were almost gritting your teeth with the effort of being conversational.”

“It showed that much?”

“You have an expressive face, for anyone who takes the trouble to read it.”

“Kelvin told me the same thing.”

“He gets his wisdom from his aunt.”

“But it’s slightly off-putting that I’m so easy to read. I like to think I’m somewhat inscrutable.”

“No doubt you are to many people. But not so much to those of us who know you in the Players.”

“I guess not.”

“I think you must’ve always needed something like the Players – a setting where it was okay to display other sides of your character, to be clownish, or passionate, or whatever.”

“I think that’s true. The Players have been a kind of salvation for me.”

“And for most of us in various ways. It caters to certain human needs.”

“I have a theory about that. It’s that people yearn to be able to trust each other. The whole fabric of human trust is falling apart, and theatre is one of the places where it still demonstrates its necessity. In theatre everybody has to rely on everyone else, and each time they all get through a show together, and through a whole production, the mutual trust is validated.”

“That’s absolutely spot-on, I’d say.”
They were silent again for a minute, sipping their tea and looking up at the photos on the wall, each photo the trophy of another brave little campaign of trusting each other and having it turn out okay.

The wind whirled harder out on the car-park and gusts of gritty air came in at the open door. The sky loomed with dark cloud.

“I’d rather not have to move out of this chair,” Megan said, laying her cup and saucer down, “but I’d better get along.”

She stood up, and again Tait saw that she looked drawn and tired.

“And how is the poor beleaguered Heritage faring, Councilor? It must be a grind, having to battle for every inch.”

“Oh don’t remind me,” she groaned. “It never lets up. Actually, this car-park area is the latest battleground. I can’t say anything more about it, but we may not have an open space here much longer.”

“No?”

“But as to the grind of it all, often the most exhausting thing is getting one’s own side to retain a sense of proportion. Heritage issues can bring out narrowness as well as idealism. Everybody wants the heritage protected, but never from themselves. It’s always the next comer who’s the blot on the landscape, never oneself.”

“I know the feeling well.”

“Thank you for that reviving cuppa,” she said, patting him arm on the arm, and stepped out into the wind, shielding her eyes against the swirling grit. She walked briskly to her car and waved and then got in and drove off.

He dozed on the sofa for a couple of hours and when he sat up he felt peckish and thought he’d wander up to the Plaza and buy a sausage roll. Then he felt a bit nauseous and went off the idea of eating. Then he told himself that he really should eat something. He went out and locked the door carefully behind him.

The streets were still wet from rain that had fallen while he was dozing. He crossed the road and went past the Council Chambers and up the hill towards the shopping plaza. The hill felt steeper than usual. He went into the newsagents and browsed along the magazine racks. He had a poem coming up in *Compact* and wanted to check if the new issue had arrived. He found it and checked the contents list and saw that his poem was there. He flicked to the right page and scanned through the poem to see if there were any misprints or glitches. It was okay. He bought the magazine and slipped it into his satchel. He felt some of that sense of relieved accomplishment that comes with seeing another piece of work safely in print. But it didn’t
feel quite as pleasing as it normally did, and he realized that he felt headachy and weak. He wondered if this was the onset of some terminal illness. That was always his first thought when he felt under par. He took the escalator to the upper level and went to the coffee-lounge. He took out the copy of *Compact* and laid it on the table, thinking that reading something might take his mind off the terminal illness idea. But his eyes felt a little strained and he didn’t feel like forcing them. The waitress came and Tait ordered a flat white.

Where he sat was directly opposite Kelvin’s record shop, and he could see Anthony behind the counter. It was only a small shop and there wasn’t much room to move between the record racks. Tait had once disgraced himself in there by knocking over a display of cassette tapes. Anthony had *not* been pleased.

“Pervin on my boyfriend, are you?” said Kelvin right beside him. “I always knew you’d turn.”
“I fought the urge as long as I could,” Tait said.
“Pervin on my boyfriend, are you?” said Kelvin right beside him. “I always knew you’d turn.”
“I’ll be generous then,” Kelvin said, sinking onto a chair. “You can have him.”
“Oh joy.”
“No, really. We’re finished. He’s leaving the shop at the end of the week.”
“Should I commiserate with you?”
“No, I’ll be glad to see the backside of him, and by that I mean I’ll be glad to see him go.
There’s been rather a delicious development.”
“Yes?”
“Remember that guy on the building site across from your place? The one I said had given me the eye?”
“Yes.”
“We met up again by chance and we’ve had a couple of dates. He’s a real peach. His name’s Rory.”
“I’m happy for you.”
“So what about my offer?”
“Offer?”
“Anthony.”
“I would take him off your hands, by all means, but I don’t know what it might drive Francesca to. These women can get nasty when they’re scorned. I’d better keep up my pretence of being straight.”
“I see your predicament.”
Tait’s coffee came and Kelvin ordered one for himself.
“I was talking to Megan earlier,” Tait said. “Is she alright, these days? She looked a bit wan and weary.”

“She was under the weather for a while and had some tests, but they came back all clear the other day, so she’s starting to pick up again.”

“That’s good to hear.”

“Yes, we were a trifle concerned.”

“She told me she can’t do ‘The Maltese Mouse’ with us. So it’s Gillian into the breach.”

“It’ll be a hoot.”

They chatted for a few moments about Kelvin’s part as Sidney Greenback, and how he should wear a grubby-looking white tropical suit.

“Speak of the devil,” said Kelvin looking up.

Gillian was walking towards them, smiling a greeting. She sat down at their table and the three of them had a long talk about the play.

Being social with Kelvin and Gillian made Tait forget that he was feeling off-colour, but when he went back outside he felt a chill go through him. He went down the hill and into the Library.

There was no sign of Marigold. Maybe she was in her little Head Librarian’s office, having a quick sip of something. It was starting to be known in the Players that Marigold took a drop when she could. Or maybe she wasn’t on duty that day. Tait had meant to give her a particularly friendly nod because of what Megan had said about her meaning well and being shy.

He sat in a comfortable chair near one of the large windows. There was some wan sunshine coming through and the Library was quite warm. He half-dozed for a while, then took out the copy of Compact and browsed through it vaguely. Then he felt like lying down and decided to return to the Green Room.

As he went to leave he caught sight of Czeslaw Milosz’s name on the spine of a book. It was The Captive Mind, the work Mike Kieslowski admired so much. This was a brand-new edition that must only just have arrived. He hurried to the counter with it and then left with the lucky find tucked safe in his satchel.

As he crossed the road to the car-park a cold gust of wind came and sent another chill through him. He went into the Green Room and closed the door behind him and lay down on the sofa. His head ached and his limbs felt heavy. Suddenly he realized he was coming down with the flu. He felt himself relax. It was always like that. He’d feel ill and imagine it was some deadly affliction, and then only after a while realize what it was.
He woke from a sleep and found it was nearly evening. He drank a good hot cup of tea to fortify himself, then rode home on the motorbike, with chills and throbs of headache going through him the whole way.

The workmen were gone from Astrid’s Meadow but the ground had been torn up and in the mud were the track marks of a miniature bulldozer. The old shack had been knocked down and the debris pushed to one side. A square of ground had been dug out and made ready for concreting.

Tait went inside and straight to bed.

* * * *

He was sick for three days.

He slept or drowsed for long periods in his clothes with the doona pulled up under his chin. Mostly he was bathed in sweat and reeked of the eucalyptus rub he smeared on himself. When he wasn’t on his bed he crept about in the cabin, wheezing and coughing and taking aspirin for his headache. He drank lots of tea to keep his fluids up and made the odd piece of toast when he became aware of the need to eat. Every few hours he took a swig of whisky – to give the germs a good hit, he told himself – until the bottle was empty. Now and then he was aware of the pelt of rain on the roof.

He spent the first night and day feeling like death warmed up, but by the second day there were times when he felt unusually vivid in his mind, as though his imagination had been intensified to make up for the clogging of his physical senses. If he thought about a colour, for example, his whole mind felt suffused by that colour. It was as though he could smell that colour in his head, and hear it, and feel its texture. He got out the photo of Francesca on her wedding day, the one of her alone against the background of the flowery vine on the fence. The deep red of the flowers and the black of Francesca’s hair seemed to pulse with warmth and life, as if by some spell the little square of photographic paper held the real flowers and the real woman, as though Francesca might blink at any moment, or a breeze ruffle the petals. He thought of those tribes who are said to believe that having your photo taken means being magically taken into the photo, having your soul captured. It was like that, except that this was a life-affirming spell rather than an evil one.

Tait had never tried dope and had no inclination to, but he often wondered whether the feeling it gave you was like this peculiar vividness of being unwell. He remembered the time years ago when he’d been in that vivid state and had read The Tempest. For two mornings he
sat out in the fetid yard of Ward 6. It was spring and there were fresh daisies in the grass beyond the wire fence that was topped with barbs. The trees across the way glistened with light. All around him in the yard were crazy men wrestling with demons, but Tait was in a state of mild ecstacy, the language of the play working on him like an elixir. Certain passages nearly made him swoon, and none was more apt than the speech of Caliban’s beginning:

*Be not afeard, the isle is full of noises,*  
*Sounds, and sweet airs,*  
*that give delight and hurt not…*

Tait had never had the experience quite as richly again, but a year or two later he read Hesse’s novel *Steppenwolf* while coming out of a bout of flu. It was a phrase from that book that gave him the term he sometimes used for the peculiar vivid mood. He thought of it as the “magic theatre” of the senses.

Now he read *The Captive Mind*. Sometimes he read a whole chapter in between his naps on the bed, other times he read a line or a paragraph over and over, savouring the thought and the language. The book was blunt and furious and polemical, and yet the mark of the great poet was there too, obvious even in the translation from the Polish.

Much of the reading was at night and when Tait felt especially moved he would stand out on the little porch with his doona round his shoulders and gaze at the stars visible in the gaps between long banks of cloud. He was pierced to the heart, for example, by the description of a young woman running down a Warsaw street during the war, and how, when the bullets hit, life and death mingled in her for one moment of amazement before she fell to the ground like an empty rag.

Gazing at the stars, Tait reflected on the distance from the Warsaw Rising to this cabin on the other side of the globe half a lifetime on. Mike Kieslowski’s parents had known Milosz back then. They’d only known him slightly and briefly, but in circumstances where you packed five years of familiarity into five minutes because you might all be dead very soon. And the link to Mike’s parents felt like a line of connection to himself.

A page or two into the book Tait had begun jotting down quotes, but soon gave up because there was a flash of brilliant insight in almost every paragraph. On every page he found things like this:

*Nothing evokes such horror in the land of dialectics as a writer*
who depicts man in terms of elemental forces of hunger and love.

Or this:

He perceived that he had blundered into falseness by living in the midst of ideas about people, instead of among people themselves.

Or this:

They have set out to carve a new man much as a sculptor carves his statue out of a block of stone, by chipping away what is unwanted. I think they are wrong, that their knowledge in all its perfection is insufficient, and their power over life and death is usurped.

Near the end of the book Tait found something he knew would be part of his awareness for as long as he lived. It was where Milosz tells of the incident that helped him to see through and reject the whole vast fraud of the Regime. It was just a fleeting moment in a crowded railway station, but the seeming unimportance of it was part of the point. Tait read the passage over and over, seeing the scene with almost hallucinatory vividness, until he knew it by heart.

The workmen did not seem to have returned. Maybe they were waiting for the ground to dry. Tait had deliberately not thought about what was happening to Astrid’s Meadow. It was too dismaying to cope with right now.

By the Thursday morning he felt he was on the mend. He knew it was Thursday because the rolled-up copy of the *Coast Chronicle* had been thrown onto his driveway. He didn’t feel sick any more, just fragile and bit light-headed. He showered and shaved and found fresh clothes to put on, expecting Francesca and the kids to turn up around one o’clock to go shopping at The Inlet.

When he checked his letter box he found the usual junk-mail advertisements. They were damp from rain having seeped into the box. At first he didn’t see the telegram among the junk-mail and might have thrown it away if it hadn’t fallen when he bent to pick up the newspaper. When it fell he accidentally trod on it and squashed it into the muddy ground. It was damp and came apart in his hand. He held the pieces together and tried to read it through the mud-stains.
It asked him to telephone someone called Lindsay. He didn’t know anyone called Lindsay. He tried to think through his light-headedness. Could it be something about his mother interstate? When had the telegram come? Yesterday? Why hadn’t it been delivered to his door? Maybe they had brought it to the door and he hadn’t heard the knock.

A car horn tooted and Francesca pulled up at the gate. Tait went back and locked the cabin door and then went down and got into the car.

“What the hell happened to the old shack?” Francesca wanted to know.

“Oh I just got irritated with it,” said Tait. “I don’t realize my own strength at times.”

“Are you alright?” she asked. “You look a bit under the weather.”

He explained about having been ill.

“This is why you must get the phone put on!” Francesca exploded. “You could be dying and I wouldn’t know a thing about it!”

“It was just the flu. I’m better now.”

“That’s beside the point, as you well know.”

“I’ll have a think about the phone,” he said in a fragile voice.

Her tone changed to solicitude.

“Poor baby, you sound as if you’ve had the stuffing knocked out of you.”

“Poor baby,” Jesse murmured solemnly from the back seat.

Tait felt his headache coming back and he felt a little carsick. He remembered the telegram in his shirt pocket and told Francesca about it and that he could only think it might be something about his mother interstate. When they stopped at traffic lights she tried to read it, holding the two muddy halves together. Between them they could just decipher the phone number given.

“It isn’t an interstate prefix,” she said. “It’s the city. Ring as soon as we get to The Inlet.”

He rang the number from a phone booth on the esplanade and asked for Lindsay. A voice told him Lindsay was in a meeting but might be free in half an hour. He said he’d ring back.

The day was starting to be sunny and warm. They sat on their favourite bench and looked at the ocean and at the gulls and pelicans. He rang back after half an hour and was told that Lindsay had left the office and would return at three-thirty. After he’d hung up he realized he should have identified himself and asked what it was all about.

They wandered up to the shopping plaza and into the coffee-lounge they always went to. They felt subdued. They sat in a booth, with Francesca clasping his hand and telling him again how it pained her to think of him alone and ill and not reachable.
“Think how you’d feel if it was me alone and sick somewhere.” she said, “Think about that, Mister Too-Stubborn-To-Have-A-Phone!”

That did bring it home to him somewhat.

“Actually,” he said, “it was a profound experience because of a book I read.”

“Well, I would have come and spoon-fed you my chicken soup, and that would’ve been a profound experience too.”

“Works on the kill-or-cure principle, does it, your chicken soup?”

“Absolutely. Patients have turned healthy just at the threat of it.”

He told her about The Captive Mind, and especially that key passage. At the beginning of the war Milosz found himself in a gigantic Soviet railway station, a brutal, inhuman place, garish with propaganda banners and deafened with official rants being blared out of loudspeakers. It was freezing cold and packed with refugees huddled on the marble floors and staircases. Milosz noticed a peasant couple with two children over against a wall. They were sitting on their bundles of belongings. The mother was feeding a child while the father poured tea from a kettle for another.

Tait then quoted the exact words:

\[
\text{I gazed at them until I felt moved to the point of tears. This was an human group, an island in a crowd that lacked something proper to humble, ordinary human life. The gesture of a hand pouring tea, the careful, delicate handing of the cup to the child, the worried words I guessed from the movement of their lips, their isolation, their privacy in the midst of the crowd — that is what moved me.}
\]

“That’s beautiful,” Francesca said.

“Even more so in the original Polish, one imagines. Milosz had an epiphany in those few moments. He saw the difference between ‘a human group’ linked by natural bonds – an entity that’s more than just the sum of its parts – and the poor broken and brutalized ‘crowd’ that modern politics is always trying to make of us.”

“Yes.”

“Milosz was to see five years of Nazi horror in Warsaw, and then the coming of the Stalinist horror. But that glimpse of the family in the railway station had fortified him. That flash of human empathy had more truth in it than a hundred intellectual arguments.”

“Yes, Francesca said, stroking his arm. “And I can see that you’re very moved by it too.”
“It moves me because it’s the perfect illustration of that Irish proverb I love so much: \textit{The only shelter the people have is the shelter of each other.}

“Yes, it is.”

“The proverb is clearer to me now. It makes the same point as Milosz’s anecdote. The difference between the intact human group and the broken crowd. It sums up a whole value-system of life. The good is what seeks to uphold that shelter of each other, and the evil is whatever seeks to tear it apart.”

“Yes.”

“I see that value-system in all the people I’ve come to admire in history and literature. Like King Charles defying those Roundhead thugs and Puritan commissars at his trial. The so-called trial, I mean. He normally had a speech impediment, but at the trial and on the scaffold he spoke fluently, as though inspired. One of the eloquent things he said was that, if the commissars prevailed, the people of England would not be able call their lives their own, or anything that belonged to them. He was saying that ordinary people would have all the shelter of each other ripped away, that they’d be made naked and homeless in the world, that they’d be turned into a mere broken \textit{crowd}. And so it has been.”

Tait would’ve said more, but the baby needed a nappy-change and Francesca had to apologise and take her to the Mother’s Room for attention. He was glad of the timely interruption, for he’d been starting to listen to himself admiringly, to appraise his own rhetorical flourish.

“Just call me Lance Lassiter,” he muttered to Jesse.

“Lass Lassamut,” Jesse replied gravely.

They visited their Unguent shop and Tait minded the kids outside while Francesca browsed for a few minutes. He saw her at the counter buying something but did not see what it was and she didn’t mention it when she emerged. They drifted through the plaza, glad to be together but with little of the buoyancy they normally felt on their special Thursdays.

A voice called out to them. It was Frank Baxter from the Players, the born-again evangelical who loved arguing theology with Gillian. Tait had decided to give him the part of Jaundice the butler in the Bush Bash play. Frank wouldn’t go in plays that had outright foul language or nudity, but “The Maltese Mouse” was all about taking lewd suggestiveness to the edge without going over it. Frank was a stilted actor, but that would be right for Jaundice who was meant to look and sound as if he had a poker up his bum. Frank was pleased to have the part and would have lingered to talk about it. It was clear also that he was noting the fact of them being out together like a family.
“I had a feeling,” Francesca said when he’d gone, “that any minute he’d whip out the Good Book and direct us to some passage on the topic of Adultery.”

“It would’ve been kindly done.”

“With compassion.”

“And charity.”

“And more in sorrow than anger.”

“And without throwing any stones.”

“Except one or two small ones.”

“A few pebbles, that’s all.”

“With just one or two good-sized rocks.”

“Half-a-brick maybe.”

“To make sure we were paying attention.”

“Can’t quarrel with that.”

“We’d be getting off lightly.”

“Considering how wicked we are.”

“How far beyond the pale.”

“Actually I’m too off-colour to be beyond the pale just now. Can I take a rain-check on that?”

“Certainly, but I’ll expect big things when you’re back to feeling yourself again.”

Tait leered and waggled his eyebrows.

“No, correction,” Francesca said. “I meant when you’re back to feeling me.”

“Actually, I think I’d be up to a mild feel of you now, if there was a private corner we could slink into.”

“No, you’re sick.”

“My vigour is returning.”

“No it isn’t.”

“Yes it is. Meeting Frank revived it.”

“Pardon?”

“He reminded me of the attractions of Sin.”

“Oh yes, of course. He has that effect on everyone.”

“Really?”

“Yes, Gillian tells me that every time she has a religious debate with him she rushes home and throws herself on Ian like a carnal beast.”
By the time they’d come out of the supermarket with the bags of shopping, it had gone three-thirty. They saw a phone booth and Francesca took the kids and sat down while Tait went to make his call.

She watched him while he was on the phone, and her gaze searched his face as he walked back towards her.

“What was it, honey? Are you okay?”

“I’m a bit amazed, actually,” he said, sitting down across the table from her.

“Good amazed, or bad amazed?” she asked, taking his hands in hers.

“Good amazed.”

“Tell me.”

“That Lindsay person is a bureaucrat in the State Arts Ministry.”

“What did he want?”

“He’s a she, actually.

“What did she want then?”

“To tell me I’ve won this year’s Governor’s Medal for Poetry.”

“You clever thing!” she cried, squeezing his hands.

“For Good Neighbours. I’m supposed to keep it secret until the press release later this month.”

“It sounds like a huge honour.”

“It’s one of the major awards you can get,” he replied. “And here’s the important bit. There’s seven thousand bucks prize-money!”

“Wow!”

“That’ll pay an awful lot of rent on the cabin.”

“With a lovely new phone installed.”

“So, I live again!”

“I’m so pleased!”

“Let’s go to a café and order up big!”

“Cheese-cake?”

“You got it, babe! We’re livin’ high on the hog now!”

“We can roll in Gluttony as well as Lust?”

“My oath! Why, I’ve got a good mind to shout cheese-cake for everyone in the joint!”

“No, sweetie. Let’s keep all the Gluttony for ourselves.”

“And all the Lust too?”

“I think so.”
“You’re right. We can’t be sure they’d handle Sin responsibly, the way we do.”
“I know. We’re in a class of our own, that way.”

* * * *

Jimmy and Lauren were the only others he told about the Governor’s Medal. They were tremendously pleased for him, despite having a load of worries just then. There was new pressure on Jimmy at work, and their son Toby was increasingly withdrawn. Lauren’s back-trouble was getting worse, and her mother’s drinking was a constant anxiety.

The Governor’s Medal for Poetry was part of the annual State Literary Awards and the presentation was to be at a dinner on the thirty-eighth floor of the State Office Tower in the city. Tait had been sent an engraved invitation for himself and a companion. He took it round to Jimmy and Lauren’s place one evening to show them.

“Obviously,” Lauren said, looking up from her clicking needles, “you’d want to take Francesca if you could. Any chance of that?”

“It’d be lovely,” Tait replied, “but I can’t see Craig standing for it. I’m already getting more of his wife’s time and attention than most blokes would tolerate.”

“Perhaps he just isn’t very committed?”

“Francesca says he is committed, despite the emotional coldness. He’s invested all his hopes into building-plans for the Valley, into starting a new chapter of their lives out there. His parents are dour types who believe in making their own way and in staying aloof. She reckons Craig feels guilty that he hasn’t measured up to that so far, that they still aren’t in their own house on their own land, beholden to no-one.”

“So he puts up with you as a sort of penance?”

“Something like that.”

“And does he assume you’ll just fade off the scene when things are on a proper footing?” Jimmy asked.

“I guess he does. Either fade out of my own accord, or be warned off.”

“Cease your attentions to my spouse, you rotter!”

“It’s all a bit bizarre, isn’t it?” Tait said.

“Don’t kid yourself,” Jimmy cut in. “Compared to what I see every day at work, this triangle of yours is a model of good management. It’s been going on for years now, but nobody’s in jail, or court, or hospital. Child Welfare isn’t coming to take the kids. Craig carries on
breadwinning, Francesca keeps on mothering and housekeeping, you go on writing. Believe me, you’re all doing *something* right.”

“So who do you think you might take to the Awards?” Lauren asked.

“I’ve been thinking. If I can’t take Francesca, I could ask my mother if she’d like to go.”

“What a lovely idea.” Lauren said.

“She’d have to travel from interstate, but it might be the chance for us to get reconciled. Up there on the thirty-eighth floor, among all those bigwigs, she’d see that her wayward son has redeemed himself a bit in the eyes of the world.”

“I doubt you’d need redeeming in her eyes,” said Lauren. “That isn’t how a mother’s mind works.”

“I’ve no idea how her mind works. And I’m sure she’s never had any real insight into mine. It’s as though there was a mix-up at the maternity ward and the wrong baby and the wrong mother ended up together, as though some crucial connection was missing.”

“Have you had huge fights in the past, or what?”

“No, there’s just always been that sense that we didn’t quite belong to each other. Of course I’m very mindful that she gave me enough nurturing to get me through childhood. Even a half-hearted parent does an heroic amount for their kid, and I’d hate to sound like one of those arseholes who denigrate the very people they owe their life to. It’s just that from very early on I was aware of this distance between us. And after I was fourteen and surviving on my own, we hardly ever saw each other.”

“That’s very sad,” said Lauren.

“My mother lost her mother at the age of eight,” Tait went on, “and I’ve often wondered whether she passed on to me her sense of being an orphan, of not having had a full quota of mother-love. I started to think about it a lot when I was in prison, when I looked back over the whole relationship.”

“And as a kid you would have internalized all that as rejection,” Jimmy said. “And that would have corroded everything else. The ability to *trust*, for example.”

“Should I stretch out on the couch, doctor?”

“Pay the fifty guineas first.”

“I’ll owe it to you.”

“You expect me to *trust* you?”

“I’m sorry. Silly of me.”

“Did you ever try to talk to your mother about any of this?” Lauren asked.
“I think I always felt it was futile. And I think I was always vaguely looking for a mother image elsewhere. And a father image too, for that matter. And I had a thing about big sisters. A big sister was the next best thing to a loving parent. I always yearned for a big, tomboyish, capable, protective sister. And when I hit adolescence the sister fantasy sort of merged into a girlfriend fantasy. My ideal, I think, was a big sister you could sleep with.”

“Quick, get on the couch! We’ll waive the fifty guineas!”

“Yes,” said Lauren. “It’s important for your therapy that we hear every detail.”

“O ye Spawn o’ the Pit,” Tait declaimed as Beadle Brimstone, pointing a long Puritan finger, “I’ll nae be ensnared by such jiplets o’ quibicity!”

“What a bummer.”

“And what are ‘jiplets of quibicity’ may I ask?

“I’ve no idea, but they sound filthy, don’t they?”

Tait had never mentioned anything to Jimmy and Lauren about his ancestor Robert Connell, but now he had been reminded of Auntie Annie and what she had told him that day.

“Some time back,” he said, choosing his words carefully so as not to reveal too much, “I had an experience of what they call “anamnesis.” I remembered my Auntie Annie, and something that she said. And I also recalled her motherly manner towards me. Now, when I think about my lines of human connection into the past, I find I think first of Auntie Annie. It’s as though my actual mother is a bit irrelevant, as though she doesn’t quite count in the equation. Does that sound horrible?”

“Horrible isn’t the issue,” Jimmy said. “In the realm of the psyche things can have opposite meanings from the ones we toss around in the everyday world. We have to deal with abominations we aren’t equipped to face in the clear light of day. It’s like having a nightmare. We can’t expect it to be polite and genteel. It isn’t the job of a nightmare to be respectable, but to be helpful to the process, to assist in getting something sorted out.”

Tait felt stirred by the whole line of thought.

“It’s a shame you two couldn’t come to see Equus up at Castleton,” he said. “It was all about these matters. It was about coming to terms with the Nightmare. Learning to trust the Nightmare in a way, so you’re neither too afraid of it nor too seduced by it. Learning how to relate properly to the power of the Abomination. And the suffering that comes of not getting the relation right.”

“Jung said the offended gods return as diseases — or as madness, or nihilism, or servitude to mere things.”
“And *Heart of Darkness* tells us the same,” Tait said. “I see it more clearly all the time. Like *Equus*, it’s a parable of the return of those offended gods.”

“Yes,” Jimmy sighed. “I go to work each day to find out what havoc the offended gods have wreaked.”

“To find who’s been cut by the cutting-edge. The cutting-edge is the arrogance and sacrilege of modernity, *and the gods deflect the cut endlessly back on us*. We’re like people trying to hack our own hearts out with a knife and wondering why we’re in agony.”

They were quiet for a while after that, and there was just the rhythmic click of Lauren’s knitting needles.

“So,” she said, laying the knitting aside to put the kettle on for a cuppa. “Do you think you will invite your mum to the awards?”

Tait shrugged.

“It was just an idea I was toying with.”

Already he was having second thoughts. He was thinking what an ordeal the evening could turn out to be, for both of them. And thinking, too, that it was Auntie Annie who would be there in spirit.

***

The first usefulness of the Governor’s Medal was in relation to Bristol Dick. It was announced to the media a few days before Tait’s scheduled reporting session. It got mentioned on the TV news, and there was an item on the front page of the Castleton paper. And it got some play on talk-back radio. Francesca said she’d heard Ron Dodd defending him against callers incensed about taxpayers’ money being handed to lunatics and criminals.

“But the man did his time,” Dodd declared. “He did the Crime and he did the Time.”

Francesca said he repeated the Crime/Time thing as though he liked the way it rolled off the tongue. Dodd was always yelling for tougher laws and harsher treatment of “crims” and “scumbags.” He had what Tait thought of as the Crack-Down Mentality that only knows one response: to “crack-down” on a situation, to brutalize it into submission. But maybe now and then he knew to play against his own bias so that he wouldn’t seem too stale and predictable.

He’d had some praise for Tait’s work, too.

“I’ve read some of this bloke’s pieces of poetry, and I tell you what, it’s not too bad at all.”

Francesca had carefully memorized that comment, so as to pass it on verbatim. An on-air plug from Ron Dodd was nothing to sneeze at. Advertisers paid a fortune for it. Tait felt a
secret hope that his book might now suddenly become a best-seller. He knew how pathetic that was, but couldn’t help it.

Of course the media vulgarized the news of the award. It was the same old “Would-Be Killer Trades Gun for Pen” stuff. But they did emphasize the Medal’s high prestige, and the fact that it was traditionally presented by the state governor in person. That was the useful thing in terms of the duel he intended to have with Bristol Dick.

They sat across from each other in silence. Neither had mentioned the award.

“So, what’s new?” Bristol Dick asked as though he genuinely hadn’t the slightest idea.

“Anything worth mentioning?”

He had leaned slightly forward over the desk in the way Tait understood so well. That little forward lean was the start position for the python. The python intended to probe the whole Governor’s Medal thing, and Tait’s inner feelings about it, in the hope of eliciting something odd or inappropriate, something to get its coils around.

Tait was sick and tired of this man.

“There’s one thing worth mentioning,” he said.

“Yes?”

“I’d like to change my reporting arrangements.”

“Ah, in what way?”

“I’d like to report less often.”

“Please elaborate.”

“I’ve been coming here fortnightly for four years.”

“But your Licence period is five years. Unless my arithmetic is at fault, that means a year still to go.”

“Your arithmetic isn’t at fault, just irrelevant to the point at issue.”

“How so?”

“I’m not speaking of the total length of the Licence period. I’m speaking of the frequency of reporting.”

“And what might you envisage?”

“I might envisage coming monthly, rather than fortnightly.”

“And you’d phone in on the alternate fortnight, would you?”

“If you insisted, though I’d rather not have to bother.”

“It’s an interesting scenario, but as you would appreciate, these are matters subject to official guidelines and parameters.”
“Of course. And perhaps I ought to acquaint myself more with those guidelines and parameters. I might find that they present no real obstacle, especially to a Licencee with four years of unblemished record in all respects.”

“They might not present an obstacle. It’s something I could look at…”

Just then Deirdre walked past the open door of the office. She paused for an instant and smiled at Tait and waved a greeting, then went on past.

That encouraged him a bit more, since it was Deirdre who’d tipped him off that most Licencees would only be reporting monthly by this stage.

“Yes, look at it by all means,” he said. “But I’d prefer to agree on a new arrangement right now.”

“It’s something we could talk about over the next little while.”

“We’ve been talking for four solid years.”

“Well, I suppose when you put it like that…”

“I’m a bit tired of us talking, if you’ll pardon me saying so. And you must surely have had your fill of my not-too-sparkling company. I think a change to monthly reporting would be just what the doctor ordered.”

Tait’s tone was that of someone on strong ground and in a pugnacious mood. He was the one Licencee in a million who had an engraved invite to the thirty-eighth floor of the State Office Tower, who was having a medal warmed up for him by the state governor in person, and who had been defended by Ron Dodd over the airwaves. The python enjoyed mauling prey, but getting even slightly mauled itself wasn’t any part of its approach. This was exactly like a python in real life: if you were a creature even just a mite too large for it to handle safely it would leave you alone. A python has an exquisite sense of that size equation. Of course it could grab you by surprise one day, or in a weakened condition. You still had to be careful, but you didn’t have to be wholly intimidated. Bristol Dick leaned back from the desk and settled heavily into his chair again. The python had withdrawn.

“Let’s try the monthly arrangement then,” he said.

“Thank-you,” Tait replied. “Can you give me that in writing?”

“I’ll send you a formal letter.”

“And the phoning-in on the alternate fortnight?”

“If you find it irksome, don’t feel obligated.”

“I won’t then.”

“Unless you feel a chat would be helpful.”

“I’ll save it up for the monthly visit.”
He went out into the street and began walking, reflecting that he had broken Bristol Dick’s power and that they both knew it. Unless he made some hideous mistake in the coming months, he would retain the upper hand until the Licence period ran out. But he didn’t feel as exhilarated as he might’ve done. He recalled the ending of Byron’s poem “The Prisoner of Chillon” and how after umpteen years the poor wretch greets his release with indifference, even regret. Tait had discovered that poem in his early days in captivity and used to wonder whether he himself would be like that in the far distant future when they released him, if they ever did release him.

My very chains and I grew friends,
So much a long communion tends
To make us what we are. Even I
Regained my freedom with a sigh.

* * * *

He was going to stay overnight at Clarion’s. Tim Niblett was to write a feature article about him for the Castleton paper’s arty-farty section and the two of them were to spend the next day together. A photographer from the paper would take some shots.

He didn’t have to be at Clarion’s till six, so he went to a movie he had long wanted to catch up with. They were showing Camelot as part of a season of “Classic Musicals” on Friday afternoons. He was deeply moved by it, especially the way the love triangle and the political tragedy were all tangled up. It was like what that scholar had said about “the strange world of Jacobite minstrelcy” where the politics is infused with the force of Eros.

Tait already knew some of the songs from the movie, but seeing them in context gave them a whole new impact. He was especially stirred by Lancelot’s “If Ever I Would Leave You,” with its perfect lyric of four parts corresponding to the four seasons of the year, and by Guinevere’s “I Loved You Once in Silence,” with its circular logic of despair.

He was deeply moved by the final scene, when King Arthur commands the boy Mallory not to fight in the battle but to go home and live a long life and remember what the Round Table
had stood for. Arthur says something about everyone being like mere droplets of water in the sea of time. “But some of the droplets sparkle,” he cries, suddenly filled with joy despite the doom of the impending battle. “Yes, they do sparkle!”

Tait wondered if King Charles had had a redemptive moment like that as he too waited for the dawn to break on the last day. He too had come through many a dire battle to meet his doom, knowing that every value he had cherished and fought for might now vanish from the world. In his own way King Charles was as great a hero as King Arthur, but a hero in the real world where everything is to some degree flawed and ambiguous. Did King Charles gain a glimpse of that sparkle, a moment of joyous recognition that all was not lost and could never be wholly lost? Did he have any inkling that his own courage and eloquence at the end would still move hearts hundreds of years later?

“I am the martyr of the people,” he said on the scaffold. That is, the martyr for the people, the one who had stood against the naked power and ambition of the commissars, the one who had fought to preserve the only shelter the people have, the shelter of each other.

“I go from a corruptible to an incorruptible Crown,” he said, then knelt at the block.

All accounts agree that when the axe fell a dreadful groan of anguish went up from the crowd. In that instant, the people had seen their own doom. “It is not my case alone,” the King had said to the kangaroo-court that condemned him. It was not a single fate that was being decided, but the fate of all, now and in time to come. The people groaned because they saw in that instant that it was all their heads under the axe, and the heads of their children’s children unto the last generation.

Black Elk spoke for them and for himself and everyone when he told of the breaking of the people’s hoop and the blighting of the sacred tree:

\[ \text{The life of the people was in the hoop, and what are many little lives if the life of those lives be gone?} \]

Yes, Tait thought, that was exactly it. Multitudes of individual lives continue, but the life has gone out of those lives.

And yet, and yet, in spite of it all, some droplets do sparkle!

The cinema had been three-quarters full, mainly with old people from the local nursing homes, together with their attendants. These Friday afternoon classics were aimed at the old folks, and it was a way for the nursing-homes to give them a cheap outing and a bit of
nostalgia. *Camelot* had been the last of the season of musicals, after *Show Boat* and *Carousel* and one or two others. The new season was to be “Classic Thrillers.”

It felt familiar, being there among the old folks and their minders. It put Tait back in the institutional framework. The attendants had the psych-nurse manner that Tait knew so well. They tended to talk to each other while the movie was on. They were used to the inmates as a passive flock in the background, beings you talk in front of because they aren’t fully there, or are only there when there’s a problem with one of them. Tait knew there was beneficial side to that. It could give the inmate a certain small advantage. It was a bit like being an intelligent sheep in the flock. You heard all the shepherds’ talk and knew what was going on, but you weren’t required to cope with any of it because you were just a sheep. It created a little tactical space between what you knew and what you did. It was one of those unintentional things that kept the Regime from being a hundred per cent oppressive.

The old people had sat quietly, and Tait had wondered what they were thinking or remembering. *Camelot* wasn’t all that old a movie, so the nostalgia wouldn’t be for the film itself so much as for the subject-matter. When these geriatrics were in their heyday, ideas of faithfulness and honour still contained a gleam of the old authenticity, and so the loss or betrayal of those things could still seem tragic and heartrending. *Camelot* had been made in the 1960s, at the last moment before all of that got wiped away. If people had understood at the time what was being lost they might have echoed the lament of Sir Bedivere at the end of the *Morte d’Arthur*. The last of the knights, he sees the stricken King being taken away to the netherworld of Avalon, and he cries out: “Ah, my lord Arthur, what shall become of me, now that you go from me, and leave me here alone among my enemies?”

When the lights came on, Tait remained seated, to give himself time for his feelings to settle down. He would let the old people go out first. An old chap stood up in front of him, a trim-looking man with silver hair and wearing a tweed jacket with a small white flower in the lapel. Tait must’ve sniffled, or wiped a tear away, or something, for the old chap paused and looked at him. Then he leaned across as though to confide. Tait leant forward and as their faces came close together he caught a whiff of peppermint on the old chap’s breath. Then the chap put a hand on Tait’s shoulder. It was an old man’s touch, weak and wobbly, but there was a firmness of intention there.

“Staunch does it, my friend,” the man said. “Staunch does it.”

Then the old chap drew himself up again and moved away along the row and was shepherded up the aisle by one of the young minders.
When Tait got out in the street he glimpsed the old chap sitting in the back of a mini-bus, staring straight ahead as if in a daze. Then the mini-bus pulled away from the kerb and was gone. Tait wandered through the streets and to the sea front, thinking about the movie and the old chap’s message.

He had a pleasant-enough evening at Clarion’s. Lance Lassiter was there in a mellow mood and they played ‘Pick the Poet’ and drank wine for a couple of hours after dinner. But Tait was tired and went to bed fairly early in the little upstairs room adjoining the front balcony. He slept, but then woke in the wee small hours. He went and sat on the balcony, his head still fuzzy from the wine. There was a cool night-wind that gradually made him clearer-headed and he could see stars over the tops of the houses.

Down on the footpath, a sheet of paper had wrapped around the base of a pole and the wind kept stirring it and flicking its edges, as though trying to dislodge it. Tait watched the little contest, knowing there was a poem there. He wasn’t sure if he should be on the side of the paper that was trying to hold on, or of the wind that wanted to keep things in flow. But then a gust came from a different angle and the paper flapped and blew away. It was never a fair contest. The paper was a single, frail, perishing item, while the wind was elemental and forever.

From a high enough vantage point, Tait reflected, you’d see all the lives of this world as so many little bits of paper taking brief turns to cling against a pole in the wind. And yet those bits of paper have meanings written on them, all those poems and prayers and promises, those insights and invocations that are meant to defy the wind longer than the mere paper can.

That was the point of the clinging-on, the point of the fight to stay in place for another few moments. So that the meaning can be read and remembered. What was the message of the paper Tait had seen from the balcony? It might have been poignant. It might have been profound. He didn’t know, for he hadn’t bothered to find out. The paper had clung there long enough. He could have gone and read it. But he didn’t, and so the contest with the wind had been in vain that time. No doubt it is in vain most times. But it’s those few other times that make up for all the waste and futility.

It was what King Arthur said about the droplets that sparkle. The occasional sparkle somehow redeems it all for everyone. And it was the truth too of the old chap’s cryptic message afterwards: Staunch does it. It doesn’t do it every time, or even very often, but just enough to keep a halfway meaningful world half intact.

Tait got his pen and notebook to jot down the central idea of the poem. As he did so he thought of that night walking along the Valley road, and how he’d suddenly recollected
Auntie Annie’s message. The message had somehow persisted all that time, had clung on like a scrap of paper against a post in a dark and windy street. As by a miracle, Tait had read it before it flapped in a gust and was gone.

That had been one of the rare, redeeming victories of the paper against the wind.

Chapter Eleven

Tait had been meaning to catch up with the Ellicotts after Hester told him about the break-in they’d had. But he hadn’t been going for walks along the lake shore just lately. He was too intent on his writing, and on the Bush Bash production. He kept expecting to see Roscoe the dog come past the cabin, with the Ellicotts not far behind. He’d have a chinwag with them then, he thought. But they didn’t appear.

Mr Dragovic was in his yard as Tait approached. They exchanged thoughts about the weather, then Tait said he’d heard about the break-in.

“They-bastard-shit-better-watch-out-they-come-near-me-for-sure!” Mr Dragovic declared.

“They-want-trouble-I-kick-they-bloody-arses-no-worry!”

He jerked his thumb angrily in the direction of somewhere further along the lake shore. Tait had no idea who he was referring to.

He could see no outline of anyone on the glassed-in back verandah of the Ellicotts’ place, and no-one called out a greeting. He went in at the gate and past the yellow-painted swing and up the back steps.

Mrs Ellicott answered his knock. Through the glass he saw her approaching from the front part of the house.

“We were just talking about you,” she said, ushering him in. “About the lovely big article in the Castleton paper the other day.”

Mr Ellicott and Hester were in the front living-room and Tait sat down with them while Mrs Ellicott went to replenish the teapot and get some more cake. The living-room, like the rest of the house, was a clutter of family photos and faded knick-knacks.

“It’s a lovely article about you, “ Hester said, indicating the paper open on the coffee-table.

“You must’ve been pleased with it. Were you?”
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Tait didn’t especially want to discuss the article, but since it was right there in front of them it would’ve been churlish not to. So he gave them an outline of the day he’d spent talking to Tim Niblett, but keeping it very general and chatty and pleasant.

They’d sat in Clarion’s little back-yard at first, then strolled into the centre of town and sat on the platform of the railway station, then they’d gone to a coffee-shop for another longish while. All the time Niblett kept asking questions and jotting notes and fiddling with a cassette recorder. Tait had talked about his life as a teenager, about stumbling between ill-fated jobs in the bush and in the city, about the world of cheap rooms and boarding-houses, about wandering the streets. He traced the whole process that led to the life sentence and then to the salvation of discovering poetry. And the more he talked, the more things came back to him. He began to see how several of those experiences could be turned into short stories. He had to admit Niblett was good at drawing him out. Once or twice Niblett tried to get him to discuss his poetry in an academic way, but Tait headed him off and brought the topic back to general ideas and broad experiences.

After lunch they’d gone to a park overlooking the ocean, and there the photographer caught up with them. He took photos of Tait leaning against the fence at the cliff-edge, his hair all blown-about and gulls wheeling in the air. Then Lance Lassiter turned up and they took some shots of Tait and Lassiter sitting at a picnic table, supposedly conferring over a poem.

“I forgot to mention that I’d asked Lance meet us here,” said Niblett. “I thought it’d be nice to get a picture of the two of you together. Two graduates of the literary school of hard knocks. The poignancy of the mentor relationship. The poetic baton being passed between the generations.”

Tait wasn’t too keen on the mentor idea. Lance Lassiter had never been his mentor. He’d been well on his way as a writer before they ever met. His initial mentors had been people like Sir Walter Scott, and like ancient Tacitus who had awakened him to the power of language with that one towering sentence: “They make a desolation and call it peace.” And Lance on his part didn’t look too thrilled with the notion that he was handing his “baton” to anyone just yet. But it didn’t seem the time or place to quibble, so they just let the photographer get on with it.

When the photographer had left, Niblett had suggested going for a drink. As they walked down a steep slope of the park, Lance stumbled and fell heavily and lay sprawled on the gravel path. They helped him up. He was quite shaken. He limped as he walked on, and had badly jarred his elbow. Sitting in a pub lounge nearby, he was subdued.
Then he surprised Tait by saying, “You know, I do feel, in a way, that I’m handing things on to you. It begins to occur to one that there has to be a changing of the guard at some point. I used to feel so vital, as though nothing could ever stop me. Now I can hear the slave whispering…”

“‘The slave?’”

“‘In the chariot.’”

Niblett knew what he meant.

“The one whose job is to whisper to the conqueror that he is but mortal?”

“Precisely.”

Lance had spoken in an undertone, with no rhetorical flourish, and Tait felt a rush of sympathy for him. The mane of white hair and the powerful features made you think of a deflated lion.

Niblett looked sympathetic too. He also looked as though he had something to say and was tossing-up whether to mention it now. His gaze was focused on Lance’s dismal expression.

“Listen,” he said, finally, “I’ve been mulling over an idea, and this might be the time to bounce it off you, Lance. Off you both,” he added politely, to include Tait.

“Yes?” Lance asked wearily.

“I’d like to write a pop-opera libretto about the Jumbywollamoks, based on your autobiography. You’d be the central character.”

It was as though Lassiter had had a magic elixir poured on him.

“That’s a most interesting concept,” he said, his voice regaining its full resonance, and giving Niblett his full attention. “Tell me more.”

So Niblett rattled on excitedly.

Tait had to admit it did have possibilities.

Niblett had another commitment at three-thirty and had to go, but Tait and Lance stayed on in the pub lounge, filling out the idea of the libretto and conceptualizing scenes.

“You know,” Lance said expansively as he leant back in his seat, “you and I should go down to Bindaroo sometime. We could spend a few days in the bush. I’d show you over my spirit-country. The old hut is still there, what’s left of it.”

The Bindaroo plateau had been Lance’s inspiration back when he was young and starting to find his way as a poet. His autobiography was full of vivid accounts of it, of nights camping under the stars, of cavorting naked with one or another of the string of girls he took there, each one hailed in turn as the great Muse of his life. And there had been male companionship with Patrick Duhig, the founder and theorist of the Jumbys. There were fine passages about
the two of them at Bindaroo, perched like eagles on some crag, planning the redemption of
the national culture. And there was an inspired account of how Lance had gone there after
Duhig’s death in the boating accident, how he strode alone through the bush in a frenzy of
emotion, declaiming his fallen leader’s poems to the trees and the rocks. However many times
he read it, that part brought tears to Tait’s eyes. He could see it working tremendously well as
a grand scene in a pop-opera.

Later they went round to Clarion’s place. Tait understood that he was the one who should let
slip about Tim Niblett’s great idea, so that Lance could seem modestly indifferent to the
whole matter.

“Yes, the photos are superb,” Mrs Ellicott said, holding the article up to look at it again. “Mr
Lassiter is a striking figure, isn’t he, with that mane of hair and the chiseled features. You
must be proud to have learned so much from him. The article says he was your great mentor.”

Tait sighed to himself. He was to be saddled with that forever.

“That isn’t quite accurate,” he said. “But Lance is certainly a striking figure, as you say.”

“And there’s the excitement of the Governor’s Prize coming up,” said Hester.

They were keen for him to talk about that too. But he wanted to get around to the break-in,
so he could offer his commiserations and leave. He had a rehearsal to get to.

“It gave us a bad feeling,” said Mr Ellicott when Tait brought the subject up. “Not so much
because of the TV and suchlike being taken, but the *intrusion* of it, and the way they trashed
the place. There was a *viciousness* that’s hard to put out of one’s mind. When you’re older
you don’t throw those things off as easily as when you’re young.”

“Mr Dragovic seemed to have an idea of who might’ve done it,” Tait said.

The three of them immediately looked uncomfortable.

“We have an *idea*,” said Hester, “but there’s no proof.”

“A lot of residents along here are uneasy about *certain people*.”

“Which certain people?”

“Well, no names, no packdrill,” said Mr Ellicott, “but that shop isn’t exactly a boon to the
neighbourhood.”

“Which shop?” Tait asked, although he already half-knew.

“On the corner,” said Mrs Ellicott.

Yes, that was the one. It was on the corner a few hundred metres down, next to the garage
where he sometimes got petrol for the motorbike. It had opened up three months ago as a
hamburger joint. It looked unclean and uninviting and Tait had only been inside it the once.
He had also been put off by the brooding Doberman that was mostly chained in front of the
shop, but which sometimes ran loose and had rushed out to menace him a couple of times when he was on the bike.

Tait mentioned about the dog.

“Yes, it’s an unpleasant beast,” said Hester. “But it’s the yobbos who create such an unsavoury atmosphere. They hang around there at all hours. And those kids are a worry, too.”

The Ellicotts nodded agreement.

Tait had noticed a number of feral-looking children around the shop.

He finished his tea and fed a few crumbs of cake to Roscoe, then went back to the cabin to get the motorbike and head into town.

As he approached the corner where the hamburger shop was he saw with relief that the Doberman appeared to be chained. There was a yobbo panel-van parked out front. Tait had seen it there before. Now its doors were hanging open and rock music was blaring out. A couple of youths were slouched against the side of the vehicle and a couple more were sitting on the kerb with their feet in the gutter. They all turned to look at him as he rode by and he heard them jeer.

He was glad he lived far enough up the street to be out of their proximity, but he still had to ride past, and a pissy little motorbike was just the thing to attract their attention. He knew that from experience. Yobbos and dogs appeared to have the same mentality. Anyone tootling along on a bike like his was a provocation to them.

* * * *

The rehearsals of “The Maltese Mouse” were terrific fun, and being the director meant he could do it the way he wanted, the way that was true to his notions of comedy. The main thing he insisted on was that everyone had to play it very straight and not mug for laughs or try to be complicit with the audience. What he wanted was the Wildean concept at the heart of The Importance of Being Earnest, of being ridiculous with a straight face.

That was also the key to Carry On humour, except that the Carry On style inverted the process. The actors mugged and primped for all they were worth, but they did it with such professional control that there was another kind of straight-facedness there for the nonsense to bounce against. The point was that the knockabout crudity was being seriously acted.

Tait tried to explain the theory of it all to the assembled cast and crew at the first rehearsal. Of course Kelvin and Francesca understood, and so did Gillian. Narelle wasn’t completely
with it but he knew she’d do whatever would please him. Frank Baxter was the weak link, but Tait hoped his natural pompousness would create the right effect.

After the first couple of rehearsals he didn’t have to hammer the point about playing it straight. Everyone saw how much funnier it was that way, and the slightest thing – a lifted eyebrow, a altered emphasis on a word – would set someone giggling and then the whole cast would crack-up. Crack-ups were helpful in these early stages. They created good fellowship and cemented the bonds. They also got the giggles out of the system.

Kelvin’s new boyfriend came to rehearsals with him. Everyone quickly got to like Rory. He was twenty-six, good-looking, and very fit from his work as a builder’s labourer. He had wavy, tousled hair and big brown eyes and a sweet manner. “Oh God, isn’t he lovely!” Kelvin would whisper to Tait at times, as if unable to believe his luck. Rory had never seen live theatre before and was entranced by it all. And because his responses were so fresh, he became a sort of sounding-board for the cast. He didn’t laugh out loud very much, but if something was really funny he’d get a radiant smile on his face, and if a scene was really coming together you could tell from his expression how rapt he was.

“I’ve never seen Kelvin so head-over-heels,” Francesca said one night. They were sitting outside during the coffee-break.

“Yes, he’s besotted. And I don’t blame him.”

“No?”

“Rory’s a peach.”

“Yes, he is,” Francesca said, “but I’m not sure I want you thinking so.”

“Don’t worry, I’m not likely to switch.”

“That’s good to hear.”

“I’ve already been tested in that regard.”

“Have you indeed?”

“Yes, I was offered Anthony.”

“And?”

“No way. Anthony had a mean streak a mile wide.”

“It’s nothing to the mean streak you’ll see in me in a minute.”

“You can put your mind at rest, my darling… unless of course I get offered Rory on a plate.”

She punched him hard on the arm.

“That hurt,” Taid said, rubbing the spot.

“It was meant to,” Francesca said, “but I’ll make it better.”
She kissed him very slowly and tenderly on the lips and flicked her tongue into his mouth, and as she did so she guided his hand to the front of her blouse.

Tait went weak with longing and they would have got hot and bothered, except that they had to compose themselves to go back inside.

The next night when they sat outside he told her about his seeming victory over Bristol Dick. “With the reporting on a monthly basis, I’ll only have to see him a few more times,” Tait said.

“I wonder why he didn’t suggest the arrangements himself by now.”

“Because he’s a hostile neurotic.”

“Have you ever thought that he might be keen on you?” Francesca asked.

“Hardly.”

“Didn’t Kelvin once tell you the man was as gay as could be?”

“Yes, but I can’t believe I’d be the object of his fancies.”

“Why not? You’re the object of my fancies, and Bristol Dick is a human being like anyone else.”

“I’m not sure I’d go that far.”

“Semi-human, then.”

“Alright, I’ll give you that.”

“So maybe he’s had an emotional investment in seeing you.”

“Actually,” said Tait, “now that you mention it, I have been thinking that I’ve been in an unhealthy mutual thing with him right from the start.”

“In what way?”

“I think he and I are more alike than I care to admit. What’s it called when two people are sharing the same mental aberration? There’s a term for it.”

“Love?”

“Stop that. No, it’s folly de deux, or something.”

“Yes.”

“If I’d been a more normal person, I’d have brought things to a head much earlier, and more spontaneously. The matter of the reporting schedule I mean. I’d have shown that I was getting fed-up, that it was time to make fresh arrangements, that I expected some reward my good conduct all this time. But instead I did what I always do. I internalized the resentment and just kept on with the fatalistic struggle of it all. I kept on joining him in little mutual mad games. We reinforced each others’ weirdness. We were like two obsessives who keep dueling with each other because no-one else is fixated enough to be a proper opponent.”
“Well,” Francesca said after a moment. “You’d know best about Bristol Dick. I’ve never met him. But I think you’ve on to something important about your own personality. The mixture of being resentful and being passive.”

“Is that how I seem to you?”

“Do you want me to speak honestly?”

“I’ll tell you that after I’ve heard it.”

“I think you have more hidden anger in you than anyone I know, and yet at the same time you’re the most sweetly biddable man I’ve ever met — in some things, at least. It’s a very intriguing combination. It’s what I found really interesting when I first met you. I remember sensing it even when we were serving teas in the tent that day, although of course couldn’t have put it into words then.”

“I’m glad you told me.”

“I see it in your reaction to the Governor’s Medal, just to give one example. It fills you with scorn and anger, but at the same time you’re grateful to get a pat on the head from the high-and-mighty. Am I right?”

“I guess so. I do feel scorn and anger. I’ve seen their stinking Regime from the bottom, you see. I know about the rats and the hulks that underlie it all.”

“And like in The Curse of Cromwell?”

“Exactly.”

“That’s a wonderful poem. I’ve been reading it over and over. I’m so pleased you put me on to it.”

That poem by Yeats was his current Companion Piece and he’d wanted Francesca to know it because it summed everything up so well, like the part where it laments:

\[
\text{The lovers and the dancers are beaten into the clay,} \\
\text{And the tall men and the swordsmen and the horsemen,} \\
\text{where are they?}
\]

“Yes,” Tait said, dwelling further on it. “You’re spot-on. I despise their Regime, and I’m also weak enough to enjoy being its blue-eyed boy for a moment.”

“The angry side is always looking for a fight, while the motherless orphan side is always yearning to be stroked and held.”

“Well,” said Tait. “That’s me analysed and hung up to dry. Shall we start on you?”

“Next time,” Francesca said.
It was time to get back to rehearsal.

“God, I wish you could come with me to the awards night.”

“I know. I wish it too.”

“You could keep an eye on the Jeckyll and Hyde conflict inside me. Make sure the raging Mr Hyde doesn’t try to strangle the Governor.”

“I’d fend him back with a whip and a chair.”

“Make him perch on a stool.”

“And jump through hoops.”

“He’d do anything for you.”

“Would he?”

“Yes. He adores you. We all adore you.”

“Who’s ‘we’ exactly?”

“Jeckyll and Hyde and all the others people in my psyche. We all love you desperately. That’s the one thing we all agree on.”

“See that you do.”

They kissed and went inside.

After three weeks the play was shaping up well. Kelvin was superb as the fat sweaty villain in the white suit, and Gillian grew more and more delightfully addle-brained as the aristocratic Dame Gertrude. Narelle was growing into the role of the perky maid with enormous false boobs, and Frank Baxter was managing to hold his own as the butler, despite a habit of putting the emphasis on the wrong word in a phrase or sentence and so deflating the effect. But it was having lots of scenes with Francesca that made it so good for Tait. He had never felt more at ease in a role, or more in tune with another actor. Sometimes when they were in long stretches of dialogue together they couldn’t help breaking into smiles of pleasure at how well it flowed. And they knew how obvious their feelings of attunement were. They only had to glance at Rory’s rapt expression as he watched them do their scenes.

* * * *

The workmen had come back to Astrid’s Meadow one day. A concrete-mixer truck had backed up the drive and poured out concrete and the workmen had smoothed it flat. A day or two later Tait went to see how well it had set and found possum footprints right across. It
might’ve been Cashew. Then another truck had come and the debris of the shack was loaded and taken away. Then other workmen arrived and started building a new little dwelling on the concrete block. Tait saw it taking shape day by day. There were two small rooms and a kitchen, and a narrow closed-in verandah at the back, for the lake view. And there was a shower and toilet cubicle. What worried Tait was the large kitchen window that looked directly on to his cabin. He would be under scrutiny. Maybe he could buy some tall potted shrubs and position them to cut off the line of sight to his front door at least. But maybe they’d soon be putting up a fence between the two properties.

It was all very dismaying. Astrid’s Meadow had been violated. It would have depressed him a lot, except for having the rehearsals to go to and the play to think about, and the Governor’s Medal thing coming up.

Striving to be calm and consistent, he thought perhaps he should perform another little rite on Astrid’s Meadow, but this time a rite of relinquishment, like when a church is deconsecrated.

Although Astrid had long ago been edged out of his heart by Francesca, she remained a symbol of what she had once meant, of the human consolation she had once provided. She was now an image of the QO itself. As a good Jacobite, Tait knew that such things are not to be discarded, that to let them go is an impiety against the shelter of each other.

He could do another little ritual, but it wouldn’t just be to relinquish Astrid’s Meadow. The true Meadow was a place of the spirit, and that spirit could be given a new and better home somewhere else.

Or was he being too eccentric? Was it rat-baggery? Rat-baggery can sneak up on you, especially when you spend a lot of time alone. He began to go off the idea of doing a relocation rite. Or at least he went off it in part of his mind. In another part, though, he knew those doubts were the voice of the Enemy seeking to undermine whatever was true and whole in him. It was the jeer of the Regime, the sneer of Modernity, the mocking voice that wants to disenchant the universe.

As so often, it was Mike Kieslowski who gave Tait’s thoughts a timely push in the right direction. His most recent letter had been especially interesting because he had talked more than usual about Caroline, and how they’d begun looking for a flat to share. “And, by the way,” Mike added, “Caroline’s just devoured Good Neighbours from cover to cover and she reckons the Governor’s prize is scarcely good enough for you.” Tait was basking in that comment when he came to the end of the letter, where Mike mentioned that he was re-reading some of George Orwell’s essays.
A memory stirred in Tait’s mind. There was something in an Orwell essay that he ought to look up. He knew it related to the Astrid’s Meadow thing, and to the enemy’s agenda of disenchantment. It was something about the blackbird, and of course the blackbird was a Jacobite symbol. He flicked through his paperback copy of the essays until the print began to swim and blur. It took half an hour of searching, but he knew it was important.

He found it in “Thoughts on the Common Toad,” where Orwell asks rhetorically: “Is it wicked to take a pleasure in spring?” And “Is it politically reprehensible,” he wants to know, “to point out that life is frequently more worth living because of a blackbird’s song?” And he goes on to point out that the Regime always wants us to think so, for its power lies in a world made barren and ugly.

Orwell had merely referred to “the editors of left-wing newspapers,” but he meant the Regime as a whole, left-wing or right-wing or whatever. He meant what Milosz called the Imperium, what Solzhenitsyn called “the enemies of the human race,” what the Jacobites called Usurpation and Whiggery. He meant the system of the Commissars of Modernity who hate the very springtime and the sound of birdsong and would abolish them if they could. Orwell was one of those who would probably be offended if you told him he was a Jacobite in spirit, or a Jacobite by analogy, but it was true. So much of his thought tended that way.

Tait no longer had any doubts about doing a relocation rite. He knew if the doubts came again he had only to recall the principle of Orwell’s Blackbird.

The next evening he rode his motorbike to the Valley and up the long slope to the top of Honeysuckle Hill. He wanted to be there just as the sun went down. There was a spot he’d found, a patch of green hilltop thronged with dandelions. It was only about twenty paces from the road, but there was a grassy bank that shielded you from passing cars. It had views both ways along the Valley, and a fresh breeze most of the time. There was a single tree growing there, only a small tree but dense with dark green leaves and berries. Just the top half was visible from the road and whenever Tait had ridden over the crest of the hill he had glanced across at it. And then one day he had stopped for a closer look and discovered the green and flowery spot. He figured a slight hollow of the ground caught the rain and so created the lush effect. And yet the grass there wasn’t the kind of sinister tangle that made you feel uneasy. It was somehow more like a lawn that had been let go a little. The whole spot was beautifully open to the sky, and yet felt snugly tucked away behind that bank.

Now Tait was standing there, near the tree.

The western skyline blazed red, but cool stars were out over the opposite horizon.
He needed a minute of quiet, with no cars passing. He looked in both directions along the Valley and listened for any sound. It seemed all clear. He took a bottle of water from his satchel and unscrewed the top in readiness to pour.

Then he spoke the words he had decided on:

*Invoking the Honeysuckle, the Blackbird, and all other goodly symbols,* 
*And for the sake of the Shelter of Each Other,*  
*And in the name of the QO,* 
*And by the authority of King Charles the Martyr,* 
*I declare this the true location of Astrid’s Meadow.*

He poured the water onto the grass and said Amen.

* * * *

He wrote to ask his mother if she’d care to come to the Awards night. On the one hand it needed to sound like a genuine offer, but on the other hand he had to make clear that it wouldn’t be the end of the world if she couldn’t make it. He weighed every word, trying to get the balance right.

He stood at the letter-box wracked with indecision before finally dropping the envelope in. It was out of his hands then. It was up to her.

Gillian’s brother was due to pay a quick visit from England where he’d lived for many years, and Gillian and Ian wanted to put on a good old Aussie barbeque for him at their place in the Valley. They invited everyone from the Players and especially the cast and crew of “The Maltese Mouse” as well as a few work friends. Jimmy and Lauren were going, as colleagues of Ian’s.

Tait loved the social occasions that were part of the life of the Players. He never felt completely at ease, but still found it delightful to sit around with people he knew, whole family groups of them, listening to the talk, throwing in a remark or a witticism now and then to hold his end up. It was the experience of being in the shelter of each other. As in so many ways, he knew that his past life worked as a factor both for and against him. Having been so much alone he had a heightened awareness of the charm and consolation of human sociability. But for the same reason he was also highly conscious of his own lack of social
ease. With the Players, though, it was seldom a problem. They knew him so well, and accepted him as he was.

Narelle attended Turrawong High School and on rehearsal evenings she didn’t bother to go home. She went round to her friend Cathy’s house to wait for rehearsal time and have something to eat. After rehearsal she always got a lift home with Therese who was the prompt and who lived nearby.

One evening Tait was in the Athena café having a meal before rehearsal and Narelle happened to walk past and see him. She came in and sat down and they talked about how her performance was shaping up. It was easy to praise her, for she had grown to have a lovely presence on stage, and she hung on to every word of Tait’s directions as though they were the Wisdom of the Oracle. When he had finished his meal they strolled down to the Green Room together. The same thing happened the next time he was at the Athena on a rehearsal night. And the time after that. He began to look forward to her turning up.

If she’d been nearer his own age he would have felt a bit guilty. In fact he did feel a bit guilty, and to reassure himself that there was nothing untoward he told Francesca about the chats at the café and that he thought the kid might have a slight crush on him.

“Have you only just worked that out, honey?”
“You’ve been aware of it?”
“It’s pretty obvious there are two lovesick lambs in our midst.”
“Are you saying that I return her feelings?”
“No, sweetie, I’m talking about her and Kelvin both wearing their hearts on their sleeves.”
“I didn’t know it was that obvious in Narelle.”
“Well, I could hardly miss it. I’m always getting a beam of coldness from her.”
“Really?”
“From her point of view, I’m the Other Woman.”
“What should I do?”
“Let her get over it, I guess. Be kind but not too kind. And remember that I own a large carving knife.”
“To use on her, or me?”
“You, my precious love, you!” she said, kissing him so lusciously on the mouth that he felt faint.

One night Therese hadn’t been able to come, so Narelle didn’t have her usual lift home. She asked if Tait could take her on his bike. He was relieved to have a ready excuse not to. She had no helmet to wear and the cops might catch them. He meant to walk her up to the taxi
rank at the railway station and put her in a cab with a few dollars for the fare. But Neil the Wheel declared he could solve the problem. He rummaged in one of the costume cupboards and pulled out an old battered helmet that had done service in a play sometime or other.

Neil looked so proud of his helpfulness that Tait didn’t have the heart to make any more objection. Actually, he suspected that Neil had a bit of crush on Narelle. It was all rather hard to keep track of, he reflected wryly.

It felt awfully nice to have Narelle’s arms around his waist as they rode off in the clear night. And it was lovely riding along beside the river, with the salt breeze and the lights rippling on the water. He rode carefully and not too fast, conscious of having this young girl in his keeping. He stayed especially alert as they approached the hamburger shop corner, in case the Doberman was loose.

They stopped outside the newsagency and Narelle did not immediately take her arms from around him. Then she did so, as though reluctantly. She got off and removed her helmet and handed it to him.

“Thanks for the ride,” she said. “It felt really lovely.”

He knew she meant the clinging-on. He wanted to say that it’d been really lovely for him too, but thought better of it.

“I’ll wait till you get inside,” he said.

She stood for a moment, then leant and kissed him on the cheek. Her long hair brushed his face. She turned and walked away and let herself in at the door.

That night Tait sat into the wee small hours, his headphones on, playing *The Storm on the Heather* and other records, and knocking off a lot of the cheap wine. After a while he got into the state of emotional delirium that came from the skirl of the pipes and the heartbreak of the songs and the fact of being half-pissed.

Those twenty minutes or so had been delicious, having Narelle’s arms around him, her body pressed close, that final glancing touch of her lips and hair. If he’d never known Francesca, he thought, it would’ve counted as the sweetest pleasure he’d ever had with anyone.

* * * *

Somebody was in new dwelling next door but Tait didn’t get a clear glimpse of him for a day or so. Then he saw a shortish, balding man in khaki clothes and knew it was one of the two men he’d seen that day when he was swimming in the lake. It was the one who’d
exchanged those few words of small-talk with him when he came up wet and still shaken from the scare he’d had.

Tait had walked down the driveway to check his letterbox. He stood for a moment looking across at the closed doors of the shop. Hester had gone and the “For Lease” sign was up again.

As he went back up the driveway the man emerged from the dwelling.

“How ya goin,” he called.

“Not bad thanks,” Tait called back.

“Been doin any more swimmin?”

“Not really. I’m always a bit worried about sharks, to be quite honest.”

“Well, yeah, there’s always a chance of a small one gettin in over the sandbar.”

“A small one might be all it needs.”

“Ya see a few of the big ones when yer on the ships.”

“The ships?”

“Coal ships, mostly. To Japan and back. I work on ‘em, although I’m startin to ease out of it now. I’ll be spendin most of me time here.”

“I see.”

“Ernie’s me name,” the man said, coming over and holding his hand out.

They shook hands and then there was a pause.

Tait wanted to ask whether they’d be putting a fence up between the two properties, but thought it might sound like an unfriendly question.

“They tell me you’re a bit of a writer,” said Ernie.

“A bit, yes,” Tait replied in a slightly curt tone, irritated as always to find his privacy infringed. “Well, I’d better get on with things.”

“Yeah, nice talking to ya,” Ernie said.

“Bye for now, then.”

They began to walk away from each other.

“Oh,” Ernie said, turning back. “I was gonna say, you could pay yer rent straight to me, if ya like, from now on.”

“Sorry?” Tait said.

“No point still goin through the agent if I’m gonna be here.”

“Sorry?” Tait said again, not quite understanding.
“I’m the owner,” Ernie said, indicating the cabin with a wave of his hand. “That’s to say, me and the wife own these two blocks. Have done for forty-odd years. Ya prob’ly won’t be seein the wife, though. She lives interstate.”

“I see.”

“I’ll tell the agent about the new arrangement.”

“Um, I’d like there to be something in writing.”

“I’ll get ‘em to send ya a letter.”

“Thanks,” said Tait.

“You’ve been here a fair while now, haven’t ya? Coupla years, is it?”

“More like four.”

“Fair dinkum? Don’t time fly!”

Chapter Twelve

The barbeque at Gillian and Ian’s was in full swing. The day was beautifully sunny, but with a refreshing breeze. Gillian’s brother from England was a tall, sandy-haired fellow who went around making immediate friends with everyone, a glass of beer in one hand and an open bottle ready in the other to top up anyone else’s glass.

The house was large and untidy and there was a very pleasant sort of gazebo running along the front of it, thickly roofed and draped with flowery vines. Most of the people were sitting around three large tables under the vine roof of the gazebo. Ian was tending the hotplate of the barbeque a few paces away, with Neil the Wheel as his offsider, and the aroma of sizzling meat and onions filled the air. A bunch of kids were trying to fly a brightly-coloured kite from an open area down near the road.

Tait was sitting at the same table as Jimmy and Lauren. Narelle and her father were there too, and three or four others. But the tables were close enough together that the people at all three could talk and joke and interact if they wanted to. The gazebo created a single space full of good fellowship.

Francesca was at the next table, with Emma dozing on her lap and Craig beside her. She and Tait were close enough to make smalltalk. They’d been chatting about something and, as
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invariably happens when cast-members from the same show are talking, they’d thrown in a few lines and phrases from the script. This had prompted them to exchange a few lines of their dialogue in sequence.

“Shush!” someone cried. “They’re doing a scene!”

So they continued exchanging lines and everyone went quiet and began to listen.

They’d taken it up where the private eye Joe Sleazy is still trying to find out who the femme fatal is and why she wants to hire him.

“I am Felicity Polkinghorne, of the Devonshire Polkinghornes. We are one of the most ancient and respected families in England. We have a social position second to none. Why, I’ve been presented at Court seven times.”

“Yeah? Any convictions?”

“The Queen spoke highly of me.”

“The Queen, eh? Well, if you need someone to give you an alibi I guess she’s about the best you can get. There’s a guy I sometimes use, Frankie the Ferret…”

“But you see, I have a secret. A terrible, guilty secret!”

“Now we’re getting somewhere. Spit it out, sister.”

“I lead a double life. To the respectable world I am the impeccably virtuous and fashionable Felicity Polkinghorne, but to the denizens of the Naughty Knickers nightclub in Soho I am Fifi, the Queen of the Feathers.”

“Let me get this straight. You moonlight at some cheap joint?”

“Yes, as Fifi, Queen of the Feathers.”

“Tell me about the feathers.”

“Well, there isn’t much to tell. They’re very small feathers and there aren’t many of them.”

“How does a girl like you get to a place like that?”

“Oh, it’s fairly easy. You jump on a number 19 bus and it takes you almost to the door.”

“Yeah, I guess that was a dumb question. Okay sister, so who’s blackmailing you?”

“Sidney Greenback.”

“Sidney Greenback?”

“A terrible and sinister man. He owns the club I work at. Three weeks ago he discovered my true identity, that I’m a Polkinghorne. And now he says that unless I give him what he wants, he’ll expose me.”

“You mean he’ll take away the feathers?”

“He threatens to inform my family of my double life. And he has photographs, you see. Compromising photographs.”
“Mmm, any idea where these photos might be stashed? A safety-deposit box, maybe?”
“They’re pinned up in the foyer of the club. Big glossy ones.”
“That makes it tough. So how much does this Greenback guy want? A hundred grand?”
“Oh he doesn’t want money. He only wants one thing from me, just one thing.”
“I think I get the picture, kid. You don’t have to spell it out.”
“I’ll tell you exactly what he wants.”
“It’s okay. I’ve been around. I know the score.”
“But I want to describe exactly what he’s after.”
“Look sister, we’re both adults. You don’t need to paint me a picture.”
“But I must tell you.”
“Okay, so tell me.”
“He wants the Mouse.”
“Just run that by me again.”
“He’s determined to get his hands on the Mouse. He’ll never rest till he gets to examine it closely, to hold it and stroke it and fondle it!”
“Pardon me if I sound slow on the uptake, but are we talking about what I think we’re talking about?”
“Yes, of course.”
“It’s just that I’ve never heard it called a ‘mouse’ before.”
“But that’s its name — the Maltese Mouse.”
“The Maltese Mouse?”
“Yes, of course. That’s what everyone in the family calls it.”
“I see. Tell me, just as a matter of interest. Was this the point where the other forty-seven detectives refused to take the case?”
“Yes. How did you know?”
“Just a hunch.”
“But you’ll take the case, won’t you, Mr Scumbag?”
“Sleazy.”
“Of course. Oh if you take the case I’ll be so grateful, so incredibly grateful. I’ll do anything I can to make it worth your while. Anything, anything at all…”
“What could I? The kid was in a jam. In my business they don’t hand out any prizes for doing what’s right. There’s only a sense you get, way deep down, the knowledge that you played it straight and made the world a little better place. Besides, I wanted to find out more about those feathers.”
“So I’ll meet you at the airport in an hour, shall I?”

“That soon?”

“We must get the flight to London. I have to do the midnight show at the club.”

“Okay, toots. I’ll go pack my toothbrush.”

“And thank you, thank you so much, Mr Vomit.”

Sleazy. The name is Sleazy. On the flight to London, Felicity filled me in. She also told me some more details about the case. The Maltese Mouse was an ornamental figurine in the shape of a mouse. It’d been brought back from Malta by one of the Polkinghorne ancestors way back when. And Sidney Greenback had one passion in life — collecting ornamental mice. In fact he had the world’s greatest collection of ornamental mice. When it came to ornamental mice, Greenback was a fanatic, a ruthless fanatic, and he played rough. That night I watched Felicity do her act at the Naughty Knickers club. She was right: those feathers were pretty small and there weren’t many of them. I went back and caught the show again the next night, and every night for a month, just to make sure I hadn’t missed any important clues…”

The lines flowed and they were in perfect tune, reading each other’s eyes and controlling the responses of the listeners so that they laughed in just the right places. In a way it was like making love.

Kelvin arrived with Rory just as they were about to stop. As Kelvin approached he called out another line from later in the play where Joe Sleazy and the sinister Sidney Greenback are sparring:

“Your visits to my club did not go unnoticed, Mr Sleazy. In fact we took particular notice. You see, not many of our clientele come to the club every night for a whole month and sit in the same front-row seat with a large pair of binoculars”

“Couldn’t have been me, Greenback. I’ve got twenty-twenty vision.”

“Come, come, my dear sir, let us not play games. My girls keep me reliably informed as to the clientele at the club. And my girls are quite able to recognize a dick when they see one hanging out in the front row.”

Rory had heard the line umpteen times at rehearsals in the Green Room, but for some reason it tickled him anew and he threw his head back and burst out with a laugh that was so spontaneous and infectious that everyone cracked up.

Later Tait sat slightly apart, watching the conviviality around him. He felt he was seeing a little surviving fragment of the people’s hoop, an unwithered twig of the sacred tree. He was
trying to remember some words of Black Elk’s about “showing tender faces to each other” and after a minute the passage came to him:

Every little thing is sent for something, and in that thing there should be happiness and the power to make happy. Like the grasses showing tender faces to each other, thus we should do, for this was the wish of the Grandfathers of the World.

That in turn made him think of Milosz’s account of the peasant family in that Soviet railway station, and how they showed “tender faces” to each other in the midst of a vast cruelty and dislocation.

Of course, Tait thought, most of these people here today don’t realize how truly sweet this conviviality is, or how easily lost. You only fully appreciate it if you’ve known the grim lack of it. Or else much later in retrospect. Decades on, a few of these people might remember this barbeque, might recall with unbearable poignancy a lovely sunny day in the Valley when we were all alive and together.

Tait and Francesca kept crossing each other’s path briefly. At one point they were side by side in the kitchen, buttering some more bread, then they were sharing a conversation with Megan and Marigold in the living room, but they didn’t get any proper time together until the afternoon. There was a friendly pony called Patches looking over the fence from the adjoining paddock and Francesca had taken Emma across to say hello to it.

Tait approached quietly from behind.

“Pretty Patches, pretty Patches,” Francesca was saying, holding Emma in the crook of one arm and feeding the pony bits of carrot. Emma cooed and chuckled when the pony put its nose near.

“You know, sweetie,” Francesca said to the baby, “you might be able to have a pony of your own one day. Would you like that?”.

“Can I have a pony too?” Tait asked, coming up to them.

“Feel like a good hard ride, do you?” she replied, leaning back against him for an instant.

“Pining for it.”

“Hop up on Patches. I’m sure he wouldn’t mind.”

“Not quite what I was after.”

“Did our little performance turn you on, before?”

“I’ll say.”
“It did me too.”

“Must’ve been obvious to everyone. Did Craig say anything?”

“No, he makes allowance for what he calls “wanking” behaviour. As you know, he calls the Players the Wankers. Besides, he’s too up-tempo to care just now. He’s come up with his Great Plan at last. The building scheme for the Valley. He can hardly contain himself. He’s waiting for the right moment to announce it to everyone.”

“So what’s the plan?”

“Oh let him tell it. He’s brought all the drawings and estimates and stuff with him. He’s hoping to get a few people like Ian – and you, of course – to contribute some free labour.”

There were shouts from below. A bunch of people were playing cricket down on the flat strip.

Tait took Emma to give Francesca a rest from the load and they moved a little further up the slope. The afternoon sun was about to pass below the crest of the hill above them and then it would get chilly. They sat on a big old tree stump.

“Have you heard back from your mother yet, about the awards night?” Francesca asked.

“Yes. She can’t come.”

“That’s a shame. Why not?”

“The height of the building.”

“The height of the building?”

“She’d get the heebie-jeebies going up that high.”

“She said that?”

“Yes.”

“Is it true?”

“Yes, I think so. She’s always been a bit funny with heights.”

“So does that mean you’ll be going alone, or what?”

“Yes, I’ll go alone. It’s better, really, because then I won’t feel guilty that I’m inflicting the evening on anyone. I imagine it’ll be pretty dire — smug and pretentious and arty-farty.”

“Poor darling,” Francesca said, touching him briefly on the knee. “You shouldn’t have to go to your big occasion on your own.”

“We lone wolves prefer it that way.”

“You’re not a lone wolf any more, and I don’t want you thinking like one. You ought to have a partner for the occasion.”

“Well, there is one hope…”

“Yes?”
“It might not be too late to have Anthony.”
“You’re not having Anthony and that’s final!” she said briskly, like a mother telling a greedy boy he can’t have a piece of cake.

The sun had gone behind the top of the hill.
“You know I’d go with you if I could, don’t you?” she said. “But it’d be stretching it a bit too far with Craig. Making an issue of it might ruin other things for us, like our shopping days together. I’d hate to risk that.”
“Me too.”
She looked at him solemnly.
“I’m sorry for all the things you miss out on because of me.”
“Listen,” he said with deep feeling. “I get more happiness from you – even as things are – than I’d get in six regular relationships.”
“Thank you for saying that, but it isn’t really true. A proper lover would be there to look after you full-time.”
“Well, you’re in the same boat. You don’t have your true love there to rely on, either.”
“I’ve got a husband and two children. That’s a huge difference. My life is occupied with other people in a way yours isn’t. And although I bellyache about that, it does keep one living and functioning.”
“I’m not about to stop living and functioning.”
“No, but you do deny yourself things out of a sense of honour.”
“Do I?”
“Yes, you do. And for the principle of loyalty. You’re very loyal to me.”
“Love has its own imperatives. I can’t claim credit for that.”
“I know very well that you love me, but that isn’t the whole of it. I know that a lot of the time you do things because you’ve set yourself to do them out of principle. Out of a determination to be a good Jacobite, or whatever.”
“I could say the same of you. You go on being loyal to obligations that a lot of other women wouldn’t put up with for five minutes, especially nowadays.”
“That’s the Italian Catholic woman in me. We’re brought up to accept our lot in life. The idea is that you ‘make a gift of yourself’ to others, although heaven knows I’m a rather dubious gift to you, my sweet.”
“You’re as much a Jacobite or a Cavalier type as I am. You’re the sort of woman Lovelace was addressing in that poem where he says: ‘I could not love thee half so much, loved I not
honour more.’ The whole point was that he was addressing a Cavalier lady who understood what he meant.”

“Well, if I do accept my lot, it’s as much to do with being pissed-off as with being honourable. Its using anger as a kind of fuel.”

“Exactly, and what is being fueled is honourable conduct. It’s the whole dynamic of what I think of as passionate poise.”

“And the same is true with you.”

“I don’t know about that.”

“I do. If other people heard you talking the way I hear you – about the Cavaliers or whatever – they’d think it was some sort of strange romantic indulgence. But I know it isn’t that. It isn’t sentimental at all, in the usual sense of that word.”

“Well, as Mike Kieslowski is always reminding me, sentimentality is the Enemy’s tool, along with brutality, and the two always go together. That’s the hallmark of all modern politics. You can see the combination in the tabloid media, which is based on the same technique as a totalitarian rally: the crowd must be kept passive and suggestible on the one hand but brimming with savage impulses on the other. And all the media are tabloid now. Some just put on a veneer of pseudo-sophistication.”

“I’m always horribly fascinated by those TV newsreaders and current-affairs anchors. The way they go from pseudo-grief to mock-outrage to smirking complacency in the space of thirty seconds. They’re like fourth-rate actors who just ‘do’ certain faces and voices mechanically.”

“But thinking they’re great.”

“I guess they need to think so, or else what they do would eat their souls away.”

“No doubt it does. They probably all have Dorian Gray portraits upstairs becoming ever more hideous. A tabloid world is what modernity has foisted on the people after it stole their genuine human world from them, after it disintegrated them into a mere broken and homeless crowd.”

“Yes, I see that.”

“The only thing that can activate our side for the struggle is genuine feeling,” Tait continued, “real emotional attachments to people and to events and to the shared history of one another. Loyalties won’t stand up under pressure unless they’re embedded in true feeling, which is connected to the sacred, or at the very least to a time-frame which puts fads and hysterias into perspective.”

“That’s what the Lovelace poem is saying, isn’t it?”
“Yes, that his love for the lady can only be real if it exists in a context in which other things are also real. His love for her and his leaving for the wars are authorized from the same source. Strip that authority away from one thing and you strip it from everything else.”

“I’m glad we talked about this,” Francesca said. “It ties in with something I bought recently. Something I was going to give you.”

“What is it?”

“Not now. You’ll see.”

“But don’t listen to me,” Tait said, feeling a sudden wave of revulsion against his own big talk. “I’m full of crap. I’m sickened when I hear myself.”

“I love hearing you talk.”

“I’m the proverbial empty vessel that makes the most noise.”

“No you’re not. You’re a beautifully quiet vessel, most of the time. And you’re my Cavalier.”

I wish I was even remotely worthy of the title. But I’ve never been tested like that. I haven’t had to go out with a sword and do what real Cavaliers and Jacobites had to do, undergo what they had to suffer. Can you imagine the sheer horror of those old battles? The screaming butchery of it all. I’m sure I’d have run away.”

“You’ve proved your mettle in life,” Francesca said softly, touching him on the cheek. “You’ve been tested in ways that a lot of people couldn’t have coped with. I admire you so much for that.”

They sat holding hands as the sun went behind the hill and the air became dank. Then they went back down to the house. A lot of the people had left by now and the dozen or so who remained had moved inside where it was snug. Lauren was comforting young Toby under the gazebo. He’d been whacked on the nose by a cricket ball earlier in the day and it still hurt.

Tait had noticed earlier that Jimmy seemed a touch withdrawn. He asked Lauren if anything was wrong.

“He had two clients suicide during the week,” she replied. “He found the second one himself, hanging from a tree in the backyard.”

“Shit, what a job to be in!”

“I know. But we have to live somehow. And I can’t work as much as I used to, with my back. It’s becoming a nightmare.”

Tait would’ve asked whether her mother was okay. He knew there’d just been another incident where they’d had to go and fetch her out of trouble. But Lauren had enough to feel depressed about.
They stood up to go in and join the others and Lauren gave a little shudder of pain as she did so. She’d moved her back the wrong way.

They were having ice-cream and trifle inside.

The group had shrunk to a core of those with whom Craig felt relatively at ease. With only a slight nudge from Francesca, he announced his Great Plan.

“I give you four words,” he said, looking around at all the faces and holding four fingers up.

“Pole-frame and mud-brick. That’s what I’ve come up with. It means I can do most of the work myself, with a bit of help here and there, and the cost will be a third of what it’d be otherwise. I’ve gone into it all pretty carefully.”

Gillian’s convivial brother had been drinking beer all day and was pissed as a newt, but he carried it pretty well. He now expressed great interest in Craig’s plans and soon Craig had the drawings out on the table, together with owner-builder magazines and material about mud-brick construction. He started going into the detail of it all, and it did sound pretty impressive.

Jimmy seemed interested too, and after a while he and Ian and Craig had their heads together over the drawings. Maybe Jimmy was trying to keep his mind off other things, Tait thought.

Gillian’s brother had gone to light a fire in the hearth, partly for the conviviality of it, but partly because it did get tend to get chilly in the night there, no matter what time of year. He never did get it started, though, because he kept standing up and flourishing the poker in the air and declaring that he’d been deeply touched by everyone’s kindness to “a mere stranger in the midst”. The notion of himself as a “stranger in the midst” seemed to make him maudlin and Gillian had to come and take the poker from him and suggest he sit down and relax.

They played charades and then some Scrabble and by eight o’clock the last people were leaving. The brother stood at the gate, a glass of beer back in his hand, making flowery farewells “as a mere stranger in the midst.”

Riding over Honeysuckle Hill with the stars winking above him, Tait slowed as he went past the new Astrid’s Meadow. He glanced across at the dark shape of the lush little tree in the centre of the circle of grass. It had occurred to him that the site resembled Black Elk’s vision of the sacred tree within the circle of the hoop. Not the vision of them broken and blighted, but the yearning glimpse of them as they had once been and might be again by some redemptive miracle.

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The next Thursday as usual Francesca came to pick him up to go shopping at The Inlet. The awards ceremony was the following night, and Tait had to buy a decent jacket to wear, and maybe a new pair of shoes. Of course he’d left it all till the last minute. He was hoping not to have to buy shoes, but he knew Francesca would press him hard. This was her big opportunity to spruce him up and improve his wardrobe.

“So, have you lined anyone up to go with you tomorrow night,” she asked casually as they drove along.


“Would I console you?”

“How do you mean?”

“I think I can go, if you’d like.”

“I’d love that. But how?”

“Craig announced this morning that he’s going to see his parents up north. He’s leaving me the car and intends to catch the early train in the morning. He’ll be gone till Sunday.”

“Is there a family emergency?”

“He wants to sell his MG and put the money towards the Valley project.”

“He has an MG sports car?”

“It was an old beat-up one he bought for a song when he was eighteen and spent years working on. He reckons it’s worth a bit now. I’ve seen it and it does look rather terrific. But there’s a problem. His father also put time and effort into it, and it’s always been kept at his parents’ place, so there’s a delicate question of who it strictly belongs to. Craig’s folks are very tight people. They don’t part with things easily. Craig intends to thrash it out with them. But anyway, the point is that I’ll be fancy-free for two whole days.”

“But I don’t want to get you into trouble, honey. Won’t he be pissed-off when he finds out?”

“He might not find out, if we do it on the quiet. And even if he does, it’ll be water under the bridge by then. And besides, he’s so full of the Great Project now that he might not kick-up much of a fuss anyway. And after all, we’ll have been at a respectable official occasion, not having a dirty weekend in a motel.”

“It’s settled then!” Tait said.

“Good. Gillian and Ian have agreed to babysit the kids, and to be discreet about it.”

“What did I ever do to deserve you?” he asked, kissing her free hand as she drove.

“I don’t know,” she answered briskly. “But it must’ve been something pretty awful. However, the task right now is to make you look presentable, my lad.”
Tait began to mutter that he wasn’t too sure about lashing out on new shoes.

“Listen, Scrooge,” she said crossly. “They’re going to hand you seven thousand dollars tomorrow night. That means you can afford to pry your wallet open a fraction of an inch today.”

“But it’ll upset the bats and spiders that live in there. They’ve never seen daylight before.”

“I’ll give you worse than daylight if you’re not careful!”

When Francesca dropped him back at the cabin that evening he had two new shirts and a new pair of trousers, as well as a lovely brown sports-jacket and brown shoes, not to mention a pile of new socks and underwear.

* * * *

Francesca delivered the kids to Gillian’s place in the late afternoon, then came to pick Tate up. They needed to get a good start, in order to have a little time up their sleeves, and there’d be heavy traffic nearer the city. They had their dress-up clothes on hangers in the back of the car to keep them fresh and uncreased, and would have to find somewhere to change. They stayed silent for a longish time, their eyes on the road, lost in their own thoughts. He turned to look at her beautiful profile as she drove. She was frowning and biting her lip.

“The lord and master got off alright?”

“Yes,” she said, coming out of her own thoughts and putting on a more composed look. “He was in a touchy mood, though. I was worried he might change his mind about going.”

“But we made it, honey.”

“Yes, we made it.”

“We were always going to. Our guardian angels were on the job. Let’s not talk about Craig.”

“No, let’s not. Do you have to make a speech tonight?”

“I’m not sure, but I’ve got one all rehearsed.”

“What’s the gist of it?”

“Well, I thought I’d model myself on the Academy Awards. I’ll sob with shock and gratitude to start with, then bravely compose myself and go into a fatuous rigmarole.”

“You’ll thank your parents for having you?”

“In a humble log cabin.”

“With nothing to eat but grits, whatever the hell they are.”

“And cornpone.”

“Cornpone, yes.”
“Ah, the smell of Uncle Abner’s cornpone chitlins! How it brings it all back!”
“Ah, the smell of Uncle Abner! How it makes you throw up.”
“The ventilation in those log cabins wasn’t so great.”
“And now look at you.”
“Rich, famous, talented and unbelievably sexy.”
“And deeply committed on social issues.”
“I weep for the horizontally challenged.”
“The glittering audience rises to a standing ovation.”
“I preen in mock humility.”
“They come smiling to escort you off stage.”
“I refuse to go.”
“You cling to the podium, kicking and screaming.”
“The police come. It turns out I’m an imposter.”
“I wasn’t fooled for an instant.”
“What gave me away?”
“I think it was the Napoleon hat you had on.”
“Damn!”
“So what are you really going to say?”
“I’ll keep it brief and graceful. I’ll just say: ‘This fucking cheque had better not bounce!’”
They lapsed into another long silence, but made a point of reaching out and caressing each other every so often. They got into the heavy traffic of the city and could only crawl along. They began to look forward to having a drink somewhere.
“Just to mention Craig one last time,” Francesca said. “The reason I’m feeling a bit fragile is that I’m aware of how much things might change for you and I when Craig gets the house built. I’m not sure how they’ll change, exactly, but they might.”
“Yes, they might.” he replied, stroking her thigh. “All the more reason to live bravely in the moment.”
“Yes, let’s do that,” she said, lifting her chin defiantly. “Let’s live bravely in the moment.”
They left the car in a parking station next to the State Office Tower and went for a drink. The Scotch did both of them good. Francesca told their friendly waitress about them going to a flash turnout and needing a place to change. They were shown a tiny cleaner’s room they could use. Francesca did her make-up in a small mirror. The casual intimacy of it made Tait feel as if his heart would burst, seeing her making herself even more beautiful than usual, and for him. When they were finished they took their discarded clothes back to the car.
Francesca’s dress was a deep blue, almost blueish-black, and went superbly with her raven hair and pale skin. She looked ravishing.

They entered the lobby of the State Office Tower.

“You alright?” she asked. “You looked a bit dazed.”

“I’m dazed by how lovely you are. Honestly, I am.”

“I’ll believe you. You look nice too, in your new jacket and with a tie on. I’ve never seen you in a tie before, except on stage.”

“We’re on stage now, aren’t we?”

“Are we?”

“It isn’t real life.”

“Some of it is. That you and I are here together is real.”

“Yes.”

They showed their invitation to a security man and were allowed to go through to the lifts.

At the lift, Francesca stopped and looked into his eyes.

“Before you get your kudos from them,” she said, “I want you to have something from me. It’s something I found in our Unguent Shop and just had to get you because it was so fitting.”

She held it out on the palm of her hand. It was a small silvery object. He took it and found it was a brooch in the shape of a Cavalier’s hat, complete with a flowing feather.

“Do you like it?”

He couldn’t bring himself to speak. He nodded instead.

“I love you,” Francesca said, taking his hand and squeezing it between hers.

“I love you,” he answered, squeezing back.

“Good,” she said briskly, straightening her shoulders. “Now let’s go up and face the bastards on behalf of the Cavaliers.”

“And the gallant Highlanders.”

“And the beautiful Sioux and Cheyenne.”

“And all the heroes of Poland.”

“This could be a long list,” she said with a wry smile.

“Then let’s just say: the lovers and the dancers.”

“Yes, that would cover it. All the people they thought they’d beaten into the clay.”

“But they were mistaken.”

“Yes.”

“And may they live to rue it!”

“Amen.”
They got into the lift and went up to the 38th floor.

END OF PART TWO
Chapter Thirteen

Nearly four years had passed.

It was a Sunday afternoon and Tait was running late for a rehearsal at the Green Room.

He had pulled up on his little motorbike at the Ellicotts’ house and was entering their front yard with a plastic shopping bag containing four signed copies of his recently published collection of short stories from Canopy Press. The stories were all about life in the institution and the book was called *Ground Leave*. “Ground leave” meant permission to roam the institutional grounds. It wasn’t a big deal to ordinary inmates, but to those who’d originally come from gaol and had graduated through the maximum security section, it was the great aim and achievement. It meant having some freedom to breathe after years of close confinement, and was a sign that the Regime had relaxed enough about you to allow you out of its immediate sight if not out of its vicinity. Not that you ever got cocky about that. Ground leave could always be cancelled and you were careful not to overstep the mark.

Having ground leave gave you a rounder sense of the institution — of the range of its people and the layout of its little world. You found out the webs of connection and the patterns of interaction, the nooks and crannies of privacy, and the way that such a peculiar community related to the larger world that began at its fringes. It meant you could see how your own daily experience fitted into another frame of reference, and so it gave you a new degree of both detachment and focus. That was why Tait had chosen *Ground Leave* as the title.

The Ellicotts had wanted three copies of the book — one to keep and two to give away as gifts — and Hester also wanted a copy, so Tait had offered to obtain them at the author’s discount price.

He knocked on the front door and waited, but no-one came. The Ellicott’s car was in the carport so he figured they might be outside in their backyard. He didn’t want to linger, so he hung the plastic bag from the doorknob and turned to go. Then he
reconsidered. It was too visible from the street. The way the neighbourhood was becoming you had to be aware of things like that. He took the bag off the doorknob and placed it down on the step where it was shielded from sight by the shrubs in front of the porch. He half-thought he should keep the books with him and deliver them tomorrow, but he was anxious to be on his way and frankly didn’t relish seeing the Ellicotts for the time being. They would want to be sociable and talk about the book, and they would want to be sympathetic about his unhappy past and all the rest of it. They’d been a bit downcast lately because their dog Roscoe had died and Tait didn’t want to have to brush aside their well-meant friendliness as he often did when it was irksome to him. Better to just leave the books and be on his way.

He got back on the bike and rode cautiously towards the hamburger shop on the next corner. There were no yobbos outside, and the Doberman was behind the wire fence at the rear. He speeded up and went past and the Doberman glared hard through the wire at him, as if adding another grievance to a burning list. Tait glanced at his watch and sped up a bit more. He didn’t want to miss the special moment.

Narelle had turned eighteen the day before. Everyone at the rehearsal was careful not to mention it and then at the chosen moment a cake was carried in with lighted candles and they all sang Happy Birthday. Then they took turns giving Narelle a hug. Tait hugged her along with the rest and felt how nice it was to have such a splendid girl in his arms if only for an instant. She was very moved and said a few words about how the Players were like her family and she didn’t know what she’d do without them.

“And we couldn’t do without you either, sweetie,” the director replied.

Amen to that, Tait said under his breath.

Now they were back to rehearsing.

Tait wasn’t required for a while and stood in the doorway looking out at the light fall of rain. He was still feeling a pleasant afterglow from the touch of Narelle’s body against his, but his mood darkened the more he looked out. The view from the Green Room door was now blocked by the heavy mass of the new Court building that stood where the open space had once been.

There had been a debate about what to do with that open space. The Shire Council had wanted to sell it to a big commercial developer. It was handy to the railway station and the ideal site for a complex of trendy apartments for upwardly-mobile
young commuter types who were Going Places. The Council had adopted “Going Places” as its new motto and everything had to be framed in terms of that. People who were Going Places “demanded dynamic career options in the city while enjoying the laid-back but sophisticated lifestyle of a region of outstanding natural endowments,” and “if Turrawong Shire didn’t meet the challenge of their expectations there were other regions that would.” That was another new slogan. The Council was “Working to Meet the Challenge of Your Expectations.” It had became the common jibe that the Council always met people’s expectations because everyone knew to expect the fucking worst. Megan Marchant and the Heritage Group had argued that the space was ideal for a park and public activity area. It could be a place to hold Town Fairs, open-air concerts, flea-markets, displays. It could be a focus for community. It could belong to the townsfolk rather than to affluent strangers whose priorities were elsewhere. Old Mrs Callender told the local paper she’d had her first kiss behind a tree on that bit of ground, back when it was a lovely grove of bushland and she was sweet sixteen. It had been a trysting spot back in those innocent days, she said, and it’d be nice to think of that spirit of happy dalliance being preserved there. Tait had been struck by her comment and had got a poem out of it, about how Eros is the true moving spirit of all community. Of course the commercial developer would have got the site except that the State government stepped in and claimed it. A new Court building was greatly needed because of the spread of the public housing estates on the town’s fringes and all through the Shire. The State government knew there were those others to be catered for, the ones who were Going Nowhere, except maybe to gaol. Tait often stood and stared at the ugly mass of the building. In particular he brooded on a square tower at the rear. The side of the tower that faced the Green Room had a narrow slit of a window, like the ones Tait recalled so well from cells he had occupied, and the police-wagons and prison-vans pulled in and out of a big roller door directly below. Tait figured the tower contained a holding-cell. Occasionally there’d be a light on in that slit window at night. He wondered if it meant someone was being kept over for court proceedings the next day. He would gaze up at that slit of a window and wonder who might be in there, and what kind of trouble they were in, and what they were feeling. It always reminded him of some lines of A.E. Housman’s, where the poet is thinking of the tribulations others will be having long after he himself is dead:
This is for all ill-treated fellows,

Unborn and unbegot,

For them to read when they’re in trouble

And I am not.

Now and then he wondered if anyone was looking back at him from that slit window, but he knew it would be high in the cell wall and would offer nothing to get a grip on. He imagined himself in there, trying to jump up, trying to lift himself by the fingers to see out. No, he didn’t think a prisoner was looking back at him. It was the structure itself that kept surveillance. This was the grim watchtower of the Regime, looming day and night over the Players’ little world of greasepaint and fellowship.

Housman’s poem “The Oracles” was Tait’s Companion Piece now and he seldom went for long without the cadence of it running through his mind. Housman had once famously defined true poetry as the kind that makes the hair stand up on the back of your neck. “The Oracles” always had that effect on Tait, with those long lines impelled by their breakneck intensity:

I took my question to the shrine that has not ceased from speaking,

The heart within, that tells the truth and tells it twice as plain;

And from the cave of oracles I hear the priestess shrieking

That she and I should surely die and never live again.

Oh priestess, what you cry is clear, and sound good sense I think it;

But let the screaming echoes rest, and froth your mouth no more.

Tis true there’s better booze than brine, but he that drowns must drink it;

And oh, my lass, the news is news that men have heard before.

And then came the concluding stanza about the Spartans at Thermopylae. Most times he deliberately did not bring that stanza to mind. He saved it for his late-night sessions with the wine and the records. Then he declaimed it over and over until he felt delirious with the terrible beauty of it. He dwelt a lot on the Spartans nowadays, and on the Athenians and the various other Greeks who fought the Persian Wars and
saved the West. Like the Cavaliers and the Jacobites, they had fought against the odds to preserve a heritage, but with better luck. That was why it was important to remember them: they reminded you that not all the wars and causes have been lost.

The rehearsal ended around five o’clock and a few people stayed talking for a while. Some of the talk was about the flooding in the Valley and when the Valley road might be passable again. It wasn’t a big deal. Nearly every winter there were floods and the Valley people took it in their stride.

Tait and Narelle and Neil the Wheel were the last ones left. Narelle was busy searching for a beret she knew was somewhere in the costume cupboards and Tait started helping her. The cupboards were a mess, musty and dusty, with garments fallen off their hangers and tangled in heaps. Tait and Narelle had worked through the cupboards from opposite ends and were now both ransacking the one in the middle. Their hands and arms touched for a moment and Tait felt the same flutter of pleasure as when he’d hugged her earlier. She found the beret and banged the dust out of it and put it with her other bits of costume.

“Thanks for the help,” she said.

“My pleasure,” he replied.

There was a pause.

“Well, I’d better go.”

“Okay.”

“Troy’s coming over to have pizza.”

“Ah, excellent,” Tait said, keeping his expression blank.

She’d been going out with Troy for a few months.

It had been awkward from the start because the first time she went out with Troy she had mentioned it to Tait and asked him if he minded. She’d asked the question very offhandedly, but he had felt flustered that she had asked it at all. She had darted a quick look into his eyes, as though to glimpse his answer there, and then turned away as though pre-occupied with something else.

“Relationships are great,” Tait had replied after what seemed a very long moment, and thinking what a lame thing it was to say.

So she’d been with Troy ever since, and occasionally mentioned his name to Tait as though to imply the question again. Do you mind? And every time Tait would keep his expression blank and offer some pleasantry.
Tait and Neil stood side by side at the door and watched Narelle get into her new little lime-green car and drive away. He knew that he and Neil probably had very similar looks on their faces, for he knew Neil had feelings about her too.

They locked-up the Green Room and Neil trudged off towards home a block away. Tait intended to go to the Athena café, to sit in the corner booth and have something to eat and read his book. He felt a bit cramped and stale, though, from being indoors all afternoon. He decided to ride along the Valley road for some fresh air, just to where the floodwater was.

* * * *

Banks of dark cloud filled the sky, moving rapidly, and now and then there’d be a glimpse of the moon. Tait stood in the middle of the road at the edge of the floodwater that stretched ahead for a couple of hundred metres. A strong breeze blew into his face and rustled the long grass of the roadside. He knew every inch of this road and could tell without looking at the gauge-post that the water was about five feet deep in the middle. Whenever the moon appeared for a moment the image of it would shimmer brokenly on the ruffled surface.

He knew the water would have come across at another four or five points between here and Francesca’s.

He had phoned her yesterday. They were coping pretty well. Craig was managing to get to work by walking over a rough bush track to where he’d left their car at someone’s house on a road that wasn’t cut off. In the evening he’d hike back, with a few groceries and things in a knapsack and a powerful torch to light his way. You could easily break an ankle on the hillside in the dark.

Being flooded-in was very illuminating, Francesca said. It took you back to pioneer days, showed you what it was like when certain forces had to be reckoned with.

“Powers and principalities?” Tait suggested.

“That’s it,” she agreed. “It reminds you that there are powers and principalities that you’d foolishly forgotten about.”

Tait mentioned his old idea of the Valley being the valley of the Brothers Grimm and again Francesca knew at once what he meant.
In the evening gloom, she said, when she kept an eye out for Craig’s torch coming down the hill, she felt fear. What if someone else came down that hill? Or something else? She was trapped and alone there with her children. It gave you a powerful sense, she said, of the world that the Grimm stories came out of, the dark Germanic forest where god-knows-what might be lurking.

“Or taking it further back,” said Tait, “its the world of Beowulf. The fear is atavistic fear, carried in the genes, or the race-memory, or the collective unconscious.”

“Sounds about right,” Francesca had said.

“And fear, of course, is a power and a principality if ever there was one.”

“Yes, it’s a dandy.”

But there were supportive powers and principalities too, Francesca went on, and they were also atavistic memories. Being flooded-in put you back in touch with those. You could feel so snug around the fire at night, you and your loved-ones in the warm circle, self-sufficient, the world unable to get to you.

“At those times you attain wisdom,” she said, “not, alas, that it ever lasts. Looking into the fire, you see that what you share is so much more real and true than what you quarrel over. And you are linked to others back in time as well as in the present. You feel so in touch with all the generations that have stared into the fire in the same way. All the little groups of people that have spent all the dark nights of the world huddled together.”

“There’s a lovely old Scottish song about all that,” Tait said. “It’s called ‘The Peat Fire Flame.’ It’s on one of my records.”

“I’d like to hear it,” she replied.

“I’ll play it for you sometime.”

“Good. I miss you.”

“Miss you, too.”

They would have said more about missing each other and loving each other, but just then one of the kids had some minor mishap and Francesca had to ring off.

The breeze strengthened across the ruffled surface of the floodwater and had a colder edge. But the rain seemed to have gone for the time being. Tait zipped his jacket up and thrust his hands into the pockets. He didn’t want to leave just yet. It was stimulating to be alone in this huge dark scene of the Valley, with the sense of elemental forces in play.
He let his mind wander and what came to him was the picture of some of those times when they were building the house. It always seemed to be fine weather, with sunshine and a high blue sky, and scatters of dandelions in the long grass, and parrots and cockatoos wheeling about in the air. That can’t have been right, for they’d worked for well over a year and there must have been many days of dreariness, but somehow those hadn’t stayed in his memory. Craig had been the mastermind and jack-of-all-trades while Tait and Jimmy and Ian and Gillian’s brother had been the volunteer labour, mostly at weekends.

Tait’s main motivation for helping had of course been Francesca. Keeping on useful terms with Craig kept the channels of access open. Craig and Francesca had had an enormous row about the Governor’s Medal evening, with Craig accusing her of spending that night at the cabin with Tait. In fact, though, they had summoned the willpower not to go to bed together after they arrived back from the city around midnight. They had stood in the shadows outside the cabin, holding each other, and then Francesca had gone home. The accusation made Francesca lose her temper in a way Craig had never seen before. She screamed and threw things and swore she would tear up the No-Sex Agreement she had with Tait and they would fuck like ferrets. She would become the slut he was accusing her of being. She would go out every night and root anything in trousers. Telling Tait about it afterwards, she’d blushed to recall how over-the-top she’d been. “The thing is,” she said ruefully, “it was only about fifty percent acting. The rest was real. I shocked myself as well as Craig.” At any rate, it had made Craig realize how much Francesca was bending to her obligations already, that it wasn’t wise to press her too much more.

Jimmy had got involved because he was so unhappy with his job in the health and welfare system. He’d begun to dream of someday chucking it in and buying a few of acres of land and being self-sufficient. He wanted to learn how to build a mud-brick house in case he ever came to build one himself.

Gillian’s brother had not returned to England. He just stayed on at Ian and Gillian’s place in the Valley. There was more to it than met the eye, Tait thought, and he had developed his own little scenario about Bro. That was what everyone called him. Gillian only ever referred to him as Brother, so others got into the same habit, and it quickly became shortened to Bro. Tait’s scenario was that Bro had got into some kind of trouble in England and had fled home to his sister with his tail between his legs.
Bro was always pleasant to be around, because of his amiable manner, but there were times when you saw how emotionally fraught he was. With a few beers in him he became apologetic about himself. His voice would get a bit wobbly and he’d say how much he appreciated the kindness shown him as a mere stranger in the midst.

The five of them became a well-functioning team. They called themselves The Crew, or The Merry Men, or The Slapsticks. They weren’t always all at the site together. One or two of them might have other obligations on a given weekend, but they all slotted into the process in their own way.

The older kids would spend time at the site with the men. Bro had an excellent way with kids and could talk to them without crossness or condescension, and he quickly became Uncle Bro to them all. If a kid was whining or getting in the way, Bro was the one who would deal with it and smooth it over.

And then very often the women and younger kids would turn up with a picnic lunch, so there’d be a lovely convivial scene, with them all gathered round the Picnic Table or sitting in a circle of folding chairs in the bright sunlight or the dappled shade, with the parrots and cockatoos also being sociable nearby.

During that year, Francesca and Lauren and Gillian each had another child and would breast-feed while they sat there at the site. They would even exchange babies and feed each other’s. That was the sweetest thing Tait had ever seen, and an absolute paradigm of the shelter of each other. When they were all at the site together he felt they were one of those “little platoons” that keep life going in the midst of so much chaos and collapse. He kept trying to write a poem about it, but couldn’t get the proper distance. He knew that if he could achieve the poem it might be his best work ever. The whole scene – men building a house, women nurturing children, and bonds of sweet friendliness between them all – was both erotically charged and an absolute challenge to the politics of the zeitgeist.

But in the end he gave up trying to force it. The reality was the important thing, not the writing about the reality. He knew there were times when art must defer to life, that art and literature can only happen at all because houses get built and babes get suckled in the real world. The chain of priority couldn’t be clearer.

Then, as often happens, the poem came of its own accord, and from a slightly different angle. He’d been at Jimmy and Lauren’s place one day and went for a walk along their street in the evening, idly noting the rows of ordinary homes.
THE LITTLE GARRISONS

Here is a dull suburban avenue,
A row of houses of the middling sort.
This is where the vast collapse has come to,
And this is where the war is being fought.

Here are the people doing what they can
As friend and neighbour, parent, husband, wife,
Continuing against the odds to man
The little garrisons of normal life.

Along the street’s perimeter they link
The small acts of meaning and of beauty.
In rooms, in gardens, at the kitchen sink,
They stand to their customary duty.

History will bring their story home,
Will liken them to those heroic ranks
Who held the last of Athens and of Rome
And fought without encouragement or thanks.

But now the quiet valour of the day
Is just to win another night ahead,
To get the dishes washed and put away,
And tuck the anxious children into bed.

The Crew really came into its own with the intensive and repetitive work, like making mud-bricks.
Craig hired a bulldozer to create the level site for the foundations, and the dozer had to scoop a big section of earth out of the slope. A sample of it was tested and it turned out to have the right ingredients of clay and silica. That was a stroke of luck and
saved the cost of bringing the stuff in from elsewhere. The huge pile of excavated earth became the material for the bricks.

But the dozer also uncovered hundreds of funnel-web spider nests, and Craig had to have the ground sprayed with a powerful insecticide. After that they only saw the odd few spiders crawling about, but everybody stayed very nervous and very careful for a longish while. You never picked anything up off the ground without looking closely. This gave rise to yet another name for the Crew: The Funnel-Web Fusiliers.

The uprights for the frame of the house were telephone poles Craig had bought somewhere and they were sunk deep into the ground. The house was to have a spacious upstairs bedroom with large windows looking out at tree-level, so the poles had to go high.

When the roof was in place, the brick-making began in earnest, and they learnt by trial and error.

At first they used only earth and water, tumbled in a huge old cement-mixer they called Rumbleguts. Then they improved the blend by adding a one-twelfth part of cement. Some of the mud-brick manuals advised using straw in the mix as well, but after seeing the quality of the bricks they produced without it, they decided not to bother. They also had to work out the best way of moulding the mud. They began with a heavy wooden mould laid on a flat sheet of iron. It made four bricks at a time, but the mud tended to cling to the wood, and the framework was hard to remove cleanly from the moist new bricks without fudging their edges. So they got a single steel mould that lifted cleanly off the brick and was easy for one person to handle. Then they discovered that the bricks could be made perfectly well on the bare ground, and that that made them easier to pick up when they had dried enough to be stacked and left to “cure” under the shelter of the roof.

Efficient brick-making took at least three people. One attended to Rumbleguts to keep the supply of mud mixture coming. Another shovelled the mud from the wheelbarrow into the steel mould on the ground. The third person, bare-foot, with trousers rolled above the knee, stamped it down so that it went into all the corners.

Tait was usually the stamper-down and he became skilled at it. It wasn’t just a matter of crude stamping, but of subtly working the mud with your foot and toes. You’d work the first couple of shovel-loads, then stand back for the next dollop to be added, then you’d work that, and so on. The aim was to get a solid block of mud with
no hollows in it. When the process was in flow, it only took a couple of minutes to complete each brick. And there was a sensual aspect, with the moist mud squishing against your bare skin.

They made several thousand mud-bricks, and allowed for a degree of wastage. Some batches didn’t have the proper drying weather and therefore did not “set” completely right, and many of those bricks would crack or crumble when you handled them. And having developed their own technique by trial and error, they preferred to discard all of the early batches even though they might have been useable. They were all conscious of wanting the house to be totally sound. “As sound as a nut” was Bro’s way of putting it. It seemed a matter of principle not to stint on the effort.

The other intensive job was laying the bricks. Craig did the actual laying with the trowel and string-lines and all that, while the others acted as brickie’s labourers, hovering at his elbow to hand him a good sound brick each time, and keeping up the supply of the mud mixture that served as mortar. As the walls rose higher they put up scaffolding platforms and built steadily upwards till they met the eaves of the roof.

Craig always brought two or three bottles of beer and left them to sit in the midst of a stack of mud-bricks where they’d stay cool until knock-off time.

“Must be nearly knock-off,” someone would say when evening began to approach.

“I can hear little voices coming out of that stack.”

“What kinda voices?”

“Little beer-bottley voices.”

“What are they saying?”

“Drink us, drink us.”

The knock-off glass or two was awfully nice. They felt they’d earned it. They felt mellow and at ease. Those times Craig would talk about his long-term plan to landscape the property into a series of terraced levels, or about the all-weather driveway he would put in, or about the fruit trees he wanted to plant, or how Francesca would want a vegetable-patch and a herb-garden. And he often said what a good place it was going to be for the kids to grow up.

One late afternoon, as they sat enjoying their beer, Bambi’s decrepit yellow Mini came along. It slowed right down and then stopped in the middle of the road and Tait saw Bambi looking up at them from the passenger side. Then he saw Jade leaning
across from the driver’s seat to look up also. He hadn’t seen them around for a longish
time and had wondered how they were faring.

People in cars often paused to look up at the mud-brick house taking shape, and
that’s what Jade and Bambi appeared to be doing. Tait wasn’t even sure if they had
registered that there were men sitting up there looking back down at them.

“Hi Bambi,” Bro muttered, giving her a wave.

But she didn’t seem to see it.

The Mini spluttered and coughed back into motion and went on past.

“You know them?” Tait asked.

“I know Bambi,” Bro replied.

“How come.”

“She comes by to sell jam.”

“Jam?”

“Yes, home-made jam. And eggs. And she’s available to do baby-sitting. And her
husband can be hired to entertain at parties. I gather he’s a professional clown, or
some such thing.”

“He does stuff with whips.”

“Really? Is he good?”

“Depends how you look at it.”

“Well, Bambi seems to be a decent little woman. But she obviously has to struggle
to make ends meet. We always buy a jar or two of the jam to help her out.”

Tait told how he used to buy lemonade to help her out when she had the shop.

“Gillian was wondering whether to hire the husband for the next kids’ birthday
party,” Bro said. “But she thinks he’s a clown.”

“Perhaps he is now. Perhaps he got out of whips and ropes and motorbikes.”

“What does he do with motorbikes?”

“You might well ask.”

“Is he the sort of person you’d hire for a kids’ party?”

Tait was in an awkward spot. He didn’t want to badmouth the man, but he didn’t
want to seem to recommend him either. He got a mental picture of Jade, thoroughly
pissed and wielding his whips at a birthday party — and then of the accidentally
lashed and bleeding children as they run screaming in all directions.

“It’s a while since I knew him,” Tait said. “I don’t know what he’s like nowadays.”
“Well, anyway,” Bro remarked again. “Bambi seems very personable.”

It was only a couple of days after that the Red-Belly Polka was invented. The toilet bowl for the house was standing disconnected amongst bits of pipe and stuff in a corner of one of the half-built rooms. Bro lifted the toilet bowl to put it somewhere else. A big red-bellied black snake had been curled up on the floor inside it. The snake reared defensively and Bro yelled with fright. The others turned to see what the matter was. Bro was frantically trying to get his legs away from the snake, but he couldn’t gain any traction backwards so he kept up a terrified frantic dance on the spot with the toilet bowl clutched in his arms and his yells getting higher-pitched all the while. The snake backed up into the corner. It continued rearing and made little threatening feints but did not seem to want to strike. Bro didn’t know quite where it was and was expecting to feel the fangs in his leg every moment as he cavorted wildly. After a few seconds Craig had the presence of mind to run around to one side of Bro and swish at the reared head with a broom. This induced the snake to make its getaway. It went very fast across the floor and out through an opening and into the grass outside.

Of course it wasn’t the least bit funny at the time. They were all somewhat shaken and Bro had the heebie-jeebies and had to struggle to compose himself.

They were impressed that he hadn’t dropped the toilet bowl, but he disclaimed any credit for that. Every muscle in his body had been clenched in terror, he said, and he couldn’t have let go if he’d tried.

Afterwards it was embroidered into the great joke of Bro’s Snake Dance, the Red-Belly Polka. They made up a whole comic persona of Bro as a kind of shaman whose weird mystical gift was to caper with serpents and bathroom fittings. Bro smiled and took all it in good part.

The shadow of it stayed with them, though. Their eyes automatically scanned the ground for anything snake-like, just as they’d learned to be alert for anything that could be a funnel-web spider. Jokes were fine, but there were powers and principalities that weren’t ever to be taken too lightly.

* * * *
He was wrong about the rain having gone away. The banks of cloud had darkened again as he stood lost in thought at the edge of the floodwater. The moon was quite hidden now and he felt raindrops on his face. He kick-started the motorbike and rode back into the town. The rain was still only a light patter so he decided to head for home while he could. As he rode along beside the river he tried to reach for the poem he knew was hovering at the back of his mind. It was something about what it means when rogue forces are unleashed into people’s ordinary lives. The forces might be natural elements like the floodwaters in the Valley, or they might be social forces. The floodwaters he’d been looking at could work as a metaphor for social forces. The poem was in the metaphor. That was all he could piece together just now.

As he turned away from the river and entered The Fens area the rain increased and he felt his jacket becoming soaked and heavy and cold and his trousers being plastered to his legs. Cold trickles ran down the back of his neck. When he approached the corner where the hamburger shop was the rain was pelting and he had slowed right down.

The Doberman lunged out from the kerb. Tait heard the demented growl and saw the jaws going for his left ankle. He twisted the hand-grip to accelerate and nearly lost his balance as the bike slewed on the wet surface. The dog made another lunge at his ankle and he shouted curses at it. Then the bike steadied itself and the tyres gripped on the road and he was able to speed away. His heart was still pounding with fright and rage as he turned in at his gate. He pictured himself fallen off back there, sprawled on the road with that brute tearing at him.

Somebody had to do something about it. Complain to the police or the Council or whoever. The dog had got steadily worse over the past four years. It was a public danger. It was constantly off its chain and menacing people. Its owners were grossly negligent. They had no right to be so irresponsible. The whole thing was perfectly clear and Tait had sworn to himself a hundred times that he would lodge a complaint. But as soon as he imagined himself following through on it, the issue became less clear-cut. He knew the first thing they’d ask would be: “Have you spoken to the dog’s owners about it?” Of course he hadn’t. They weren’t the kind of people you spoke to about anything. They had glowering faces and edgy manners. They had a horde of aggressive brats who jeered and threw stones. They had yobbo friends with panel-vans who hung about boozing and hooting and swearing at the tops of their voices. If
speaking to them had been an option then everyone in the vicinity would have spoken to them about a dozen different things, a dozen infringements of other people’s privacy and well-being. Tait was thankful he lived further up the road, but he knew from the Ellicotts that all the nearer neighbours were deeply unhappy.

Tait had other options than confrontation, that was the thing. He didn’t have to ride past the hamburger shop. He could go another way. It was longer and less convenient, but it saved the aggravation. He had chosen to take the more direct route tonight because of the rain. He’d brought the trouble on himself, really. That was the only way to look at it. He couldn’t control those people’s behaviour, much less their dog’s, but he could control his own. He could make better choices and save himself the unpleasantness.

The rain became torrential as he put the bike under cover. Inside the cabin he stripped off his wet clothes and dried himself and put pajamas on and wrapped a blanket round his shoulders. Then he got out Housman’s poems and started browsing through them, hoping to imbibe some of their stoicism. Housman was one of those writers who had what Tait called passionate poise. Like Hemingway and others, he was stoical not because of any lack of feeling but because there was so much feeling it had to kept in check.

There was a bottle of Scotch at hand, a recent birthday gift from Jimmy and Lauren. He poured half a glass and added a small amount of water, then took a long sip. The warmth of it flowed through him and he leaned back in his chair and looked up at the Blue Board.

At the top left was Trotsky’s message on behalf of the Great Commissariat: YOU MAY NOT BE INTERESTED IN WAR, BUT WAR IS INTERESTED IN YOU. At the top right of the Board was the little brooch that Francesca had given him, the one in the shape of a Cavalier’s hat. Those two things conveyed the whole spectrum of good and evil, of friend and foe. Anytime Tait felt he was losing sight of that spectrum he had only to look up at the Blue Board to be reminded.

He looked for a record to put on. He had not played The Storm on the Heather for some time, so he set that one going and adjusted his earphones and settled back and took another big sip of the whisky.

The old songs stirred him as they always did and the final stanza of Housman’s poem “The Oracles” came to his mind, the one about Thermopylae. As the vast
multitudes of the Persian army approach, the Spartans calmly groom themselves in readiness to die defending the pass:

*The King with half the East at heel is come from lands of morning;*

*Their fighters drink the rivers up, their shafts benight the air.*

*And he that stands will die for naught, and home there’s no returning.*

*The Spartans on the sea-wet rock sat down and combed their hair.*

And that reminded Tait once again, as it always did, of the superb reply of the Spartan called Dieneces who was a sort of John MacBride of his time. When told that the Persian arrows would fly so thick that they would darken the sun, he replied, *“Then we shall have our fight in the shade.”*

Tait swallowed more of the whisky. He needed to get himself a bit sloshed so he could go to bed. He didn’t want to sit up late tonight. He was filled with self-disgust and just wanted to sleep and forget. He wanted to forget the appalling gulf between the passionate poise of the heroes he read and thought about so much and what he knew to be his own chicken-heartedness.

Whatever the odds, he reflected, *they* stood and fought, even in the shade of the Persian arrows. *They* didn’t piss up their own jumpers with drivel about having “other options than confrontation” or about how they could make “better choices to avoid unpleasantness.”

* * *

By next morning the weather had fined up. The sky was sunny and bright and there was a strong breeze off the lake to help dry the ground. Looking through his window Tait saw the grass bending and the leaves being ruffled. He could also tell the strength of the breeze from the quivering of Ernie’s radio aerial. His landlord was a radio ham and spent most of his days and nights talking on his elaborate equipment to other radio hams around the world. The aerial rose high over the roof. It was well secured by wires but had a certain amount of quiver in it and Tait had learned to use it as a wind-gauge.
Ernie had turned out to be an easy chap to live near. He was seldom visible, made no noise, and did not appear to want to pry into anyone’s affairs. Now and then he took a job on the coal-ships to Japan and might be away for a few weeks, but that was happening less often. If Tait and Ernie happened to both be outside at the same moment they’d exchange nods and greetings, but mostly they only spoke when Tait knocked on the door to pay some rent.

And Ernie was blessedly easy-going about the rent. A couple of years back Tait had been in dire straits again and had lagged a long way behind in his payments, but Ernie hadn’t said anything. And when another Arts Council grant came through and Tait went to him with a wad of notes to cover the arrears, Ernie just chatted about the weather as he bent over his kitchen table to make out the receipt.

“Thanks for being so patient,” Tait had said in heartfelt gratitude.

“Ah, never mind that,” Ernie had replied, waving it away with his hand. “I know what its like. Too right I do. There was many a time I never had an arse in me trousers!”

That was all he said.

Ernie would’ve been a Depression kid, the child of battlers, and must’ve grown up seeing things that would make a strong man weep. Tait could picture him as a barefoot urchin, like the young Willie MacLew.

Tait worked hard all morning on a poem. It was about the importance of a stoic outlook on life, and how the poems of Housman had helped him to clarify that. He always wary of writing poems about other poets and their work because it could become an enclosed circle with real life shut out of it. But once in a while didn’t hurt, as long as you were aware of the danger.

At about two o’clock he knocked off for a sandwich.

The sky was still very clear and blue over the lake and the breeze was still blowing. If the weather stayed like this the floodwater in the Valley would quickly recede. Francesca might even be at tomorrow night’s rehearsal. He hoped so. He was yearning to see her, and yearning for a good intense cuddle in a dark nook somewhere.

Bro might also be at rehearsal. He had become a mainstay at the Players. He’d resisted all urging to go on stage but was a willing helper with everything else. He was one of the few people who could get on happily with Marigold and the two of
them were usually in charge of the box-office and front-of-house arrangements.

Marigold had tended to be a bit dour with the paying customers and having Bro as her offsider lightened her up. In the current production he was the prompt. Bro had moved away from his sister’s place in the Valley and now had a flat over at Tuskett, not too far from Jimmy and Lauren’s place. He worked as a salesman at Sinbad’s Discount Carpets and was said to be very good with customers because of being so amiable. And he had some kind of background in accountancy and did tax-returns for people on the cheap. Tait never quite understood what Bro’s exact credentials were in that field, but he was thinking of getting him to handle his next tax form.

Tait needed bread and milk and decided to go up the street to Errol’s. He felt like being out in that strong breeze for a few minutes. It would brace him for another couple of hours work on the poem.

He knew the postman had been past so he checked his box. He hadn’t heard from Mike Kieslowski for a few weeks and was looking forward to a letter. But there was nothing. He glanced across the road at the old shop. After another long period of being empty it was now occupied as a residence. As he went up the street he looked back and saw Ernie carrying a step-ladder.

Up at the newsagency Errol was in a flap of exasperation. His front window had been spray-painted with obscenities during the night. He was huffing and bristling about it as he attended to customers.

“Isn’t it wonderful! Isn’t it just marvelous! I ask you!”

Then he stalked outside to check on his assistant who was struggling to remove the paint with a rag and metholated spirits. After a moment out there with his hands on his hips he came back in, clicking his tongue and declaring again that it was just marvelous and that whoever they were they were nothing but hoons.

Tait nodded and agreed as he paid for his milk and bread.

“And what are the parents thinking of?” Errol demanded. “That’s what amazes me. I suppose they’re out to the booze and the poker-machines every night!”

Tait nodded and agreed.

Narelle wasn’t there. She had left school now and was working at the newsagency in Turrawong Plaza with her easygoing friend Cathy. She had a room at Cathy’s place. She had got very good exam results and could have gone straight to university, but she’d chosen to take a year or so to reflect on what she wanted to do in life. Living
and working with Cathy was a welcome change from being at her father’s and having to put up with his over-finicky manner. She loved him dearly but she’d been helping him behind the counter ever since she was tall enough to see over it and it was time to break away a little and get a fresh outlook.

How sweet she’d been back then, Tait recalled, when she was the Owl Child and had served him that first time he went in. And now she was just as sweet, but in a quietly sexy and more grown-up way.

Tait always felt a little erotic tremor run through him when he thought about Narelle’s sexiness. Most times he would then turn to imagining Francesca in his arms. But sometimes his thoughts would not make the transfer to Francesca and it would be Narelle he was making love with. And there were times when it was somehow both of them in the one person.

He went into the liquor shop to buy a bottle of beer. The woman there said how off-putting it was about Errol’s window, and that she often felt nervous nowadays, serving in a liquor shop, the way this neighbourhood was going. Liquor shops got held-up a lot. She’d never been held-up herself, she said, but the one at Tuskett had been done over last week by a bandit with a sawn-off shotgun. It made you wonder, she said, when the law of averages would catch up with you.

Tait nodded and agreed it was a worry.

As he walked back to the cabin he could not get his mind off Narelle. He tried to change the mental image into that of Francesca, but Narelle stayed with him. As he went up his driveway, pre-occupied with his thoughts, he saw that Ernie was up the ladder with a big set of pruning shears. He was trimming the top of a spindly tree that had been swishing very close to the power line.

When he was back inside the cabin he did not feel like working on the poem any more. He felt too aroused and edgy. The thoughts and images of Narelle were very vivid and he went and lay down on his cold narrow bed and clutched his pillow as the anguish grew in him.

Let the floodwaters recede quickly, for he desperately needed Francesca to be at tomorrow night’s rehearsal. He desperately needed Francesca, full stop. Every fibre of his body was aching to hold her.

Then he thought of something. He went into the work-room and put on a record he had bought cheap the other day, *Kenneth McKellar’s Old Scottish Favourites*. He set
it at the beginning of “An Eriskay Love Lilt” and turned the volume up loud. He
didn’t bother with the earphones. The lake wind whooshing through the trees would
cover the sound of it. As the power and purity of McKellar’s voice filled the room,
Tait’s anguish began to drain away. ‘Sad am I without thee… Sad am I without
thee…’ Here was all the human pain of love and yearning and separation, but raised to
a level of grandeur. Here it was in its true context of Time and Fate and History and
the coming and going of generations. Here was the grief that becomes its own
consolation, the heartbreak that somehow mends the heart. Here were fadeless words
and a melody that had seen so many people through so many troubles, and far worse
ones than a bit of water across a road, or having to go a few days without a cuddle.

Chapter Fourteen

She didn’t get to the next rehearsal. The water had gone down a lot but was still too
depth to drive through.

It was okay though, for they’d had a stimulating talk on the phone that afternoon.
Tait had said how much he ached to hold her and Francesca replied that this was an
uncanny coincidence, because was she aching to be held.

So they whispered of what they would do to each other next time they were together.
She had to whisper in case the kids were nearby, and Tait whispered in response.

The two older kids were big enough to understand and repeat anything they saw and
heard. This had forced Tait and Francesca to be much more discreet around them.
They’d agreed a long time back that they had to make it a priority not to “confuse” the
kids.

“Keep the confusion all to ourselves, you mean.”

“Precisely.”

“Good plan.”

It wasn’t so much that they feared the kids would say something in front of Craig.
Craig had long ago learned to live with what he and Francesca occasionally referred
it at the beginning of “An Eriskay Love Lilt” and turned the volume up loud. He
didn’t bother with the earphones. The lake wind whooshing through the trees would
cover the sound of it. As the power and purity of McKellar’s voice filled the room,
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It wasn’t so much that they feared the kids would say something in front of Craig.
Craig had long ago learned to live with what he and Francesca occasionally referred
to in private as The Understanding. This was that Francesca would go on being a wife and mother and his exclusive bedmate, and he in turn would not pry into her doings with Tait.

Francesca’s concern about the kids was to see that their respect for their father wasn’t damaged, or at least not damaged any more than might happen in the general way of things.

“I know they’re often hurt by his emotional coldness,” she had said a few weeks before, “but I can’t deny that he works hard to provide for us materially, and that’s also a form of loving and caring. He deserves to have the respect of his children.”

“Yes,” Tait had agreed.

“And anyway,” Francesca had continued, in a rueful tone. “Who’s to throw the first stone? He might be a cold fish, but I’m a raging adulteress.”

“But we don’t have sex.”

“Yes we do. Be honest. Doesn’t it say somewhere in the Bible that if you fornicate in your heart it’s the same as really doing it.”

“Something like that, I think.”

“There you are then,” she went on. “I’m not saying we should stop doing what we do, but we mustn’t delude ourselves that what we do is innocent or somehow not real. It is real.”

“Yes, it is.”

“And I know this. If Craig had a female equivalent of you in his life, it’d cause me a lot of hurt.”

“I’ve never heard you say that before.”

“Time goes on, and one reflects on things – in the odd moments of not having a thankless meal to cook or a load of dirty washing to do.”

“I’m sorry,” he had replied, awkward as always when she said things like that. And now there was another awkward moment.

“I had a bad case of the blues yesterday,” she said. “I was reading your new book over again, and thinking how sad those stories are, and I was aching to talk to you. I think I could almost have reached right through the phone line to hug you. But of course The Unreachable One still doesn’t have a phone line.”

“I did go and see about it, that time,” he replied lamely.
“Oh yes, you found you’d have to fill out some forms, so the next thing I know I’m getting a full-on rant about concentration camps.”

“I was making a valid point.”

“Of course you were.”

“One has to get the big picture.”

“I get the big picture: they didn’t have telephones at Culloden, so you mustn’t have one either.”

“I knew you’d understand.”

“You’re such a fool.”

“Guess so.”

Her voice softened.

“You’re very comical when you rant like that.”

“Am I?”

“Yes, it’s the mad sincerity that you radiate.”

“Don’t call me mad. I have a Licence to be at Large!”

“Expired long ago.”

“Well, yes.”

“So you can no more prove your sanity than I can prove mine.”

“No, I guess not. That’s a sobering thought.”

“But you aren’t merely comical.”

“Aren’t I?”

“No, you’re also a tiny bit loveable.”

“Just a tiny bit?”

“Just a smidgeon.”

“Just a skerrick.”

“Just enough to keep me from murdering you for your silliness about the telephone. I should murder you with a telephone. Hit you over the head with it. That’d be poetic justice.”

“I want you to cuddle me to death.”

“We could do mental cuddling.”

“Bugger mental cuddling. I want to feel your flesh.”

“Say ‘flesh’ again.”

“Flessshh!”
“Again.”
“Fleeeessshhh.”

They hadn’t been able to take it any further because the kids had come whining around her just then.

The rehearsal went well with a skeleton cast. Tait stood-in for Francesca because he knew her dialogue almost as well as his own. He made the others laugh when he copied the sultry voice and slinky movements she used in her role as the mysterious Romanian countess who might or might not be a German spy. Narelle was playing the innkeeper’s wholesome daughter, and a chap named Brandon Hagen was doing the part of the handsome ski-instructor who might or might not be a British spy.

Brandon didn’t belong to the Players. He was from the drama group up at Melrose, halfway to Castleton. Despite niggling rivalries, the different groups in the region always went to see each other’s shows and sometimes used each other’s people if they were especially right for a part and felt like a change of venue. Brandon Hagan was in his mid-thirties and a high school physical education teacher. He was very fit and handsome and debonair. He’d been roped in because the plot of the play required that the ski-instructor be a dashing devil with the ladies.

Tait was watching Brandon do the seduction scene with Narelle. The ski-instructor is trying to enlist the innkeeper’s daughter to help him keep tabs on the Countess, so he is focussing all his charm on her. This was the first time in her six or seven years with the Players that Narelle had to do a part that involved being seriously groped.

The two of them were sitting on a wrought-iron garden-seat. Brandon had his left arm around the back of the seat in readiness to clutch the girl to him, and his right hand was inching towards her thigh. His lips were against her ear as he muttered blandishments. At a certain moment Narelle had to begin to melt against him, then Brandon had to make a sudden show of passion and clutch her thigh and plant a long intense kiss on her mouth. It had to look convincing because for once this Casanova has miscalculated and made too bold a move too soon and this prompts the girl to remember her virtue. The director kept harping on how this moment was a major plot-point. The sudden unleashing of sexuality had to be powerful enough to make the audience feel the girl’s reaction to it.

“Sell it, sell it!” she kept saying. “You have to sell it!”
Tait hated that scene and would have preferred not to watch, but he couldn’t help himself. He always felt a knot of tension growing in his stomach as the crucial moment approached, and when Brandon planted the long hard kiss on Narelle’s lips he felt like running over and dragging the bastard off her. And then he would feel a flash of rage at Narelle and would want to turn away and never speak to her again. Narelle always smiled at Brandon when they finished the scene, and Tait fretted endlessly over what that meant. Was it because she’d enjoyed being mauled and slobbered over? Or was she just being amiable? Or was it to cover her embarrassment?

Later on in Act Two the ski-instructor has a go at seducing Francesca’s character, but somehow that didn’t get Tait churned up in the same way. The wily Countess was more than a match for him, and besides, Francesca didn’t smile at Brandon afterwards. She was turned-off by his tendency to preen. “It’s as though he’s forever watching himself in a full-length mirror,” she declared. She was put off even more by what she felt was his lack of commitment to the craft of acting. She and Tait agreed that being the local glamour-boy up at Melrose had gone to his head.

That night Tait stood outside for a while, looking up at the square tower of the Court building, and at a scatter of cold stars above it. Narelle came out for a breath of air and they chatted about various things, including the paint that had been scrawled on the newsagency window. Narelle said it was just the latest in a pattern of unpleasantness. She was worried that the paint scrawls might have been meant to get back at her. She had twice been accosted by yobbos, she said, and had told them in no uncertain terms to piss off. She hadn’t mentioned it to her father. Tait asked if they were the ones from the hamburger joint further down. No, she said, these were other yobbos who lived in the opposite direction. The barbarian hordes were spreading out.

Then they talked about how bright and cold the stars looked. And then Narelle asked him in a slightly halting voice what he thought of her big scene on the garden-seat with Brandon.

“You do it very well,” he replied, unable to keep a slight curtness out of his tone.

“Do you have any advice?” she asked softly, moving half a step closer.

He knew she was asking: *Do you mind?*
For a moment he was deeply tempted to tell her that he did mind, that it made him miserable to see her being mauled and slobbered over, that he didn’t want anybody kissing her like that except himself.

And the thing that wrenched his heart was knowing that she would completely accept his right to say those things to her.

“No advice,” he said instead. “Just keep up the good work.”

* * * *

“I’m intrigued to hear that you have ancestral links with Preston,” Mike Kieslowski wrote. “What a fatal destiny that town has had. So many of our side’s hopes were dashed there at one time or another.” Tait still hadn’t told anyone about his ancestor Robert Connell, but had mentioned in a letter to Mike that he had family connections to that part of Lancashire.

He knew what Mike meant about the fatal destiny. In the Civil Wars they had lost a major battle at Preston. Then the Rising of 1715 had ended there, with the Jacobite forces besieged in the town. That was when the young Earl of Derwentwater was captured. The Regime offered to pardon him if he would renounce his beliefs, but he refused. His words on the scaffold were often in Tait’s mind:

Some means have been proposed to me for saving my life, which
I looked upon as inconsistent with honour and conscience, and therefore
I rejected them; for, with God’s assistance, I shall prefer any death
to a base unworthy action.

Afterwards he was remembered in the beautiful Jacobite song called “Derwentwater’s Farewell.”

And then came the Forty Five.

Marching rapidly south from Scotland, the Prince’s army had arrived at Preston on the 26th of November. It had great hopes of recruitment there, for Lancashire was known among English counties for its partiality to the Cause, so much so that Whigs referred to loyal Jacobite women as “Lancashire witches.” But it was recorded that
aside from just one local gentleman, Francis Townley of Townley Hall, “only a few common people” joined the Prince at Preston.

Tait’s ancestor was one of those.

He wondered if Robert Connell had already known Mr Townley, the only one of his “betters” to have stepped forward when it really counted. It would be nice to think so. Townley met a brutal fate, and proved just as dauntless at the end as young Derwentwater had been.

The army was in Preston again two weeks later, retracing its route north.

The fateful decision to turn back had been made at Derby, after the Prince had lost a long and bitter debate with his top commander, Lord George Murray. The Prince used all his eloquence to argue for going on at any cost, while the dour Lieutenant General spelt out the hard realities of their situation. The Highland chiefs agreed with Murray and the Prince was outvoted.

It was one of the great “What Ifs?” of history. They were just a hundred and twenty miles from London. What if they had gone on? Historians still argued about it. And Mike and Tait took differing views.

“The Prince was right,” Mike fiercely maintained. “It was all or nothing. Our fortunes were at the flood and we should have ridden the flood no matter what. London was in a total panic. The Usurper was packing his bags to piss off back to Hanover. The decision at Derby makes me want to weep!”

Tait was more cautious.

Yes, there were times when it had to be all or nothing. There were times when it was your duty to risk everything, and the Prince’s men had already done that by coming out in arms for him in the first place, never mind the additional perils of war itself. In the eyes of the Regime they were now all filthy traitors and outlaws and could expect no mercy. So their willingness to throw caution to the wind wasn’t the issue at Derby. It was simply Murray’s job as Lieutenant General to ensure that if they threw caution to the wind it was as a calculated military gamble and not a mad escapade of wishful thinking.

The Prince had five thousand men. The Regime had thirty thousand, deployed in three separate armies. On their day the Highlanders could outfight anyone – and they’d already thrashed the Regime’s forces in Scotland – but they were still only human. Even if they beat the other three armies in turn on their way to London, their
own casualties would bleed them to nothing. And if they suffered a defeat, way down in the south of England, not a man of them would escape death or capture.

Murray thought like a Highlander. *His* soldiers weren’t poor wretched nobodies like the redcoats of the Regime, to be flogged into obedience and then tossed away like chaff. They were the fathers and brothers and sons and husbands of the Clan. If they marched on from Derby and it went ill, the glens would be filled with weeping, and would be left defenceless.

The Prince was an exceptionally decent man, especially as princes go, but he wasn’t a Highlander.

And the English Jacobites had not risen, even though a Jacobite army had now marched half the length of the country. That was the other key factor. It was just the outnumbered Scots and a handful of loyal English to do it all. The argument for marching on was based in the end on the wild hope that the Regime would suddenly and totally surrender, and that just wasn’t going to happen.

The true Jacobite mission was to save society from the death-agenda of the Great Commissariat. Getting its own forces killed or captured near London – or maybe trapped and besieged in London – would do nothing to accomplish that.

If Tait and Mike had been casting votes at the council-of-war in Derby that day they’d have cancelled each other out, for Tait would’ve sided with Murray. They could still beat the Regime. Murray had every intention of beating it in the field, and had the skills to do so – as he had shown already and would show again in further victories at Clifton and at Falkirk – but it was crucial they fight on friendlier ground in the north.

Tait imagined Robert Connell back at Preston from Derby those two weeks later. He realized that he had never tried to visualize his ancestor in any detail before. What did he look like? Did he have the lineaments of the family in his face? “Would I know him if I passed him in the street,” Tait wondered.

The more he tried to get an exact mental picture, the more he saw a male version of Auntie Annie’s face, but thinner and paler and more haunted. It was the face of some common person of the time, one of the disinfected rabble that the Puritan-Whig ethos was busily creating, someone who’d quite likely never had a proper ration of food or of shelter, someone with bad teeth, blotchy skin, and chilblains. Tait felt a sudden rush of compassion for that flesh and blood human being.
The Prince’s army left Preston on the 13th of December, to take the wintry Pennine roads north.

Did Robert Connell have sad farewells to make that morning? Were there relatives in the town? Did he have friends there? Did he have a girlfriend? Tait had no way of knowing, but he preferred to think not. He preferred to imagine that his ancestor had come to Preston alone, to work, or to look for work, and hadn’t been there long enough to form any ties. He preferred to think the relatives were someplace else and only learned of these events later. For Robert Connell was now a “rebel” and a “traitor” and anyone in Preston known to be close to him could be due for a hard time once the Jacobite forces had gone. Tait preferred to assume that his ancestor had been alone, with only his own neck to risk. He had chosen to step forward for the shelter of each other, but that didn’t necessarily mean he’d ever had much of the comfort of it himself.

The last to leave the town were young Lord Elcho’s patrols of cavalry, who were gone by about midday. An hour later the forces of the Regime arrived and god knows what ugly things began to happen. The departing army’s order-of-the-day had given ominous warning to stragglers: “If anyone stays after the rearguard it is at their own peril, as they are not to be waited on.”

But in his letter Mike was able to impart something new about Preston.

“Ever read the Dickens novel *Hard Times*?” he asked. “If not, I do recommend it to you, although it’s a book that’ll break your heart.”

Tait knew of it of course, but hadn’t read it.

“The setting is a northern industrial town in the 1850s,” Mike went on. “It’s a poisonous hell-hole, a smoking pit of degradation. Dickens called it ‘Coketown’ but it was based on what he saw in Preston when he went there to observe an industrial strike and lockout. This was a hundred years after Culloden, and the Regime had been conjuring up the Dark Satanic Mills, whole new modes of mayhem that would make all its previous ravages look like a picnic. *Hard Times* is a vision of Preston’s dark apotheosis, and the world’s too. Its as though the Spirit of the Pities is hovering over the desolated town and saying: “The Cause had no luck in this place and so departed. Behold the consequences!”

Yes, thought Tait, or one could adopt another wording to make much the same point: “Those who stay after the rearguard do so at their peril.”
“Not that one would call Dickens pro-Jacobite,” Mike noted. “He acknowledged the appeal of the songs and stories, but curtly dismissed the Stuarts as ‘a public nuisance altogether.’ Still, I count him as one of those who have something like the Jacobite temperament and sense of honour, even if they wouldn’t thank you for saying so. Orwell is another. Actually, there’s a quote of Orwell’s that really sums up that whole side of Dickens, and also links him nicely to Chesterton, who of course was pro-Jacobite to the bootstraps: ‘What he is out against is not this or that institution, but, as Chesterton put it, ‘an expression on the human face.’”

Towards the end of the letter Mike mentioned that he was still looking for a decent job. His doctorate in Political Science hadn’t exactly turned out to be a solid meal-ticket. Mike had never complained about it, but Tait knew how handicapped he was by his own fervent principles. He was far too politically offside to have any chance of getting an academic post. And a Public Service position – if he could secure one – would require him to grovel to wicked people and help promulgate evil policies. And he was not willing to be a “suit” in the halls of corporate capitalism, which was just another branch of the Commissariat. So he was doing casual jobs at night, stacking shelves at the local supermarket, for instance, and keeping on with his writing.

His main impact now was as a fearless book-reviewer for Compact magazine. He kept up a fusillade of what he called “creative contempt” for the commissars and their dupes and bootlicks. This was in answer to the “creative destruction” that they practiced, to what he described as “their 500-year program of smashing the world to bits so that their stinking homicidal utopias can occupy the ruins.” Mike was becoming notorious for his blistering attacks on the zeitgeist, but it didn’t appear to bother him.

“For every ten people you make enemies of,” he wrote to Tait, “you also gain a friend. And as you know better than most, mate, our side is accustomed to such odds.”

But of course the book-reviewing paid a mere trifle. It was Caroline who had the proper job and who kept them going financially. But that would shortly stop, Mike revealed, for they were soon to play Mummies and Daddies.

Tait knew what important news it was. Mike’s parents had fretted for years about him not having begun a family. They were afraid they would die before he made grandparents of them. They must’ve had poignant thoughts of themselves back in that transit camp at the end of the war, vowing to carry the torch of life into the future and
visualizing the children they would have, and then the generations of children to whom the torch would pass.

And Tait knew how much it must mean to Mike himself. Fulfilling his parents’ hopes had always been a matter of sacred honour to him.

And of course he loved Caroline to distraction.

One of Mike’s most beautiful poems was called “The Wars of Love and Honour” a title that came from a line of James McAuley’s. In it he depicted himself and Caroline in their bed. She is fast asleep beside him, her hair tousled on the pillow, the gentle rise and fall of her breathing just audible to his ear, the warmth and softness of her body easing through him as a glow of delicious comfort. In a flash of insight he understands that this was what all the sacrifice was for, what it is always for. Not for the high proclamations and thrones and towers that are fated to be one with Nineveh and Tyre. It was for things as fundamental as this: so that a man and woman could lie warm in a love-bed together, possessing between them the means of life’s renewal. It was to try to guarantee that on the other side of the Flame and the Dark, on the far side of all the death and ruin, on the far quiet shore where the survivors gathered, there would still be scenes like this. The man in the poem quietly weeps in gratitude to all those who fought those wars of love and honour. Then the woman stirs awake and embraces him tenderly. She cannot know why he weeps, and yet somehow she does know, and nothing needs to be said.

Yes, the coming baby was big news, and it was because it was so momentous that Mike had mentioned it so casually at the close of the letter. Tait was touched to perceive this bashfulness in his normally tough-minded friend.

“I’m still a bit baffled as to how it happened,” Mike had ended, “but Caroline says she’ll talk to me about it when I’m older and can understand the concepts.”

* * *

Ernie was being prosecuted by the Shire Council for damaging a tree. It seemed a Council ranger was driving past that day and saw Ernie up the ladder with his clippers. Ernie was flabbergasted when the notice came. It was his own tree on his own property, and he’d only trimmed the top so as to prevent it whipping against the power line in the wind.
“But they can’t be serious!” he’d spluttered to Tait, shaking his head. “They can’t be serious!”

He had gone to see the Shire Clerk, to tell him how silly the whole thing was. He had no doubt that a few words of explanation would clear the matter up. He expected the Shire Clerk to be mortified by the blundering of his own officials. Instead the man had jumped up and ranted at him. “Don’t talk to me!” he’d yelled. “Don’t talk to me! I know your type! I know the mentality! If it moves, shoot it, and if doesn’t, ringbark it! Why do you think we brought in the new regulations, eh? It was to get you blokes by the scruff o’ the neck. So don’t come to me when you get caught out!”

Ernie said the man had thrust his ugly bloated face so near that he could feel the spittle hitting him.

He had approached the councilors for the local ward but got no help or sympathy at all. So Tait urged him to contact Megan Marchant. As a councilor for the Heritage Alliance, the tree-preservation rules were matters of interest to her.

Being such a reclusive man, Ernie was probably brooding himself to a frazzle over the injustice. Tait knew all about that kind of brooding. But then again, maybe Ernie had an outlet through his ham-radio. Perhaps he had friends on the airwaves to whom he could unburden himself.

Anyway, Megan was now looking into the whole matter, and Tait intended to ask her about it next time they met.

But just now he had something else on his mind. Picturing Robert Connell on that wintry north road out of Preston had reminded him of what Black Elk said about the Two Roads of life. There was the road of good fortune, and the road of trouble and war. He’d been told this in a vision by one of the spirit Grandfathers of the World:

Then when he had been still a little while to hear the birds sing,  
he spoke again: “Behold the earth!” So I looked down and saw it  
lying yonder like a hoop of peoples, and in the centre bloomed  
the holy stick that was a tree, and where it stood there crossed  
two roads, a red one and a black.

The red was the road of flourishing and ran north and south, while the black was the road of trouble and ran east and west. And you could symbolize them by tying a red
and a black stick together crossways. A couple of years ago Tait had done exactly that. He had tied two sticks and taken them out to Honeysuckle Hill and had placed them at the foot of the lush little tree that stood in Astrid’s Meadow. He had done it because of what the Grandfather had said. The two roads of life, the two roads of the world, crossed at the sacred tree.

It had seemed a fitting thing to do.

Now he was trying to figure out the north-south idea. If the north-south road was the symbolic road of the good, how did this equate with the ill-fatedness of the Prince’s campaign? He carefully re-read the whole of Black Elk’s account, trying to see what the medicine man himself had understood from the vision. It seemed to come down to the idea that the two roads are not totally opposed. It isn’t a rigid contrast of good and bad. The road of peace can bring certain ills of its own, while the road of war can bring out certain virtues. You might lose your way on the red road that is easy, and you might find your way on the black road of hardship.

It was like that passage in the Bible along the lines of: *He who gains his life shall lose it, and he who loses his life shall gain it.*

Yes, he thought, the Two Roads must be a bit like that. It all began to make sense to him.

Tait was outside the cabin one afternoon, looking under the trees for sticks of the right shape and colour. He wanted to make a new sign of the Two Roads to place at Astrid’s Meadow. The old one was deteriorating and the black and red colours had faded. He had wandered a certain distance along the shore in search of the perfect sticks, but hadn’t found them. When he meandered back towards the cabin he saw there was a car in the driveway. Then he saw Bro standing under the trees at the bank, his arms extended and his head thrown back, as if surrendering himself to the lake and the sky.

“I’m just re-discovering what a delightful spot you’ve got here,” Bro called out as Tait approached.

“Yes, it has its moments,” Tait called back. “I was just going to put the jug on. Fancy a cuppa?”

Bro had not been at the cabin for a while, not since one beautifully crisp autumn night when he and Tait had made a little campfire outside. Bro had a guitar with him that night and played and sang a little. His voice wasn’t very strong but he made up
for it with a delicacy of phrasing and tone. One of the songs had been an unusually slow and wistful rendition of “Dixie” that Tait had never forgotten.

“So how’s the carpet trade at Sinbad’s?” he asked now, as they sat sipping their tea in the work-room.”

“The firm ought to be called Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves,” Bro replied. “Or just the Forty Thieves would do. They rort the customers rotten. I only stay there because nothing better happens to have come along. Anyway, I thought I’d pop in on you.”

“I’m glad you did.”

“I’m not interrupting you?”

“No, I’ve done my stint for the day.”

“Good. I remembered you saying you prefer to be left alone until about three o’clock in the afternoon.”

“Yes.”

“And Kelvin told me that too.”

“Kelvin’s a sweetie under that sometimes intimidating manner.”

“Yes, and just as well, since he could break any of us across his knee.”

“Yes, there is that.”

Tait described his first meeting with Kelvin, when he’d delivered the furniture to the cabin and had carried the heavy items inside as though they were weightless.

“He has a high opinion of you too,” Bro said. “Your acting and writing and so on. Actually, that reminds me why I mainly called in. I’ve read Ground Leave and wanted to tell you how much I enjoyed it, if ‘enjoyment’ is the right word for such sad stories. And I wanted to ask you to autograph my copy.”

“Be pleased to.”

“I’ll grab it out of the car now, so I it doesn’t slip my mind.”

When Bro came back in he had Jimmy Sale with him.

“I was driving past and saw Bro,” Jimmy said. “I had a horrible suspicion that you two might be making mud-bricks without me.”

“He’s found us out,” said Bro.

“All right then,” Tait told Jimmy. “You can play mud-pies with us.”

“The Merry Men ride again.”

“And to put us into the spirit, Bro will perform the mystic rites of the Snake Dance.”

“Oh no he won’t!” said Bro, sitting firmly back down in his chair.
The three of them had a nice time for twenty minutes, talking and sipping tea. Jimmy talked fondly about his daughter Jo – short for Josie – who was now nearly three. She was a happy, curly-haired kid and Jimmy’s delight. And his boy Toby had thrown off a good deal of his earlier nervous temperament and was more outgoing. The good outcome with their kids had helped fortify Jimmy and Lauren against their other problems, but things were still difficult. Jimmy was a marked man at work because he couldn’t hide his contempt for what was happening in the health and welfare sector. And Lauren’s back problem remained. And money was desperately short.

Jimmy had patients to see and left, declaring that the little interlude had saved his sanity for the day and maybe even for the whole week.

“May I look at your bookshelf?” Bro called in his politely amiable way as Tait made two more mugs of tea in the kitchen.

“Of course.”

“I see you read Chesterton,” he called after a moment.

“Yes, I’ve read him a lot,” Tait replied. He knew which section of the shelves Bro was looking at. It was what he thought of as The Archive. These were the books he would grab first if the cabin caught fire and he had to scramble out of there. They were books on which much of his outlook on the world had come to be based. Alongside Chesterton there was Solzhenitsyn, and Czeslaw Milosz, and Pasternak’s Doctor Zhivago, and Burke’s Reflections on the Revolution in France. There was Burke’s friend Samuel Johnson and their mutual friend Goldsmith. There was a collected Shakespeare. There was Orwell’s Essays and Conrad’s Heart of Darkness and Hesse’s Steppenwolf. There was Black Elk Speaks, and Dee Brown’s Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee. There was Tolkien and C.S. Lewis. There was Yeats and Housman, and Mike Kieslowski’s Double or Nothing. There were a couple of good anthologies of verse. And there were books about King Charles and the Cavaliers and their lost war to defend the human race, and books about the Jacobites and their faithful continuation of that same lost war.

“Going by some of these,” Bro said as Tait brought the mugs of tea in, “I imagine you’d be a fan of Richard Weaver.”

“Richard who?”

“Weaver.”

“No, I haven’t a clue. Tell me something about him.”
“He was an American, a Southerner, who died in 1963. His main book came out in 1948, I think it was, and was called *Ideas Have Consequences*.”

“That seems to ring a faint bell.”

“He was a brilliant thinker, and very traditionalist. Like Chesterton.”

“Sounds like he’s right up my alley. How did you come know about him?”

“I learned a lot when I was living in South Carolina.”

“You lived in South Carolina?”

“Yes, in Charleston.”

“How come?”

“I was with a girl I’d met in Istanbul. She was from Charleston. She took me home with her.”

“You’re a dark horse, Bro.”

“She had the most captivating Southern accent you ever heard,” Bro said, leaning back and seeming to mellow in the recollection. “Her name was Bobbie-Mae Flowers. I kid you not. When she talked to you, it was like having warm honey poured over your soul. She was doing her Master’s dissertation on the Southern Agrarian writers and she often read her material out to me in that delicious accent. It was more a sensual experience for me than an intellectual one, I can tell you. Still, a lot of what she said did sink in.”

This was fascinating. In the four years he’d been around, Bro had never been known to have a girlfriend, although he was quietly charming enough to have had a string of them if he wanted. Tait had often wondered if he was of Kelvin’s persuasion. It appeared not.

“Was that where you learned to play ‘Dixie’ the way you do? Very slow and sad.”

“I sort of developed that myself,” Bro said. “I found such an undertone of sadness in the Southern character. Bobbie-Mae had it too. I tried to catch the feeling of it in that tune.”

“And the Southern Agrarian writers you mentioned. Who were they?”

So Bro told him interesting stuff he’d picked up from Bobbie-Mae. It began to click into place with the mention of John Crowe Ransom.

“Oh, I love his poetry!”

“Several of them were poets. There were twelve in all and they brought out a famous manifesto called, *I’ll Take My Stand*, which is course a phrase from the song ‘Dixie’
itself. They argued passionately against what they saw as the anti-values of the modern world. The Richard Weaver I spoke of was a generation younger than the Southern Agrarians, but he came along and reiterated their case in Ideas Have Consequences."

“T’ll have to try to get hold of it.”

“Might be difficult to find, I don’t know. But T’ll lend you my copy, if you like. I would need it back, though, when you’ve finished with it. It’s a rather precious keepsake.”

“I’ll treat it with care, Bro, and return it quickly.”

“I know you will.”

“So how long ago was it, you and Bobbie-Mae?”

“Longer than I care to remind myself.”

“And what happened?”

“Ah,” Bro sighed. “The usual thing, I suppose. The usual thing with me, I mean. I somehow didn’t follow up on what was being offered to me. Didn’t seize the day, as the saying goes.”

“I think I know what you mean. I’m like that too. I watch in anguish as things go past me. But the anguish doesn’t seem to translate into doing anything about it. What is that, do you think?”

“An insufficiency of passion?”

“You reckon?”

“One shies away from the hurly-burly of it.”

“You think?”

“Seems true in my case, but that doesn’t mean its true in yours. The impression I’ve gained of you, if you don’t mind me being personal for a moment, is that you have a huge amount of passion about things but keep it on a powerful leash.”

“I sometimes feel like Harry Haller in Steppenwolf. Do you know that book?”

“No, I’m sorry.”

“He’s a fifty-year-old German scholar who lives in solitude in a rented room and pictures himself as an old lone wolf of the steppes. He’s so unhappy that he’s forever planning to cut his throat, and yet he never does anything to help himself out of the bind. That book haunted me when I first read it. I could see myself depicted, or at least the self I’d be if I ever reached fifty-odd.”
“What happens to him?”
“He’s saved in the nick of time by a woman he meets in a bar and who teaches him to dance.”
“To dance?”
“Yes, to loosen up enough to connect with the power of the erotic, which is the power of wholeness. She says to him at one point: ‘You are very backward in all the little arts of living. Harry the thinker is a hundred years old, but Harry the dancer is scarcely half a day old.’”
“That’s very Richard Weaver-ish, actually. He says that the proper time for rationalizing about life is after you’ve established your emotional relation to it.”
“After you’ve learnt to dance?”
“Just so.”
“The lovers and the dancers have been beaten into the clay. And the tall men and the swordsmen and the horsemen, where are they?”
“What’s that from?”
“A Yeats poem, ‘The Curse of Cromwell.’”
“Ah.”
“A favourite of mine. And of Francesca’s too.”
“Ah.”
They did not speak for a minute, and Tait sensed that Francesca’s name had set Bro on a line of reflection.
“The thing is,” Bro said eventually, “one does in fact learn something along the way, however little and late it may be. One learns the importance of hanging in, of not wandering vaguely off yet again to be a stranger someplace else. You and Francesca…”
He stopped.
“Sorry,” he said, with an apologetic glance, “It isn’t for me to speak about matters.”
“It’s okay, go ahead,” Tait said, intrigued to know what he’d been about to say.
“Observing your relationship has sometimes given me food for thought.”
“In what way?”
“With regard to the thing about hanging in. It has seemed to me – and I might be totally wrong here – that there’s a certain exercise of will involved on your side.
Maybe on both sides, I don’t know. It’s hard to signify what I mean. It’s just an impression one gets, but now and then it’s quite a strong impression.”

“Is this an impression gained by people in general? Or just you?”

“Oh I don’t know really,” Bro said, as though wishing he hadn’t brought it up. But then he went on, choosing his words carefully.

“I suppose there’s a bit of a general awareness in the Players of the strength of your attachment over a rather long period, and that it must take a certain application of the will to keep it going in view of what might appear to be the, um, unrewardingness of it. But of course who’s to say. It isn’t my business or anyone else’s.”

“You can speak your mind. We’re bonded by a thousand mud-bricks, not to mention the shared perils of funnel-web and red-belly.”

“You spoke a minute ago about watching in anguish as things go past. Anguish is the key word in all this, I think. One needs to have a certain capacity for anguish in order to experience life at all. Anguish and desperation can be good things in the same sense that physical pain can be a good thing. They warn that all is not well with you and you’d better do something about it — or at least let someone else do something about it, if they’re offering. I’ve never had much of that capacity for anguish.”

“A capacity for it is one thing,” Tait said, deeply stimulated by these ideas, “as long as it doesn’t become a positive appetite, which is what I suspect I am prone to.”

“As I said, you give the impression of keeping a tight leash on it. I suppose that’s how you’re able to convey the anguish of things in your writing — by keeping your own anguish under a discipline.”

“What you said about misery as a spur to action does finally apply to Steppenwolf. He only meets Hermine – the woman in the bar – because anguish and desperation drive him there one night. The misery that urges him to cut his throat is the same misery that puts him in the way of finding salvation.”

“Yes.”

“There’s a quote by Holderlin,” Tait said. “I only discovered it the other week. It’s totally apt here. It goes something like: “Where danger grows, there grows also the rescue.” One would normally assume he meant a quality like courage, but he might just as easily mean anguish, mightn’t he?”
“Yes. Or even just a degree of **willpower**, maybe. That’s something I’ve been dwelling on a lot over the past couple of years — the idea of willing yourself to stay committed to something or someone, and not be the eternal stranger in the midst. Or as they say in the Church, perform the rituals of faith and faith will grow."

Bro ran his hand across his forehead and went on.

“Not to have your bags always packed, is what I mean, either actual bags or emotional ones. Like with Bobbie-Mae. She did her sweet best to teach me to dance — even to that somewhat heartbroken tune of the South — but I always had my bags packed in the next room. Am I mixing my metaphors here?”

“No, you’re being very eloquent,” Tait said, moved by the emotional break in Bro’s voice.

“Hell, that’s a bad sign when I haven’t even had a drink.”

“Actually,” Tait said, realizing that the sky was beginning to darken into evening, “I happen to have the last remains of a bottle of Scotch on the premises. Could I force a drop on you?”

“I daresay you could.”

“I wish you had your guitar with you,” Tait said as he poured the whisky. “I’d love to hear that version of ‘Dixie’ again. It’d be even more evocative now that I know about South Carolina and all that. Will we drink to Bobbie-Mae?”

“Yes, bless her dear little Confederate heart.”

They raised their glasses and took a sip of the whisky.

“Are you still in contact at all?” Tait asked.

“Not for many a long year,” was the wistful reply.

“Ah well, here’s to a new era of **unpacked bags**.”

They raised their glasses again.

There’d only been a tiny bit in the bottle, so they took very small sips to make it last.

As Bro was leaving, Tait mentioned about Ernie being persecuted by the Shire Council for trimming the tree, and how ludicrous it was.

Bro pondered for a moment, clasping his signed copy of Tait’s book, then spoke:

“I think Richard Weaver would say it’s exactly what we ought to expect nowadays. He’d say such things aren’t mere flukes of silliness but the working-out of the whole logic of rogue power in the world.”
“What a great term — ‘rogue power’. Yes, rogue power is loose in the world. But people would say that’s being paranoid. They’d say it’s being a conspiracy theorist and a ratbag. Seeing everything as interconnected.”

“It might be ratbaggery,” Bro said. “Or it might just be drawing proper conclusions from evidence.”

He got into his car and then pointed to a leaf on the ground.

“Suppose you picked up a leaf and saw that it was blighted in some way. You could take that to mean that something had happened to one single leaf, or you could surmise that the whole forest might be in trouble. I think I’d be worried about the whole forest.”

“What a good illustration.”

“No credit to me,” Bro said with a wry smile, setting the car into motion. “It’s something I remember Bobbie-Mae saying.”

* * * *

Tait had found two sticks that were beautifully straight and smooth. One was reddish enough to represent the red road and the other was dark enough to stand for the black. He was carrying them around in his satchel, together with a piece of twine he would use to bind them together. Next time he was going over Honeysuckle Hill he would stop and put them in place.

He kept wanting to ride out to the Valley. He wanted to hold and cuddle Francesca, even just for five minutes. The yearning gnawed at him when he was trying to do his work. He reckoned five minutes of solid cuddling on a regular basis would make all the difference.

But he kept putting off going to the Valley because he and Francesca were scheduled to “have a talk” about things and he never quite felt up to it. He wanted the cuddle without the talk. He knew the cuddle would calm him whereas the talk was likely to do quite the opposite.

He’d got to feeling so bereft because at the last few rehearsals they’d hardly been able to cuddle at all. Things kept going awry whenever they slipped outside. One night Neil the Wheel was over-zealous and kept flashing his torch at them. Another night a cast member came outside for a smoke and saw them there and insisted on
chatting. Another night the costume lady decided she had to confer with Francesca at that very minute and called out for her. And then another night a drunk had staggered past and put Francesca out of the mood. The next night Tait had wanted them to go and sit in the back seat of her car, the way they often used to, but she said there wasn’t enough time.

“We’d be all unbuttoned,” she said, stroking his hair, “and then we’d have to stop.”

The last time they’d been together Tait had begged for them to go into her car and she had agreed.

“Well, here we are then, honey” she had said. “Are you okay?”

“I miss you,” Tait had groaned, hugging her to him.

“Me too, baby,” she had replied, returning the hug.

“We have no time together any more,” he groaned against her hair. “How has it got like this?”

“That’s the way it goes.”

“Remember when we used to have our Thursday afternoons at The Inlet?”

“Those were the days.”

“The Bedding department.”

“Whispering stuff to each other till we were nearly fainting with lust.”

“Do you suppose two other people might be doing the same thing now?” he asked, undoing her blouse.

“I’m always in favour of traditions being kept up,” she replied.

“Things have changed so much. I hadn’t realized how much until just lately.”

“What made you aware of it?”

“I don’t know.”

“I do,” she said. “Sheer frustration. I can feel it in you from ten metres away.”

“That obvious?”

“Yes it is. Poor baby.”

“I can hardly recall the last time I had your bare breast in my hand.”

“Feel me now, sweetie, if you want to. But remember we don’t have much time.”

He reached around and undid her bra, then cupped her left breast in his hand and kissed her deeply. It felt almost unbearably nice.

He squeezed her nipple quite hard, the way she used to like him to do. But this time her whole body flinched and she drew her mouth away from his.
“Sorry,” she said, “but that hurt.”
“What’s wrong?”
“That nipple’s sore from being bitten.”
“You’re still feeding the bub?”
“No, it was Craig in the throes of lust the other night.”
They both knew at once that it was the wrong thing to say. Francesca never mentioned her sexual life with Craig. It had always been part of the Agreement that she would never have to mention any details and that Tait would never have to hear any.
“I’m sorry. That slipped out.”
“Its alright.”
“No, it isn’t alright. I felt a little tremor of hurt go through you when I said it.”
“It’s okay. I’ve got broad shoulders.”
“Not in all respects. In some ways you’re just a poor lonely boy who needs looking after. We both know that.”
“Is that really how I seem?”
“Shh,” she whispered. “Don’t talk.”
She drew him close and nuzzled his throat and stroked his hair and then kissed him softly and deeply. She was trying to make it up to him, and he felt very grateful. But his mind wasn’t on it. He was thinking of what Hermine had said to Harry Haller the poor Steppenwolf, that the thinker was a hundred years old and the dancer scarcely half-a-day old.
She began fumbling at his fly-zip.
“Let me make you come.”
“We don’t have time.”
“I want to help you relax.”
“I am relaxed, honest.”
“Are you sure?”
“Positive.”
“You’re angry with me.”
“We’re angry with each other.”
“Yes, we are. It’s always there, isn’t it, somewhere just under the lovingness?”
“You’ve always been right about that. I’ve been the one who’s often tried to deny it.”
“Only once in a while. Mostly you’ve been very sensible about it. It’s that that allowed us to have what we’ve had over these years. You’ve been too sensible for your own good, really.”
“We should go back in.”
“Don’t you think?”
“About what?”
“That maybe you’ve been too sensible for your own good. Too accepting of the situation.”
“Sounds like a topic for another time.”
“We do need to talk about it soon. About us in general.”
“By all means. But they’ll be wanting us inside any minute.”
“Alright,” she said. “We’ll talk sometime soon. Come out to the Valley one afternoon when I’m by myself.”
“Okay,” he said.
“Could you do my bra up? Or are you feeling too pissed off with me now to want to touch me anymore?”
“I could never be that pissed off with you,” he replied.
He reached round inside her blouse and fastened the bra. The warmth and softness of her body was as enticing as ever, but now he felt removed from it, as though he was standing outside the car watching himself through the window.
Francesca went back inside first, and Tait followed. He paused for a moment at the door and glanced across at the Court building and saw the light was on in the watchtower of the Regime.

* * * *

Bro’s copy of Ideas Have Consequences was inscribed “To Cute Kangaroo with all my love, Bobbie-Mae.” It was written in a nice flowing hand in violet-coloured ink that was a tiny bit faded.
The first time he flicked the book open at random, Tait had found himself reading this:
We face the fact that our side has been in retreat for four hundred years without, however, having been entirely driven from the field.

Finding such a passage at first go might have been a fluke, he told himself. He flicked to another page and saw another passage and grew sure that it hadn’t been a fluke. The second passage ran:

Are those who died heroes’ and martyrs’ deaths really dead? It is not an idle question. In a way, they live on as forces, helping to shape our dream of the world.

He copied that out on a piece of paper and pinned it at the top right hand corner of the Blue Board, where the Cavalier brooch had been. He pinned the brooch back into place on the piece of paper. The quotation and the brooch together expressed it all.

He then devoured the book in two sittings over two nights, his mind and heart as totally engrossed as they’d been with Milosz’s The Captive Mind.

He was carrying it about with him in his satchel, carefully wrapped in a piece of cloth to keep it clean and protected. He wanted to read it again, more slowly, before he returned it to Bro. He was anxious not to have it too long, though, in case Bro was feeling uneasy about having lent such an irreplaceable keepsake.

He had phoned Peppercorn’s bookshop in Castleton and been told that the work was still in print, but might have to be ordered from overseas. They were to ascertain the exact details for him and he was to phone them back.

He had it with him in the satchel the afternoon he decided to ride out to Francesca’s. He also had the two sticks and the piece of twine to bind them with.

It was later in the day than he’d intended. The two older kids would be home from the quaint little Valley school they went to.

When he arrived he peered through the glass of the sliding door that led into the kitchen, then walked around to the lounge room door and peered in there as well. There was no sign of anyone. He went to the back verandah and heard children’s voices up on the hillside. He went up the bush track. Francesca and the kids were paying a visit to Emmett the Melancholy Monster.

“Just the man we need,” Francesca said, smiling and greeting him with a kiss on the cheek. “We’re taking photos of ourselves with Emmett. You can take one of all of us.”
So Tait took a few shots of Francesca and the three kids posing against the front of the old truck. Emmett looked like their fearsome old guardian. The two huge eyes looked especially deep and dark, and the snaggly teeth of the broken grille were large and menacing.

“These shots mightn’t come out too well,” Francesca said, “with the light starting to go. But never mind. Now, let Jess take a photo of the two of us.”

Jesse was now nearly seven and had all his father’s aptitude for any kind of technical process or gadgetry. Tait and Francesca leant against the stubby bonnet of the truck while Jesse gave them solemn instructions about which way to look and how to stand.

“Hold hands!” he insisted. “Go on, don’t be shy.”

“Who are we to argue?” Francesca muttered and took Tait’s hand in hers. The touch sent a little shiver of delight through his whole body.

Jesse finally clicked the button.

“That’s the end of the film,” he said, disgustedly. “Just when we were starting to rock and roll!”

That was an expression he’d picked up lately and used all the time.

“Let’s head back then, Francesca said. “I can feel the evening dankness.”

They walked very slowly back down the track, Jesse and Emma running ahead and the two and a half year-old Cass gamely negotiating the rough ground just ahead of them. Tait wanted very much to clasp Francesca’s hand again but something restrained him.

“I meant to come earlier in the day,” he said, “so we’d have a chance to be alone and have a talk.”

“Do you want to have a talk?”

“I don’t know. You said we should.”

“And you always do what I say, don’t you?”

“Do I?”

“Pretty much.”

“I’ve never had the phone put on.”

“Ah, your one great act of refusal. Well, let’s say your other great act of refusal, aside from refusing to come to my wedding. I spent my wedding day worrying about you, and hoping desperately that you were okay.”

“I’m sorry. And I’m sorry for the phone thing too.”
“The phone thing has been your ongoing gesture of defiance of the horrible bitch you got tangled up with.”

“I guess so.”

“Hey, you don’t have to agree quite so readily.”

“No, I bow to your insight.”

“And if I ask you to be celibate for years on end – or for the rest of your life even – you go along with it without a squeak.”

“It would appear so.”

“Not many blokes would knuckle under like that.”

“Do you see it as knuckling under? I thought it was an expression of love and caring.”

Francesca took his hand and squeezed it.

“It is, sweetheart, it is,” she said. “And I’ve been deeply grateful for it. More than I know how to tell you. It’s just that it’s turned into an imposition on you that isn’t fair or reasonable. I don’t want to go on being unfair to you, that’s all.”

Cass tripped over and Tait went forward to pick her up and set her on her feet again. As he did so he realized that he was shaking noticeably. They walked another few metres in silence.

“Please don’t look like that,” Francesca said.

“Like what?”

“Like this is your last walk to the gallows.”

“It might be, for all I know. I’ve no idea what you’re actually saying to me. Are you telling me you don’t love me any more, or what?”

His voice had gone trembly.

She stopped and put her arms around him.

“No, my sweet, I’m not saying that. I’ll never stop loving you. Not ever.”

“What are you saying then.”

“Just that you need to get a life. A proper sex-life, for example. You have to get your needs met. I don’t meet your needs, and haven’t done for years. And I can’t meet them, given the other obligations I’ve got. That’s what I’m saying.”

They were silent for another moment. Then Francesca spoke softly against his shoulder.
“You can’t exist on an occasional feel of my tits in the shadows outside the Green Room. It breaks my heart that you think you can.”

“Are you saying we can’t cuddle any more?”

“No,” she said, stepping back and looking him in the face. “Listen, honey, I’m in an awful bind here. I don’t want to seem to be pushing you away, but I also don’t want to encourage you to go on hurting yourself by being fixated on me. I want to be there for you if you ever need a cuddle, but I don’t want you to regard a cuddle with me as the be-all and end-all in life.”

They were nearly back to the house and the track was smoother. Cass had gone ahead. They stood and looked at each other.

“Do you remember telling me once that you felt you’d been in an unhealthy relationship with that probation officer?”

“Yes.”

“That if you’d been more spontaneous and natural you’d have asserted yourself sooner? That you wouldn’t have put up with so much?”

“Yes.”

“Please don’t take this the wrong way, but I think there’s been a similar thing with us. And a lot of it has been my fault. It was my fault at the start. I was attracted to you and decided to take you to bed. I went to your place that time with condoms in my pocket so we could have a night of lust. It was that calculated. And without a doubt it was a lovely experience for both of us. And so were the other times we did it after that. I don’t regret that lovemaking one iota and I never want you to regret it. But I can see now that I should’ve been more sensitive. I should have been more aware of what I was tampering with, of all the deep needs and insecurities you’ve got inside you. And then there’s the whole other thing on top of that — your whole attitude of devotion, which is wonderful in its own way, but which I think is also quite masochistic.”

She saw the hurt look on his face.

“No, baby, don’t take offence. I know I’m saying this in a clumsy way, but I’m only concerned for your good. Do you believe that?”

“Yes,” he replied, knowing it was true.

She stroked him on the arm.
“I’d had a lot of sexual experience, one way and another, and I wasn’t as sensitive as I should’ve been to the fact that you’d had virtually none, and that it was a very big deal for you. By the time I did fully realize it I’d fallen in love with you and didn’t want to back off.”

“But you want to back off now?”

“Let me finish what I’m trying to say.”

“Go ahead.”

“Normally there’s a kind of safety-valve that lets people play around with each other without it causing too much harm. That safety-valve is that people will tend to stand up for themselves. Beyond a certain point they’ll blow their top and storm out, or there’ll be a blazing row, and so certain things will get adjusted…”

“The anguish becomes its own cure.”

“Sorry?”

“Just something Bro and I were talking about.”

“It seems to me now that the whole of human society depends on that safety-valve of people sticking up for themselves. That’s the only thing that brings us all through the chaos of a zillion relationships going on every minute. The thing with you is that the safety-valve doesn’t work properly. You can be so fluent and witty that a person doesn’t quite grasp how totally fucking unhappy you are. And when you aren’t being fluent and witty you’re off in a mental world of your own. But I was closer to you than anyone else and I should have been a better friend. I should have been cruel to be kind, and not let you spend seven years of your life fixated on me. There was no payoff in it for you, unless it was the masochistic one. I played the masochistic game with you instead of helping you to stop playing it. I’m sorry.”

They looked down the path and saw that Cass had reached the house safely. A puff of evening breeze came through the branches above them.

“Say something,” Francesca murmured. “Let me know me what you’re thinking.”

“I’m thinking that if your logic is correct, I should blow my top right now. I should get furious and demonstrate that my safety-valve does work.”

Francesca shook her head.

“No, my love,” she said softly. “That won’t help us now.”

“No? What then? What’s the next step?”
“We have to move on. Not away from each other, exactly, but on. The fact is that I’m expecting another baby.”

“Ah,”

“I’m to be a mother-of-four, can you believe it? My Dad would be so pleased. He used to say a woman who didn’t have at least four bambini wasn’t trying.”

“Are you pleased too?”

“Oddly enough, I am.”

They hugged.

“Come in the house and I’ll give you a shot of rum to calm your poor nerves. You’ve been shaking like a leaf. God, the things you put up with from me!”

“You’ve had to put up with me too.”

“What a pair we’ve been!”

Two shots of rum helped a lot.

He decided not hang around.

“You aren’t going to go off and plunge into an abyss of depression, are you?”

“No.”

“You sure?”

“I think so. I have to admit that what you said made a lot of sense.”

“That’s one of the things I’ve gained from knowing you. I’ve learned how to think a little bit. Or try to.”

“I haven’t been a total loss then.”

“A total darling is what you are, and sometime soon you’ll find your true partner and she’ll make you believe it. She’d better, or she’ll have me to answer to.”

Francesca walked down to the bike with him. He put his helmet on and looked at her and smiled as sincerely as he could. He didn’t want to leave her feeling bad.

They gave each other a final hug.

“Can I ask you something?” he said.

“Of course.”

“That day you were married. Do you remember standing in front of a fence with red flowers on it, having your picture taken?”

“Yes, vividly.”

“What were you thinking of just then?"

“You.”
“How can you remember that one moment?”

“How can you remember that one moment?”

“Because of words that were going through my head. I was thinking ‘these flowers are as red as heart’s blood’ and the phrase ‘heart’s blood’ made me think intensely of you.”

“Thanks.”

“For what?”

“For what you just said.”

“Does it help somehow?”

“Yes.”

“I’m glad then.”

“See you at the next rehearsal,” he said.

“Yes,” she smiled back.

He kick-started the bike and rode down the grassy slope to the gate.

Jesse ran along the deck waving and making motor-bike noises and shouting: “Let’s rock ‘n roll! Yeah! Let’s rock ‘n roll!”

* * * *

He rode to Honeysuckle Hill and went into Astrid’s Meadow. At first he felt numb and sat with his back to the trunk of the little tree and stared straight ahead without seeing anything. Then the thought came to him that he was Damaged Goods and he felt a wave of grief. Yes, he was Damaged Goods. He was someone whose safety valve didn’t work. She’d hit the bull’s-eye about that. It was the story of his life. It was the reason he’d got the life-sentence. With him, misery always just kept on and on and grew and grew until it could only end in ruination. It would always be like that. Fate had been generous and had given him extra chances, but he didn’t deserve them.

And it would go on happening because that was what was wrong with him. The psychiatric jargon for it was: A personality disorder of a schizoid type. That’s how the shrinks had put it in court. But it just meant Damaged Goods without a Safety Valve. She’d said he would find his proper partner and then everything would be okay. But why should a kindly providence go on handing him extra chances that he couldn’t live up to? No, there wouldn’t be anyone else for him. He’d blown it. He would be alone
forever now. And of course she knew that. She’d just said about him finding his true partner to give herself an out. He pictured her face when she was saying those things to him and it seemed to him now that her expression had been cold and hard. There’d been a savagery there.

She’d cast him off like a fucking dog.

For a few seconds under his breath he called her every kind of name he could think of.

Then he felt overcome with panic and he jumped up, meaning to rush back to her and beg her not to cast him off. He would plead on his hands and knees. But it had to be straight away. If the casting-off was allowed to stand any longer it wouldn’t be able to be changed. He was frantic to get back there.

But it was too late. He saw Craig’s car approaching the turn-off down below. Craig would be there first. The door had closed. He had lost her.

For a while he strode grimly back and forth, wearing a track in the grass, thinking how to kill himself. Then he imagined how sorry she’d be for what she’d done to him. He visualized her weeping at his grave and felt an unbearable rush of love and remorse.

He sank back down beneath the tree with his face in his hands and cried.

When he’d finished he felt emptied out. He looked up at some stars in the clear sky. They looked very bright and clean. There came a faint sound of cattle mooing, wafted on the breeze that stirred the leaves above his head. The grass of the meadow was fresh and sweet and he remembered Black Elk’s words about the grasses showing tender faces to each other.

She had said she wouldn’t ever stop loving him and that she’d always be there if he needed a cuddle. He would cling to that. That would be his lifeline. If he had those two things to rely on he might just get through okay. He could trust her to be as good as her word. How kind she’d always been. No other woman in the world would have been so loving and so patient. She’d kept on being sweet to him through thick and thin.

But now, as she’d said, she had other obligations. Profound ones. She had those other four people to look after. She had to be the lynchpin of their lives. And soon there’d be five of them, five people to be the wife and mother to. That was her job. It wasn’t to mollycoddle someone else and give him her breast as if he was another
infant. It wasn’t to play masochistic games with a weirdo. She had a rightful task, and
had pointed that fact out to him in as loving a way as possible. It was admirable.

Tait felt deeply struck by this idea of the Rightful Task and sat thinking about it, the
beauty of the Valley night all around and above him.

He supposed that every person had a Rightful Task, and that it was determined by
their situation and their talents. Recognizing your Rightful Task was the real essence
of wisdom, and having the moral fibre to pursue it was the essence of character. He
supposed that the bottom line wasn’t necessarily to succeed in the task, but to agree to
undertake it and to do your best.

He vaguely recalled a quote by someone. The gist of it was that mere mortals cannot
command success, but they can try to make sure they deserve it. He saw that what we
might call a failed life was one in which the Rightful Task was simply never taken up.

Tait began to see that all his thought for years now had been circling around this
notion. The idea of the Rightful Task had been implicit in all of it — in the bracing
energy of Mike Kieslowski’s scorn and rage, for example, and in the vivid insights of
the writers they both admired, and in the inspirational dramas of history. It was the
Rightful Task of the Spartans to defend the pass at Thermopylae, and of the poet
Simonides to write the greatest of all epitaphs for them:

You who pass by,
Tell them at Sparta
That we remain here
Obedient to their wishes.

King Charles had seen his Rightful Task and had gone to the block as a martyr for
the people. His great-grandson the Prince has seen his Rightful Task and had
summoned up the heroic effort of the Forty-Five.

And Tait saw that every person’s Rightful Task was equal in the ultimate scheme of
things. It was something like the equality of souls. A person’s task was in proportion
to their placement. It related to the scope they’d been given. Robert Connell had been
a mere common man, a nonentity, but he offered up as much to the Cause as any of
the aristocrats did — namely, everything he had.
Yes, Tait could see it clearly now. He had sat still and made his mind quiet, had allowed the stars and the breeze and the sense of the good earth do their work. Francesca had taken up her Rightful Task, just as Robert Connell had done. Whatever gaps of time lay between them, they were on the same roads.

Always the same roads, everywhere and forever, the roads Black Elk had been told about in that vision, the roads that Tait knew he must symbolically renew here in Astrid’s Meadow.

He got the two sticks out of his satchel and bound them crossways with the piece of twine. Then he found the old sticks sunk in the grass. He twisted them and they broke apart easily because the old twine had rotted. He laid them aside and then took up the new sticks. He felt he should say something but had no words prepared. He decided not to think about it but to do and say the first thing that came to him. He looked up at the stars and held the sticks up to show them and said: “Stars of heaven, guide us on these roads.” Then he laid the new sticks down at the foot of the tree.

He went home then, feeling calm and reconciled.

It was the next evening that he heard the news.

Bro had been killed in a car crash. Bambi Blain had been in the vehicle with him and was fighting for her life in hospital.

Chapter Fifteen

Gillian was deeply distraught by her brother’s death and it was mainly Ian who was handling things.

They’d wanted to bury Bro in the little old graveyard in the Valley, the one near the Pioneer Museum, but severe new regulations had just come in. That graveyard had been declared one of the Council’s “Protected Heritage Sites.” There were exactly fifty of them around the shire because the Council thought fifty was a good round number that would present well in the media. The result was to make the graveyard unusable and untouchable. An old couple were being prosecuted for planting a shrub
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there. It was meant to shade the headstone of the old woman’s parents, but the Council called it Willful Damage of a Protected Site and said an example had to be made. Megan Marchant was battling to have the prosecution dropped.

So Bro was laid in the bare, dusty suburban cemetery at Tuskett one morning. It was just Gillian and Ian and their kids, and one or two relatives who’d come from elsewhere to attend. Bro wouldn’t want a big deal made of the burial service, Ian said. He would prefer people to have a drink and be convivial, so there was to be a get-together out in the Valley in the afternoon.

By the day of the funeral Bambi’s condition had improved. She was vaguely conscious for short periods and was felt to be out of danger. Gillian had gone to see her and had found Jade and Bundle at the bedside. Jade had been in a sort of half-witted state and Gillian had spent the time trying to think what comfort to offer. “It was like he was shell-shocked,” she reported. Bundle had been silent and still the whole time, gazing at his mother’s face on the pillow.

The story began to come out, and Tait got the accurate version from Francesca, who’d got it from Gillian. Bro and Bambi had been lovers for three years. They’d been able to have their assignations because Bambi pretended to have babysitting jobs on certain evenings and Bro gave her the money that she supposedly earned. They were in love, Gillian believed, and would have set up openly together, with Bundle, except that Bambi couldn’t bring herself to abandon Jade. But she would’ve pulled the plug sometime soon. Gillian was sure of that, for Bro had begun to make poignant remarks whenever he had a few drinks. They were all about how he would soon have to find the moral fibre to unpack his bags once and for all and stop being the stranger in the midst. And he’d suddenly become interested in the techniques of stepfathering and read books on the subject.

Also in those final weeks, Gillian said, he’d referred quite a lot to his time in South Carolina. She knew that sign. It meant he was grieving over what he saw as the mess he’d made of his life, and determining to do better.

Almost everyone from the Players was at Gillian and Ian’s place for the get-together in the afternoon. Only Kelvin and Rory were missing. They’d been having a week’s holiday in Fiji and weren’t due back till the following evening.

There weren’t any real formalities. Ian just called for everyone’s attention at a certain point in the afternoon and invited people to offer their thoughts about Bro.
Gillian spoke first, and in an unsteady voice. She said that a younger brother or sister always seems like a little brother or sister. He’d been her little brother, even though he was six feet tall, and she perhaps hadn’t been as good a big sister as she ought to have been… She stopped and Ian moved forward to be supportive but she recovered and finished in a firmer tone.

Craig was a surprise. He spoke simply and touchingly about how Bro had helped him build his house. He tried to offer his thanks one day, he said, and Bro waved it aside with the offhand remark that it was the least he could do. Tait knew exactly what Bro had meant. He’d meant that helping build someone else’s house was a way of making amends to life for never having built his own, for never having unpacked his bags in South Carolina or anywhere else.

Megan took up that metaphor and said that Bro had built a house in the affectionate memory of all those who’d known him, and that a house built of affection was just as real as one built of stone.

Tait had been asked to finish by reading a poem, so he read his new one about Housman. Its themes of longing and loss and stoicism seemed to fit the occasion. But he wished there was a tape of Bro picking out “Dixie” on the guitar. That would’ve been the perfect thing to end on, not just for the poignancy, but also for the stirring note of defiance that was always in that tune, however slow and sad you played it.

For a long time Tait sat sipping beer and nibbling cold chicken with Ian, Craig, Jimmy, Lauren, and Narelle. They chatted about various topics but always came back to the subject of Bro and the great days of the Merry Men and legendary moments like the Snake Dance. They retold the now highly embroidered tale of the Red-Belly Polka for Narelle’s benefit and she laughed aloud, shaking out her long hair as she did so and leaning momentarily against Tait’s shoulder.

He kept making a mental note of where Francesca was. Francesca had stuck close to Gillian all afternoon, to give her support, and to allow Ian a break, and they were now with another group at another table. Tait didn’t get a chance to talk to her till it was nearly evening. There were only a couple more rehearsals before the play went on, and when the run of the show was over they couldn’t be sure how often they’d see each other until the next production got under way. Neither mentioned the talk they’d had that day on the path back from seeing Emmett.
“Don’t worry about things, my sweet,” she said, patting him on the hand. “The trick is to trust the flow, for better or worse. That’s what I’m doing now, trusting the flow. We’ll have the contact we’re meant to have. No more and no less. Don’t you think?”

Tait nodded yes, although he wasn’t sure he wanted to trust the flow quite that much. It would be nice to have at least a vague arrangement in place.

He was about to say something to that effect when she pointed over his shoulder.

“I see Mister Preen is with us.”

Brandon Hagen was nearby, looking like a cut-price matinee idol, being all tall and wavy-haired and charming to anything in a skirt.

“I’m nearly choking on the smell of his aftershave lotion from here,” Tait grunted.

“You don’t suppose he’s the Preen Queen, do you?” Francesca asked, scrutinizing him through narrowed eyes.

“You think he might be? He comes on awfully strong with women, though.”

“Like when he gropes your little sexpot in that seduction scene?”

“Which of my little sexpots do you mean?” he asked, serious-faced, not liking this line of talk. “I have so many on a string.”

“Alright, I won’t tease you,” she smiled, giving him another reassuring pat on the hand. “But if its any comfort to you, she told me she doesn’t enjoy it.”

“Really?”

“Yes, we compared notes on the subject. As you may have noticed, I get a share of his physical attentions in my scenes as well.”

“Yes, I have noticed.”

“But that doesn’t appear to vex you to the same extent.”

“I figure that you’re a match for him, or for any bloke with wandering hands, whereas Narelle’s just a kid.”

“So your concern for her is like that of a kindly, protective uncle?”

“Something like that.”

“I’ll believe you,” she said, giving him a tickle under the chin, “although thousands wouldn’t. But to return to my point, Brandon’s coming on so strong with women could be a sign of something quite the opposite, something being repressed. What do you think?”

“I guess its possible,” Tait said, relieved she’d let the other thing go. “It’s a pity Kelvin isn’t here. He could settle it for us with one glance.”
“Well, who cares?” Francesca said briskly, glancing in the other direction. “There’s Gillian looking a bit fragile again. I’d better go and be supportive.”

They touched hands and Francesca went away.

When Tait turned he saw that Narelle had been standing watching them from the gazebo and was just turning aside as though quite casually.

He managed to have a good talk with Megan before she and Marigold left. He wanted to ask about Ernie’s trouble with the Council. Megan said she had induced them to let the matter rest.

“But they’ll regard him as having had a warning notice, which means they’ll be all the quicker to nail him another time.”

“Things seems to have got so ridiculous lately,” Tait remarked. “Like with that couple that planted the shrub.”

“Ah!” Megan said, throwing her head back in vexation. “It’s a madhouse. We plead for years for a sensible heritage policy and we get laughed at. But then one fine day they realize – somewhere in the recesses of their dim provincial cunning – that heritage issues have become mainstream and that they can get political mileage out of them, so they go at it like bulls in a china shop. Or they actually start believing in the ideas, which is even worse. In one fell swoop the situation is turned inside out. One day they’re too obtuse to see the virtues of what they’re stubbornly opposing, and the next day they’re too obtuse to see the dangers of what they’re wildly implementing.”

“The only constant is the obtuseness?”

“Exactly. The upshot is that I now seem to spend as much time defending people from the heritage rules as I used to spend arguing for some rules. In my time on Council I’ve learnt there are two ways that good ideas can be stymied. They can be blocked and stalled, or they can be adopted in ways so manifestly stupid that they are brought into total disrepute.

“And thus we get heritage-fascism?”

“That’s a handy term. May I make use of it? Yes, heritage-fascism. And its part of a disturbing change of outlook that one sees creeping on all the time. Council used to see itself as representing the values and attitudes of the general run of people out there. That was when it bothered to reflect on itself at all, which thankfully wasn’t often. Now it increasingly sees the ordinary population as a rabble of rednecks and throwbacks whose every act and impulse needs to be curbed. You actually hear them
use words like that now — ‘rednecks’ and ‘throwbacks.’ Believe it or not, a lot of these drongos in Council now see themselves as morally superior beings with a right to tell others how to live and think.”

“It’s the way of the world now,” Tait said glumly.

“Marigold’s been seeing this process, too. Council has currently got some expensive ‘consultant’ doing a study of the Shire Library system. The brief is to cleanse it of ‘racism and sexism.’”

“And ‘violence,’” Marigold prompted.

“Oh yes, and ‘violence’ too, which can apparently be defined in about seventy-eight different ways, from atom-bombing Hiroshima to having ‘uninvited eye contact’ with any person who chooses to be affronted by it. And what was that other delightful clause, Marigold?”

“Any material whose tendency could be to encourage hegemonic Anglo-Celtic mono-culturalist assumptions,” said Marigold, carefully enunciating. “I learnt it off by heart.”

“So things don’t too look good for Biggles and Peter Rabbit?”

“Or Charlotte Bronte.”

“You’re kidding?”

“I wish I was,” Marigold sighed. “This ‘consultant’ doesn’t think a work like Jane Eyre should be on the shelves. Apparently it’s guilty of ‘deferring to patriarchal constructions of social reality.’ But it’ll be banned over my dead body.”

“Mine too,” said Tait. “Let me know what happens. I’d be happy to sign a protest letter or something.”

Megan and Marigold had to go then. Megan was due to address another function. She left with a final wry comment on the new heritage rules:

“They keep reminding me of the point of the old adage: Be careful what you wish for, because you might just get it — with bells on!”

* * * *

Tait had let Gillian know that he had Bro’s copy of Ideas Have Consequences.

“Keep it,” she said.
“Are you sure? It has an inscription from his friend in South Carolina. It’s a real treasure.”

“That’s why he’d want you to have it.”

So now it was alongside his other special books on the shelf, and above it stood the heavy metal-framed photo of Francesca looking like the Lady of the Roses on her wedding day. Now that he’d learned that she had been thinking of him at that moment, the photo possessed even more of an emotional charge. The two things seemed to Tait to go together, the book and the photo, the warm violet-coloured ink of Bobbie-Mae’s inscription and the pulsing red of the flowers in the photo. They were both symbols of Lost Love he told himself, then realized with a stab of sorrow that he was now mostly thinking of Francesca in that way.

Bambi made a better recovery than the doctors had anticipated. She was out of the intensive care unit and getting stronger. Gillian paid visits nearly every day and kept everyone up to date on the patient’s progress. She was also bumping into Jade and Bundle quite often at the hospital and discreetly checking to make sure that they were getting along okay. Ian talked to Jimmy Sale about them and Jimmy arranged for one of his more sensible colleagues, a chap named Roger, to drop in from time to time at the abandoned orchard out in the Valley where they lived. They existed in poverty in a run-down shack, Roger reported, but Jade had regained his composure and did a reasonable job of rough-and-ready fathering. And Bundle, who was now nearly ten, seemed an unusually placid child.

Tait kept vaguely intending to drop in on Bambi at the hospital one day, but he didn’t fancy meeting Jade there. For all he knew, Jade still harboured unfriendliness towards him and he wasn’t in a frame of mind for awkward encounters.

He was keeping to the cabin, trying to work hard on new poems and not dwell too much on Francesca. The play had finished and they’d stolen a bit of time together at the after-show party on closing night. They’d slipped away into the shadows outside and had held hands and kissed very lightly and sweetly on the lips a few times, in between chatting about various harmless matters, but there was no heavy cuddling. Tait had wanted very much to undo her blouse but had been scared to make the move. He didn’t quite know where the boundary was now. He was scared that she might tell him in so many words that it wasn’t appropriate anymore. Then he thought maybe he was being too gormless and might be pissing her off. But she seemed alright and he
was grateful just to have the time alone and the hand-holding and the few light
smooches on the lips. The main thing, he told himself, was not to press matters, not to
bring anything to a head. He would rather go on imagining that he was allowed to
fondle her, even if it was a false belief, and even if he never tried to, than to find out
for sure that he wasn’t allowed to anymore. It was like when someone is afraid they
have a fatal condition but prefer to remain unsure than take the risk of a proper
diagnosis. Better a wistful hope than an awful truth.

He thought of the stoical severity of that recent poem he’d written about Housman,
and he wondered where his own reserves of stoicism had gone.

He was sitting at his work table, staring out the window at the lake. A letter from
Mike Kieslowski lay unopened in front of him. He was looking forward to reading it,
looking forward to being braced by the swashbuckling vehemence of Mike’s
opinions.

The letter had nearly gone astray. His letterbox had been wrenched off three nights
ago and kicked out of shape and flung into a ditch down the road. But it wasn’t
personal. Several other letterboxes along the street had received the same attention.
Ernie had promised to get him a new box immediately but hadn’t yet done so. This
meant that Mike’s letter had been left on top of the gatepost and a wind had blown it
off into a clump of grass and Tait had been lucky to notice it out of the corner of his
eye.

He wondered if the letterboxes had been the work of the same yobbos that Mr
Dragovic had confronted a week or so ago. But there was such a plague of yobbo
shitheads in the area now that it was hard to pinpoint any culprits in particular. Mr
Dragovic still had a dressing on his forehead, having been cut by the edge of a dustbin
lid that was hurled at him. Tait had heard about it from Hester. Mr Dragovic had
discovered a pair of foul-mouthed yobbos skylarking on the yellow-painted swing in
the Ellicott’s backyard. He ordered them off and they bawled threats and obscenities
before departing. Later they reappeared with two others and threw stones and bottles
at his house. There was an ugly scuffle at the back fence and that’s when the dustbin
lid was hurled. The Ellicotts had been out at the time but now felt more uneasy than
before and were in fear of reprisals because of their swing having been the initial
point of contention. They had now taken the swing down.

Tait opened Mike’s letter.
“Great to hear you’ve discovered Richard Weaver and the Southern Agrarians,” it began, “though I must confess I’m less acquainted with them than I ought to be. The history and heritage of the South is much more Caroline’s field than mine. She did whole stacks of work on the Civil War – more appropriately known to some as the War for Southern Independence – and its various legacies of the spirit. She found out enough to cure herself of a number of stock assumptions — that the war was fought over slavery, for example. Slavery was an awful thing, as people like Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson understood, but everyone knew it was destined to pass away in time, although of course not soon enough for those on the receiving end of it. (Even so, the plight of many slaves could hardly have been any more sorrowful than that of the factory-fodder in the England of the Dark Satanic Mills.)

“Slavery is an impossible topic to discuss honestly because one can too easily be accused of making light of its evils. The bottom line, though, is that every people or nation or tribe that comes to grief needs to look at itself unflinchingly and ask: “How did this happen? Yes, of course we were undone by cruel enemies, but what was it about ourselves that also undid us? What attribute did we lack? Was it courage, or vision, or unity, or what? Without insight into the downfall there can be no resurrection. And all need to ask those kinds of painful questions — enslaved Africans and their descendants as well as crushed Confederates and their descendants. And now of course the whole of so-called Western Civilization ought to be asking these dire questions of itself. One who was willing to confront these issues was the Southern poet Allen Tate. In I’ll Take My Stand he wrote that the South would never have been defeated had it possessed a richer and deeper religious life. In other words, the South was brought down by a certain kind of shallowness at the core.

“And yet despite that, and even with the enormous moral blemish of slavery, the South still upheld the basic values of human fellowship, whereas the North was modernity itself, a merciless machine to disenchant and atomize and alienate. The war was in fact a classic struggle between Gemeinschaft and Gesselschaft. The North’s very methods of waging war tells us all we need to know about it — Sherman’s march to the sea was Modernity Under Arms, and unspeakably vile. And let us not forget a creature like Sheridan, who can almost be said to have coined the great slogan of modern mass murder. ‘The only good Indian is a dead Indian,’ he declared a few years after the Civil War when he was bringing fire and sword to the West in the same
style that it’d been brought to the South. His ‘only good Indian’ line carried on from
the view that the only good Confederate was a dead one, and it can be traced through
the whole subsequent catalogue of horrors. The only good Jew… The only good kulak…

“It was thus the minions of the great sainted Lincoln who laid the ground for the
death-camps and killing fields. The Southerners share with various other peoples –
like those American Indians, and indeed like their own former slaves – that particular
tragic sense of the world that comes from having the juggernaut drive over you. As
Heinrich Mann put it: ‘The defeated are the first to learn what history has in store.’

“We need only compare those Northern commanders with the transcendent figure of
Lee to understand the true nature of the conflict. In The Captive Mind, Milosz gives
us a powerful hint of the relative moral status of the two sides. In one passage he
equates the honour and valour of the Warsaw fighters, flinging themselves against the
Nazis, with the honour and valour of the Confederates flinging themselves against the
Northern invader, against the North’s brutal Imperium.”

Tait knew the passage and had been moved by it.

“A Confederate general got it exactly right when he later wrote: ‘We should have
freed the slaves, and then fired on Fort Sumter.’ Slavery in the South only served to
hand the Regime an easy and a permanent propaganda victory over opponents who in
most other respects had right on their side.

“And of course history is largely written by the winners, so we’ve all been taught to
be furious at the thought of people being bought and sold in Alabama while staying
ignorant of certain other little matters. For example, up North you could legally buy
your way out of conscription for $300. So the affluent had the option of staying at
home in one piece and moralizing about the wickedness of the South, while the poor
sods without a razoo got to be compulsorily killed or crippled or blinded or driven
mad with horror. I’ve no idea what an actual slave cost, but up North a poor man’s
life was on the barrelhead for 300 bucks.

“There’s Modernity in a nutshell — endless rhetoric about Freedom and Justice, but
if you’re Joe Blow you’d better come up with the cash or its the fucking blood-bath
for you!”

Tait stopped and looked through the window at the lake for a minute, to let the point
sink in, then read some more.
“Interesting to hear about your friend the Shire Councilor, and her shrewd remarks on the new arrogance of power. I’m depressed but alas not surprised to hear of it showing up now in a regional area like yours. Social solidarity holds out longest and for obvious reasons in the rural heartland. When the rot begins to be visible there, we know we’re in deep trouble.

“It’s clear we are seeing a whole new depth of moral putridity in the Western elites. God knows they’ve been vicious enough over the last few centuries, but they are now casting off the last vestiges of a sane mind or a decent heart. The time wasn’t entirely ripe for them before. They did not possess the technical means to undermine human society to the extent they wanted. They had to await the advent of such things as television, a destructive power compared to which Sherman’s march through Georgia was a fond caress. But now the time is ripe and the tools are in their hands and the ultimate abyss gapes wide, especially now that all their pretended utopian schemes have faded. In the classic manner of ego-maniacs, they find a scapegoat for their own dismal outcomes. It’s the classic cry of Who shitted in my trousers? And it turns out that it’s the people who have failed, who have not lived up to the wondrous visions that their intellectual guides and moral saviours had for them. So the people are to be taken by the scruff of the neck and have their noses rubbed in their own viliness. The ego-racket once revolved around the conceit of doing things for the people, whether they liked it or not. Now it revolves around the malignant aim of doing things to the people. Now we come to what Orwell identified as the final aim of modern power — ‘a boot stamping on a human face forever.’ This requires that endless justifications be found, so now we see the demonization of ordinary people and everyday life. Ordinary people must be policed, and must be made to police each other, because they are now by definition nothing but bigots, racists, abusers, cheats, molesters, defilers and exploiters. They are worthy of nothing but that boot in the face. They are the ‘perpetrators’ of every evil under the sun and of whole new and ever-expanding categories of offence. The whole system gears itself up to manufacture the ‘evidence’ of all this wickedness, to trawl it up out of nowhere by means of statistical drivel and media hype and all the other techniques of the Big Lie. (Richard Weaver wrote of ‘the Great Stereopticon,’ the Regime’s propaganda machine, forever pumping out stereotyped ideas and images.) Then a self-fulfilling logic of hysteria begins to operate and the ‘evidence’ becomes so overwhelming that nobody dares challenge it.
And by then the delicate realm of human intimacy – the last refuge and resource that people have – has been degraded into a filthy stamping-ground of crazed inquisitors.

“And yet that’s only half the story. It gets worse. The new despotism is a gargantuan fork with two prongs. One prong is to intrude into every crevice of the average person’s life, the other prong is to abandon him or her to the predators. Today’s Regime won’t lift a finger to safeguard your right to walk safely on a public street, for example, but it will squat like a malignant troll in your private life to make sure your domestic relationships aren’t ‘abusive.’

“This two-pronged attack, this melding of what would seem to be opposite tendencies, is today’s most deadly development. There isn’t an agreed name for the process, but the logic and the strategy of it is plain enough. And it means that the crims and the yobbos function as tools of the Commissariat’s power, as minions of the Regime. They are the low-level looters and burners, unleashed along the route of the new version of Sherman’s March. But now the march is to be permanent, an endless trampling of the whole society, the ever-exultant boot in its face.

“And the people are helpless because they no longer have leaders who are bound in solidarity with them. Lee was one of the last great inspirational examples. On the eve of the war, Lincoln offered him command of the Union armies. Lee said no. He chose to stand or fall with his own people and community in the South. He chose to be on the side that was outnumbered four-to-one and was probably going to lose.

“But such leaders no longer exist for us. They are as cold in the ground as Colonel Hugh MacGrady and those others in that lovely old poem you sent.”

Mike was referring to a 17th century Irish lament called “The County of Mayo.” Tait had sent him a copy because of the poignant way it tied in with Chesterton’s “The Secret People.” The two poems, written centuries apart, summed up the transformation of the Western elites:

’Tis my grief that Patrick Loughlin is not Earl in Irrul still,
And that Brian Duff no longer rules as lord upon the hill,
And that Colonel Hugh MacGrady should lying cold and low,
And I sailing, sailing swiftly, from the County of Mayo.
Those were the old lords. They had names, roles, histories, identities, attachments. No doubt they could be foolish or unjust, but their faults were at least those of real human beings who belonged to an intact human world. And ditto their virtues. Most of the time they must have upheld the communal ethos and been constant in their duties. And if they seriously failed to live up to those duties, at least they and everyone else knew that the duties existed and that they had failed in them. They were like those old Highland chiefs who appeared to have unbridled power and yet could be chastened and brought into line by the disapproving looks of their clanspeople. These old lords and ladies of Mayo and elsewhere existed in a context of real human tears and joys. They could therefore be remembered fondly and lamented with feeling. But they all went down in the great wreck of the world, and the mavens of modernity set up the Regime in their place. As Chesterton put it:

They have given us into the hand of new unhappy lords,
Lords without anger and honour, who dare not carry their swords.
They fight by shuffling papers; they have bright dead alien eyes;
They look at our labour and laughter as a tired man looks at flies.
And the load of their loveless pity is worse than the ancient wrongs.
Their doors are shut in the evening, and they know no songs.

It only needed the addition of Max Weber’s immortal words: “This nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved.” And of course that applied equally to the female of the type, the New Unhappy Lordesses. One mustn’t pollute the language by calling them Ladies.

Tait recalled Ernie’s account of the Shire Clerk’s bug-eyed spite that day in the Council office. There was an actual example of the “bright dead alien eyes” in a place where they “fight by shuffling papers.”

And yet Chesterton had been much too kind to the new lords. In his poem they could almost elicit sympathy for their inner emptiness. Orwell had caught the true essence of them — the urge to grind human faces under their boots forever.

“By the way,” Mike wrote at the end of his letter, “I’m just doing my review of Ground Leave. I’ll pop a draft into the mail for you, so you can let me know if there’s anything you’re unhappy with before I send it on to Fergus.”
Fergus was Fergus Gunn, the famous playwright and the literary editor of *Compact* magazine. He had been a good friend to both Mike and Tait from the start, printing their poems regularly. Now Mike was his star polemicist as well, and the chief stimulator of outrage in the Letters column of every issue. The most recent furor was over an article of Mike’s entitled “The World of BAWF.” The acronym BAWF stood for Boast And Whine Feminism. That’s the kind of feminism that spends half its time boasting of women’s superiority and the other half whining of their helplessness. The storm of protest had included demands that Mike be gaoled, flogged, killed or castrated, or at least dragged in chains before the Equality Tribunal. Questions had been asked in Parliament, and it was proposed to make a new law to protect feminists from “vilification.”

Fergus backed Mike to the hilt through these various tumults. His plays had made him a lot of money over the decades and he could afford to defy the commissars without ending up in the dole queue. Mike was what he called his “Polish cavalry” (the reference being to the stories of the Polish cavalry charging Hitler’s panzers in 1939) and he reckoned that such *élan* deserved encouragement.

Fergus himself was notorious for “stirring the possum,” in the dry Australian style, but he pointed out that possums aren’t especially dangerous and don’t typically strike back with every intention of destroying you. What Mike did with such relish and aplomb, he declared, was more like kicking a crocodile or toying with a taipan.

Tait looked forward to seeing Mike’s review of *Ground Leave*. He knew it’d be hugely favourable, and bristling with defiance of the Enemy.

It was late afternoon and he needed to get out of the cabin. He was thinking how Mike’s letter had almost gone astray and of how annoyed he felt that Ernie had not replaced the letter-box immediately. He wanted to go into Turrawong and buy a new one himself right now. He saw Ernie outside and went and raised it with him. Yes, Ernie said. Do that, and deduct it from the next rent. Ernie looked a bit under the weather and headed back inside, saying he might have a quick lie-down before he got back to his ham-radio.

Tait needed to hurry to get to the hardware shop in the Plaza before it closed. He set out on the motorbike and would have taken his alternative route to avoid the hamburger joint and the Doberman but the journey was a few minutes longer that way. Heading along the street he saw Mr Dragovic out in his front yard washing his
big four-wheel-drive vehicle. Mr Dragovic didn’t have a dressing on his forehead but you could see the red mark of the wound.

“How’s the head?” Tait called out as he slowed almost to a stop.

“Ahhh!” Mr Dragovic responded with an abrupt gesture as though it was too trivial to bother with. Then he jerked his thumb in the direction of the hamburger shop and stuck his chin out pugnaciously:

“Doesn’t-matter-mate-next-time-I-break-they-bloody-head-no-worry!”

“Good on you,” Tait said and waved and went past.

There was a panel van outside the shop and a bunch of yobs around it. They jeered and hooted as Tait hastened past. Then the Doberman lunged out at him and he heard the yobs urging it on: “Garn, git the fuckin cunt! Yeah, git the fuckin cunt!”

His heart banged wildly and his hands went shaky on the handlebars, but he was able to pull ahead of the snarling beast.

All the way into town the lines of “Bonnie Dundee” drummed in his head. There had to be an answer to all this vileness. Surely the forces of good would return somehow, the way Dundee and his Highlanders came back from the wilderness to thrash their foes at Killiekrankie and send them scuttling for their worthless lives!

So tremble, false Whigs, in the midst of your glee,
For you’ve not seen the last of my bonnets and me!

* * * *

After four years of work in his spare time, Tim Niblett had completed his musical about the Jumbywollamoks. He had written it mostly on the basis of Lance Lassiter’s memoirs and had penned the lyrics of eighteen songs. The musical score had been done by a young composer at the Castleton Conservatorium. The initial brainstorming for the project had occurred around the teak table in Clarion’s lounge-room, and it was Tait who suggested the show’s title: Eucalyptus Temple, that phrase from Lance’s best-known poem of the Jumby period.

Now the show was to have its premiere in the main hall of the Conservatorium and Tait had been sent two free tickets. He had been set to drive up with Jimmy Sale, but Jimmy had to back out at the last minute so Tait went alone on the train.
He went to Clarion’s place and then they strolled to a restaurant to have a meal and a drink with Tim and Lance and a few others before the show.

On the way there, Clarion enthused over the young tenor who was doing the lead role as Lance Lassiter, or rather “Ross Rossiter” as the character was called in the show. He was barely out of his teens, they said, but could already rattle the rafters.

Garibaldi’s was an Italian eatery. Tait had never heard a restaurant called an “eatery” before, but that was Clarion’s word for it so he supposed it was what you said nowadays.

There were eight of them, including Sabina Sharpe, still in the black leather jacket and with the cropped hair. With her was a woman from the university Drama department. Tait didn’t catch the woman’s actual name but thought of her as “the Drama Queen.”

“You’re Drama, aren’t you?” Clarion had asked her.

“I am Drama,” she replied with a sort of queenly condescension.

And there was another academic named Harold Morelock who had a neat white goatee beard.

The proprietor came to their table to say hello and for a moment Tait wondered if they’d hired an actor to play the part of an Italian eatery proprietor. The man was short and dark and rotund and garrulous with a stage-accent. He wore dazzlingly white chef’s clothes and a tall chef’s hat and had a red bandana round his neck. He wrang his hands and half-bowed and addressed Tim Niblett as Professori.

The meal was on Tim, so Tait wasn’t quite as dismayed as he might have been by the outrageous prices on the menu. He ordered the lasagne and when it came he was taken aback at how tiny the portion was. He felt awkward and resentful in an up-market place like this. He had that old feeling of betraying his former comrades back in the institution. A real pile of food in front of him would have helped, would have given him something to concentrate on.

The party had divided into two groups having two separate conversations. Lance and Clarion and Harold Morelock were gossiping about the Conservatorium, while the others were discussing the new ‘sexual harrassment’ guidelines at the University.

Sabina and the Drama Queen were both on something called the Vice Chancellor’s Task Force which was about to recommend a more draconian approach to the issue.

Tait was stuck at their end of the table.
Tim Niblett mildly asked how allegations of harassment were to be corroborated. This appeared to exasperate the Drama Queen. She pursed her lips and said that the idea of “corroboration” was a tool of patriarchal power.

“If the victim feels harassed, then she has been harassed,” she declared firmly. Tim looked mortified at having asked so insensitive a question.

Tait wanted to get up and go out in the fresh air, but he was wedged in the corner and felt trapped.

“Suppose I feel that I’ve been abducted by aliens,” he asked. “Does that mean I have been?”

The Drama Queen gave him a hostile look and began pretending to be interested in the conversation at the other end of the table.

“Suppose,” Tait asked, as though talking to thin air, ‘that I feel an overwhelming conviction that I’m Jesus Christ, or the Emperor of China, or a penguin. What then?”

The Drama Queen gave him another dirty look, and Tim Niblett shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

Only Sabina Sharpe was giving him her steady attention.

“Suppose I feel I’m the falsely-accused victim of feminist cant and hysteria,” Tait asked. “Where does that leave us?”

Sabina spoke then, in a calm and patient tone.

“You have to realize we’re talking about a duty of care, a concern to protect the vulnerable.”

Tait went on, gazing into the air above.

“Suppose I hold a belief that the phrase ‘Good Morning’ actually means, ‘I intend to kill you before the day is out.’ Must anyone who bids me ‘Good Morning’ be dragged away in handcuffs for having made murder threats?”

“Crude parody isn’t helpful, you know,” Sabina said in a patient tone.

“I think the whole thing is beyond parody,” Tait replied.

“These young women are at risk!” snapped the Drama Queen angrily.

“Why, because they’re inexperienced and immature?”

“Yes, and because hegemonic misogyny has further denied them full autonomy as human beings!”
“Those are precise reasons to ask for corroboration if they should happen to make life-ruining accusations against people. Or is to be like in *The Crucible*? You might recall the question posed in that play: ‘Are the accusers always holy now?’”

“So we aren’t to protect the vulnerable?” Sabina asked in a calm voice. “Is that what you’re saying?”

“I’m pointing out the obvious — that this alleged lack of autonomy in the young women is a double-edged blade. If it’s a danger to *them*, it’s equally a danger to *others*, and those others deserve some protection too. Conversely, if the young women are autonomous enough to be taken at their own unsupported word, then they are also capable of looking after themselves in the arena of day to day relationships. This isn’t rocket science. The logic of the thing is pretty clear.”

“Surprise, surprise,” the Drama Queen exclaimed sourly, “the male invokes the repressive hegemonic power of logic.”

“Otherwise,” Tait added, “you’re operating on Lenin’s principle of ‘Who Whom?’ And that’s the concept that has piled our century with corpses.”

“Oh yes, and now he throws in a dose of good old Red-bashing!” the Drama Queen cried.

“You could call it by the acronym BAWF, if you’d prefer. That stands for Boast And Whine Feminism, the kind that always wants to have it both ways. I’d be glad to send your so-called ‘Task Force’ some copies of an excellent article about it by Michael Kieslowski.”

The conversation at the other end of the table had stopped and the others were now listening.

“Of course,” said Harold Morelock in a hesitant tone, as if making a very daring point, “this whole area is somewhat of, um, a minefield.”

“That’d be one word for it,” Tait said wearily. He wanted to get out into the fresh air.

The Drama Queen was seething, working herself up to another angry retort, but Sabina laid a stilling hand on her arm.

“We’ll have to agree to differ, won’t we?” Sabina said to Tait in an even voice and with a fixed half-smile.

But now he saw for the first time how cold and unblinking her eyes were.

“Certainly,” he said, giving her an equally fixed half-smile.
Where the Drama Queen was all jagged nerves and outrage, Sabina was total focus. Fergus Gunn’s metaphor came to mind. It was like toying with a taipan. The creature kept coiled and kept facing you, but wouldn’t strike until it saw an opening for a clean and lethal hit.

This was different from the slow circlings of the python that he knew so well from his years with Bristol Dick. It occurred to Tait – and not for the first time lately – that the probation officer had not been quite as malevolent as he had seemed. Bristol Dick was addicted to playing mind-games – they might in fact have been the only thing he had to fill up an empty life – but playing games requires an element of co-operation, of mutual understanding of the rules. Why would he have wanted to destroy a stimulating partner in those games? Tait could tell that Sabina Sharpe had little interest in game-playing for its own sake, and none at all in the mutualities of it.

On the short walk to the Conservatorium, Tait found himself alongside Harold Morelock.

“I thought you made some valid points back there at the restaurant,” he said to Tait in a low voice. “Quite valid points, actually.”

And he glanced around as he said it, to make sure no one else had heard. This pathetic rabbit, Tait reflected, was a full Professor of Classics.

The front of the Conservatorium building was lit up and a crowd of people mingled and chatted on the footpath outside and in the lobby. Most of them were connected with the Conservatorium or the University, or were the parents and friends of the students who mostly made up the cast and the orchestra. And some were the general public who’d been drawn by the advertising posters around town.

Lance Lassiter was at his most impressive. He walked among the people like an affable prince, accepting their homage and exchanging a gracious word with this one or that. Tim Niblett followed behind, like a valued courtier, but a mere courtier all the same. He looked immensely happy and proud though. Tait felt pleased for him that four years of work had come to fruition tonight. He could imagine the sweat and anguish it had cost.

There was a slight flurry with the seating arrangements. According to the seat numbers, the Drama Queen was supposed to be alongside Tait, but Sabina unobtrusively guided Tim into that seat instead, so that Tait was placed between him and Morelock.
The orchestra was warming up in the pit and the audience began to settle.

The show opened with a crash, literally. The scene was the docks during the Depression and the wharfies were supposedly unloading an unseen ship. There were sudden cries of “Look out, the cable is breaking!” and “Watch out! Watch out!” and then a thundering crash. Then the Patrick Duhig character – called “Declan Mahoney” in the show – is carried onstage with a broken leg. Declan winces with pain, but in a strong-jawed sort of way, then declares that this is only the latest in a string of injuries the wharfies have suffered due to the greed of the bosses. He starts to sing a song called ‘Toil and Strife’ and the other wharfies gather round him and join in.

Tait thought it was a good song and was stirred by it. It reminded him of “Old Man River” from *Showboat*.

Declan remains slumped against a stanchion, pondering his broken leg and wondering aloud how he and his white-haired Irish mother will manage now. The wharfies drift back to their work. All except one. He is “Ross Rossiter,” the newest wharfie on the job. He is a handsome young fellow with tousled hair and throughout the show he goes on wearing the same costume of shorts and singlet and hiking boots so that you never lose sight of his fine physique.

Ross confesses to Declan that he’d never really thought about the ills of society before, but now his eyes have begun to open. Declan likes the cut of the young fellow’s jib and invites him home. This leads into the second scene.

It is the shabby but spotless kitchen of Declan’s house in the slums. The white-haired Irish mother smiles from a rocking-chair in the corner while a bunch of penniless bohemian poets drink beer at the table. They all have a marvelous *élan*, as though they are young Hussars at the White Horse Inn, and they go into a rollicking number called “Pour Us Another Glass.”

The song was a toe-tapper, and Tait liked it a lot. It put him in mind of “Nothing Like a Dame” from *South Pacific*.

These poets are all wonderfully gifted, but they drink avidly to Declan’s superior genius. Declan has been working for years on an epic poem about “Australis” and its unique destiny to unify Justice, Art, and True Harmony with Nature. When published, this epic will flabbergast the critics and usher in a whole new consciousness.
Declan bows his head modestly at this homage, but then indicates Ross and tells the others in a prophetic tone: “Don’t ask me why, but I have a hunch young Ross here might just give us all a run for our money!”

The others look wonderingly at the embarrassed newchum poet.

“That’s providing,” Declan adds, “that he can stay real.”

There’s a solemn chorus of agreement that staying real is the hardest thing of all in such a phoney world. This leads into the next song, a half-bitter, half-comic number called, “Tell Me How the Hell to Stay Real!”

Tait enjoyed the song very much. He heard in it an echo of “You’ve Got To Pick A Pocket or Two” from Oliver.

After the others have gone, Ross shyly confides that he does indeed have a means of keeping himself real. There’s a stretch of mountain wilderness where he goes to camp and hike and commune with the primordial. He invites Declan to visit this unspoilt realm, and this leads into the third scene.

The two of them are standing on a rock pinnacle. Declan describes his great vision of “Australis” and anoints Ross as his spiritual lieutenant in the struggles that loom ahead. Their destiny is to forge a new Harp on which to sing this land, a poetry rooted deep in aboriginal verities. He goes into a big song called “A New Harp to Forge” which hymns the creed of the Jumbywollamoks.

Tait was very moved by the song. It had in it a suggestion of “Climb Every Mountain” from The Sound of Music.

And so the show rolled on, covering the grimness of the later 1930s; the ordeal of the war years and the gaoling of Declan; the flowering of the Jumby movement and then its collapse in ridicule; the sex and the politics, the loves and betrayals.

Then came the penultimate scene back at the very wharf where it all began. The ageing, depleted, spirit-weary Declan bids an unknowingly poignant farewell to his old comrade. He intends to do a spot of quiet fishing in his little boat out on the bay, out there on the water where – you somehow sense – something fatal is waiting to happen.

The final scene was the one Tait loved so much in Lance’s autobiography. Ross returns to his eucalyptus temple and strides the bush in a frenzy of grief, declaiming passages from Declan’s unfinished epic masterpiece “Australis.” He suddenly understands that it’s the glory of the Vision that matters, not the mundane fates of its
a colytes. The big finale number was called “The Vision Never Dies” and it was very powerful. It reminded Tait of “The Impossible Dream” from *Man of La Mancha*.

It turned out that all the songs reminded you of other songs, and all the scenes felt slightly familiar. It seemed to Tait that Tim Niblett had been groping at first for the essence of the thing, but by a little way into it he knew more or less what story he was telling. This was a version of *Don Quixote*, a tragedy of vain hopes and persistence in folly. The show itself wasn’t what you’d call deep, but it was trying say something about the deep wells of human behaviour, about idealism and honour, delusion and ego. Tait had liked it, in a way, because of its failings. The fact that it reminded you of all those old shows, of the best of an outmoded popular culture, gave it a depth of reference, and so the hackneyed elements worked as source of strength. Things become “hackneyed” because they are well-known and oft-repeated, because their message can be recognized by all sorts of people. The sun coming up each morning is a “hackneyed” occurrence if you want to see it that way. To be “hackneyed” is to convey certain broad lines of truth, the sorts of truth that fashion tries to repudiate. Derivative or not, *Eucalyptus Temple* was about genuine things — art, ambition, friendship, failure, memory, death, the eternal earth and sky. It sided, in its own way, with the QO and against the Regime.

He knew Mike Kieslowski would also have approved of it. It wasn’t at all a work you’d expect to come out of a milieu of deracinated pseuds and wanker sophisticates.

Tait’s opinion of Tim Niblett had gone up greatly. As soon as the lights came on he shook Tim’s hand. Most of the audience was pleased and satisfied, but the academics only looked embarrassed, and the Drama Queen wore an expression of frank distaste. He saw Sabina lean towards Tim to say something pleasant, but she was wearing that fixed half-smile again, and the taipan’s eyes didn’t blink.

Tait went into the lobby and saw Lance Lassiter standing amidst a cooing crowd of admirers. He had an aura round him, as though he had just stepped miraculously out of his own legend.

Tait moved out of the lobby and stood on the steps of the building and breathed in the fresh night air. Some trendy types were talking nearby.

“I couldn’t believe it. It was sheer pastiche.”

“Oh, total pastiche.

“And pastiche of the lamest kind.”
“The vulgar populist pandering made me nauseous.”
“Fascist populism running amok.”
“Hardly what you’d call cutting-edge.”
“Oh yes, cutting-edge for the Fifties.”
“Aha, you’re right. It’ll be the hit of 1954!”

They all giggled.

Tait wished he could go home now. He had vaguely arranged to stay the night at Clarion’s place, but there might still be a late train he could catch. He started to fish for the train timetable in his pocket and glanced back at the scene in the lobby.

He was astonished to find Narelle standing there looking at him.

* * * *

Narelle had come to the show with her friend Cathy in Cathy’s car, and they offered him a lift home.

“I had no idea you were there,” Tait said from the back seat as they drove along.

“We saw you when you arrived,” Cathy said, “But we didn’t want to butt in on you.”

“You should’ve said hello.”

“You’re friends with Lance Lassiter then?”

“We know each other.”

“That must be amazing,” Cathy said.

Amazing was a key word with Cathy.

She was an outgoing girl and Tait knew her a little. She’d gone to school with Narelle and now they both worked in the Plaza newsagency together. Cathy loved dance and had been going to classes ever since she was a tot. She’d had small parts in musical shows with the Players, parts where she could show off her dancing skills. Tait remembered a dazzling little tap-routine she did in one of the pantomimes.

Narelle had hardly spoken and seemed to be intent on watching the road ahead. Tait chatted with Cathy while he looked at the outline of Narelle’s head and shoulders from the back seat. He was still feeling a mite shaken at the way she’d been standing there when he turned around. She’d looked so lovely. She had on jeans and a polo-neck jumper and her long tawny hair was loose around her shoulders. Her gold-rimmed glasses exactly suited her colouring and they highlighted her eyes as she
looked directly at him. Her gaze had powerfully reminded him that the Owl-Child had turned into a young falcon.

“So, what’s your verdict on Eucalyptus Temple?” Tait asked.

“It needed some dancing in it,” Cathy said, “but otherwise it was amazing!”

“Narelle?”

“I really enjoyed it,” Narelle answered thoughtfully, turning her head a little towards the back seat. “I must admit I was a bit lost with the politics – like why Declan was put in gaol by the government during the war – but the show was really entertaining.”

“The politics of it all was very confused,” Tait said. “In real life, I mean. The show had an uphill struggle to present a clear story-line.”

“Did you like the show?” Narelle asked.

“Yes, I did, a lot,” Tait replied, then muttered wryly to himself, “Populist Fascist pastiche is my thing.”

“Sorry?” Narelle asked.

“Nothing.” Tait said.

“What does it mean?”

“What?”

“What you just said.”

“I was just being silly.”

“Oh, okay,” Narelle said and resumed watching the road ahead.

Tait realized it had sounded as though he was talking down to her, as to a child.

“It was just what some of the trendies were saying about the show. That it was pastiche.”

“You can have pastiche in dance too,” Cathy said.

“It means made up out of bits and pieces, doesn’t it?” Narelle said.

“Yes, pretty much,” Tait agreed.

“And what about the ‘fascist’ thing?” Narelle asked.

“That’s to do with the confusing politics of it all,” Tait said. “I don’t fully understand those myself. There are two sets of confusing politics involved, you see — those of the original events in the 30s and 40s, and those of the present moment.”

“I hate politics!” Cathy declared. “My mum keeps telling me I should read the paper and be informed, but it’s all too shitty.”
“George Orwell said that being well-informed doesn’t mean knowing what’s in the newspaper, but knowing what kind of world you’re living in.”

“Hey, thanks, I’ll tell my mum that,” Cathy said gratefully over her shoulder. “It’ll carry weight if Orwell said it. We loved doing Animal Farm at school, didn’t we, Nar?”

“Yes,” Narelle said.

“That’s what started you writing poems, wasn’t it?”

Narelle didn’t answer.

“You write poems, Narelle?” Tait asked.

“I’ll say she does!” Cathy cried. “She’s got a whole big folder full, but she won’t talk about them to anyone except me. She doesn’t think her stuff is any good, but it’s really amazing.”

“And it was Animal Farm that started you off?”

“Yeah,” Cathy explained. “She came to school one day and showed me this poem she’d written about ‘Mollie’ – you know the little white mare whose only cares about wearing pretty ribbons and stuff. It was amazing.”

“What drew you to that particular character in the book?” Tait asked.

Narelle didn’t answer, so after a moment Cathy gave her a slap on the arm and said:

“Talk!”

“No,” said Tait. “I understand if you’d rather not. Some writers hate discussing their own work. They need to have creative privacy”

“No, it’s alright,” Narelle said after another moment. “I don’t mind.”

Tait got the feeling that she had just made a real and difficult decision.

“I just felt kind of sorry for Mollie,” she went on. “I couldn’t see what was so terrible about her wanting to look pretty and to be happy, especially when everything around her was so harsh and cruel. I mean, I know she was a vain, foolish creature, but if wanting to have a nice life was a crime we’d all be guilty.”

“Use every man after his desert, and who shall ’scape whipping?” Tait intoned.

“Anyway, I was jotting my thoughts down about all that and it turned into a poem. It wasn’t very good, but I’ve written some better ones since then. I mean, I think I have.”

“I’d love to see some of your work. But only if you didn’t mind showing it.”

“No, I’d be okay showing you.”
“Excellent,” Tait said, still adjusting this whole unknown side of her.

They drove in silence for a while, and Tait concentrated on the curve of Narelle’s hair coming down around her shoulders. He wished very much he could run his hands through it. He was also trying to imagine what her poems were like.

“So, Narelle,” he asked after a while. “Who are the poets you admire? There might be some we have in common.”

“I can tell you who she likes most of all,” Cathy said at once.

“Who?”

“Guess,” said Cathy.

“I don’t know.”

“I’ll give you a clue.”

“Okay.”

“He’s in the back seat of this car.”

“Good lord,” Tait cried in mock alarm. “I thought I was alone back here!”

“She’s wrapped in your poems. She knows them all backwards.”

“That’s good, I always felt they’d make more sense backwards,” he said wryly.

But he was inwardly quivering with delight at all this.

Narelle didn’t say anything and they drove on in silence again. Cathy turned the car radio on, quite low, and there came the flowing, plaintive notes of a saxophone. It seemed to go on for a long time and to become hypnotic.

Tait felt as though he had gone into a trace. He felt deliciously lulled by the warmth in the car, by the perfume the girls had on, by the sense of being in this metal shell that was surging along in the dark, and most of all by the nearness of Narelle who was as lovely as a young falcon and knew his work backwards.

He would’ve been content to stay like that forever.
Gillian popped in at the hospital every couple of days and she reported that Bambi was now able to sit up and talk. Jade and Bundle were often there when she called in. She’d find them at the bedside playing Snakes & Ladders and telling Bambi all the news from out home in the Valley — what they’d cooked for dinner the previous night, or what they’d heard on the radio, or how the weather had been, or the latest little adventures of their cat called Treacle.

Things would go quiet, though, when Gillian arrived, and Jade would not speak to her at all except for the barest civilities. Gillian felt an intense need to be supportive. She felt that for Bro’s sake she had to be like a sister to Bambi now. To Jade, though, she was just the interloping sister of that bastard.

In a private moment Gillian asked Bambi whether she should stop visiting and generally back off and leave them be. Bambi had begged her not to. Bambi said that she too felt the sisterly connection, the pathos of their mutual link to Bro. She was adamant that they mustn’t lose that.

Without Bambi there was no money coming in and Jade and Bundle were nearly destitute. Jimmy Sale’s sensible colleague Roger had linked them up to one or two of the local charities that could provide a regular box of food and the occasional few dollars in cash. And now he was trying to dodge a tangle of red tape on their behalf to see what government benefits they might be entitled to. It was a tricky situation, Jimmy explained to Tait. Nowadays it was always tricky. The difficult problem was to assist those in need of help without “clientizing” them, that is, without putting them into the clutches of the system.

“Once they become fully-fledged ‘clients’ of the system as a whole,” Jimmy said grimly, “they’ll never emerge alive.”

The atmosphere in the health and welfare field was increasingly one of hysteria, of draconian mentalities of control, of ruthless modes of intervention. It was less and less a matter of assisting fellow human beings and more and more a drive to police and punish a guilty rabble.

“The system spouts an endless drivel of compassion,” Jimmy said, “but the real drive now is towards a stalinist brutality and contempt.”
Tait told him what Richard Weaver had written about the brutal and the sentimental being two sides of the same coin.

“Absolutely,” Jimmy said. “I see the truth of it every day. That’s why the decent people inside the system try to work quietly together as a little network.”

This network operated almost like a resistance movement against the system itself. It tried to get useful things done for people as much “off the books” as possible. A word here, a phone call there, and a helpful bandage might be applied without it turning into an amputation. But the network was being whittled away as the decent people got worn-down and were driven out by the zealots, by those whom Jimmy and Tait had begun to call the “the Hounds of Halifax” – a phrase that had a conscious echo of “the Hounds of Hell.”

Halifax was the northern English city where there’d recently been a crazed official rampage against hundreds of innocent parents accused of sexually abusing their children. Hundreds of children had been seized, scores of families broken up, lives and trusts and reputations ruined, a whole community hurled into a Kafkaesque nightmare. It had all been set off by crack-brained pseudo-medical nonsense that if a child’s anus distends by certain fractional degrees it is an infallible sign of molestation. It was the exact equivalent of the old witch-hunting claptrap about warts and pimples being teats to suckle the Devil and suchlike.

“Halifax is the future,” Jimmy said miserably. “It will go on happening in different ways in different places because all the health and welfare systems of the Regime are now mentally and organizationally geared for it.”

Jimmy and Roger were concerned that Jade could become an object of interest to the local zealots if they grew aware of him. For one thing, he had kept Bundle home from school for the first fortnight that Bambi was in hospital, and was still letting him miss a couple of days a week. They’d nearly lost the woman who was the lynchpin of both their lives and it was natural for them to want to stick close to each other for while. But the school headmistress was an officious type and had begun to make an issue of the boy’s absence.

Suppose the truant-officer turned up at the boy’s home to investigate? Jimmy and Roger knew all too well how easily it could snowball.

The truant-officer would have heard that the boy’s mother was in hospital as a result of carryings-on with another bloke, who was now dead. Here was death and injury
and illicit sex. This was a family out of control. He or she would then find that the boy’s home was a hillbilly shack, and that the floor was none too clean and that the cupboard was pretty bare. He or she would see that Jade was a “redneck” type and that the boy was “quiet.” In the eyes of the new zealotry, finding a “redneck” male with a “quiet” child was a Grade A danger signal.

They could hang Jade on that alone.

But suppose there was more?

What if the truant-officer judged that Jade was a bit hostile at the intrusion? A prole with nothing to hide wouldn’t be hostile. A prole with nothing to hide would in fact be grateful for a supervisory swoop from a highly-trained professional, someone exalted enough to have scraped a Pass in Sociology. A truant-officer was an operative of the modern state, and as Richard Weaver put it: “The modern state does not comprehend how anyone can be guided by something other than itself.”

And suppose, moreover, that he or she got an earful of stupid or malicious talk from some neighbour.

Suppose any number of things.

Oh yes, it would be self-evident to any snooping fuckwit of a petty official nowadays that Bundle was a child “At Risk.”

And it would only need a word of this to come to the ears of the local Hounds of Halifax, and very soon there’d only be another smear of blood on the ground where a family had been.

So Roger was being as helpful as he could – advising Jade not to antagonize the school headmistress, for example – while treading lightly to keep things as unofficial as possible.

An immediate and critical problem was that Jade and Bundle had no transport other than Bambi’s old clapped-out Mini, which was now more clapped-out than ever. Jade had been keeping it going by the skin of its teeth but it was due for rego and needed a couple of thousand dollars worth of repairs.

Roger had mentioned the problem to Jimmy who mentioned it to Tait. Tait mentioned it to Francesca and she mentioned it to Gillian. Gillian went to see Roger and gave him a cheque for three thousand dollars to hand on to Jade, supposedly having come out of the blue from an anonymous well-wisher.
Tait kept thinking of Milosz’s account of that peasant family in the railway station. Milosz didn’t claim the family was perfect. No doubt if you could examine it you would find it was a veritable casebook of folly and error. But compared to the alternative – the empty atomized crowd, the dehumanized expendable rabble – it was a sacred thing to be defended. And the same applied to the “little platoon” of Jade and Bambi and Bundle. While it was still there, still hanging on by even a fingertip, it deserved to be defended. Indeed, thought Tait, defending it could be a good example of someone’s Rightful Task.

He had been working on a poem about the witch-hunting mentality, the mindset of the Hounds of Halifax in all times and places. Now he’d finished it and sent it off to Fergus Gunn who accepted it for Compact by return of post.

THE CALLING

It was our professional renown
That we could tell the Markings of the Beast,
That we could half-depopulate a town
And still assert that witchery increased.

Unfair to see us as demented fools,
The canting loonies of a darker day.
We worked within a sober set of rules
And had our codes of conscience to obey.

Burning for the truth, we only built
A case on what we truly heard and saw.
And if that always pointed to the guilt,
Well, it wasn’t innocence we hunted for.

And people were supportive, by and large.
They understood the set-up rather well,
Knew criticism would attract a charge
Of being in complicity with Hell.
Our overriding passion was concern.
It overrode us everywhere we went.
It drove us on relentlessly to learn
What pimples on a witch’s elbow meant.

You’d hardly credit all the pains we took
With pincer, rack, hot-iron, ducking-stool.
In all good faith, how could we overlook
The use of any diagnostic tool?

So scrupulous were we in these affairs,
So jealous of a blemish on our names,
That no-one ever lacked our tender cares
Or ever went unjustly to the flames.

Our only mistake was to have feared
This calling might eventually be gone.
But new Abominations have appeared
And the great work is being carried on!

* * * *

The key to the door of the little shed had gone missing and Tait was scanning the nearby ground for it. He was completely puzzled. He’d come out of the cabin that morning with the key, had used it to unlock the shed door to wheel his motorbike out, and had then left it in the lock as he always did. It was a big, rusty, old-fashioned key that looked like an antique. He needed that key. He needed to have the motorbike secure at night. A little motorbike wasn’t something you’d leave outside. Not the way the neighbourhood was going.

A few nights before, Tait had been woken in the wee small hours by what sounded like murmuring voices outside the cabin. He lifted his head off the pillow to try to catch the sounds more clearly. There was a wind in the trees and he thought that...
maybe it was only the sighing wind he’d heard, or that maybe he’d been dreaming the voices, so he drifted back to sleep, feeling vaguely pleased that both the cabin and the shed were firmly locked and secure. Next day he happened to glance across at the vacant block next door and saw that a patch of long grass had been newly flattened, as though a number of people had been sitting there. He’d had a slight case of the willies ever since.

Now, scanning the ground, he suddenly knew that the key had been deliberately taken sometime that day while he was inside the cabin. He went and told Ernie what had happened and asked him if he’d noticed anyone lurking about. But Ernie hadn’t seen anything amiss. In fact Ernie wasn’t too well these days and seemed a bit dopey at times from tablets he had to take.

Tait would have to go and buy a bolt and a padlock and fit them to the shed door. But he didn’t have a drill to use and Ernie didn’t have one either. He tried to think who might have a drill. The Ellicotts might, and Mr Dragovic might. He knew Craig had one. It was four-thirty now and he would have to hurry to get to the shops in Turrawong to buy a bolt and padlock. Then he could ride out to Francesca’s and borrow the drill. Craig wouldn’t be home from work yet but Tait knew where the drill was kept and Francesca would give him the okay to take it. And needing to borrow the drill gave him a genuine excuse to drop in. He didn’t quite know why he should need an excuse to drop in, but somehow he felt that he did. He hadn’t seen Francesca for nearly a month and was gnawed by worry that if he wasn’t careful the relationship could start to fade away. It was imperative that he re-connect.

But it all seemed a bit beyond him. He didn’t have the energy.

He stood there, half-enraged and half-forlorn, remembering how he’d had to replace his letterbox after it was vandalized. He hated being under pressure like this, the feeling of having been interfered with, targeted, focused-on by malignant forces. It unmanned him and left him feeling adrift and ineffectual. It was at times like this that he knew he could never be a man of action. He could never be an effective soldier, he realized, because all his energy and coolness left him in real-life situations. He was only energetic and cool in contemplation and in his writing.

He felt like such a fraud when he thought about the great people he admired — of those Cavaliers and Highlanders and Poles and Confederates, of the French of the Vendee who had defied the Revolution with incredible valour, of those Irish rebels of
1916 and all the “Wild Geese” who’d gone before them, of the Sioux and the Cheyenne and the Apache, of all those others everywhere who’d fought so well against the odds. What had Yeats called it? *All that delirium of the brave.*

Oh yes, Tait sneered at himself, you’re gung-ho for battle and bloodshed, but only when the battle is far enough away and the blood is someone else’s. Hail the armchair warrior, the warmonger from the sidelines: “No, I’m sorry, I’m not available for the actual sword-work, but I can whip you up a ferocious poem!”

There was a line in *Twelfth Night*, where Sir Toby Belch is prodding and gullling the cowardly Sir Andrew to mock-heroics:

*Taunt them with the licence of ink!*

That’s me in a nutshell, Tait thought disgustedly.

He knew that there was an element of this self-disgust in his clinging to the friendship with Mike Kieslowski and in his emotional link with his ancestor Robert Connell. Mike *did* have a soldierly nerve and belligerence and that helped give Tait what little backbone he could muster. And Robert Connell symbolized the hope that even now there might still be a faint trace of gumption left in the genes.

He thought again about the bolt and padlock and wondered how much they might cost. He was becoming very worried about money again, trying to spend as little as he could, trying to eke out every dollar.

He decided he had no energy to do anything about the shed door and would go back inside and lie down and force himself to relax enough to take a nap. He would think about the shed door again afterwards.

He lay on his bed and drifted about in his thoughts. He regretted not having ridden out to Francesca’s place to borrow Craig’s drill. He was suddenly filled with panic at not having seen her for so long. He got up off the bed, meaning to ride straight out to the Valley and thinking how devilishly clever he was to have thought of needing the drill, to have devised such a brilliant alibi. But then he felt utterly drained of energy again and lay back down. It came to him that he was ill. He had something dreadfully wrong with him and might be on his deathbed. He might die without ever seeing Francesca again. He got a vivid image of her out in the Valley, standing at her gate, her beautiful face a picture of woe and abandonment, looking along the road for him, thinking: *Oh, where is he? Why doesn’t he come?* The pathos of it was exquisite.
Then he understood that he was coming down with the flu or something. He relaxed into that realization and drifted into a doze.

He became aware of a knocking at the door. He thought he might be dreaming it, but it came again and he was pretty sure it was real. He got up off the bed and looked through the curtain and forced his eyes to focus. There was a car in the driveway. The luminous face of his bedside clock said it was just after six. He’d been dozing for about two hours. He dragged himself to the door and went through the little rigmarole of opening it. The latch had become faulty and wouldn’t retract properly and you had to lever the tongue back by inserting a knife-blade. Tait kept a small kitchen-knife by the door for that purpose.

He got the door open and found Narelle standing there.

She looked at him with an odd expression and he wondered what was the matter.

“What’s wrong?” she asked in a peculiar-sounding voice.

“I don’t know,” Tait answered, baffled. “Is something wrong?”

“What’s that for?” she asked, pointing to the knife he still had poised in his hand.

“For opening the door,” he said, feeling that it was self-evident and wondering why she needed to ask. “The, um, thingamebob doesn’t work,” he explained patiently.

“What do you call it? The, um, lock.”

A gust of breeze came in the door and Tait felt the cool rush of it on his face and began to be clearer-headed.

“Sorry,” he said. “I was having forty winks. I think I’m getting the flu.”

She was still looking at him oddly, but seemed slightly reassured.

“Feel like a cuppa tea?” he asked, stepping back from the doorway. “I’ll just bung the jug on.”

“Have I come at a bad time?” she asked. “I didn’t want to disturb you.”

“No, no,” he cried, as breezily as he could as he filled the jug with water at the sink and switched it on, “I’m glad to see a friendly face at my door. Honestly.”

“Shall I shut the door?” she asked.

“Yes, do,” he replied, going into his work room and flicking on the desk-lamp. “And have a seat in here. This is where I always feel most comfortable.”

She followed him in and sat down in the arm-chair. She had a cardboard folder in her hand. She was looking up at the Blue Board and around at the things in the room.

“So, what’s new?” he asked brightly.
“I just brought those poems to show you, like I promised, that’s all.”
“Gosh, thank you. I’ve been looking forward to seeing them.”
“They aren’t very good,” she said.
“I’ll be the judge of that, young lady,” he replied in an avuncular tone.
He thought he saw a pained look go across her face.
He went out to the kitchen to make the tea. He slipped into the shower cubicle where the wash-basin was and took a look at himself in the mirror. His hair was disheveled and sticking out in tufts and his face looked flushed and his eyes seemed to be bulging. He looked like a lunatic. He splashed some water on his face and ran a comb through his hair and went back and made two mugs of tea and took them into the other room.
Narelle was examining the Blue Board.
“This is such a nice room,” she said. “And this board is so interesting. All these little notes and quotes and things. And this lovely little brooch.”
She was reaching up, touching the little Cavalier’s hat brooch lightly with her finger.
“I hope you don’t mind me looking at these things,” she said. “I remember what you said in Cathy’s car about people who need creative privacy.”
“I don’t mind at all. You haven’t been here before, have you?”
“No, not once,” she said. “I’ve often thought of calling in, over the years, but I was afraid I’d be interrupting your work.”
“How many years have we known each other now? About seven?”
“Yes.”
“This visit’s overdue then.”
“I know,” she said.
Tait was able to look at her from behind for a minute while she was intent on the Blue Board. She wore jeans and a white blouse and black shoes and her long tawney hair was loosely fastened by a ribbon at the back of her neck. For the first time Tait completely registered how shapely she was. She was a grown woman. She suddenly seemed more physically real to him than she ever had before, and a flutter of longing went through his whole body.
They began to chat about various things, especially about Eucalytus Temple and what they’d thought of it.
“May I look at your record collection?” she asked after a while.
Tait watched her again from behind as she squatted beside the record-player. He still felt woozy and unwell, but was deeply stirred by her presence.

“Put a record on, if you like,” he said.

“What’s your favourite?” she asked.

“Pick one you like the look of.”

So she put on a record of South American pan-pipes, then sat back in the armchair and closed her eyes.

They stayed quiet while the music flowed and swirled around them.

“What does it make you think of,” she asked, without opening her eyes.

“Oh, I don’t know. Condors in the sky, circling the peaks of the Andes, maybe. How about you?”

“The same.”

“Condors in the sky?”

“Yes, or eagles.”

“You know,” Tait said, “I’ve often thought of you as a falcon.”

“Have you really? Why?” she asked, still without opening her eyes.

“I don’t know. I just have. When I first knew you I thought of you as a baby Owl, then you turned into a young falcon.”

She did not say anything for a moment and Tait felt that he’d made a mistake. It was always a tricky thing to reveal ideas that you’ve long harboured. They took on a deeply private quality over time, and to blurt them out was like betraying them. He’d only done so because of the unsettlingness of her physical presence.

“I’m glad you think of me in certain ways,” she said, eventually. “I think of you in certain ways too.”

He waited in vain for her to elaborate.

“Well,” he said, to fill the gap, “let me have a look at those poems of yours, young lady.”

Again he saw the pained look go across her face. She opened her eyes and turned to look straight at him.

“Do me a favour? Don’t call me ‘young lady’ like that. It sounds like patting a ten-year-old on the head.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, disconcerted by her sudden direct gaze. “You’re right. It’s patronizing. I won’t say it again. I only said it because I’m feeling a bit odd.”
“Odd about me?”
“No, odd in the sense of ‘unwell.’ As I think I said before, I’m coming down with the flu or something. I’ll be a wreck for the next few days.”
“Yes, you look like death warmed up, actually. You scared me a little bit when you opened the door.”
“Sorry.”
“Its okay. I’m glad I came. But I think I should go now and let you have a night’s rest.”
“I haven’t looked at your poems yet.”
“I’ll leave them with you. I didn’t expect you to drop everything to look at them straight away.”
She stood up and loomed over him a little and he got a powerful awareness of the outline of her breasts against the fabric of the blouse.
He didn’t want her to go yet, but didn’t quite know how to say so. It wasn’t just because her physical presence was so stimulating. There was a tremendous sense of unsaid things waiting to be brought out into the open.
“Will anyone be keeping an eye on you while you’re sick?” she asked.
“I’ll be okay,” he replied. “I’m used to having to drag myself through it.”
There was a silence, and their eyes met, and when she spoke they both knew they’d come to the point of the whole thing.
“What about her,” she asked. “Won’t she be coming to check on you and look after you?”
“Oh she’s got a family to worry about. That’s more than enough.”
“So she’s not in charge of your well-being nowadays?”
“Not any more, assuming she ever was.”
“That’s interesting to know.”
“Is it?”
“Yes, very. It tells me where I stand, doesn’t it?”
“Where we both stand, I guess.”
“So then, I’ll be in charge of your well-being, shall I?”
“I can’t ask you to go to any bother for me.”
“Yes you can, and you well know it. Don’t give me false politeness. Speak honestly.
“Alright.”
“I’ll come each day after work.”
“There’s no need.”
“There is a need. Speak honestly.”
“Yes, there is a need,” he agreed.

They looked deep into each other’s eyes and both gave an enormous sigh, like two people who’ve just done something quite perilous on a cliff-face and found it wasn’t so hard after all. They smiled at each other because of having sighed in unison.

“Well, there we are then,” she said, still smiling.

“Yes.”

“And since you’ve just told me something important, I’ll tell you something important.”

“What?”

“There isn’t any Troy.”

“Sorry?”

“My boyfriend Troy. He doesn’t exist.”

“But I met him, didn’t I, one time at the Green Room.”

“You met my cousin Troy who was staying with us briefly. I let you think he was my boyfriend, and I went on letting you think that he was still on the scene.”

“Why?”

“To try to make you jealous, of course,” she said briskly. “But that doesn’t matter now.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

“And you understand that I’m legally an adult, don’t you? That I’m not jailbait or anything?”

“Yes.”

“That we’re perfectly entitled to be with each other?”

“Yes.”

“Good,” she smiled. “As long you’re very clear on that.”

Then she breathed another big sigh of relief.

“And to think I almost chickened out of coming here this evening!”

Tait wanted to tell her how grateful he was that she hadn’t chickened out, but he couldn’t speak. He stood up from his chair and she put her arms around his waist and brought her face near to his.
“I’ve sensed how unhappy you’ve been lately,” she said.
“You’ve been unhappy too.”
“But we’re both okay now.”
“Couldn’t be better.”
She moved to kiss him on the lips.
“I don’t want to give you my flu germs,” he whispered.
“Okay,” she whispered back, touching his lips with the tip of her finger. “We’ll wait till you’re all better. After seven years another few days won’t hurt us. Besides, that’ll be a good incentive for me to nurse you.”
They stood together for a minute, their arms around each other’s waists. The pan-pipes were still playing.
“This’ll be our special music,” she murmured. “The flight of the condor.”
“The flight of the falcon.”
“Have you got a thing about falcons?”
“Only since you blossomed into one.”
“Anything to please you.”
Tait levered the door-latch open with the kitchen knife and they walked out to her car. He got a sudden shiver of chill when the breeze hit him.
“Don’t stay out here,” she urged.
“It’s alright. I’ll just see you off.”
She got into her car and started it.
“Can I make a suggestion?” she asked, grinning up at him.
“Yes?”
“When anyone knocks, put the knife down before you swing the door open.”
“I frightened you, didn’t I?”
“Can I be honest?”
“Yes, be honest.”
“For a second I thought you might’ve gone back to being crazy. Not that I’m necessarily saying you ever were crazy. But if you were, it was from loneliness, wasn’t it?”
“Yes, I think so.”
“Well, young man, you won’t be having that problem again.”
“Won’t I?”
“No, you won’t. Now go inside to bed and keep warm, and Nurse Narelle will be back tomorrow with a great big thermometer to stick in you!”

Tait watched her drive away.

The breeze was sending chills through him but he didn’t mind. He went over to the trees at the bank and stood under the rustling leaves and looked out over the water at the lights on the far shore all vivid and twinkling. Here he was, Mister Damaged Goods himself, having just been handed a new gift of love and a new set of chances that he absolutely didn’t deserve. The breeze against his body felt vibrant and life-giving and the feverish chills that were going through him began to seem delicious. He had an intense conviction of the friendliness of the elements, of the benevolence of the stars.

* * * *

Narelle’s poems were a revelation.

He spent the next day reading them in between taking naps and keeping warm and dosing himself with aspirin. He had expected the subjective gushings of an adolescent, albeit a highly intelligent one, but Narelle’s poems were older than her years and there was no gushing in them at all. They were detached and precise and finely observed. The piece that impressed him most was called “Rain City.” It was about someone wandering the city streets on a wet day and giving vivid little pictures of what they see. It was full of things like the umbrellas that “bloom in the rain like big, strange, restless flowers,” or like the shops that are all “overstocked with damp,” or like the disconsolate busker playing his flute under a dripping awning, “trying to charm his empty hat,” or like the melons and bananas on the fruiterer’s barrow, “remembering the sun where they came from,” or like the caped policeman, “directing the wind at the intersection,” or like the pair of bright yellow gumboots that stand out so brightly that from the opposite side of the street “you see them walking along by themselves.”

The poems were arranged in the folder in the order they’d been written over the past three years, beginning with the one about Mollie from Animal Farm. Tait was fascinated to follow the line of development, the strengthening of the vision and the technique. But there’d been talent there right from the start. The Mollie poem looked
artless at first but you saw that it was making a large point about good and evil. And it seemed to Tait that it also connected to the whole issue of the Rightful Task. In a cruel and ugly world, just staying pretty and happy yourself might be your best contribution. The Rightful Task was related to a person’s inherent gifts and talents. Not every Rightful Task was the heroic one of a Leonidas. If you were a vacuous creature like Mollie, just being faithful to your little whims of prettiness might be as true a task as any.

And what was the alternative? To declare that since the Mollies of the world aren’t fit for the Great Schemes of the Commissars they must be shipped off to the gulag? That was in fact the Regime’s basic view.

The other thing that impressed Tait was how little of him showed up in Narelle’s poetry. Poets learn the basics of their craft by imitating someone, the same way an apprentice first learns to be a plumber or a carpenter or a hairdresser. There was an occasional echo of tone, and a few similarities of phrase, but Narelle had sublimated his influence very quickly. The Mollie poem was most like one of his – using clear simple language to suggest a larger line of thought – but even there the imitation wasn’t glib or slavish.

As the afternoon went on, Tait became keyed-up at the thought of her being there soon. The flu hadn’t hit him as hard as usual and although he felt ill he felt buoyant as well, with the “magic theatre” heightening of the senses.

At four-thirty he had a shower and put clean clothes on and splashed his face with aftershave. He was combing his hair and smiling at himself in the mirror when she knocked.

She was holding up a large thermometer when he opened the door.

“See,” she grinned. “I always keep my word.”

He drew her in by the wrist and closed the door and they held each other in silence for a minute or two, rocking gently together, as though to reassure themselves that this new situation was really true.

“Are you okay?” she asked as they reluctantly let go.

“I’m fine. You’re the best tonic ever made.”

“You’re a pretty good one yourself. All day at work I’ve been chuckling with glee, knowing I’d be seeing you.”

“I think I’ll nickname you ‘Chuckles.’”
“Only if you don’t mind me murdering you.”
“What would you like me to call you?”
“How about, um, ‘Sweet Adorable Joy of My Heart.’
“That’s catchy. I like it.”
“And I’ll call you a taxi.”

They giggled, recalling the silly scene they’d had to rehearse together in a revue with the Players. They had to do the hoary old gag over and over; Please call me a taxi. Okay, you’re a taxi. They had rolled around in hysterics together while everyone else waited grimly for them to recover.

“That was your fault,” she said as they stood remembering the scene. “You started cracking-up and I cracked-up too because I loved you.”
“Oh, so I’m the culprit?”
“Yes, for being so cute.”
“Damn, I don’t have an alibi for that.”
“No, you don’t.”
“But if I’m cute, you’re a vision of heavenly delight.”
“Okay then.”
“You don’t intend to argue?”
“Not with you. You’re so wise.”

Besides the thermometer, which showed his temperature was only a little above normal, she’d brought an enormous can of vegetable soup.

After they’d eaten they were sitting in the work-room listening to music.
“I read your poems today,” he said.
“What an ordeal for a sick man to go through.”
“They were wonderful.”
“Oh, of course.”
“No, truly.”
“You’re biased.”
“I swear on my life, you have a real gift. You should send ‘Rain City’ to Fergus Gunn at Compact. I think he’d snap it up.”
“Really?”
“Really.”

She came and stood beside his chair and leaned down and nuzzled his cheek.
“I love you,” she said softly.
“I love you,” he murmured back.
“We can do whatever you want,” she whispered. “I’ll stay with you tonight if you say so. I’m on the Pill.”
“I do want you to stay, but we should wait till I’m better, like we agreed. I don’t want to infect you.”
“What willpower you’ve got.”
“Famous for it.”
“Could we just have a light cuddle now?”
“I daresay the invalid could cope with a light cuddle.”
She settled across his lap in the armchair and they held and caressed each other while the pan-pipe music filled the room with the sound of soaring wings.
She went home to Cathy’s place at nine-thirty.
Each evening she’d arrive just after he’d showered, and they would eat and then listen to music and cuddle gently till it was time for her to go. He gave her his spare door key.
On the fourth day he was feeling almost entirely better and had been at his desk working and forgot the time. He was showering a little later than normal when she let herself in. She stripped off and got into the shower with him.
After the shower they felt unbearably aroused and hurried into bed and made love.

* * * *

The whole thing was an enchantment. At the end of his thirties Tait felt he was having his first normal love affair. What he’d had with Francesca hadn’t been normal, except for the fleeting interlude between their first making love on that night of the big storm and her discovery that she was pregnant to Craig.
But Narelle was entirely his.
They quickly got into a happy routine. On weekdays Tait would finish up his day’s work of writing and head into Turrawong to meet her when she finished work at the Plaza newsagency. They would spend the first hour or so just savouring the pleasure and relief of being together again. Most times they would stroll down to the river bank and sit on a bench there and hold hands and tell each other how their day had
been. When the stress of missing each other had been soothed, they might go to the supermarket and buy some food to take back to the cabin, or they might feel like having something to eat in their cosy booth at the Athena café, or they might go for a drive along the Valley road. Ever since she’d got her car, Narelle had been one of Megan’s volunteer helpers at the Pioneer Museum and had her own key. When they drove out that way in the evenings they could let themselves in and have a nice private place to cuddle or make a cup of tea or just hang about outside and enjoy the spectacle of the Valley sunset and the coming on of the huge quiet night.

Or they went down to the Library, to catch it before it closed. Narelle was a voracious reader and often needed to change half a dozen books at a time. She read all sorts of things: mystery novels and poetry and biographies and a lot of geography books. She was keen on geography and could reel off screeds of information. If you needed to know about the climate of Buenos Aires, or where exactly Lichtenstein was, or the height of Mount Fujiyama, Narelle was your girl. It became a little game between them. She had to give him a kiss for any geography question she couldn’t answer, and he had to give her a kiss for every one she got right. When he lost he would feign reluctance to pay up and she would leer and rub her hands like Shylock anticipating the pound of flesh. But for all her interest in geography, she had no particular desire to travel, she said. She just liked knowing what was over the horizon. Her favourite novel in the world was *Le Miserables*. She’d dipped into it first when she was twelve, and she re-read it every couple of years.

One evening they went to the Library and found a row of posters had been put up on the wall. They were photos of authors the Arts Board had sponsored in recent years and Tait’s picture was among them, the second from the left. He would have felt embarrassed except that Narelle gazed at the picture with such a look of pleasure on her face that he almost felt glad it was there.

“I feel like screaming out to everyone,” she whispered. “Hey, see that beautiful man on the poster, that’s my lover!”

“I agree it’d be an excellent thing to do,” he whispered back, “if screaming wasn’t frowned on in here.”

“What d’you think they’d say?”

“They’d say: ‘Beautiful man? You don’t need a lover, you need an eye-specialist.’”
“I know what I need,” she replied huskily, kissing him quickly but deeply with her
tongue, then walking demurely away to scan the shelves.
It took him a minute to recover.
Marigold was at the front desk when they took their books up to be processed.
Although Tait still felt awkward in her presence, she had grown friendlier towards
him because of a poem he’d written. It was a poem about Charlotte Bronte and the
current purge of the Shire Library system. He had given her a copy of it and it seemed
to have struck a deep chord. Now he asked how the purge was going.
“All I’ve heard for sure at this point,” Marigold said, “is that in future we’ll have to
stop putting the emphasis on books.”
“You’ve been emphasizing books here at the Library?”
“We’ve been very remiss. Books discriminate against the illiterate, you see. And
books can be offensive to all those who don’t like books. We have to become an
‘audio-visual resource centre.’ And we also have to make ourselves into a ‘site of
social inclusion.’ I heard something about putting in a billiard-table, and maybe a tap-
dancing area.”
“Tap-dancing?”
“Or it might be rap-dancing. I’ve only heard about it at third-hand. Perhaps it was
meant as a joke.”
“Don’t bet on it.”
“And the half-dozen books we’re allowed to keep will need to be Socially Relevant.”
“Of course.”
“We’ve already made a good start in the Relevance department,” she said. “Did you
notice the new posters on the wall.”
She said it deadpan but he saw there was actually a tiny smile on her lips.
“Ah yes,” he said. “I was especially struck by that bloke second from the left. You
can see the Relevance fairly oozing off him.”
“I know.”
“It’s made a disgusting puddle on the floor.”
“I’ll have it mopped up.”
She went on processing their books and Narelle casually slipped an arm around
Tait’s waist, the way a lover does. He saw Marigold’s eyes flick across and note the
fact. Her face was back to its normal severe expression and he couldn’t tell what she was thinking, but he figured she probably disapproved of cradle-snatchers.

“I’ve never heard Marigold make a joke before,” Narelle said after they’d left the library and were heading up to the Plaza. “I hadn’t thought it was possible.”

“It’s either joke or weep, I guess.”

“You’re right. None of what’s happening is funny. It’s tragic, like you showed in that poem.”

Tait mulled the poem through again in his mind.

TO CHARLOTTE BRONTE, ON HEARING OF MOVES TO BAN
JANE EYRE FROM CERTAIN LIBRARIES

Now I imagine you have put aside
The small concerns of literary fame.
Undoubtedly you knew before you died
How much of it is just a foolish game.

I picture you at Haworth at the last,
The graveyard beckoning outside the door,
And all ambition withered in the blast
Of elemental forces from the moor.

Worn out with burials and wearing black,
Attending to a sick and sad old man,
What novels you’d have traded to give back
An hour of life to Emily or Anne!

Yet we who read you in another age,
Who feel you as a presence in the heart,
Can tell that you were winning on the page
The ever-poignant victory of art –

The glimmering of that across the years
Lit the way for many a one like me,
Helped us to endure the vale of tears
And trust in destinies we couldn’t see.

But now fanaticism slashes through
The tie between the living and the dead:
There is a world of meaning to undo,
A universe of ashes to be spread.

Yet be at rest. It’s our problem now
If the zealots drag your book out to burn,
For we know every outrage we allow
Will be inflicted on us in our turn.

They encountered Kelvin in the Plaza only a couple of days after Tait had got over the flu. They were looking in a shop window when he came up behind them and put a hand on both their shoulders and said like a stage copper — or at least as much like one as his high-pitched voice allowed:

“Hullo, hullo, what’ve we got here then?”

They started chatting and when Narelle happened to glance away Kelvin gave Tait a theatrical raised-eyebrow look of “You two?” Then Narelle saw Cathy across the way and went to speak to her.

“Am I about to get a scolding?” Tait asked when she had gone.

“For what?”

“You know what.”

“No, I don’t know anything, except that it’s always nice to see nice people getting together.”

“You don’t disapprove on Francesca’s behalf?”

“Oh absolutely, I’m known for my narrow judgemental attitudes, aren’t I? Lordy me, you have some funny ideas at times.”

“Sorry.”

“But since you raise the topic of our mutual dear friend Frannie, I will say something. It’s been painfully obvious for years to everyone in the world – except
clever you – that that particular cake can only be cut so many ways. It’s a relief to know that you’ve seen that now. Assuming you have seen it.”

“I have.”

“Well then,” he said, making a sort of ecclesiastical blessing with his hand. “Let gladness be upon you.”

“Gladys? You think me and Gladys?”

“Gladys is a get-down funky woman for sure, but no. Stick to Narelle for now.”

“And how are things with you? How’s Rory?”

“You may well ask,” he said with a woeful look. “The lad has a wandering eye. Of course I never minded that when it was wandering to me. What perverse creatures we are.”

“So, what can you do?”

“Be horribly abject, I suppose. It’s pathetic, but there it is.”

“I know the feeling.”

“Yes, I know you do. But things are on the up for you now.”

Narelle rejoined them and Kelvin said he had to hurry back to the record shop. He had a new employee, a young woman.

“I must hurry back and relieve my girl,” he declared, then rolled his eyes in mock horror. “My god, did I say that! Bye-bye!”

“What did you talk about?” Narelle asked when Kelvin had hurried off.

“You and me, partly.”

“Oh, he knows all about that.”

“He does?”

“He and I have had some heart-to-heart talks at different times.”

“You have?”

“Yes, backstage at the Players, mostly. The last time was a few weeks ago. I asked him what he thought about the age difference between you and me.”

“And?”

“He put on his silliest voice and did a funny little dance-step and said: ‘It ain’t the years in your life, kiddo, it’s the life in your years.'”

At some point in the evening they would head back to the cabin to snuggle in the armchair and listen to music and drink some of the cheap wine that Tait always had
on hand. Or they’d watch a movie on the battered old TV set he’d acquired. Or they
would just sit and read.

He loved the way she read. She scanned the page quickly and you could tell from her
body language whether she liked a book. If she was enjoying it she showed the tip of
her tongue and gave occasional little nods of the head. If it wasn’t to her liking she’d
make little faces of disbelief or protest and sigh with disappointment. And she would
tap her toes together. The more determined the tapping, the more annoyed she was.
But she’d keep on reading. It had to be an awfully bad book for her not to finish it.
Tait would pretend to be reading but would actually just watch her for minutes at a
time, enchanted.

She had a half-unconscious habit of reaching out now and then to caress him.
Sometimes, when she did that, he would clasp her hand and keep hold of it for a
while, would gaze at it, and kiss it, and trace the lines of her palm, and nibble her
fingertips, and marvel at his luck in life. She would go on reading, sweetly making do
with one free hand until he was ready to let her have the other one back.

Tait understood that these were the little ordinary wonders of intimacy that most
people experience first as teenagers and get used to. He’d never had them, back then,
and was still trying to catch up.

* * * *

Several nights a week Narelle stayed over. As a child she’d gone through a phase of
having night-terrors and had developed a whole going-to-bed routine to calm herself
into a restful mood. She always had her cassette player and some favourite tapes with
her. She especially liked old Tony Hancock radio programs. They soothed her
because they were endlessly amusing without being raucous. She always got into bed
a little while before Tait. She would sit up against the pillows in her favourite pajama
top and half-listen to a Hancock tape that she already knew by heart. She would jot in
her diary, and doodle on a pad. And she always had her childhood copy of The Wind
In the Willows and would read a few pages. When she felt quite composed she would
turn the light out and wait for him to come in.

That half-hour or so before he joined her was exquisite. He sat in his work-room in
the deep silence of the night, or with just the sound of the wind outside, and felt his
whole being humming with desire and anticipation. And Narelle found it exquisite too. By the time he slipped in beside her they’d be quivering for each other’s touch.

After making love they’d sleep close together. Narelle said she slept better with him than she ever had in her life. She said how lovely it was to wake momentarily in the deep night with your lover’s arms around you and the lullaby of the wind in the trees to send you back to sleep again.

Tait slept soundly too, except that when he did wake momentarily he found himself listening for anything untoward, and sometimes got a picture in his mind of a ring of silent figures sitting in the grass of the vacant block next door. The figures were faceless and uncanny, like aliens from outer space, and Tait couldn’t tell for sure how savage they might be.

They often made love again in the morning, then had a shower together and rubbed each other with towels, and then sat at the little kitchen table, eating toast and grinning with happy satisfaction.

There was one slight problem when she stayed the night — her car being visible from the road. Her father might see it first thing in the morning if he drove past. As a newsagent he was up and about early.

“Would it upset him to know you spend nights with me?”

“No hugely,” she replied. “I mean, he acknowledges that I’m grown up and running my own life. It’s just that I’d have to put up with him fuss-potting about certain things in his typical way.”

“What certain things in particular?”

“Oh, the age difference between us, I guess,” she said, and rolled her eyes.

“And my dreadful background?”

“That too, I’m afraid,” she said, stroking his cheek. “Are you insulted?”

“Yes, terribly, and I demand satisfaction.”

“You had satisfaction only an hour ago.”

“It’s a lot like Chinese food.”

“Come to think of it, a dim-sim wouldn’t go down too badly right now…”

So they got into the habit of parking her car round behind the cabin on the lake side. It was slightly tricky, inching it past a couple of trees, but they felt more at ease with it out of sight of the road. Not that Tait felt totally at ease. He was always a bit
worried the car might be interfered with. Then again, Ernie’s car was always parked outside and nothing had happened to it.

Their weekend routine was for Tait to do a stint of work till after lunch while Narelle was busy with her own stuff — helping out at the Pioneer Museum, or spending time with her dad. Then she’d come to the cabin and they’d decide how to spend the afternoon and evening. A few times on Saturdays they went to a movie at The Inlet, but they stopped going because the loutishness in the audience infuriated them. Increasingly they drove to the beach near the lighthouse and took long walks along the ocean’s edge, looking for interesting shells and pebbles.

On Sunday afternoons they mostly went round to Jimmy and Lauren’s place, although they would stroll up to the nearby Catholic church at a certain point of the evening so that Narelle could go to Mass. “I know I’m a very bad Catholic,” she said, frowning at the thought of her own misdeeds, “but I get quite anxious if I don’t at least go to weekly Mass.”

The church was called Our Lady Star of the Sea and they liked it for its name, despite it being an ugly modernistic structure.

Tait had never had any religious connection and found the Mass deeply interesting. It had the tang of oddity but at the same time felt comfortingly familiar. He began to think more about the religious dimension and decided that he himself was a “cultural” Christian — one who inherits the gist of it all via two thousand years of Western culture. Even if you can’t or won’t believe in the literal teaching, you might still believe in the art and ritual that embody it. They were powerful signs and symbols of the QO and their mere continuation was a defiance of the Regime. He had a poignant sense that those forms and ceremonies were a kind of final banister to keep people from pitching into an abyss — not the Hell of the literal teaching but the abyss Nietzsche had spoken of, and Kafka had described. A passionate atheism might keep you going a little while longer, but only because it had the fleeting energy of the rebound from the faith – like a rubber ball thrown against a brick wall – and after that there was nothing but the abyss. Tait never went in the door of Our Lady Star of the Sea without thinking of Philip Larkin’s poem “Church Going” and the question it poses: What remains when disbelief has gone?
It was lovely, walking back after Mass, holding hands. They felt close and calm and freshly bonded with each other, and they felt integrated once more into the overall scheme of things.

Narelle got on beautifully with Jimmy and Lauren, and with their kids Toby and Josie. Narelle and Lauren would bustle round in the kitchen together, cooking up big pots of spaghetti bolognese, talking like two women of the same age who’d been pals for years.

“I think you’ve really hit the jackpot there,” Lauren told Tait. “I’ve never known such commonsense in an eighteen year old.”

One Friday evening they drove to Castleton. The second volume of Lance Lassiter’s autobiography had just come out and he was to give a reading from it at Peppercorn’s Bookshop. The charisma was in full flow that night. Tait sat absorbed in the way Lance used his voice like an instrument, almost like a whole orchestra. He could bellow like thunder, or whisper like an eddy of breeze trembling a spider’s web. But however quiet his voice you could hear him perfectly in the back row. Narelle was spellbound by the richness of it.

Afterwards they adjourned to Clarion’s place. Lance, as usual after a performance, seemed completely spent. He slumped in his usual armchair with his head back and his eyes closed, his dog Chieftain beside him, while the others chatted around the teak table. Tait noticed after a while that Lance was recovering. He was looking Narelle up and down and the more he looked at her the more alert he became.

The conversation got around to Tim Niblett and Eucalyptus Temple.

“Poor Tim fumbled the ball rather badly there, and I’m sure he’s very aware of that,” someone remarked.

“I was supposed to review the thing for the paper,” Clive said, shaking his head sadly, “but I cried off. I mean, what could I have said? One doesn’t want to be cruel, but on the other hand there’s the issue of one’s own integrity as a critic. So I just left it alone.”

There was some talk then about a restructuring of the departments at the university and that Tim Niblett might be offered early retirement.

“He’ll take it, I imagine,” said someone. “Given the contradictions of his position now.”

“Oh yes, he’d be wise to go out with a modicum of grace,” said someone else.
Tait could see from Narelle’s expression that she was puzzled by all this.

“What was wrong with *Eucalyptus Temple*?” she asked, looking around the table.

There were various little smirks and chortles.

“That it was a *pastiche*?” she asked. “Is that it?”

There were more grins and snickers.

“No, really,” she said, beginning to go slightly red in the face.

Tait was about to say something to back Narelle up, when Lance spoke in a tone of profound hurt, but in a poetic sing-song:

“I have never flinched from a clean blow,” he said, “I have never recoiled from a clean wound. Let my enemy fire frankly from ten paces in front and I’ll make no moan. It’s the *manipulation* that hurts. I trusted too much, was too little on my guard. Such is one’s way in the world. Thus the poison seeps in, the dagger thrusts home…”

He rolled his head back and sighed.

“What does that mean?” Tait asked a trifle curtly.

“I make no recrimination,” Lance sighed, making a sort of saintly gesture of renouncing grievance. “Let the matter pass out of remembrance.”

“Are you referring to what Tim did with *Eucalyptus Temple*?” Tait asked, again somewhat curtly. “Are you claiming he *manipulated* you, or the image of you, or something?”

“I make no complaint,” Lance declared, sighing and making the saintly gesture again.

Narelle’s puzzlement had turned into the same kind of irritation that Tait was feeling.

*I enjoyed* that show,” she said firmly. “And so did most of the audience.”

“I enjoyed it too,” Tait said. “It had at least one huge thing going for it; *its heart was in the right place*. Not a common quality these days.”

“Yes,” Narelle added firmly, ‘that’s exactly right!”

There was a brief silence, in which polite allowance was clearly being made for the two simpletons, and then the conversation veered on to another topic.

They left shortly after that, explaining they had a longish drive ahead of them.

“So what’s their problem?” Narelle asked as they drove along.

“Tim Niblett has offended the commissars, obviously, and is being turned into a non-person.”
“Just because of that show?”

“That was clearly a heinous crime, but I presume there’s a larger context. The dark currents of university politics and ideology. Who knows? It’s hard to follow unless you’re in the circle of it.”

“And Lance was claiming that Tim Niblett manipulated him?”

“Yes, poor innocent babe-in-the-woods that he is.”

“How ungrateful!”

“Yes, he was happy enough to bask in the glory of it on the night. But of course that was before word came down from the Commissariat that the show was disapproved of. But I’m pleased to hear you call him an ungrateful wretch. I’ll worry less.”

“About what?”

“About you falling for his fatal charms. He’d race you off the first chance he got, you know.”

“Really?” she said, grinning.

“Yes, he was mentally undressing you tonight.”

“I felt my clothes coming off, but I thought it was you.”

“Seriously, Lance will pounce on anything in a skirt.”

“He won’t be pouncing on me. I’m taken.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Well, there’s this mystery-man who lives in a cabin by a lake…”

“Sounds like a hip guy.”

“He’s plenty hip.”

“I’ve heard his picture is up on a wall somewhere as an icon of What’s Happening and Where It’s At.”

“Yes, people gaze up in wonderment as they pass.”

“That’s why they keep stepping in the puddle.”

“I know.”

“That stuff is hard to get off your shoes.”

“And yet to know him is to love him.”

“That always reminds me of another expression: ‘Who know them best despise them most.’”

“Who said that?”

“Robert Burns, for one. He said it about the Hanovarian usurpers.”
“I should learn more about all that Jacobite stuff you believe in.”
“You’re better off staying sane and normal.”
“No, I want to be like you.”
“How sweet you are.”
“I want to understand all this political correctness, like we saw tonight.”
“You should talk to Mike Kieslowski.”
“Maybe I should get a degree. I have the option of going to Castleton University if I want. But of course we’d be more apart, and I can’t bear the idea of that.”
“Me either.”
“But I will need to make up my mind about uni at some stage.”
“Yes.”
They drove in silence for a while, then Narelle spoke.
“You know all that mental undressing that was going on earlier?”
“Yes.”
“I’m still feeling quite turned on.”
“Are you?”
“Yes. Do you think you could do something about that when we get home?”
“I suppose I could have a bash at it, if you insist.”
“Yes, do. A good hard bash at it.”
They sped gleefully towards the cabin.
It was midnight when they got there and Tait knew something was wrong as soon as he saw the door of the shed ajar. The motorbike was gone. He got his torch and vainly searched the immediate surrounds. He thought he had secured the bike pretty well with a length of chain looped through the front wheel and padlocked. They couldn’t have wheeled the machine away. They must’ve half-carried it. Or maybe they’d had bolt-cutters with them. But then the severed chain would probably still be there. He wished his mind felt clearer.
Narelle wanted to stay but he insisted that she go. He knew he’d be horribly on edge till morning and probably wouldn’t sleep a wink. He’d be hearing every sigh of wind and falling twig outside and wondering if the intruders had returned. He could hold the fort better if he had only himself to worry about.
He fell asleep sometime around three o’clock and woke at seven when Narelle let herself in.
They searched the immediate area again in daylight, but to no avail. Then they found it by accident when they went to stand at the lake edge. The bike had been pushed over the bank and had snagged against a shrub halfway down, otherwise it would’ve fallen to the rocks below.

It was hard to retrieve. Tait had to borrow a rope from Ernie and crawl down the bank and tie it to the bike and then drag the dead weight of the machine back up. Narelle helped and so did Ernie, but Ernie looked unwell and Tait was afraid he’d strain himself.

The plastic covering of the brake-light had been broken, and the front mudguard was bent out of shape, but otherwise the bike seemed okay.

It was Friday morning and Narelle had to get to work. At nine o’clock Tait went to the phone box outside Errol’s and called the motorbike repair place and arranged to get the brake-light fixed that day.

At about ten-thirty he was riding towards Turrawong. He had taken the longer route in order to avoid the Doberman at the hamburger joint. He didn’t feel up to coping with that just now. He had taped some red cellophane over the brake-light. It was a just to get him to the repair place, to ensure that the light would still give a reddish glow when it came on.

He was stopped by a copper who drove up behind him. He was warned about riding with a faulty light, and rebuked for trying to hide the broken fixture with cellophane.

Chapter Seventeen

Mike Kieslowski’s draft review of *Ground Leave* came in the mail, and its title was rather beautiful: “The Sacrament of Bedlam.”

After warm congratulations to Tait on becoming a pin-up boy for political correctness at the Library, Mike discussed his angle on the review.
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After warm congratulations to Tait on becoming a pin-up boy for political correctness at the Library, Mike discussed his angle on the review.
“As usual I’ve run on too much and been a mite relentless and the piece will need to be trimmed, so let me know if you’d like me to cut the politics back and focus more on the artistry.

“Of course,” he continued, “it’s the eternal double-standard. Our foes are ideologues to their fingertips and hold that that everything is political and that their writings are allowed to be blazing screeds of agitprop. But if we get political we’re paranoids and ranters. And yet leaning over backwards to be reasonable is even worse. We then come across as lacking the courage of our convictions, and we forfeit even the ounce of respect we might’ve got for our toughness. No, the only way to go about is to take the hostile fire without flinching, and hurl as much back as we can muster.

“I don’t fear defeat as such. Defeat can be a badge of honour, the proof that you stood and fought it out. Our defeat, if it’s of the right kind, can be the inspiration of those who come after us. You know what Pearse said after the Easter Rising, just before they shot him. ‘If we have not won our country’s freedom by this deed, then our children will win it with a better deed.’ The only thing I’m really afraid of is one day having to look back and realize that we didn’t gallop hard enough at the bastards. That we let it go by default.”

The “political” part began about half-way through.

“For all the quiet poignancy of these tales of institutional life, the existential message is as urgent as the one we find in the stories of Kafka or Conrad. Tait’s ‘Lakeside Mental Hospital’ is in fact the modern West in all its travail, and the key issue is the relation between the rulers and the ruled, for it is that relation which forms, or rather deforms, all else.

“The institutional elites depicted here are the elites of modernity. They are the usurpers who have seized the key to all modern control — the power to define knowledge, and thereby to determine what ‘reality’ is.

“The message of these tales is that the mental hospital is life-affirming insofar as it is a real community of human beings, people who must rub along together over time, and for no other reason than that they are together, and are social creatures, and need what Tait is prone to call ‘the shelter of each other.’ Or in other words, insofar as they partake of the sacrament of shared lives, in this case the sacrament of Bedlam. By contrast, the place is life-denying insofar as it is forced to be a so-called “therapeutic
community,” a fake thing made to serve agendas originally cooked up by crazed intellectuals like Descartes and others who so helpfully shone our path to the abyss.

“The elites in this case – doctors, nurses, therapists, anyone on the staff side – rule by dint of a medicalized model of existence, just as the Western elites in general rule by dint of a progressivized model. And the master-model in both cases is science, or, to be more exact, the ideology of scientism.

“The essential claim is that only a special kind of expert can know reality. In the scientistic model there is no sacred circle, no still centre to which all things return, no divine essence to which any poor fool might connect by inherent instinct or intuition. There is only ever the onward march of a spurious expertise. This means that the only ones qualified to rule are those in the vanguard of analytical awareness, of restless cognition, those mavens who march in front reading the ever-shifting signs. Which of course means, in practice, inventing the signs and interpretations to suit their own ends.

“But that isn’t enough to guarantee domination. They must be able to enforce their supposed superiority of knowledge, to crush dissenters or “re-educate” the unenthusiastic. The method is to make an idea like Progress a savagely moral concept as well as a mere descriptive one. Like the slogan of Orwells’s revolutionary farm animals, Four legs good, two legs bad, the progressivist line is a crude bludgeon: Progress good, lack of progress evil. The way is then open to demonize and destroy all who fail to lick the progressivist boot with sufficient abjectness.

“In all of this the modern elites are aided by one terrible flaw in the hearts and minds of ordinary people — our apparent inability to grasp a basic law of the universe: What goes around comes around. We seem unable to keep in mind that we will duly suffer whatever we are willing to see inflicted. And the modern elites play on this fatal flaw. They rule by atomizing us out of all solidarity with each other, by exalting the principle of Divisibility over the principle of Wholeness.

“The creed of Divisibility is that parts of the whole are always expendable in the name of some crazed utopian scheme. It is the mindset of Diderot’s classic statement in the eighteenth-century: “We must strangle the last king with the entrails of the last priest.” Many have been glad to see kings and priests eliminated, but they might’ve taken pause if they’d had the wit to see that Diderot was also implicitly declaring: We will kill the king and the priest in you! And needless to say the Diderots of the world
claim the right to define what the ‘kingly’ or ‘priestly’ – which is to say the ‘reactionary’ – parts of you are. That claim is the basis of all modern revolutionary terror, from the Puritans to Pol Pot.

“Tait’s inmates of a madhouse are the analogues of ordinary people in modernity. Their crucial relationships are no longer with each other – and certainly not with the integrity of the inner self – but with the ruling power and its trained operatives. Indeed the ruling power forcibly asserts the right to judge the legitimacy or otherwise of all personal relationships and of the individual’s own inner states. The horizontal connection has been abolished and the vertical one turned into a puppeteer’s wire of despotic control. And this is viciously ironic, given modernity’s endless boast that it liberates people from rigid hierarchical structures. That was surely the cruel swindle Chesterton had in mind when he wrote that the exactions of the new lords of modernity are ‘worse than the weight of the ancient wrongs.’

“The Regime has a vested interest in atomizing people, for atomization serves two key functions for the ruling caste. First it makes the average person helpless and second it keeps him or her dysfunctional.

“The elites want people helpless because it averts any danger of revolt. And they want them dysfunctional because servicing that impairment provides the routine control mechanism, not to mention the salaries and careers of the ‘helping professions’ which are the core cadres of the Regime.

“People must be put to an endless rat-race of social-workers, a non-stop gauntlet of guides, counselors, trainers, teachers, inspectors, controllers, investigators and re-educators. A small but choice illustration is the way the commissars graciously inform us every December that, yes, it is still permissible to have an office Christmas party — as long as all participants undergo an education program on issues of ‘harrassment’ and ‘responsible drinking’ and a ‘smoke-free environment’ and all the rest of it. The ninety-nine page book of guidelines to be acquired from the Enforcement Directorate of the Bureau of Festive Regulation.

“Even a Christmas party is now just another site of dysfunction to be serviced and thereby policed. Except that it’s probably illegal to call it a ‘Christmas’ party any more, lest we offend the multi-culturalized, whose manufactured grievance must also be maintained.
“Tait’s picture of the loony-bin is an allegory of this modern West in which the rhetoric of empowerment is a trick to render people powerless, and the rhetoric of health and sanity is a ploy to keep them sick and mad. And if that seems a harsh judgement on a well-meaning psychiatric profession, it was no less a figure than Jung who first rejected Freud’s medicalized and scientistic model. “Because of it I am accused of mysticism,” he wrote in Modern Man in Search of a Soul:

> the human psyche from time immemorial has been shot through with religious feelings and ideas. Whoever cannot see this aspect of the human psyche is blind, and whoever chooses to explain it away, or to ‘enlighten’ it away, has no sense of reality… It is permissible for science to divide its field of enquiry and set up limited hypotheses, for science must work in that way, but the human psyche may not be parcelled out.

“Tait too takes his place in the only battle that ultimately matters, the contest between the sacrament of Wholeness and the murderous rampage of Divisibility. He lines up in the name of honour with what appears to be the losing side, defying the juggernaut which has already trampled our world half to bits.”

Yes, Tait saw it was a bit relentless, but he agreed with Mike about not having to regret afterwards that you didn’t gallop hard enough at the bastards. That’s why Mike was the Polish cavalry.

He wrote back to say that he liked the review very much and would hate to see any of it cut.

* * * *

It was Francesca’s birthday and there was a barbeque at her place. They were mostly people from the Players and were sitting round on the wide timber deck of the house while Craig prodded at steaks and sausages on a portable hotplate.

This was the first Players gathering that Tait and Narelle had come to as a twosome. Narelle was okay with it but Tait felt uneasy when they first arrived. He wondered
how awkward it might be with Francesca, and also if there’d be hints of general
disapproval of the age difference.

“They’ll think I’m a pervert,” he’d said in the car on the way.
“A kiddie-fiddler, you mean?”
“What a term, kiddie-fiddler!”
“That’s what my dad calls them.”
“Is it what he calls me, by any chance?”
“Not very often.”
“Oh, great.”
“No sweat. I’ll explain all the circumstances to anyone who asks.”
“Will you indeed?”
“I’ll make them see it wasn’t as incriminating as it looked.”
“What wasn’t?”
“The way you first enticed me with that bag of lollies.”
“That isn’t funny!”
“Okay, I’ll stop now.”
“Thanks.”
“But we’ll take it up again when we’re back at the cabin. We’ll play a little game.”
“What game?”
“Well, let’s just say it involves a bag of lollies.”
“Stop the car and let me out!”
“No can do.”
“So I’m helpless in your clutches?”
“’Fraid so,” she said and gave a Dracula-type laugh. “My evil plan has succeeded.
The poor unsuspecting pervert has become the purvee!”

He had not seen Francesca for a while and she was now visibly pregnant. She was barefoot and loose-haired and a bit slatternly, like an earth-mother.

There wasn’t really any awkwardness about him being there with Narelle. Francesca gave them both a welcoming peck on the cheek when they arrived, and then threw him a sardonic look when Narelle was glancing away. A bit later they found themselves in private in the kitchen when they went to make more salad.

“You’re looking well,” she said brightly.
“You too,” he replied, indicating her belly.
“Yes, I’m fighting fit,” she declared, looking down at herself. “But this little number had better make the most of it, because I close down production after this. Four should be enough to support me in my dotage.”

“I can’t imagine you ever in dotage.”

“You say the sweetest things. So, what have you been up to?”

“This and that.”

“Well,” she said, giving him the sardonic look again, “whatever you’ve been doing has been doing you good.”

“As they say, A little of what you fancy…”

Their hands were close as they stood at the kitchen bench and she squeezed his fingers for a moment, turning her head to make sure nobody else was in sight. The one touch was enough to unfreeze a lot of poignant feelings. The flippancy had gone from both of them.

“I’ve missed you,” she said softly.

“Me too.”

“I always want to hear from you. Just to know that you’re okay.”

“I am.”

“Don’t ever let us go out of touch,” she whispered, glancing over her shoulder again.

“I won’t.”

“I was worried that I’d hurt you too much that day when we had the talk.”

“No, it needed to be said.”

“Thanks.”

“How is it for you, out here?” he asked

“Bloody hard, at times,” she replied, “but it can be satisfying, too. I’ve got involved in helping to run Birthing classes, and Breastfeeding groups.”

“Earth-mother stuff.”

“Yes.”

“That’s just what you look like, an earth-mother. You look bountiful, like Demeter, the goddess of the harvest.”

“Ah, I always wanted to laze around on Mount Olympus in golden pajamas with no worries.”

“Actually, Demeter was one of the few Olympians who knew sorrow. That’s why I’ve always liked her.”
“I’ll accept the label then.”

“Good.”

“And I’m told your photo is pinned up at the Library.”

“Not any more. They took it down. There’s an Anti-Whaling message there now.”

“What a shame.”

“The blaze of my comet was brief but dazzling.”

They grinned at each other, happy to have found they could still talk easily, and then went back out to the deck with the fresh bowl of salad.

The others were discussing what the Players might do for the end-of-year show. For various reasons no one wanted the burden of directing a full-length play. But the group’s coffers were running low and they had to make some money. The hall-hire charges had greatly increased and there’d been a huge jump in their insurance bills because of the explosion of litigation in society. An amateur theatre group now needed millions of dollars worth of cover in case someone twisted their ankle on stage or choked on a peanut in the audience.

They were tossing ideas around and someone said how Tait’s one-act comedies always went over well. Why not string three of them together? It sounded like a neat idea, but there was still the question of who would direct. For a moment Tait was on the brink of offering but then pushed the notion away. Directing an entire show of any kind was no joke. The show owned your soul for at least twelve grinding weeks and you had so many worries you couldn’t think straight. For Tait it would mean all that writing time virtually up the spout.

“How about a separate director for each of the plays,” Francesca suggested, “to lighten the load on any one person?”

That made it a bit more feasible.

Tait felt obliged to offer himself, since it was his work they’d be presenting, but he dreaded the disruption to his routine. He was trying to finalise his new collection of poems to send to Canopy Press, and he had ideas for a couple of new stories. He hated having a fragmented mind, having his focus blurred. It always filled him with anxiety. He felt a knot of anxiety in his stomach now.

“I could do one of them, I guess,” he said cautiously.

“And I think Gillian might be willing to do one,” Kelvin said.
Gillian and Ian and their kids had just arrived and were walking across from their car.

“I heard that!” Gillian called out. “What am I being roped into?”

“The white-slave trade,” Kelvin called back.

“Oh alright.”

But when she heard what it was really about she cried off.

“I just can’t commit to a show at the moment,” she said. “Now if it’d been the white-slave thing, that’d be different!”

Then a woman named Mona spoke.

“Hardly an issue to make light of, I’d have thought,” she muttered primly, giving both Kelvin and Gillian a reproachful look.

“What isn’t?” Kelvin asked.

“Trafficking in women.”

“Well that isn’t my favourite kind of trafficking, I have to say,” said Kelvin, putting on a campy wrist-action.

“It isn’t a joking matter,” Mona persisted sourly.

“So you’re the Joke Police are you, dearie?” Kelvin replied in a slightly nettled tone.

“Guard your tongues, everyone!”

Mona gave him another reproachful look but said nothing. She was a new member who had just moved up from the city. Tait had heard her tell someone that she worked as a “co-ordinator.”

“We need two more patsies, er, I mean volunteers to direct,” said Kelvin. “I’d do it, of course, except that I’ll be tied up just then. That’s if I can find someone who’s willing to tie me up. And if they could add a bit of hearty flagellation, so much the better…”

Tait would’ve loved having Kelvin direct one of his comedies, but he knew Kelvin had booked himself and Rory for another holiday around that time. He’d done it as a gesture of hope, the hope that the two of them would still be together then.

“How about me?” Narelle asked. “I’ll direct one, if I’m allowed to.”

They all looked at her. It was an excellent idea. Even at eighteen she had years of experience with the group and was known to be calm under pressure. Being calm in the midst of mayhem was the main requirement.
The Players rule was that a new or unknown director had to have an experienced director as supervisor to keep a helpful eye on them. Tait and Narelle could work on two of the plays in tandem. He’d be her supervisor on one of them and she’d be his offsider on the other. It’d be fun doing all that stuff together. But the knot of anxiety remained.

“That’s two,” said Francesca.

“And I’ll be the third,” said Mona in a very firm tone. “I’ve done all kinds of directing with other groups I’ve been in.”

Someone mentioned the rule about the supervisor.

There was a silence.

“I suppose I could help Mona out with that,” said Gillian slowly, “Seeing as it wouldn’t be much more than a formality.”

“That’s all it’d be,” said Mona very decidedly. “I always have my own ideas about a play.”

Tait’s knot of uneasiness tightened.

There was discussion about casting. The consensus was that they have one cast do all three plays. That way they’d only need to scrape up half-a-dozen or so of their best comedy actors.

Mona said she wasn’t sure if that was acceptable. She might want to cast her own piece separately. They explained to her that finding a top-notch cast was often an uphill struggle.

“Depends how you go about it,” she replied firmly, like someone who knows she is going to have to re-educate her colleagues. “I never had any problems with the other groups I’ve been in.”

A few people exchanged glances.

Then they got around to thinking up a title for the show as a whole.

“A Night With Tait.”

“And the raffle prize will be an actual night with him,” added Kelvin.

“A Taste of Tait.”

“And the prize will be an actual taste of him.”

“Tait’s Tidbits.”

“And the prize will be his actual tidbits in a box.”

“Kiss Me Tait.”
“The Tait and I.”

“Taitlahoma!”

“Wait a minute,” said Kelvin. “What does the great man himself say? I hear the faint rumbling of inspiration about to burst forth.”

“How does *Tickle Your Fancy* sound?” Tait asked.

“Sounds top-notch, old boy,” said Kelvin in the voice of an upper-class ninny. “Just the ticket! Absolutely spiffing! Allow us to pay a spot of homage.”

Kelvin led a little round of genteel clapping, and there were upper-class mutters of “Well played, sir” and “Jolly good,” and “Author, author.”

“Yeah but what about the *Woorrarkers*?” Ian interjected in a laid-on proletarian whine.

“I think *Tickle Your Fancy* is just perfect,” said Francesca.

“I’m not totally convinced,” said Mona. “Let’s leave it on the back-burner for now. I’ll think up a few alternatives and let you all know.”

Tait reflected on how threatened he felt whenever an awkward note was struck among the Players. They were the nearest he had to a family. They were the “little platoon” to which he belonged. Any problem with the Players was a problem at the core of his life.

Nothing was decided yet about Mona directing his play, for there’d have to be a proper committee meeting at the Green Room, but something told him that she was the kind of irritation that doesn’t go away.

Craig and the kids brought out a birthday cake with lighted candles and everyone sang *Happy Birthday* to Francesca and gifts were handed over. Tait and Narelle gave her a big old teapot-stand they had found for two dollars in the op-shop. It was rather beautiful, a mosaic made up of fragments of coloured tile, mostly sapphire blue and ruby red. And it was satisfyingly heavy and solid. Francesca said she loved it.

Later they played cricket down on the flat area near the road. The sun gleamed on the grass and on the trees and there was just enough breeze to make the leaves flutter and the long grass gently wave. A few wisps of white cloud trailed across the sky.

Tait was supposed to be fielding but he wasn’t paying attention. He was thinking of all those who had fought the centuries-long war for the shelter of each other. His mind was full of his current Companion Piece, a poem by Stephen Spender:
See how these names are feted by the waving grass
And by the streamers of white cloud
And whispers of wind in the listening sky.
The names of those who in their lives fought for life,
Who wore at their hearts the fire’s centre.
Born of the sun, they travelled a short while towards the sun
And left the vivid air signed with their honour.

It conjured up sunflowers, among other things. The sunflower was a Jacobite emblem of fidelity and this could be a Jacobite poem. Not that Spender would have intended that in the 1930s when he was writing as a Communist. In a recent letter Mike Kieslowski had sharply denigrated Spender, quoting some witty barbs of Evelyn Waugh’s. But Tait was drawn to the poem for the same reason he’d been drawn to what Orwell said about the Blackbird — though it wasn’t consciously intended to have a Jacobite connotation, the meaning was there in all its richness if you chose to see it. Symbols are wiser than we are and always mean more than anyone intends. And when you come right down to it, Tait knew, eloquence is eloquence and can’t be denied.

Narelle was having a turn at batting and he thought how poised she looked. Francesca was standing on the far side of the flat area with her three kids round her. He could hear her telling them to be ready if the ball came their way. She had the earth-mother look even more strongly than before. Craig was wicket-keeping. He kept up a patter of encouragement to everyone, and was deliberately not trying to catch or stump any of the batters. He seemed more relaxed with himself and the world than Tait had ever known him.

Tait edged back up the slope and found a nice patch of grass. He could hear Kelvin’s voice from the deck of the house. Kelvin was saying something amusing to Gillian and she was laughing. The sound of the laughter seemed to float down the slope like a silvery quality in the air. Tait sat down, making sure there weren’t any funnel-web holes, and fondly watched Narelle. She had a quick eye and good co-ordination and she hit the ball cleanly.

He lay back in the grass and closed his eyes. He was thinking about symbols again and trying to recall the exact words he’d read a few months ago in a book by Northrop
Frye. It was Frye’s comment that had counteracted Mike’s negative attitude. It was Frye who’d made Tait look at the Spender poem with a receptive eye and heart.

*The language of reason is implicitly aggressive. It is only the language of symbol that can express a faith that is pure vision... In short, the language of symbols is the language of love.*

The sunlight was a reddish glow on his closed eyelids and stems of grass caressed his skin whenever there was a sigh of breeze. After a while he felt Narelle come and lie down beside him and was aware of their hands touching as lightly as the stems of grass. Then she entwined her fingers in his and they lay still.

“What are you thinking about?” she asked.

“Nothing.”

“Yes you are. I can feel your mind working.”

“I was thinking how sexy you look with a cricket bat. You should carry one around with you all the time.”

“Okay, I will. But what were you *really* thinking about?”

“The road from Preston,” he said.

“What Preston is that?”

“In Lancashire.”

“In the context of what?”

“The Forty-Five.”

“Ah, I see,” she said with a sigh of understanding.

She was halfway through reading Prebble’s *Culloden* because she wanted to get an insight into all that stuff. She was moved by the heartbreak of it all. “Those poor people,” she’d said sadly after reading the first couple of chapters, and she’d meant *all* the people she was reading about, not just those on the good side.

“Don’t let me break your train of thought,” she said now, easing back in the grass and patting his hand.

Tait had not told Narelle anything about his ancestor Robert Connell. He hadn’t told anyone. Not even Jimmy Sale. Not even Mike Kieslowski. He knew that to talk about it would only make it shrivel. One day he might talk about it to people he loved, but then it would be like the ear of corn in the ancient Greek ceremony of the Eleusinian
Mysteries. He had read that at a particular sacred moment the participants were shown
an ear of corn which had been reaped in silence.

An ear of corn. Another eloquent symbol. Another profound word in the symbolic
dictionary of wholeness.

When Narelle asked what he was thinking about, he’d been visualizing the Prince’s
men stretched along the north road from Preston, and with Robert Connell somewhere
among them. But instead of cold and snow and the rigours of the march he had seen
them lying at ease in sunny grass and flowery meads. They were alive and yet
appeared timeless and motionless, like painted figures. Like symbolic figures. It was
as if they had taken on the quiet sufficiency of their emblems – the oak-leaf, the
sunflower, the honeysuckle, the rose – symbols that had no need for strife because
they had their rightful place in what Richard Weaver called “our metaphysical dream
of the world.”

It was the minions of the Regime who used that “language of reason” as an
aggressive weapon to fanaticize everything, who bludgeoned the world with rhetoric
and battered it with jargon. They were mad with a monstrous rage to become, whereas
the Jacobite spirit – the spirit of the QO – wanted only to be.

But soon the painted figures would have to dissolve back into real life and the
flowery banks revert to the bitter snows of an actual December. The symbols had to
be fought for. They were no longer allowed to exist in their beautiful balance and
cohesion, their lovely power of enchantment. People had to go forth to defend them
— like the Minstrel Boy in the old song, going to the wars with his sword and his
harp.

The real sword must fight for the symbolic Sword, and the real harp lament for the
symbolic Harp. And the symbols in turn have to solace the whole ordeal, and invest it
with beauty and transform it into a sacrament. Only the symbols can truly do this.
They alone can explain the ordeal in that “language of love” which the heart
understands.

There was nothing random or frivolous about any of this. It was truth so plain that
you had to make an effort to see it. Frye had seen it and put it succinctly:

*There are laws of culture just as there are laws of nature… and a society
that willfully ignores either set of laws is going to get into plenty of trouble.*
Tait kept seeing the painted figures at ease in the flowery meads. He wanted to keep that vision as long as he could, wanted to hold back the moment it would have to dissolve and the Prince’s men would have to resume their march on the real road of that December.

They would fail in the end of course, and the troubles of the world would then grow even more beyond control. And yet Tait understood, as he lay there in the waving grass, that it wasn’t their mundane defeat that would matter, but their symbolic victory. For they were travelling a short while towards the sun, and would leave the vivid air signed with their honour.

He turned on his side and put his arm around Narelle and began drifting into a doze.

He was startled out of it by the shrieks of a child. Francesca’s youngest kid had stood on a nest of ants. He and Narelle jumped up and hurried to her and brushed the ants off her bare legs and feet. She was gasping with either pain or fright. Tait carried her quickly up the slope to the house. Craig went for some antiseptic while Francesca hugged the child in her arms."

“There, there, darling. Mummy’s got you, Mummy’s got you…”

“Are you sure it was only ants that bit her?” Craig asked as he came back and examined the reddening marks on the child’s skin. “Nothing else?”

“It was ants,” Tait said. “They were swarming round her feet.”

“She kind of froze on the spot,” added Narelle. “They might’ve been bull-ants.”

Tait could imagine the pain. Even a single bull-ant bite is enough to jolt you. But the dabs of antiseptic and Francesca’s calming hugs appeared to be doing the trick. The child wasn’t gasping with distress any more.

“She’s a tough little cookie,” said Craig, stroking her hair. “Aren’t you, honeybun?”

The child looked up him and sniffled and solemnly nodded agreement.

“What a little trouper,” said Gillian.

“Keep an eye on her for the next hour or two,” Ian said. “Just to be sure there’s no delayed reaction.”

“Aren’t you taking her to the hospital now?” Mona asked in a surprised tone.

“What for?” Craig asked.

“To have her properly assessed. I’d have thought it was the appropriate thing,” said Mona sharply.
“We’ll take her if we need to,” Craig said. “But she seems alright. We’ll just keep an eye on her, like Ian said.”
“That’s a fairly casual attitude, isn’t it?”
“What do you think is wrong?” Francesca asked anxiously, searching Mona’s face as if for a clue to what she might know that the rest of them didn’t.
“The child’s just had a traumatizing experience.”
“We are aware of that.”
“Child trauma should never be taken lightly.”
“Are you a nurse or something?”
“No, but that isn’t the point.”
“Funny,” Francesca said, her voice turning cold, “I’d have thought it was. Ian is a physiotherapist and we trust his advice. Okay?”
“Well, it’s up to you,’ Mona replied stiffly, as if it pained her to say so. She turned and went out to the deck, but as she went she said something else in a lower tone which none of them entirely caught. But Tait was pretty sure he heard the phrase “parental duty of care.”
People were gradually leaving as the afternoon waned and Mona left shortly afterwards too.
“Who invited that woman here?” Francesca asked. “I certainly didn’t. I hardly know her from a bar of soap! And what was it she mumbled.”
Tait mentioned the “parental duty of care” remark.
“Fucking hell!” Francesca exploded. “Was she having a go at the way I look after my kids? If I’d known that I’d have slapped the bitch’s face!”
They calmed her down and a while later they were having a quiet glass of beer on the deck. It was just the six of them, Craig and Francesca, Narelle and Tait and Ian and Gillian.
Craig was saying how he wanted to build a garage and workshop.
“A new project for the Merry Men,” Tait said without thinking. Then they remembered about Bro.
Gillian started talking about Bro and how she’d always been worried by his strange detachment from life, and how it had worried Bro himself.
“He felt as though there was a sheet of glass between himself and other people. It pained him to be told that he was amiable or pleasant. He felt those qualities were just a pale substitute for some essential thing he lacked.”

“The passion of life?” Tait asked.

“Something like that,” Gillian agreed. “Which is why the whole Bambi thing seems so amazing. To have kept up a secret intense love affair for three years. If only he’d found someone unattached, Bro could’ve had real happiness for once. I’m sure he loved her, though. Bambi, I mean. And that she loved him back.”

Bambi was out of hospital now and back home with Jade and the Bundle. Gillian called in to see her every couple of days. The abandoned orchard where they lived was about ten minutes drive.

“She feels wracked with guilt,” Gillian said, “about all that’s happened, and wants to make it up to Jade and their son, but she’s also terrified of sinking back into the dead-end of their old life together. I keep suggesting she get involved with the Pioneer Museum when she’s feeling up to it. Or the Players, maybe.”

“And there’s the Mothercraft group,” Francesca added.

“She always sends her regards to you,” Gillian said to Tait, “whenever your name pops up. She says what a loyal customer you were when she had the shop across the street.”

“I wasn’t, actually,” Tait replied. “Although I suppose I did keep the lemonade sales ticking over.”

“You and Narelle should pop in for a visit. It’d make her day to see fresh faces.”

“How is Jade?”

“She tells me he can’t do enough for her. Waits on her hand and foot. But he disappears up the paddock when I arrive. He’s still deeply angry about Bro, of course, which is natural.”

It was beginning to be evening and the sun slanted reddish through the trees beyond the deck.

Tait and Narelle took their leave.

“Shall we go and visit Bambi sometime?” Narelle asked as they pulled away in her car. “I’d like to meet her. I could help her get involved with the Pioneer Museum.”

Tait agreed they might pay a visit sometime.
“Or you could always pop in by yourself,” he said. “The thing is, I’m not sure how comfortable I’d feel.”

“Poor baby,” she said, patting him on the knee protectively. “We’ll go together and I’ll look after you.”

“You’ll protect me from the big scary world?”

“I think it might be my calling in life.”

“You’ve given up the lion-taming idea then?”

“The urge went away.”

“And the plan to go over Niagara Falls in a barrel?”

“The glamour faded.”

They were driving over Honeysuckle Hill and Tait glanced towards Astrid’s Meadow as he always did.

“Can I ask you something?” Narelle said.

“Of course.”

“What do you look at, over there? You look across every time, without fail.”

“Do I?”

“Yes.”

“Is it that little tree you look at?”

“Yes.”

“Is it?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re fobbing me off.”

“No.”

“It’s one of your special secret things, isn’t it? One of those things you think about a lot but never mention.”

“Do I have secret things?”

“Yes, lots of them.”

“Does it bother you?”

“Sometimes it does. Sometimes I think I won’t rest until I get to the bottom of you.”

“If I’ll pardon the expression.”

“What?”

“A Kelvin-ism.”

“Of course.”
“What about the other times, the times it doesn’t bother you?
“That’s most of the time. After all, I have my secret things too.”
“I see. Well, maybe I should try getting to your bottom.”
“Maybe you should.”
“Maybe I will.”
“As soon as we get back to the cabin.”
“Step on the gas, Sister,” Tait said in the hard-bitten private-eye voice.
“You got it, Big Boy,” she replied like a tough floozie.
The car surged forward.

* * * *

It was about midday and Tait was gazing out the window, feeling at a loose end.
The previous evening he'd posted his new collection of verse to Canopy Press. He
had pondered for weeks over the title and had finally settled on *The Freedom of the
Air*. It was prompted by a prose-poem of Solzhenitsyn’s about a newly released
prisoner who walks in a city park and smells the apple-blossom after a rainy night.
Tait had taken the final couple of lines as his book’s epigraph: *With fresh air to
breathe under an apple-tree after rain, we may yet survive a little longer.*
All the poems in the collection had been written since his release and the title was
meant to reflect that. He also wanted it to have a tone that was both optimistic and
cautious. On one hand there was the pleasure of being out of captivity, of being out in
the unbounded air itself, of savouring the sweetness of the common world, of the
possibilities of life. But there were also the darker connotations, a touch of the
ominous, as though the air might prove to be the only thing that is free, or as though
the very idea of freedom might prove as empty as the air. There was the edge of
unease in that expressed hope of surviving only a little longer.
It might be three months before Canopy Press gave him their verdict, and in the
meantime there was nothing he could do to influence it. He had a new short story to
start working on, but he needed to wait a day or two, to recover his freshness of mind.
He thought of strolling down to say hello to the Ellicotts. He hadn’t seen them for a
long while. They no longer took their walks past the cabin, and he hardly ever went
down in their direction anymore. When he was on the motorbike he preferred to take the longer route to Turrawong and spare himself the menace of the Doberman and the yobbas. And he’d got out of the habit of going for walks along the lake shore. His routines were different now.

The day was sunny but with a strong wind. The trees swayed above his head as he locked the cabin door behind him and set out. He thought how wild and beautiful the lake looked, with long patterns of white foam scudding across it and breaking and surging along the shore.

As he neared Mr Dragovic’s place, and the Ellicotts’ next to it, he saw the grass of the reserve was long and unkempt and had tyre tracks all through it. Mr Dragovic had always been meticulous about mowing that patch of reserve. He would mow it and the Ellicotts would come out with their clippers and carefully trim the verges. In earlier days Tait had often seen the three of them contentedly at work.

He went past Mr Dragovic’s and stopped at the Ellicotts’ fence. There was no sign of life and the backyard had a vaguely disused look. He thought to go and knock at the back door but turned away and walked over the edge of the bank for another look at the panorama of the lake.

The foam surged around the rocks. He stood right at the edge of the bank and braced himself against the wind. It was exciting to be so near the edge in the buffeting air. It was no more than a few metres to the rocks but it would still be a dangerous fall and he was relishing the sense of risk. He realized he was being foolhardy and began to step back. At that moment he saw someone emerge below him. He was seeing the top of a head and bare shoulders. The person stepped on to a dry section of rock and walked a few steps out amidst the swelling foam. It was a youth about seventeen. He wore only a pair of jeans and had a bottle of beer in his hand. He turned back to face the bank and saw Tait standing above. They looked at each other for a moment and Tait lifted his hand in a gesture of greeting.

“What are you lookin at, ya fucken cunt?” the youth shouted in the wind.

Tait stood still, a bit stunned by the abruptness of it.

“Piss off, ya fucken wall-eyed cunt!” the youth shouted.

Tait remained where he was. He was still trying to bring his mind back from the beauty and grandeur of the scene.
Three more youths appeared below him and looked up. They’d been in a cave-like recess of the bank. One of them had caroty red hair. Another wore a piece of chain around his neck. The other had a tattoo down his arm.

They began shouting foul abuse. The youth out on the rock lifted the beer bottle to his mouth and drained the last of it, then took the bottle by its neck and hurled it up at Tait. Assisted by the wind, it flew past his head.

“Ya missed the fucken bastard!” yelled the caroty-headed youth. He picked up a lump of driftwood and hurled it. It caught the top of the bank and fell back and they had to jump out of its way.

“I’ll fucken kill you!” snarled the youth who had thrown it, his face distorted with hatred.

Tait felt afraid. He turned and walked away. He didn’t know if they were coming up after him or not. If so, he wasn’t sure how quickly they’d be upon him. He was looking around on the ground for something to defend himself with. If only there was a heavy stick. He felt watery in the stomach and trembly in all his limbs. He was thinking that by pausing to look for a stick he was making it easier for them to catch him. He should perhaps be running away as fast as possible, assuming he was even capable of running in his trembly condition. But no, he wasn’t going to run. He would walk away, if they let him, but not run.

He was near Mr Dragovic’s fence when he saw them come up over the bank a hundred metres away. They headed towards him. He shinnied over the fence and glanced around for a shovel or something, anything that would make him look like a serious proposition to tangle with. There was nothing.

The back door of the house opened and Mr Dragovic signalled him to come in just as the youths got to the fence.

He stepped out the door to let Tait go in past him. He had a shiny metal baseball bat in his hand.


They stood hurling threats.

“Gonna fucken kill ya, ya fucken cunt!” said Carrot Head.

“Gonna bust ya fucken face in, ya fuckin bastard!” said Bottle Thrower.

“Gonna smash ya fucken head open!” said Neck Chain.
“You’re fuckin *history*!” said Tattoo.

Carrot Head started kicking the wire mesh in a frenzy.

Mr Dragovic looked for a moment as though he was about to go out to defend his property, but then he stepped back inside and pulled the door shut and latched it.

They watched through the window to see what the yobs would do.

“They-come-over-fence-I-phone-coppers-maybe.” Mr Dragovic muttered.

It sounded a bit feeble. Not like the swashbuckling Dragovic of old.

“Have you phoned them before about this kind of thing?”

“Yeah-few-time.”

“Did they come quickly?”

“Nah.”

“Did they come at all?”

“Nah.”

Carrot Head stopped kicking the fence and the four of them moved off, shouting threats as they went.

Tait’s trembly feeling grew worse as the immediate danger receded and the reaction set in, then it began to ease.

He stayed at Mr Dragovic’s for half an hour and heard how things had been lately.

The cave-like space under the bank had become a favourite lair of the yobs from the hamburger joint. They used it for boozing and dope-smoking at all hours of the day and night. Sometimes there were a dozen yobs and hoons there, along with their occasional females. The area was now under a kind of enemy occupation. They’d cut a barrier-chain further along so that they could drive their panel-vans right on to the reserve. Others revved up and down on trail-bikes. Tait knew about the trail-bikes. He often heard the noise and sometimes they would come deafeningly up as far as the cabin. There was a whole floating population of intruders, from toxic brats of ten or twelve to doped-up drunken goons in their twenties. Carrot Head and his pals were from the age-group in the middle.

“Doesn’t anyone complain to the Council?” Tait asked merely as a matter of form.

Mr Dragovic made a European gesture of disgust and muttered a couple of expletives in whatever language it was.

Tait understood.
He learned that the Ellicotts were away. They’d gone to stay with their daughter in
the city and were only coming back long enough to put their house on the market. A
few weeks earlier they had started to go from door to door with a petition to have the
area better policed. Hester’s was the only signature they could get and they lost heart
by the time they’d approached four or five others. But word of what they had tried to
do quickly got back to Yob HQ at the hamburger joint and they’d begun to receive
some regular little attentions, like oil in their pot-plants and broken glass on their
driveway and thumps on the walls of the house in the middle of the night.

Mr Dragovic declared that he had no plans to sell up, but again it didn’t quite have
the resounding ring of his old manner. Tait had never thought about Mr Dragovic’s
age, but now he reckoned that the man must be about sixty. At that age, he supposed,
the pressure of stuff like this can begin to wear you down.

He’d never been inside Mr Dragovic’s house before. He was very struck by a framed
photo on the mantelpiece. It was a grainy black-and-white one that showed a group of
young people around a table at an outdoor café. When you peered closer you saw that
they were barely out of their teens and were shabbily dressed and underfed. From the
vehicles on the boulevard behind them you can guess that it’s not long after the
Second World War. The city has a bombed-out look. But the young people are
smiling and waving at the camera and entwining their arms.

“Is this you?” Tait asked, pointing to one of the figures, the comedian with a
hopeless haircut who was pretending to fall off his chair while a pretty young woman
alongside pretended to catch him.

Mr Dragovic nodded yes.

Tait wanted to ask what city, and what year, and what the occasion had been, but he
refrained. He imagined, though, that none of those people ever forgot that gathering.
It had the look of a Last Time about it — a Last Time of them all being young and
alive and happy together.

He left by the front door and walked briskly up the road to the cabin, looking over
his shoulder every now and then. He hoped that Carrot Head and the others were still
right back at the hamburger joint. He thought of the spitting hotplates there, and the
foul greasy stink of the air, and the atmosphere of mindless menace, and the big black
mad-eyed dog.

“Hell’s Kitchen” would be a good name for that place, he thought.
He told Ernie about his encounter with the yobs, and that maybe they knew where he lived and might come round sometime to have a go at him. They discussed what the two of them could do in a situation like that. Or if Ernie was ever under threat. Ernie had become more conscious of these worries after Tait’s bike was pushed over the bank. He’d had a floodlight put up so that the area between his dwelling and the cabin was better lit at night, and had got a locksmith in to make the door of Tait’s little shed secure again.

Tait rode to Turrawong the next evening to meet Narelle at the Plaza at knock-off time. He went the long way of course, to avoid Hell’s Kitchen.

He planned to talk to Narelle about the matter of her car being unprotected when she stayed with him overnight. They had to think of a solution. It was one thing for him and his belongings to be at risk, but the thought of her having to suffer it was intolerable.

But they didn’t get around to that.

She’d had a note from Fergus Gunn at *Compact* magazine. He’d accepted her poem “Rain City” for publication.

“And look what he says there!” she beamed, pointing to three words in big scrawly capitals.

SHOW ME MORE!

They went to the Athena café to celebrate with melted cheese on toast and milkshakes. Tait was awfully pleased for her, but his mind was partly somewhere else. He’d had the hint of an idea for a new poem. It was about Narelle and her sweet habit of sitting up in bed reading *The Wind In the Willows*, but then there was a darker aspect, a connection to the sense of lurking menace that he now felt and could not put aside.

* * * *

Canopy Press had forwarded a letter from a film producer named Douglas May. It appeared he had a company called Mayhem Productions and was keen to acquire an option on Tait’s book of short stories.

*Ground Leave* worked like a novel, May wrote, because of the unity of the institutional setting and the ongoing themes and characters. Most importantly, there
was a single narrative voice. He had been profoundly moved by the outstanding artistic quality of the work, its humanity, its comic flair, it’s tragic dimension. He would write the screenplay himself and would wish to adhere totally to the spirit of the book.

Were the film rights available?

Tait called from a public phone in the Plaza the next evening. He said his name and that he was ringing in response to the letter.

“Letter?” May said.

“Your letter about my book *Ground Leave*.”

“Just refresh me.”

Tait told him the gist of the letter.

“Of course,” said May in a tone of complete confidence.

“So I thought I’d just give you a quick call.”

“Have you written a screenplay before?”

“No, why?”

“It helps to have a proven track-record.”

“Didn’t you intend to write the screenplay.”

“Why do you say that?”

“That’s what your letter said.”

“The letter would’ve come from Alicia’s desk.”

“Who is Alicia?”

“Alicia Hemming, my partner. That why we’re Mayhem productions.”

“The letter had your signature.”

“That doesn’t mean anything.”

“So you wouldn’t be writing the screenplay?”

“Give me a break. I can’t do everything.”

“Should I speak to Alicia, perhaps?”

“She’s in Cannes.”

“Ah.”

“Networking.”

“I see.”

“We may be looking at a narrow window of opportunity.”

“With networking?”
“With your novel.”
“Not, strictly a novel.”
“Well, your material, whatever it is. The tax write-off provisions will be coming
under review.”
“I wasn’t aware.”
“I’m flying out tonight.”
“To Cannes?”
“Hobart.”
“Ah.”
“But I’m glad we had this chance to kick it around.”
“Yes, I won’t hold you up, though.”
“Have I got your home address?”
“Not that I know of.”
“What is it?”
Tait slowly said his address.
“I think I can remember that.”
“Um, might it be useful to write it down?”
“I’m in the bath.”
“All the best then,” Tait said and hung up.
He slumped in disappointment. A film option would’ve brought some money in. He
wasn’t sure how much, but perhaps it could have been a couple of thousand dollars.
He was beginning to be haunted again at the back of his mind by the fear of
destitution.
Next day he dropped a line to Canopy Press to let them know he’d be agreeable to
them granting an option, if the matter ever came up again, but he didn’t really expect
it to go any further.
Narelle was still buoyant from having her poem accepted and Tait didn’t want to
spoil her mood, so he didn’t say anything about his run-in with the yobbos. He told
himself the best way to cope with the yobbo threat was to ignore it as much as
possible. To be fearful all the time was to grant them a victory over you.
But that didn’t mean you shouldn’t be prepared. He remembered the baseball bat Mr
Dragovic had that day and which was obviously kept at hand. Out in the little shed he
had often noticed a length of steel pipe on the floor under the laundry tub. It was
encrusted with old spider webs and he had never wanted to touch it. But now he fished it out and cleaned it off. It was a metre long, just the right circumference to be gripped and just the right weight to be swung with momentum. He imagined the yobbos turning up some night, maybe trying to take him by surprise when he went outside. It would only take one good blow with the pipe to see an assailant off. Then again, he thought of Carrot Head kicking that fence in a demented frenzy. Perhaps a yobbo just turns more animalistic when you belt him one and needs to have his head smashed before he’ll stop.

The problem would be to keep his own nerve. Tait knew he was a physical coward and was liable to collapse in a heap at the crucial moment. He had to develop the gumption that would help him through it. There was that memorable phrase of Yeats’s: the delirium of the brave. That was what he had to nurture in himself, that delirium that floods you when you listen to a record like The Storm on the Heather and for a little while at least you know you could face anything. But you had to be able to summon that spirit at a moment’s notice and when you might be least in the mood for it. You had to be able to switch that record on in your head and respond to it in a flash.

Tait decided to carry the pipe all the time in his satchel, so he cut it down to the right length with a hacksaw. It didn’t swing as well in the hand, but it was now better suited to jab with. Up close, a jabbing weapon has the advantage. That was always mentioned in relation to Culloden. It was said that the bayonets got the better of the swords that day because they could work on interior lines in a narrower space than a sword could. Tait knew that wasn’t actually true. Where the Highlanders got through the walls of musket-fire and actually reached the enemy line with their swords, they broke through. It was the swords that beat the bayonets, not vice versa. The bayonets had their great moment after the battle, when they were used to kill wounded Jacobites in cold blood.

Still, the jabbing idea was valid. He would rely on a quick hard forward thrust with the pipe, a jab at about neck-level. A jab like that might ‘send them home to think again,’ the way the invaders are sent packing in “Flower of Scotland,” that triumphant song of Bannockburn. He began to practice the physical motion of that thrust every day. He was fairly fit and of normal height and weight, so he figured there was no reason he couldn’t give a decent account of himself if he had to.
But he remained uneasily aware that it was the heart that mattered in the end, not the sinew.

When Narelle stayed the night he got her to park her car beside Ernie’s, right under the new floodlight. They didn’t care any more about her father seeing it there. Errol had worse things to worry about. The liquor store alongside him had finally been held-up. The assailant had pointed what he said was a flare-pistol. He said he would shoot a flare in the woman’s face if she didn’t open the till. He said he would burn her fucking face off. Now Errol was wondering when his turn might come. He was in a constant fuss of outrage at the iniquity of it all. Narelle was dropping in to see him more often since the hold-up. They were talking more than they had for a long time and they had discussed her relationship with Tait.

“For all his fussing,” said Narelle, “Dad’s a realist in the end. He knows there’s more to worry about in the world than the finer points of who I’m sleeping with.

They were lying snug in bed at the cabin, hearing a lovely soothing patter of rain on the roof.

“Things must be in a bad way,” Tait said, squeezing her, “when someone regards their daughter being in my clutches as a lesser evil.”

“Yes, I know,” she said, pulling him on top of her. “And to think what I have to suffer in your clutches.”

Tait felt a certain amount of his pent-up rage flowing away as Narelle sighed with contentment underneath him.

As almost always, a part of his mind was detached from what was happening and it was as though he was looking down on two other people in a bed. He was thinking of Mike Kieslowski’s beautiful poem “The Wars of Love and Honour” and of the whole message of it. Here was what the Cause was ultimately all about, what it had battled so long to defend — the rightness of a man and a woman being warm and loving in a bed, with the possibility of new life contained within their shelter of each other.
Chapter Eighteen

They were driving along the Valley road in Narelle’s car one Saturday afternoon, on their way to drop in on Bambi. They had made a picnic lunch, with plenty of sandwiches and a big apple pie. They knew that Bambi and Jade and Bundle were surviving at a pretty basic level, if not actually hand-to-mouth. They decided to take the food and drink with them and pretend they’d meant to have a picnic in the Valley but had decided on impulse to call in and say hello.

Tait still felt a bit nervous about the visit.

As they drove along they were talking about Mike’s review of *Ground Leave* which had just appeared in the new issue of *Compact* magazine. A copy of it lay on the back seat. The text had been trimmed a little but most of the political emphasis was still there. They both thought it was excellent. Narelle found Mike’s combative style as bracing as Tait did, although she occasionally wondered about the eventual cost.

“I know he feels he’s in a war and has to keep shooting,” she said. “And I think I understand why he sees it that way. But surely a person needs to have time out of the trenches. Does he ever relax? Does he ever go for a walk in the park to enjoy the flowers?”

“I think he agrees with what Orwell said about politics being like a mad dog — take your eyes off it and it might rip your throat out.”

“Yes, but you might end up seeing nothing in the world except mad dogs.”

Tait knew she had a point.

It was, he thought, very like the impulse that had made him see and cherish that vision of the Prince’s men at ease on the flowery banks. It came from sensing the need to have some relief from the chill wind of war and struggle and pain and effort. That was why, in his mind’s eye, he held them there in that dreamy stillness, like painted figures among painted flowers and foliage, as unstrained as their own emblems of rose or oak-leaf or daffodil. It was only this interlude that would make bearable what was going to happen afterwards.

Tait still hadn’t mentioned to Narelle his run-in with the four yobbos, so he didn’t show her Mike’s latest letter.

It was the letter in which Tait first heard the name of Sam Foster.
“Sorry to hear about the rising tide of menace in your neighbourhood,” Mike wrote. “Things are the same all over, except of course in the protected enclaves of the elites. They are careful to keep their own environment safe and pleasant. Pleased to hear you mean to defend yourself stoutly if it comes to it. But you need to be aware that if you break the skulls of yobbos who are trying to break yours the Regime will treat you as the criminal, not them. The yobs and muggers and vandals and burglars are the new shock troops of the Regime’s war against human society. Their attack won’t be called off until everything we value lies in ruins. And now a bloke named Sam Foster has come up with a clarifying name for what is happening. He calls it Anarcho-Tyranny, the combination of anarchic lawlessness and tyrannical control. Anarcho-Tyranny abandons you to every kind of danger and depredation, to an increasingly Hobbesian existence that can only be ‘nasty, brutish and short.’ At the very same time, though, it tightens the screws of nit-picking surveillance on you, puts draconian controls on your most intimate life and behaviour. The task of the new anarchy is to vandalize all public trust between normal human beings, that of the new tyranny is to scrutinize all personal intimacy between them.

“What we have at work are two extreme pathologies. On one hand there’s utter nihilism, which despises the human order per se and yearns to see maximum harm done to it. On the other there’s the cant of the puritan control-freaks who smell sin all around them because they’re wrapped in their own unnatural stink. As D.H. Lawrence put it: ‘To the Puritan all things are impure.’ And in both pathologies the key element is hatred of the life impulse itself, the hatred that would take the sun out of the sky and forbid the grass to grow. It’s the psychodrama of the abyss, and Anarchy and Tyranny are the two pale horses we now behold. The two are not incompatible opposites, as we had thought, but can be harnessed in tandem. It is a mark of the Regime’s evil flair to have seen that, and of Sam Foster’s acumen to have named it.”

Mike enclosed a newspaper clipping. It reported that a Sentencing Advisory Board had recommended that parents who smack their children be sent to jail, and that this was the same Board which recently recommended that street muggers not be jailed except when their attacks were of an “aggravated” sort.

“There we have it in a nutshell,” Mike noted. “Parenting is the criminal act now, and mugging people on the street is a mere peccadillo, a mild impoliteness. And of course,
if the mugger should hurt his fist while punching some little old lady in the face, he
can sue her for damages.

“Sam Foster is an American, a Southerner, and until two years ago he had a
nationally syndicated newspaper column, but he got the chop because he pressed the
Regime too hard. He told too many ugly truths about it. So now he writes a
fortnightly subscription newsletter from his home in Tennessee. Caroline and I have
started getting it and it’s terrific stuff. It’s commentary more cogent than we see
anywhere else. A lot of influential people read it, although furtively. Foster is seen as
too far beyond the pale. He defies the cosy little system the Commissariat has going
nowadays — in return for strict obedience on core issues, you’re allowed to parade
your independence of mind by quibbling over peripheral points. To take an issue
Foster touched on recently, you are no longer allowed to question the principle of
having women in military combat, but you may quibble over whether sexual-
harrassment rules in the military system ought to be totally draconian or just
unsparingly severe. The bottom line is that you must uphold that (a) women are
perfectly able to cope with having their arms and legs blown off on a battlefield, but
that (b) they can’t be expected to handle an Unwanted Sexual Overture while
enjoying an ice-cream sundae at the base canteen. You see, the Commissariat isn’t
unreasonable — like Orwell’s Big Brother, it just wants you to agree that $2 + 2 = 5$.
Foster’s response, on the other hand, is more along the lines of: ‘Go and fuck
yourself!’ No doubt they are looking for ways to nail him with some neat little frame-
up. Something nice and technical, like tax-avoidance perhaps.”

Tait mentioned the concept of Anarcho-Tyranny to Narelle and they talked about it
and agreed how apt it was. Even describing so ugly a thing, the term had a kind of
beauty. It had that gleam of total cogency, that light of true illumination. It was like
when Tacitus tells you that they make a desolation and call it peace.

They went past Francesca’s place, then past Ian and Gillian’s, and continued along
the road for another few minutes. The landscape grew flatter, and the earth more dry
and yellow, and the bushland became more of a prickly scrub. They were following
directions Gillian had given them and knew to look out for a dirt track on the right.
They found it and turned off and bumped along for a little way. There were long
stretches of eroded ground alongside and the track had fissures along its edge. They
were worried that the ground might crumble away under the car’s wheels and they kept to what looked like the firmer side of the track.

“There’s the old Plymouth,” Tait said, seeing it through gaps in the side of a dilapidated shed.

He’d meant to bring the hubcap to give back to Jade, the one he’d found in the gutter outside the shop after they’d taken the Plymouth away. He’d forgotten it, though, until they were halfway to the Valley and it was too far to go back. In actual fact he wasn’t quite sure now where he’d put it.

They stopped at a rusted wire gate and got out of the car. They could see a dwelling among scrubby bushes and the yellow Mini parked there. The air was oppressively hot and still. They called out hello and the sound of it seemed to die quickly in the heaviness.

“How ya goin?” came a flat voice from somewhere to the side of them.

Jade had come out from behind some scrub. He stood there at a distance and made no move to approach. At first glance he looked much the same as ever in his worn-out denim jeans and jacket and cowboy boots, just a bit older and skinnier. But Tait saw there was a hollow, sunken look to his face now. He was gazing at the car and at Narelle who was closer to him.

“How are you, Jade?” Tait called.

“Not too bad, squire,” Jade replied after a moment and in a monotone.

There was a long pause.

“I see you’ve still got the old chariot,” Tait said, pointing at the shed where the Plymouth was.

“Yeah, I have,” Jade replied again in a monotone.

Narelle broke the next pause by saying that they’d dropped in at Gillian’s suggestion to say hi to Bambi.

“She’s just havin a sleep,” Jade said.

“Oh, okay then,” said Narelle, who seemed put off by the slightly eerie way he had materialized from the scrub to stand there at a distance. “We didn’t want to interrupt her peace and quiet. We’ll see her another time.”

“Yeah, alright,” Jade said.

But as they moved to get back in the car he seemed to change his mind. He stepped forward.
“Um, she might be awake,” he said. “I’ll just see.”

He went down to the dwelling and a minute later reappeared and signalled them to come.

As they went towards the dwelling they saw Jade walking away, his shoulders hunched and his hands in his jacket pockets. He was heading toward some straggly rows of dead-looking fruit trees.

The dwelling was an old rambling structure that had been put together out of odds and ends. The walls were partly ancient weatherboard and partly fibro, and the several windows were of different sizes and shapes. The roof was corrugated iron and there were strips of tin nailed along under the eaves to cover a gap. The whole structure had been made oddly attractive, though, by the quaint way it was painted. Different parts were done in various fresh colours and there were stylized flowers and star-signs.

There was a decrepit little caravan up on blocks near one end of the dwelling and it too was fresh with colour and had flower designs on it.

It was like a lost haunt of hippies.

A set of wind-chimes tinkled very softly in the almost unmoving air. There was a cackle of chooks from nearby and a white goat was tethered under a tree.

The entrance to the dwelling was a sliding glass door, and Bambi was just easing the flyscreen door open as they approached. Tait had half-expected to see her in casts and bandages, or limping on crutches, but at first sight she appeared okay. She looked pleased to see them. She kissed Tait on the cheek.

“What a long time it’s been,” she said.

She smiled and they saw that some teeth were missing on one side and that the skin around that side of her mouth was red and scarred-looking. They saw too that she was a little unsteady on her feet and that she held her left arm stiffly against her side as though it didn’t work very well.

Tait introduced Narelle.

“Jade thought you might’ve been asleep, so we weren’t going to disturb you,” Tait said as they were ushered inside.

“I was lying down, actually,” Bambi said, “but I can do that anytime, can’t I? And Jadey knew I’d kick myself if I missed seeing visitors.”

The inside of the dwelling was a bedroom and loungeroom in one, with a kitchenette at one end. They sat down on a cane settee with brightly coloured cushions.
Bambi’s face had a pasty, puffy look and her hair hung lank and dull, but she seemed glad to chat. She and Tait talked about the old days of the shop.

“He was so reserved when we first knew him back then,” Bambi told Narelle.

“Always lost in his own thoughts. But he was our best customer.”

“No I wasn’t.”

“You were our only customer. Or pretty nearly.”

“Ah well,” Tait murmured, not knowing what else to say.

“We went bust of course,” Bambi explained to Narelle. “We just didn’t have the profile in the neighbourhood, you see. And we’d sunk everything we had into it. It wasn’t one of our best times.” She lowered her eyes, then looked up again with determination. “But times are what you make of them! I believe that. I really do.”

“So do I,” said Narelle.

Bambi started to make a pot of tea for them. She moved slowly but purposefully, like someone who felt very fragile but wasn’t going to be put off by that. A fan stood whirring in the far corner and Bambi went to adjust it in their direction. Tait jumped up to do it for her but she waved him back.

“I need to have little things to do for exercise,” she said. “Even just walking across the room is good for me.”

She apologized for only having a bit of dry fruit cake to go with the tea. Narelle mentioned the picnic food they’d brought and hurried out to get it from the car.

When the tea was made and the picnic food unwrapped, Narelle asked if Jade might like a sandwich or a piece of apple pie.

“Oh he’ll be busy up the back for a while,” Bambi replied matter-of-factly.

Tait assumed she meant Jade wasn’t willing to be sociable.

They drank their tea and ate sandwiches and talked about Tait still being at the cabin, and what was happening with the old shop now, and about Narelle’s job at the Plaza newsagency, and about the pros and cons of life in the Valley.

Narelle said how much she liked the way the dwelling had been painted.

“Oh Jadey did that for me,” Bambi said. “And Bunny helped do the caravan to match. That’s where he camps. They’ve both been so supportive. I wanted the place to look bright and cheery. We take a lot of our mood from the look of things around us, don’t you think?”

“Yes, I do,” said Narelle.
“A dreary place makes a dreary person,” Bambi said.
“How is Bundle doing?” asked Tait.
“As good as gold,” Bambi said fondly. “He was always the best little boy in the world. You remember him at the shop when he was little. He never cried or acted up, did he?”
“No, he didn’t,” Tait agreed.
He described a vivid recollection he had, of Jade teaching Bundle to sing “Ghost Riders In the Sky” one day outside the shop, of the child, hardly more than a baby, watching his father’s face intently and listening carefully to the words and trying to repeat them.
“That’s lovely,” Bambi murmured. “I didn’t know about that.”
“Is Bundle around?” Narelle asked.
“He’s over at a neighbour’s place for the afternoon. There’s a boy his own age there that he’s friends with.”
Tait’s mental picture of the scene in front of the shop had included the Plymouth and that reminded him about the hubcap. He told Bambi about having found it and kept it safe all this time.
“Heavens above,” she cried. “Jadey’ll be so pleased to know that. He’s been groaning for years about losing it!”

The interior of the dwelling was hot, even with the fan on them, but it was soothing too, because of the pleasant way it was done out. It was painted mainly in a pleasant light green and there was a fish tank with two willowy tropicals in it. Bambi said the fish had been a gift from Gillian — something relaxing to look at while she was on the mend. And there were some wall-hangings with interesting designs. One had a single Chinese letter-sign on it. Bambi explained it was the sign for “crisis” and that it was made by combining the separate signs for “danger” and for “opportunity.”
“I love that idea,” she said. “That a crisis is also an opportunity. A chance to grow, or to move on, or to find yourself.”
“Yes,” Narelle agreed. “It’s a lovely idea.”

Narelle urged Bambi to get involved with the Pioneer Musuem as soon as she was well enough.
“I’m one of the helpers there, too,” she said. “so I could show you the ropes.”
The two of them fell to talking about that and other things and Tait was able to lean
back and observe them both and think his own thoughts. He was thinking what a
darling Narelle was, how nice it was to be with her and to operate as a couple, like
now, with her taking up the conversation and giving him a rest. This must be what
couples do all the time, he reflected, function as a team like this in all sorts of ways
and without giving it a thought. But for Tait it felt new and delightful. He’d had little
bits of it with Francesca, like with their weekly shopping days at The Inlet, but those
moments were always a bit haunted by the briefness of the time. With Narelle it was
so much more continuous and he could relax into it.

He was also studying Bambi’s face and imagining her with Bro all those times when
they were being a couple together.

Coupledom was good for people. It was good for the human race. It didn’t do to
have too many loners. Half the woes of the world stemmed from having too many
loners, he thought, from having too many people who lacked the shelter of each other
– or felt that they lacked it, which came to the same thing. That had been his own
downfall, and that was what he was still trying to recover from.

They stayed for about an hour and Bambi insisted on giving them some fresh eggs in
a shoe box, and they in turn insisted on leaving the big apple pie that was still
untouched.

She didn’t come outside to see them off, because she found walking on uneven
ground a bit difficult still, but she kissed them both on the cheek and asked them to
call in again soon.

There was no sign of Jade.

“What a nice person Bambi is,” Narelle said as they drove carefully along the dirt
track. “I’m so impressed by the way she’s trying to stay quietly positive about
everything.”

“Yes.”

“I wonder what she remembers about the crash. I mean the actual moment of it. Can
you imagine your lover being killed right beside you? What things must go through
her mind.”

“Yes.”

“I’m not sure what to make of him, though.”

“Jade?”
“He seems pretty weird.”

“He had a dream of resurrection,” Tait said. “But everything just went backwards instead, and kept on going backwards.”

“Couldn’t he put up more of a fight, the way Bambi is trying to do, instead of just being sullen?”

“Who knows what fight anyone can put up? Who can even say what constitutes putting up a fight? I certainly can’t, and I spend most of my waking time wondering about it.”

“What about all your heroes, all those Cavaliers and Jacobites? They saw it pretty clearly, didn’t they?”

“I don’t know. Maybe each one of them had to wrestle through his own dark night of the soul. But if they did see it clearly it was because they lived closer to an idea of honour than anyone does nowadays.”

“And were they better off, having that idea of honour?”

“I have to believe they were, otherwise the ancestral past would have no redeeming power for us. There’d be no hope at all. In the end, its only some notion of honour that holds the living universe together.”

“What an interesting thought.”

Tait’s mind had started racing.

“There’s a wonderful quote from Chesterton,” he said, “which I think I’ve just this minute comprehended in a fresh way. It makes it clear that honour stands as the complete opposite to both nihilism and puritanism. and therefore as the opposite to Anarcho-Tyranny.”

“Can you remember the quote?”

“Every word. It goes like this:

Our attitude towards life can be better expressed in terms of a kind of military loyalty than in terms of criticism and approval. My acceptance of the universe is not optimism, it is more like patriotism. It is a matter of primary loyalty.

The world is not a lodging-house at Brighton, which we are to leave because it is miserable. It is the fortress of our family, with the flag flying on the turret, and the more miserable it is the less we should leave it.
“That’s tremendous. But if it’s all so clear-cut, what’s the problem?”

“The problem is that two hundred and fifty years have gone by since Culloden. We’re that much deeper into the pit of being atomized, of being alienated from ourselves and from each other. We’ve been made to see the world as a dreadful lodging-house rather than as the great fortress of our family. We are the disordered rabble on whom Anarcho-Tyranny is now being inflicted. And the only answer is to somehow regain that honour which is a kind of military loyalty to the universe, a primary loyalty to all that underpins us.”

“That’s a beautiful way of looking at it.”

Tait was hurriedly trying to formulate it in a way that would stick in his mind till he could jot it down.

“The world of Anarcho-Tyranny is the world as a crime-scene, a place of ill-doing and fear and suspicion, a place where the ruling power is that of the police, a power that can wreak destruction in two quite different ways, either by its undue presence or its undue absence. Thus Tyranny and Anarchy. Against that there can only be a whole vision of the world as an honour-system that works by a sane and generous trust in things, that sees the world more as a place of love and heroism than of hatred and villainy.”

Tait had now got his pen and pad from the satchel. He jotted down: ‘The world is either a crime-scene or an honour-system.’ That was enough. The line of thought was there and could be followed through later.

He sighed with relief and attended to what Narelle was saying.

As they went over Honeysuckle Hill he looked fondly across towards Astrid’s Meadow. It represented so many things to him now — the sacred circle, the tree of life, the people’s hoop, the Two Roads. And now there was the idea of the world as an honour-system.

* * * *

They were together at the cabin one evening, sitting in the workroom. Narelle was sprawled in the armchair re-reading one of Tait’s plays, the one she wanted to direct for the end-of-year show. She was mentally “blocking” it, working out how to position the actors on stage at each moment.
Tait was at his work-table. He’d been trying to block another of his plays, but could
not keep his mind on the task. He kept thinking of the front page of the local paper.
He’d fetched the rolled-up copy from his driveway that morning and had felt a sort of
crawling of the skin when he saw the lead story. It was shock-horror stuff under a big
headline. It screamed about new figures showing that the sexual abuse of children was
at “crisis” level in the region.

He had an overwhelming sense that the report was fraudulent. It had the very smell
of falsehood. He thought of Orwell’s dictum about what it really meant to be well-
informed — that it wasn’t knowing what was in the paper, but knowing what kind of
world you were living in. This was a world in which the Hounds of Halifax were
starting to run amok everywhere. It depressed and disgusted him that falsehood could
be trumpeted like this, could be given the full tabloid beat-up, could be treated as
though it was inherently plausible. But that was the nature of hysteria. It was the
whole mentality of Salem, vividly depicted in The Crucible. It was what Samuel
Johnson was talking about when he wrote:

_Thus was the law of witchcraft at once established by law and by the fashion,
and it became not only impolite but criminal to doubt it; and, since prodigies
are always seen in proportion as they are expected, witches were every day
discovered and multiplied…_

The new worldwide hysteria of child sex abuse was the perfect tool of Anarcho-
Tyranny. It seeped a deadly poison through the most intimate channels of life. It
pumped an acid that would disintegrate every human bond. That was its anarchic
function. At the same time it whipped up every kind of zealot frenzy, every puritan
impulse to invade and scourge and punish and control the most personal human
affairs. That was its tyrannical function.

It added up to Salem on a vaster scale: the human and social order terrorizing itself
apart and the mad inquisitors all-powerful. It was the perfect model of the world as a
crime-scene. It was the total negation of the world as an honour-system.

Tait hadn’t said anything to Narelle about the stuff in the paper and he didn’t know
if she was aware of it. He would have liked to talk about it just to ease the lonely
despair he was feeling. On the other hand, even to discuss it was to give it a credence or a dignity that it shouldn’t be allowed to have.

The TV was on in the kitchen, but turned down low. There was a sitcom they both liked and always tried to watch. It would be coming on shortly but in the meantime there was the local news bulletin.

Narelle lifted her head to listen.

“Did you hear that?” she asked.

“What?” he asked, feeling a stab of worry that she might’ve heard a suspicious noise outside.

He made a mental note of where his satchel was, with the iron bar in it.

“On the news.”

“As you know, I try not to hear the news.”

“It said Castleton University is opening a new campus at Ridwell.”

“Oh, yes. There was a bit about it in the local rag.”

“Really? Why didn’t you mention it?”

“The paper sickened me too much.”

“Do you have it handy?”

He gave her the paper and she glanced at the front page and made a face of repugnance and started to flick through.

“A campus at Ridwell would really solve a problem for us,” she said. “Ridwell’s only ten minutes from Turrawong. I could do my BA there and you and I could go on just as we are, with no disruption at all. It’d be perfect.”

“You fancy getting a degree, then?”

“Yes. I think so. There’s always been a vague assumption that I’d gradually take over the business from Dad, and I half took it for granted myself until recently. But do I really want to do that?”

“Do you?”

“I’m not sure,” she said, giving him a direct look. “It might depend a fair bit on you. Would you fancy being the life-partner of a shopkeeper?”

“Um…”

“If you did fancy that, it would be a big factor in my thinking.”

“Um…”
“Don’t look so panic-stricken. You don’t have to answer the question right now.

Maybe not for a few years.”

“Whew!”

“It’s just that I don’t want to feel I’m tied to a single option.”

“No, you need to have choices. So its university for the immediate future?”

“I was leaning that way, and meeting Bambi strengthened it a lot.”

“It did?”

“Yes, meeting someone who yearns to go forward in life and yet has so few avenues.

It showed me how lucky I am to have the uni option on a platter.”

“I see.”

“I was worried, though, about having to be focused up at Castleton. But if they start

a campus right nearby at Ridwell it would all fall neatly into place.”

“Yes.”

“I never want to be a whole hour’s journey away from you.”

“I don’t want that either.”

They both became a bit choked with their feelings.

“Being around you is an education in itself,” she said then, with a smile.

“Well, when one happens to be a magnificent sexual athlete one can impart a good deal to a willing young pupil.”

“Of course. But I was referring to the intellectual side. You’ve clued me up so much.

I was always good at school, and could write a good essay, but I never quite

connected abstract ideas to the fact of whether a person has a half-way decent life or non-stop misery.”

“Like Structure and Agency.”

“That’s a good example. If you hadn’t told me about that I’d never have known what

a useful tool it is for thinking about life.”

“Ideas Have Consequences.”

“Yes.”

“What’s It All About, Alfie?”

“What?”

“Does Your Chewing Gum Lose Its Flavour On the Bedpost Overnight?”

“Are you mocking one or both of us?”

“Just me.”
“Well, don’t. I don’t like my lovers being mocked.”
“Lovers, in the plural? How many do you have?”
“I’m down to just the one at the moment, I’m afraid.”
“Poor thing.”
“How about you?”
“Same here. Just the one.”
“These are lean times.”
“Have to make the best of it.”
“What’s yours like?”
“Gorgeous tits. How about yours?”
“Hung like an ostrich.”
“An ostrich?”
“Slip of the tongue. I meant an elephant.”
“Actually, the ostrich thing turns me on.”
“I can tell by the foam round your mouth.”
“I’m glad we’ve had this talk.”
“My eyes have been opened.”
“Your blouse is next.”
“No, I have to read this item about the new campus. Then our sitcom is on.”
“My passion is rampant. If it’s thwarted now it’ll only burst forth like a raging ostrich when we’re in bed. There’ll be feathers everywhere.”
“Promises, promises.”
She had found the item about the new campus and began reading it earnestly.
Tait’s depressed feelings had begun to lighten.
A few minutes later, as their sitcom was about to start, they heard a noise outside. It sounded like someone on the steps of the porch. They waited for a knock but none came. Tait went and peeked through the bedroom curtain. There was no car in the driveway. He unlatched the door and stepped cautiously on to the porch, knowing the iron bar was in the satchel just behind him and that he could step back and reach for it if necessary. It was a quiet night with no wind. Narelle’s car stood next to Ernie’s under the floodlight.
“Look,” murmured Narelle, pointing towards the lake. “There’s someone there.”
Someone stood under the trees at the bank, outlined against the expanse of water and the lights of the far shore. Tait peered hard to see if there were others, but could pick out only the one figure. On an impulse he stepped off the porch and went briskly across to Narelle’s car and walked around it, making an elaborate show of checking that it was okay. Looking back at the open door of the cabin, and at Narelle framed in it, he got a mental picture of a whole pack of yobbos suddenly appearing and cutting him off. And of course he didn’t have the iron bar with him. He thought what a silly thing he had just done.

The figure came towards them from the shadows of the trees. It was Jimmy Sale.

“We thought you were a prowler,” Tait said, with relief.

“Sorry, I was about to knock, but then I felt like having a quiet minute by the lake.”

“Where’s your car?”

“I parked on the street.”

“Come in then. You look a bit disgruntled.”

“That’s one word for it,” he replied grimly.

They went inside and Jimmy slumped into the armchair.

“So, how are things?” Tait asked.

“Things stink,” said Jimmy.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Narelle asked.

“I’ve got to get out of this job,” Jimmy said. “Out of the whole rotten system.”

“Has something happened in particular?”

“Yes, that,” Jimmy said, pointing to the front page of the paper that was lying beside the chair. “Have you read the statistics they cite, about the high level of child sex abuse in the region?”

“Yes.”

“They’re false.”

“Yes,” Tait said. “I knew that by instinct.”

“They were inflated by the local Hounds of Halifax and then fed to the media.”

“You know that for sure?”

“I was at the staff meeting where they decided to do it.”

“I see.”

“I wish I hadn’t been,” Jimmy sighed. “Then I wouldn’t be in the fix I’m in now.”

“Which is?”
“Wondering if I should try to blow the whistle on the whole fucking pack of them!”
But of course it wasn’t a real option.
You picture yourself striding nobly forth with a searing blast of revelation that will
astound everyone, but even a minute’s thought tells you it doesn’t happen that way,
not when the evil you wish to expose accords with the zeitgeist and fits the lunacy of
the time. And besides, Jimmy wasn’t a free agent. He had a family to be worried sick
about.
The zealots had always peddled agitprop when they could, but there’d been a degree
of resistance within the system. Now the resistance had crumbled. The commissars
knew they could afford to push harder. That meeting, Jimmy said, was meant to break
their last few opponents.
Only Jimmy and Roger had spoken out against cooking the figures. There might
have been others who shared their view, but they kept silent. Jimmy said he left the
meeting with a lingering hope that he and Roger had succeeded in staving the matter
off. The next thing he knew, the doctored numbers were all over the media.
They discussed what it meant for Jimmy himself, now that he stood revealed for the
umpteenth time as a patriarchal pig who would never learn and was due to be
chopped-off at the waist. Of course his destruction would not take place in some
dungeon of the secret police. The commissars weren’t stupidly inflexible. They
tailored these matters to suit conditions. Jimmy’s doom would revolve around the fact
that he had a wife with a bad back, two young kids, a mortgage, zilch in the bank, and
no way of earning a living except in a profession controlled by his enemies. If the
process went especially well, from a commissar’s point of view, Jimmy might even
eventually put a gun to his own head, as so many beleaguered men were now doing in
the society.
Narelle hardly spoke, but you could tell she was shocked by what she was hearing.
The three of them walked down the driveway to where Jimmy’s car was parked on
the street. There was nothing much else to be said. They gave him a forlorn hug and
watched him drive away.
They stood at the kerb and looked at the dark vista of the street, and it seemed as if
the whole power of the Enemy lay upon it.
“Have things truly got so bad?” Narelle asked in a low voice.
“It would appear so,” he replied grimly.
“I feel like a fool.”

“Why?”

“For not having understood before.”

“You’re not even remotely a fool,” he said, putting his arms around her.

“How do you cope with the knowledge of it, especially the times you’re on your own?”

“I have two resources.”

“Yes?”

“Cheap wine, and the songs of defiance.”

“Lead me to them.”

“Yes, come inside and I’ll play you ‘Bonnie Dundee’ and ‘The Rising of the Moon’ and a few more. That’ll put some red blood back in our veins.”

“Yes.”

“And then we’ll cap it off with the finest sound in all the world — the massed pipes and drums beating out ‘The White Cockade.’”

“Okay.”

They began walking back down the driveway.

“And I’ll tell you about Fontenoy,” he said.

“What’s that?”

“A battle, in 1745, on the eve of Bonnie Prince Charlie’s rising.”

“What happened?”

“It was a victory for the Wild Geese, the Jacobite exiles who made up the great Irish Brigade of the French Army. What made Fontenoy so sweet a victory was that it was won against the Hanovarian forces under “Butcher” Cumberland himself. It was going badly and the French were being driven back. But then the Wild Geese advanced with their pipes playing ‘The White Cockade’ and won the day.”

“Good on them.”

“We need to remember our triumphs,” he said.

* * * *

Canopy Press had accepted The Freedom of the Air, Tait’s new collection of verse. They had responded quickly and it gave his morale a big boost for a week or so.
There was also an advance of a few hundred dollars, which enabled him to pay Ernie a good chunk of rent to cover the arrears and put himself a little ahead.

Ernie was hardly visible these days. When he wasn’t glued to his ham radio at all hours he was mostly having a nap on his couch. He no longer came out to water plants or rake leaves or trim bushes. Being screwed by the Council had made him bitter. “Place can go to hell for all I care!” he’d muttered one day when Tait happened to be chatting with him and they were noticing how unkempt the property looked.

Having been rebuked for trimming foliage, Tait thought, Ernie was probably due to be rebuked again for not trimming foliage.

Tait began to do the odd bit of raking and watering, just to keep the place looking reasonable. He found he enjoyed it and tried to do half-an-hour or so each afternoon when he’d finished work at his desk and needed to stretch his limbs in the fresh air and feel the earth under his feet.

He was doing that now, raking a few leaves down near Ernie’s front fence. It was late afternoon and the shadows were lengthening across the ground. The old shop over the road was being re-opened as a business. A painter was just finishing the big sign on the front window. It said: Ace Video Rentals.

He wasn’t seeing Narelle that evening. She and her friend Cathy had some girl-type occasion to go to and Tait was free to please himself what he did for the next few hours.

He thought he might walk down and say hello to the Ellicotts and ask how they were getting on with selling their house. He’d not seen them for a while and might not have many more chances. He had known them for eight years now, he reflected, and eight years was a sizeable chunk of a person’s life. It was nearly the length of time he’d spent in custody. He’d be sad to see the Ellicotts go, not because he’d been bosom-pals with them or anything, but just because it would illustrate the endingness of things. Samuel Johnson said that there was a kind of horror in coming to the last of anything, because it reminds us of universal doom. And the Ellicotts leaving would have an additional sting because they were being driven out by the yobbos. The day they left would be a win for Anarcho-Tyranny.

If he went to the Ellicotts he would walk down along the road, not along the lake shore. Except for the bit right in front of the cabin – which could not be surrendered
without total dishonour – the lake shore now felt like forbidden territory. Another win for the Enemy.

As sometimes happened, two different lines of thought were jostling in his mind and he could not focus properly on either of them.

One was something that Mike Kieslowski had mentioned in his last letter. It was an insight of Sam Foster’s, and like all the best insights it was a clarification of something one already vaguely knew. It was about modern tyranny’s way of criminalizing things. It typically criminalizes not particular _behaviours_ as such but certain categories of _people_. This reverses the fundamental order of justice. Instead of people being wrong in their behaviour, their behaviour is wrong because they are the people they happen to be. This means the only way they can cease to offend is to cease all behaviour. In other words, by being _dead_. This was why modernity was the supreme age of mass-murder.

Sam Foster’s key point was that you could pretty much tell which categories of people were listed for elimination. They were the people _who could no longer do anything right_, who were damned whatever they did. Ordinary parents, mothers, were now being placed on that list. Husbands and fathers in particular, of course, had been on it for some time.

Tait saw that modernity can be defined as the urge to destroy ever larger categories of people, combined with the ever-enhanced means of doing so. It starts with killing the King and a few centuries later most of the population is set for the chop

*First they came for the King, but I was not a King so I said nothing…*

Tait had been brooding on this whole matter partly because of Jimmy Sale’s recent experience and partly because of something he’d read in Narelle’s cherished copy of _Les Miserables_. It was in Chapter Ten where someone is declaring that the French Revolution didn’t go far enough.

> _We demolished the ancient order of things physically, but not entirely in the idea. To destroy abuses is not enough; habits must be changed. The windmill has gone, but the Wind is there yet._

There it was. The demolition process cannot stop until the very wind is abolished, the sun taken out of the sky, the grass forbidden to grow, human relationships
oulawed altogether. The Windmill and the Wind is a metaphor, but metaphors are about reality. The Cambodian killing fields were just one real example of this determination to abolish the Wind. There were lots of other examples happening right now, but they were closer to home and wrapped in everyday familiarity and thus more difficult to recognize for the horrors they were.

Tait had come up with a term for this process of the total overthrow of all things: *revolutionary infinity*. It was another name for the endless expansion of mass-murder, and very like Sam Foster’s point about criminalization. It came down, in the end, to the Enemy’s way of seeing the world as a *crime-scene* and thereby turning it into precisely that.

Tait stopped raking and leant against the fence. He was getting a headache because his thoughts weren’t able to flow in one stream. They were checked by the other matter in his mind: Narelle’s question about whether he’d fancy being the *life-partner*…

Sooner or later – if she didn’t lose interest in him – he would have to answer that question. She’d said it might not need answering for years yet. She had uni to think about for the time being. But the question would be waiting there in the background. He knew that what he had with Narelle was quite different from what he’d had with Francesca. Even despite the age-difference, it was so much more normal, more sensible, more kindly, more conducive to common happiness. It was an amazing stroke of fortune that he had never expected and didn’t deserve. It was a gift that he should be on his knees thanking Providence for.

But it was much more unsettling than what he’d had with Francesca, more worrying at some deep level. He knew the reason for this. With Narelle there wasn’t a convenient husband on the scene to make her safely unavailable.

Unlike Francesca, who had seen through him like a pane of glass, Narelle might actually put Mister Damaged Goods to the test.

Tait didn’t feel like raking any more. Nor did he feel like strolling down to see the Ellicotts. He put the rake away and went inside the cabin and lay down on the bed. His headache was getting worse. He wanted to go to sleep and not have to think about anything.

It was all a load of shit, he groaned to himself. There were two good reasons why he would never have to answer Narelle’s question. First, she would get tired of him soon
enough. Second, the society was going down the drain and the only issue was how to meet the end. Planning a future was as pointless as counting your Confederate money with Sherman at the door.

He was staring at the ceiling twenty minutes later when Kelvin knocked.

“You look terrible,” Tait told him.

“You don’t exactly look like Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm yourself,” came the grim reply.

Kelvin didn’t feel like coming inside so they took two chairs out under a tree and sat looking at the water.

Kelvin lit a cigarette and puffed at it.

“You’re back on those things, are you?”

“Don’t scold. I can’t cope with it just now.”

“Neither can I.”

“Are you heartsick too?”

“Somewhat.”

“Sorry.”

“I’ll get over it. What’s bugging you?”

“You need to ask?”

“No, not really. So what’s he been doing?”

“Cheating on me.”

“Just a one-off thing, or what?”

“If only.”

“Do you want to talk about it?

“No, it’s alright. I’ll just sit here and knock off this whole packet of smokes.”

“It was Rory who got you to quit, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, that’s the point.”

“Can I have one?”

Kelvin held out the packet and Tait took one and leaned across to have it lit. He took a small puff and coughed, then just held the cigarette in his lap and let the smoke drift past his face. He was glad Kelvin had turned up. It had got him out of his own constricted thoughts.

“So, are you going to forgive him.”

“Only if he crawled on hands and knees.”
“Any sign of him doing that?”
“None.”
“You’ve broken up then?”
“Seems like it.”
“You’ll find someone better.”
“No, I’m off men.”
“Me too.”
“Listen,” Kelvin said. “Be devastatingly honest. Should I have surgery?”
“Gelding isn’t the answer.”
“I mean slimming surgery, smarty-pants.”
“No.”
“Why not?”
“Because obviously your weight isn’t the problem — at least not in relation to having a partner. If it was, you wouldn’t have got Rory in the first place.”
“I suppose not.”
“Someone else is waiting around the next corner for you.”
“With a crowbar?”
“With love and tenderness.”
“Someone who’s always wanted a pet hippo?”
“This sensitivity about your weight is part of your grieving process when you have a break-up. I’ve seen the pattern of it.”
“Have you?”
“I’ve known you for eight years, kiddo.”
“Christ, what a burden on you.”
“Yes it’s been crushing, but there it is.”
“You really think there’s someone round the next corner?”
“Absolutely.”
“It’s a pity I’m off men, then.”
“Dreadful shame.”
“I might have to weigh my options, if you’ll pardon the expression.”
“Yes, I think you should weigh them.”
Kelvin blew a long stream of smoke and squared his shoulders and pretended to cheer up.
“Well, that’s me counseled. I might only smoke half this packet after all. What about you? What’s Narelle been doing to make you heartsick?”

“Nothing. She’s wonderful.”

“What then?”

“Various things.”

“Spill it.”

Tait told him briefly how bad things had become for Jimmy Sale, and a little about the plight of the Ellicotts.

“Things are tough all over,” Kelvin said. “Nobody’s happy any more. I see it myself. And I see it through Auntie. She’s inundated with people’s miseries. Their troubles with Council, with the police, with the dole office, with whatever. She’s worn to a frazzle. We’re a bit worried about her.”

“About her health?”

“She’s been having some tests. She might not stand for Council again. Just depends. She hates the Council now, and doesn’t want to be there, but she also doesn’t want to leave people in the lurch.”

Tait mentioned how Megan had stuck up for Ernie.

“She has an Ernie on the phone every hour of the day.”

They sighed and looked at the water for a bit.

“Let’s get back to what really matters,” Kelvin said. “Discussing each other’s love life. You said Narelle was wonderful. What does that mean?”

“It means she’s wonderful, an absolute darling girl.”

“So there’s no problem there?”

“Only with me.”

“Aha. What’s wrong with you?”

“I’m not a whole person.”

“I see. And dare I ask which parts are missing?”

“The faculty of optimism, for one thing.”

“Go on.”

“I dwell in a wasteland of the spirit. I exist grimly from day to day, and I assume that by next week or next month I’ll be dead or in gaol or destitute in the gutter.”

“Go on Sunshine.”
“I know intellectually that I sabotage my hopes of happiness in life, but I don’t know how to change myself emotionally.”

“Has Narelle had a go at you about this?”

“No, as I said, she’s been a darling. But if we keep on together she’s going to expect us to have a proper future, and she’ll have every right to expect that, but she’ll be stuck with a bloke who’s inherently futureless. I don’t want to string her along on a false premise. I don’t want her wasting herself on damaged goods like me.”

“You sound a lot like a certain person we know who moans about his weight. And the same reply is probably appropriate. If you were such a bad lot Narelle wouldn’t have seen whatever she saw in you. Our jaundiced view of ourself isn’t the be-all-and-end-all. The other person’s encouraging view of us matters just as much.”

“Can I tell you something awful?”

“Please.”

“I think Francesca was the love of my life because she wasn’t available. I could love her totally because I didn’t have to be a proper partner. I could be a kind of parasite, taking just enough nourishment to survive on, but not having to be a source of nourishment myself.”

“Uh-huh,” said Kelvin meditatively.

“You want to hear another awful thing? I think Craig understood that as clearly as Francesca finally did. Craig could tolerate me because he knew I hadn’t the slightest interest in taking his woman away from him, just in having a fairly harmless lend of her as a love-object. How pathetic is that?”

“You’re a mere beginner in the pathetic stakes, I can assure you. Still, what you say is fascinating, and has a ring of plausibility.”

“I’m embarrassed now at having said it. Pretend you didn’t hear a word.”

“If that’s what you want. But I still think the key here is Narelle and her attitude and input. You might not be as ‘whole’ a person as you want to be, but Narelle might have some wholeness to spare, just as you might have a bit extra of whatever she’s most in need of.”

“That’s a good thought, actually. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. I have in fact known a number of people whose Parts were greater than their Wholes.”

“I believe you.”
“I’d better make a move.”
“Okay.”
“Will you be at the Players’ meeting this month?”
“I guess so.”
“That Mona woman is planning to make a pest of herself.”
“I hadn’t heard. What is she up to?”
“She wants the Players to adopt a Mission Statement.”
“Such as what?”
“Oh, a lot of crap about all creeds and colours being welcome.”
“And how we abhor racism and sexism?” Tait asked wearily.
“Yeah, like that.”
“And homophobia?”
“No doubt,” Kelvin said, standing up. “But having flirted with homophobia myself just lately, I’ll definitely knock that one on the head.”
“I think it’s important that all gets knocked on the head, or there’ll never be an end to it.”
“Megan feels the same way. She plans to be there to keep the lid on.”
“This Mona is a classic commissar type. I don’t want her directing one of my plays in the end of year production.”
“She needs to slapped down, that’s for sure.”
“The Big Fist is the only thing her type understands.”
“Monaphobia is the way to go.”
Kelvin left, his manner as upbeat as he could make it, but his face still taut with the anguish of dejected love.

Tait went inside and felt focused enough to tinker with a poem. It was one he’d been working on intermittently for months. It had been sparked off initially by Bro’s remark that day about the blighted leaf, the metaphor he’d picked up from his lost Bonnie-Mae. The poem had given a lot of trouble, running up blind alleys of complexity, and he’d despaired of it several times. Now after all that straining and forcing it began to do what every poem needs to do in the end — simplify itself back into coherence. By midnight he was satisfied with it.
SIGNS

Of the circle of people known to me,
Not one appears to have an easy mind.
The more I look at them the more I see
How this one falters, that one falls behind.

Money, health, careers, relationships,
All areas of life seem under strain.
They all seem fundamentally at grips
With nagging worry, weariness and pain.

I am speaking of merely local grief,
Of little realms of personal despair;
Yet one might notice in a single leaf
The blighting of the forest everywhere.

Chapter Nineteen

They were driving to Ridwell with Jimmy.
It was a very humid Wednesday evening and the air-conditioning in Jimmy’s car
didn’t work so they had all the windows open. That didn’t help much because they
were caught on a narrow road in the peak-hour traffic and could only crawl along.
Jimmy kept looking at the gauge on the dashboard, worried about the engine
overheating. The car had seen better days and was one of Jimmy’s many worries at
present. He couldn’t afford major repairs if it clapped out. He still had his official
work-car but didn’t dare use that for any non-official purpose. He knew the Regime
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week, as was all his paperwork. An eye was being kept on everything he did. And it was the same with Roger. The two of them were marked men. The only reason the Regime was playing a waiting game, Jimmy said, was that he and Roger were insiders who knew where some of the bodies were buried. Chopping them off at the waist required a little calculation and a touch of finesse.

It was because of that whole situation that they were driving to Ridwell.

A seminar was being put on by the local operatives of an international direct-sale company, Intrigue Perfumes, and Jimmy was very keen to check it out. An acquaintance he hadn’t seen for years had phoned out of the blue from overseas to let him know that Intrigue was expanding to Australia and that it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, a chance for Jimmy to get in on the ground floor. Jimmy was desperately in need of a new livelihood and felt deeply touched that the old acquaintance had thought of him. He appeared to regard the call as a providential sign.

Tait was a bit skeptical. It wasn’t that he knew anything about business, it was just that he’d been at Jimmy’s place the night the phone call came and had heard the conversation, or Jimmy’s side of it at least. The caller had stressed that he would vouch for Jimmy, would sponsor him, would be his contact in the venture. Generous-natured himself, Jimmy was quick to see the same virtue in others. But Tait somehow didn’t think the call had come out of sheer goodness of heart.

Lauren had been skeptical too, clicking away with her knitting needles. To her it sounded too much like a “pyramid” scheme to be trusted. But she also knew Jimmy too well to try to dampen his response when his emotions had been touched. He had to be allowed to follow it up.

When Jimmy was out of the room, the two of them compared thoughts. They recalled the old Groucho Marx line that truth and sincerity are all that matter in life, and if you can fake those you’ve got it made.

When Jimmy said about attending the seminar, Tait invited himself and Narelle along. He thought Jimmy needed some steadying company, but he was also curious to see what it was all about.

The traffic was still crawling, so they turned left across a railway bridge. They had some time up their sleeve and were just near the site of the new university campus and Narelle wanted to have a quick look at it. The place was set in bushland and had formerly been a national Anglican youth camp. The departed Anglicans had left an
administration centre and one large building with a lecture-hall and some classrooms. New work was already underway and two big yellow bulldozers were parked for the night on a stretch of churned-up ground.

Because basic facilities were already there, Castleton University was to begin running First Year courses at Ridwell from the following February. The student numbers would increase as new installations grew to accommodate them. Narelle had already applied to be in the first intake.

They got out of the car and strolled about. It was a pleasant-enough spot, with the bushland all around, but very humid because of being down in a hollow between the hills. They found a tap sticking up out of the ground in an open space for no apparent reason. They tasted the water cautiously and found it was cool and delicious. They drank and wet their hankies and wiped their faces. As they headed back to the car Narelle happened to glance over her shoulder.

“Look!” she cried.

An impressive-looking bird had come out of nowhere and was perched on the tap gazing at them.

“It’s an eagle.”

“Or at least a hawk.”

“Isn’t it beautiful!”

“It’s an omen,” Narelle said.

“Yes,” Tait agreed. “A mysterious fountain of water with a guardian hawk watching over it. Can’t get much more omen-ish than that.”

“What does it mean?”

“Health, Wealth and Happiness!” declared Jimmy in a tone of touching conviction.

“Aha, good old Robin Rainbow is alive and well!”

“Yes, he is,” said Jimmy defiantly.

“But of course his old nemesis Beadle Brimstone would read the omen in quite a different light.”

“Let’s hear it then, if we must,” Jimmy sighed.

Tait screwed his face up to like a bug-eyed Puritan maniac.

“Behold, Water, and a great Bird!” he cried in a mad voice, pointing a portentous finger. “The Unrighteous are to be drowned, I tell ye! And also shitted on from a great height!”
“No, I’m with Robin Rainbow,” said Narelle firmly. “I think it’s a sign of good things coming for all of us.”

“Oh, alright then,” Tait agreed grudgingly, letting the crazed expression leave his face. “

They drove on in lighter spirits.

The seminar was being held in the conference room of an up-market motel. There were about seventy people there, enough to fill all the chairs. Tait found the whole thing fascinating and paid close attention in case there was a poem to be got out of it.

It was like a meeting of some evangelical church, presided over by two clean-cut men in grey suits who could’ve been Baptist ministers. They were Nick and Chris, the regional heads of the Intrigue franchise. There was a lectern with a big logo displayed behind it. Nick gave an introductory address while Chris stood at the back of the audience and made polite but firm interjections.

They were things like,

“Um, Nick, sorry to interrupt, but I’d be grateful if you could expand on that last point.”

Or it was,

“Sorry to break the flow again, Nick, but I’m not sure if I understand the full benefits of that aspect. Could you just list them again?”

And Nick would respond with something like,

“Ah thanks for pulling me up on that, Chris. Yes, it is such an important point.”

The two of them created a whole atmosphere within a few minutes. They conveyed the decency, the modesty, even the slight fumbling awkwardness of genuine people who aren’t out to grandstand in any way. At the same time they had the dynamism, the shortling excitement, the spring in the step of people who’ve seen salvation and can’t wait to share it with all those who can make use of it. Of course you understood that not everyone was capable of making use of it, but at least there were these seventy or so outstanding people who had come along that evening. At the same time, though, you didn’t need to be any anyone special to take the Intrigue Avenue to Total Wealth and Happiness.

“Sorry to interrupt again, Nick, but how would you define the Intrigue Insight that Opens the Door to Total Financial Achievement?”
“No, I’m glad you asked, Chris, because I was just thinking about that. I believe you could put it this way: Anybody can do it, but only the fortunate few that I call the Intrigue Individuals have the vision to see that anyone can do it!”

“That certainly is a wonderful insight, Nick. But just so I completely understand it, could you explain it a bit more?”

“I’m delighted to have the opportunity, Chris. Let me put the whole thing from another angle…”

After the lecture, they screened a film about the world-wide activities of the Intrigue Corporation.

It began with shots of a gigantic-looking but very clean industrial plant in the town of Intrigue, Idaho, then longer footage of beautiful couples and families all smiling at each other along the street as though it was Happy Town. Then there was a flurry of reeled-off statistics which showed that in only fifteen years the equivalent of six out of every ten people in the world could have the potential to be within the projected orbit of a possible Intrigue franchise. Or something like that. It was hard to follow but it was put over with such aplomb that you couldn’t help seeing the immensity. The accompanying visuals were of joyful faces of people of every creed and colour.

After the whirl of statistics came a report on the Intrigue Foundation’s “Kids Don’t Deserve to Suffer” Initiative which funded sick children. There was a lingering shot of the silver-haired President of Intrigue International at the bedside of a brave toddler with a bandaged arm, and a beaming nurse looking on. You had to be sensitive to pick it up, but the narrator’s voice definitely wobbled with emotion at several points.

Next came a World Renowned Analyst explaining how the latest research had proved that Wealth Visualization was a factor in the success of 83 per cent of millionaires polled by Gottlieb Associates, the award-winning publicity consultants to many high-profile Hollywood personalities and recording artists.

The film ended with a parade of Intrigue operatives testifying to the camera about the life-changing success they’d had:

I’m a single mother…

After my amputation, I never thought I’d get back on my feet…

I was skeptical when a neighbour first told me about…

The friendships I’ve made through Intrigue…
I can’t express strongly enough…
I just want to tell everyone in the whole world…
In the first year I made enough to pay my house off...
The Intrigue Way to Wealth is the way to go…
Bless you, Intrigue! You’ve changed my life!
Don’t wait! Do it now!

What struck Tait most was the way all the testimonies insisted that this plan really worked. Nearly every person confided that he or she had tried other schemes of this type, had wasted their money and broken their hearts on dud ventures. But this one works! they kept declaring. This one’s genuine! Tait saw how the whole pitch was geared to what one might call the eternal pilgrim in people.

After the film Nick began to introduce the keynote speaker, a young Englishman named Trevor who was Intrigue International’s newest World Star Achiever for having made a hundred and twenty-nine thousand pounds last year.

Again Chris interjected:
“I know you weren’t going to mention this, Nick, and I know Trevor himself wouldn’t want it revealed, but he’s literally just off a very arduous flight from London and hasn’t even had a chance to rest or freshen-up. Despite this he generously agreed to come straight to the venue and talk to us because he didn’t want to let anyone down.”

For an instant Nick looked dismayed that Chris had let the cat out of the bag like that, but then he squared his shoulders and told the audience that, yes, it was true, and was typical of the old-fashioned grit and concern-for-others he had personally always found in the Intrigue Community.

“The cynics can call that kind of integrity old-fashioned if they want to,” he said, “But I’ll be darned if I’ll agree with them!”

He almost glared at the audience, as though they were the very cynics he was defying, and you could tell how strongly he felt. If taking a stand on principle meant losing the audience’s goodwill, he was prepared to pay that price and no mistake.

There was a big round of applause. Everyone wanted to reassure him that he wasn’t alone and that old-fashioned integrity had plenty of supporters here tonight.

Trevor came on and was charming the way he apologized for his slightly rumpled and unshaven appearance. He endeared himself even more when he confessed that he
had half-thought of ducking out of this obligation tonight, because of his sheer bone-
weariness, and that the only reason he hadn’t was because the Intrigue Way to Total
Achievement had been so good to him that he felt he had a duty to give something
back.

There was another big round of appause.

Then Trevor launched into his talk and Tait thought he saw a look of steel come into
the man’s eyes.

The key to everything was the Intrigue Sample Case, or the Red Box as it was fondly
known. Trevor held his own box up to show them, the one that had enabled him earn
a hundred and twenty-nine thousand last year. It was very attractively done in red
leather and contained thirty-six little sample-bottles of Intrigue Perfume. Buying the
Red Box for three hundred dollars was your first step. That gave you the right to take
orders for the perfume, but, much more importantly, it empowered you to sponsor
others to purchase a Red Box. After that, Trevor said, your Income Avenues Began to
Multiply. You got a commission on all the perfume orders you took and a cut of the
three hundred dollars on every Red Box you helped sell. But the greatest potential
was in the percentages that accrued to you from “down the line.” When you recruited
another Red Box person you thereafter got your cut from every order they took and
every Red Box person that they recruited. And so it kept replicating until you were
getting an endless flow of little cuts from the myriad activities of hundreds of people.

The watchword, Trevor insisted, was Dedication. It was Focus. It was Keeping Your
Mind On the Job. There was no Time Off, he declared. If you want Time Off go and
be a hobo in the park. And every word and action must be geared to the Program. You
carried your Red Box with you everywhere all the time. Every social interaction must
be viewed as a business opportunity. He described how he would carry his Red Box
in the crook of his arm while walking down the street. If he saw anyone’s eyes flicker
to it momentarily he would politely stop them and tell them what it was and how it
could transform their lives. Another technique was to go to parties and place the Red
Box on the food or drinks table and then stand a few paces away. As soon as anyone
evined the slightest curiosity you stepped forward and gave them the pitch.

But the most affecting thing was the way Trevor gamely battled his utter weariness.
He kept pausing to blink and take a deep breath and then push on again. Once or
twice he apologized for his voice being a little hoarse. He knew he probably wasn’t
giving of his best tonight but he hoped they would make allowance. The thing was, if he could help put even one deserving person on the Road to Total Financial Fitness he would feel the strain had been totally worthwhile.

Someone in the audience assured him how much they all appreciated what he was putting himself through for their sake. There was a long and heartfelt round of applause.

When Trevor had finished, Nick and Chris took questions from the audience. There was such a lovely feeling among everyone now. Nick and Chris both confessed that the atmosphere here tonight was something very special, something they would remember for a long time.

Afterwards there were drinks and snacks out in the lobby. Trevor was still there, chatting tiredly but with a satisfied smile. He had intended to leave straight after his talk, he said, but the audience had been such warm people that he couldn’t tear himself away.

On a table were a number of Red Boxes that you could examine while Nick or Chris gave you lots of friendly information about the Intrigue Empowerment that was yours if you wanted it. Tait and Narelle sniffed at various little sample-bottles of perfume while Jimmy was on the other side of the room talking to Trevor. The stuff smelt pretty good.

They felt ready to leave and went across to Jimmy who introduced them to Trevor. “What do you want to do with your Wealth?” Trevor immediately asked Tait, looking him searchingly in the eyes.

“Which Wealth is that?”

“The Wealth that’s right there waiting for you, the Wealth that’s rightfully yours, the Wealth that already belongs to you and only needs to be taken possession of.”

Before Tait could think of an answer, Trevor turned his head to respond to someone else who was pressing to speak to him.

“Ready to go?” Tait asked Jimmy.

“Be there in a sec,” Jimmy answered.

They went out into the sultry air of the car-park and stood by the car and compared their impressions.

“I felt myself being sucked in,” Narelle said. “And somehow wanting to be sucked in.”
“Same here,” Tait agreed. “It’s like watching those state-of-the-art magicians on TV who can make a 50 ton railway carriage disappear in front of your eyes. You know it’s a trick but you’re as much mesmerized by the trickery as you would be by the reality.”

“Like the way Trevor told us in plain words that nothing is disinterested, and that everything is manipulation, and yet we still felt grateful because the poor exhausted man had come to us out of the sheer goodness of his heart.”

“Yes, it was superb.”

“Do you think he was straight off the plane and genuinely tired, or was the whole thing concocted?”

“Who knows? Who knows if there’s even a difference? The pretence is the reality, somehow.”

“Like, what does it matter if it’s a fake hall of mirrors, or a real hall of mirrors?”

“Something like that. It’s also very much like in Yeats’s little one-act play, The Pot of Broth.”

“I don’t know it.”

So Tait told her about the Irish con-man who claims to have a stone that will boil up into a rich broth, and how the trick is so finely poised between pretence and reality that you can hardly tell which it is.

“What’s keeping Jimmy, d’you think?” Narelle asked.

“He’s probably fascinated with all this for professional reasons. After all, his work is all about observing the finer shades of human delusion.”

When Jimmy emerged they were dumbfounded. He had bought a Red Box and was full of the vision of the Wealth that was Already His and Only Needed to be Taken Possession Of.

He told them excitedly that he’d got a three per cent discount on the Red Box because of being personally vouched for by the old pal who’d phoned him. He was also amazed by something he had just found out. Trevor came from the same part of England where Jimmy’s cousin was living and actually thought he knew him! Of course poor Trevor was so mentally exhausted right now that you couldn’t expect him to be totally clear about it, but what a weird bit of synchronicity!
Tait felt he’d let his friend down. He’d failed to notice that it wasn’t Jimmy they’d been with for most of that evening, but Robin Rainbow at his most vulnerable. And the grifters had seen him coming like a Christmas turkey.

* * * *

It was the evening of the committee meeting at the Green Room and Tait and Narelle intended to be there, to help thwart Mona’s brain-storm that the Players adopt a Mission Statement.

They were sitting in their favourite back booth at the Athena café, waiting for their eggs-on-toast to come.

Narelle was very happy, having just received a note in the mail from Fergus Gunn. He had accepted two more of her poems for Compact magazine. She had the note on the table in front of her and was smoothing it lovingly and talking to it as though it were a kitten. “What a nice little note you are,” she crooned. “What a sweet little note.” Then she turned to Tait. “Would you like to pat my dear little note?” So Tait gave it a pat, then put his arm around her waist and held her close.

He was terrifically pleased for her about the poems, and felt deep satisfaction that she was happy. In fact these days he was delighted with her in every possible way. At times he felt so choked with it that it made him feel frantic. At those times he needed to hug her feverishly. If they were alone he did so, and Narelle always gently hugged him back and stroked him and murmured calming words. Sometimes the frantic feelings came when he was by himself at the cabin, and then the only thing that helped was to put the earphones on and play Storm on the Heather as loud as he could bear it. The frantic feelings about Narelle would then merge into the emotional tumult of the songs and burn themselves away.

He knew why the frantic feeling overwhelmed him at times. Having this girl in his life was too good to be true, too good to last. Nowadays, whenever they were having a sweet time together he would find himself thinking: *This is to recall afterwards, when she has moved on. This is for the Memory Bank. One day this recollection will be all I have to keep my heart beating.*
If Tait had been completely happy at that moment he might’ve got into the frantic mode, but he was still feeling shadowed by an incident that evening on his way into town.

As usual he had taken the longer route to avoid Hell’s Kitchen and was riding along with no other traffic in sight. There were still some open paddocks along there and it was normally a pleasant stretch of the journey. But this time a car came revving up from behind with a deafening blast of its horn. It slowed alongside him and began to edge him off the road. He was forced on to broken bitumen and pot-holes. He bounced and swerved and could barely control the bike. In his desperation he glanced at the car and saw there were three yobbos sneering and yelling. One thrust his head out of the window and snarled, “Die, cunt!” and threw a can at the spokes of the bike. The car then hurtled ahead and Tait pulled up at the roadside, badly shaken.

So, he reflected miserably as he proceeded into town, the minion-brutes of Anarcho-Tyranny are patrolling this route too. It was just like in *The Lord of the Rings*. The shadow of Mordor was spreading and soon there would be no place free of it. And like those orcs of Tolkien’s, the yobbos had been made the way they were, had been twisted out of some former and better shape by evil powers. They had been manufactured for mayhem.

He met Narelle at knock-off time at the Plaza and they gave each other a hug as they normally did, but Tait held on tighter and longer than usual.

“What’s this in aid of?” she asked against his shoulder.

“Can’t I just be glad to see you?”

“I’m not complaining.”

Just then it felt so right that they belonged to each other, right that they were each other’s comrade and consolation against the gathering dark of Mordor, right that they should battle and survive together for as long as possible, for years and years perhaps, if fate allowed. Only later – after the trauma of the yobbo thing had waned a little and they were rejoicing in Narelle’s good news – did the pessimism return, the piercing awareness that having this girl in his life was too good to be true and wasn’t meant to last.

How to fathom the contrariness of it? The feeling of being happy deflated his morale and threw him into confusion, while the awareness of peril and doom steadied him and made everything seem coherent, even if it was a coherence of anguish. He knew
there was a poem in this. It might just be about a person being Damaged Goods. On the other hand it might be something more. It might be about some people having a talent for happiness and others having a talent for despair. The phrase “a talent for despair” struck him deeply. That could be the poem’s title, and most times when he hit on a title he began to see the full gist of the idea. He started to pursue it in his mind while still half-listening to Narelle.

“Ah, look who’s there!” Narelle said suddenly.

The yellow Mini had pulled up in front of the shop and they could see Bambi in the passenger seat.

“Let’s say hello,” Narelle said and got up.

As they headed to the front of the shop, Jade came in and stood at the counter. He returned their greetings with a curt nod.

Bambi rolled her window down and smiled out at them.

“How are you?” Narelle asked, bending down.

“Better every day,” Bambi replied. “If I get any fitter I’ll be dangerous.”

“It’s so great to see you out and about,” Narelle declared.

So the two of them chatted for a minute until Jade came back with the cigarettes he’d bought and got in on the driver’s side.

“I rang that lady,” Bambi said. “About the Pioneer Museum.”

“Megan.”

“Megan, yes. She said I’d be very welcome to be a helper there.”

“Of course you would.”

“I might start in a couple of weeks, perhaps.”

“Yes, do,” Narelle said. “I’m on duty there most Saturday mornings. We could do it together, if you like, to begin with. Or you might prefer to work with Gillian. She’s there at certain times too.”

“Saturday mornings with you sounds nice,” said Bambi.

“Great. Let me give you my work-number at the Plaza newsagency. That’s the best place to reach me.”

She borrowed Tait’s pen and notepad to jot the number and gave it to Bambi.

Jade sat passively staring through the windscreen until Bambi was ready to go. They drove off in fume of smoke from the Mini’s exhaust.
Tait needed to jot down the essence of what he’d been thinking about when he was interrupted. He had to make sure it didn’t slip away. It was dismaying how easily that could happen. An idea burgeons in your mind and seems unforgettable, and then there’s a moment of distraction and its gone and you never get it back. Or if you do get it back it feels inert and you can never quite re-animate it, never quite recover the *frisson*. You find that most of the little tingling nerve-ends of implication have gone.

He jotted down the phrase “a talent for despair” and put the note-pad in his shirt pocket and buttoned the pocket-flap over it. That phrase was enough. The *frisson* was safely held in it. At least he hoped so.

They got to the Green Room ten minutes before the meeting was due to start. Francesca arrived at the same time and the three of them found seats together at the back. Francesca was now heavily pregnant. She looked tired but declared that getting out of the house on her own for once was an absolute tonic.

“You don’t know what its like,” she said, “to have endless juvenile demands coming at you. And the kids are just as bad!”

Narelle was talking to someone next to her, and Francesca chatted to Gillian who was just in front of them. Tait was able to steal long glances at Francesca’s face from the side. He found her as beautiful as ever and felt a stab of intense yearning that almost made him wince. He wished they could go out and sit in the back of her car like in the old days. For a few moments he felt utterly bereft. Then Narelle absent-mindedly stroked his thigh as she went on chatting with the person beside her. It reminded him that he wasn’t bereft after all and wouldn’t necessarily have to die of longing and loneliness.

Megan declared the meeting open and Tait vaguely registered that her voice and manner seemed a touch flat. The minutes were read and then came the usual droning discussions about how many thousand paper cups they should bulk-buy, and how the insurance cover had gone up, and how Council had complained again about the untidy state of the hall.

Mona was in the front row. She sat leaning forward, like a jittery cat waiting to leap on its prey.

The meeting was opened for General Business and Mona jumped in first and launched a passionate spiel about the Mission Statement. The Players needed one. They were lagging behind the times. They needed to show that they were an ethical,
principled group with a commitment to contemporary values. What did they stand for? What did they believe in? What was their purpose? Why shouldn’t they nail their colours to the masthead and put their cards on the table and look the world in the eye?

She sounded very sincere, very concerned, and there were some murmurs of agreement.

When she’d finished, Megan invited comments. Again her voice didn’t quite have its usual vibrancy.

Kelvin spoke first and Tait expected him to go at it strongly, but he sounded peevish and irritable and not altogether interested. He said the only apt Mission Statement for the Players would be a four-word one: “Anything for a giggle.” Whatever else they came up with would be a total crock of crap. Then he folded his arms and stared at some point on the wall.

Gillian said she agreed with Kelvin. The only “purpose” of the group was to have fun and good times. And of course to present good theatre. They hadn’t needed a Mission Statement all these years and she didn’t see why they needed one now.

Then Therese spoke up on Mona’s side. She observed that Mission Statements were becoming the norm and she didn’t see why the Turrawong Players should be out of step with the world.

Tait began to worry.

Therese was one of their best directors and the person around whom a loose “opposition” faction revolved. Tait had only ever been dimly conscious of this faction until Narelle outlined it all to him in some detail not long back. It tended to attract those who resented Megan’s ascendancy and who therefore disliked what they saw as her clique of cronies. Megan’s Mafia, they called it. That meant Kelvin, of course, and Marigold, and Gillian and Francesca and Tait himself and a number of others. Tait was astonished to learn that the faction held Francesca in particular scorn. They considered her a supercilious cow, an over-rated prima donna, a ruthless up-stager, and a slacker who never did her share of the menial chores.

“I thought you knew all this,” Narelle had said.

“No, I didn’t,” he’d replied. “But then again, I suppose I did know at a certain level but never chose to dwell on it. Typical of me: sharp as a tack about some things and a total dill about others.”

“Don’t call my lover a dill.”
“What then?”

“Relaxed on the uptake, let’s say.”

“Seems like the same thing.”

“It is, but it sounds more caring.”

“Gee, what a pal. But how did you come to perceive so much?”

“Well,” she replied, looking slightly uncomfortable. “I kind of gravitated to that lot for a while. I wasn’t exactly Francesca’s greatest fan back when she was the Light of Your Life, and I enjoyed hanging out with people whose opinion of her was no better than mine. But I got over it because I didn’t want to belong to a set that you weren’t part of.”

A lot of things fell into place after that. Tait recalled snide remarks he had overheard, catty whispers, odd little hissy-fits and clashes of temperament, a few peculiar casting decisions Therese had made. In particular he recalled various little coldnesses towards Francesca which had vaguely puzzled him at the time.

But the faction had never got out of hand. Therese cared far more about theatre than politicking, and anyway she and her friends always got a reasonable share of whatever was going. It wasn’t as though they’d ever been closed-out.

But now, at the meeting, a whole new scenario came clear in Tait’s mind.

This Mona creature wasn’t just an individual pest, but the Leninist agitator type who could take over a faction and use it to wreak havoc. There was something Sabina Sharpe-ish about her, though at a lower level of intelligence.

He realized Megan must be perfectly aware of this whole scenario. No doubt she understood that the Players could live with a faction under someone like Therese but never under a Mona type.

The discussion went on for another little while and the opinion seemed about evenly poised. That was worrying, but Tait told himself it would be alright. It was Megan’s job as president to sum up the issue and provide an overview and some guidance. She was brilliant at that and had such an air of unforced authority that she could always carry the meeting with her if she wanted to. But now Tait saw that she was struggling. She was too upright, as though holding herself together with an effort, and her face was wan and her eyes listless. He noticed too that Marigold, in the treasurer’s chair, had her hand resting reassuringly on Megan’s arm. Kelvin had said that Megan was unwell. Now Tait could see it for himself.
We might get beaten on this, he thought.

He had to assume that only three people in the room understood the full thrust of what was going on — Megan, Mona, and himself. If Megan was partly out of action he should try to take up the slack. But he needed to hurry. The discussion was about to end. If only he’d anticipated this and had some notes up his sleeve.

He got the nod to speak last and began slowly, giving himself time to think.

Mona’s idea was a serious one, he said, and they should pay her the compliment of not underestimating it. It was serious because a Mission Statement was not just a harmless piece of window dressing, wasn’t just a flourish of good intentions to pin up on the wall and show what nice people we are. It might appear to be a mere harmless flourish, but it carried a political agenda and promoted certain attitudes at the expense of others. Mona had urged, for example, that they get in line with “contemporary values,” and that meant pushing the whole social atmosphere of the Players in a certain direction. If you want to go in that direction of your own free will as an individual, that’s fine, but you should understand that having it written up as a collective pledge or policy makes it a matter of coercion.

There were two basic issues here, he said. One was about Control and the other was about Trust.

The Control issue was this. A Mission Statement appears to be a sign of openness and transparency, but in fact it only serves to restrict the sense of possibilities, to limit the breadth of real awareness. You could almost call it “the tyranny of narrow definitions.” Members of a theatre group ought to appreciate that better than anyone, for they see all the time that a play is infinitely more than just the printed script. It is also the silence between the lines, the power of what is not being said or stipulated. It is a thousand intangible factors which can’t be planned or accounted for, things which exist in the flash of the moment or the subtle realms of artistry. It is mood and memory and sorrow and love and delight. It is light and dark and colour and design. It is facial expressions and body language and tones of voice and the whole mysterious chemistry of personality. And that’s merely a play. Life itself, the life of something like the Turrawong Players, is infinitely more complex still. It is what the poet Philip Larkin called the million-petalled flower of being here. To foist a Mission Statement on all this, to seek to bring it under some glib form of words, to subject it to the
tyranny of narrow definitions, would only show that we don’t understand the beauty and mystery of what we about as a theatrical group.

The Trust issue was this. A Mission Statement is not a sign that you can trust ethical principles to apply. It is rather a sign that you can’t trust them to apply. It is a declaration that common decency and civility are now so demeaned and ineffectual that they must be bolstered by infantile formulas of promise or admonition. It’s exactly like Nanny pinning up a sign: *In this nursery, good children don’t want to hit each other!* The sign tells you infallibly that in this nursery the children do want to hit each other. Or take the example of a smarmy notice on the wall of a government office or a big corporation, telling you how dedicated they are to our well-being. We know they don’t give a stuff about our well-being, and the more smarmy signs on the wall the less confidence we feel. A Mission Statement is the same kind of fraud. It symbolizes at least two of the worst features of modern life — spin-doctoring and moral grandstanding. Both are deeply manipulative, and both widen the gap between image and reality and thereby undermine people’s basic trust in each other and in the ordinary processes of this world…

He’d never spoken so well. The phrases clicked into place like magic and you could’ve heard a pin drop in the room. Mona had glared at him at first but was now drooping lower and lower in her seat. Megan appeared to have regained her focus and gave little nods of agreement as Tait made his points. Neil the Wheel was standing just inside the door, his big torch dangling from his belt, having come in from patrolling the carpark. He gazed at Tait as if a Martian had materialized and was addressing them in an unknown tongue.

Tait thought of a quote from *Doctor Zhivago* that would be the perfect clincher to his whole argument. The frozen and starving Zhivago is reading Bolshevik proclamations on a noticeboard and perceives that in their mad hectoring is the whole murderous delusion of the modern age.

*Have they no memory? Don’t they remember their own plans and measures? Have they forgotten that by these measures they have left no stone standing upon stone? What kind of people must they be to go on raving with this never-cooling, feverish ardour, year in, year out, of things which are non-existent, of themes which have long vanished, and to know nothing, to see nothing, of the reality*
which surrounds them?

Yes, he could reel it off verbatim. He paused a moment, his heart captured by the power of Pasternak’s words. But then he sensed he’d be pressing the arty-farty intellectual thing too far. He needed to come back to earth and wrap it up. He was lucky to have held their attention this long. He mustn’t blow it.

To conclude, he said, he would just cite Therese’s point when she asked why the Players should be out of step with the rest of the world.

“I can’t speak for anyone else,” he said, “but when I look at the state of the world outside this room I can’t help thinking to myself, the more out of step we are the better!”

He sat back down and both Narelle and Francesca patted him and whispered approval.

Megan called for a show of hands on whether the members wanted to take the Mission Statement proposal any further.

Mona was defeated by a significant margin and went home as soon as the meeting ended.

Megan didn’t stay either, but she made a point of thanking Tait for his input.

“You won it for us, my dear,” she said, with a tired smile, patting him on the shoulder.

Tait felt as though he’d had a medal pinned on him.

Marigold took her home then, while Gillian explained what had apparently happened. Megan had been put on a new medication that day and had had a very bad reaction to it. She’d had a weird turn in the car-park when she arrived and had gone on feeling woozy but still felt able to chair the meeting.

Francesca left then, after giving Tait a friendly hug and Narelle a peck on the cheek.

“You’re hot stuff when the gift of the gab comes on you!” she told him with a grin as she started her car. “We’ll have to be careful. God knows what you might talk us all into. Or out of.”

He and Narelle decided to go back to her room at Cathy’s house for the night. It was only three streets away. It was something they did occasionally when they’d been at the Green Room and it was getting late and they didn’t feel either like separating or going all the way home to the cabin.
Narelle went back inside to fetch her bag and Tait stood looking up at the high square structure at the rear of the Court building, the dark watchtower of the Regime. It loomed there all the time, but sometimes it looked more actively malignant than at other times. At this moment it looked inactive, as though the forces it represented had suffered a slight check somewhere along their vast lines and there was a pause while this was being factored-in.

It was as though the high command at Mordor was taking a moment to reflect.
But it would only be a moment.

* * * *

The shop across the road was now trading as a video rental place. It also had bread and milk and soft drinks and chocolates and potato-chips. Tait had gone in to get some milk and browse the stock of videos and found himself being talked to by the lady there. Her name was Lynette and she was ruddy-faced and frizzy-haired. She knew how talkative she was.

“Don’t mind me,” she’d told Tait. “Talk the tail off a floppin brass monkey, I would!”

There was a daughter, Mindy, who was about fourteen and in one of Gillian’s classes at Turrawong High. There was also a husband who worked at the power station, but Tait hardly ever saw him.

Tait had been put off, initially, by Lynette asking him about his writing. She’d been told all about the weirdo writer at the cabin who never spoke to anyone and had a lot of guns.

“Guns?”

“I heard you’re a gun-freak,” Lynette said. “That’s what they reckon, anyhow.”

“Ah, I see,” Tait said, and bent his head to continue browsing along the video racks. He didn’t want to encourage this kind of rumour by even denying it. He thought it was interesting, though, the way a thing gets changed in the telling, like that game of Chinese Whispers. It was like the way folklore happens. He had once been in the news for doing something with a gun, so he must be a gun-freak.

“D’you go roo-shootin, or what?”

“No,” Tait said in a clipped tone that he hoped would discourage her.
“Pig-shootin?”
“No.”
“Target-shootin?”
“No.”
“Bird-shootin?”
“No.”
“Bottle-shootin?”
“No.”
“That’s alright,” Lynette declared, getting the message. “Don’t mind me. I’d stick me nose in a floppin bee-hive, I would!”

But Tait was glad he’d gone over that day. He had got a new poem out of it, or, rather, he’d been able to clinch the one he’d been toying with, the one about some people having a talent for despair. Because of going to the shop he’d been able to clinch it quickly and in a single vivid surge of comprehension. He was always pleased when it happened like that because it seemed, as he expressed it to himself, more like Inspiration than Perspiration.

On the wall above the video racks Lynette had stuck some reproductions of old movie posters. One of them was for the classic Western, *Shane*. Tait had seen it on TV not long before and now he began to dwell on the meaning of it. And Lynette’s thing about being a gun-freak connected to his line of thought.

The film related a rich poetic myth, but with a kind of threadbare style and texture that made it seem like real life. You could almost feel the mud, the cold, the rawness, the bare subsistence of it all. It was exactly what Hemingway would have come up with if he’d ever written a Western. And Shane was a Hemingway hero — a man damaged in his soul, detached, ironic, but nursing a last fragment of idealism, a final gleam of inviolable honour.

Thinking about *Shane*, he had found his thoughts going to another classic movie, *The Seven Samurai*, and that made the whole concept come clear. Both films depicted men without community who nonetheless come forward to fight on community’s behalf. Shane does it for the struggling homesteaders against the cattle-baron’s gunmen, and the Samurai do it for the peasant villagers against the bandits. They were the damaged men who have the suicidal courage to defend *gemeinschaft* against all odds. Men with normal hopes of happiness don’t want to do it. Why would they? It is
because of their normal hopes that they will try to avoid the worst kinds of trouble if they can, will try to wriggle away, or will quietly toe the line and wait to see if things improve. But the damaged men have a talent for despair and know that trouble seeks you out and that things only ever get worse and that you might as well go into the fight now, for whatever its worth.

You could say they are the ones who know the truth of Trotsky’s words: “You may not be interested in war, but war is interested in you.”

Tait saw how closely it all tied in with Robert Connell and those others who joined the Prince against all the odds and all the promptings of ordinary common sense. No doubt they too were damaged men, men with a talent for despair, men who would therefore step forward when most others wouldn’t.

But what a heartbreaking insight, Tait thought: The unhappy go forth to fight for the happiness of the world.

He suddenly understood that this was the “terrible beauty” that Yeats perceived in the Easter Rising. That was what had stalked through the GPO and was embodied in Pearse and the others — the blood-sacrifice that damaged men make of themselves at the altar of the world’s wholeness.

And it also connected to what Chesterton said about an attitude to life not based on optimism but on something tougher and leaner and more fatalistic, and more mythic too, something like military loyalty.

But of course everything connects to everything once you begin to look at it. That’s Larkin’s million-petalled flower of being here.

Typing out the finished poem, and staring through his window at the lake, Tait remembered that he still hadn’t caught up with the Ellicotts to wish them farewell. For weeks he’d been intending to. They’d be gone as soon as their house was sold. They might even be gone already. He hadn’t been past to see if the For Sale sign was still up. He just didn’t go down that way anymore.

His route to Turrawong on the motorbike was now longer and more nerve-wracking than ever. He had to go up past Errol’s and through to the highway and then endure twenty minutes hugging the very edge of the road, the traffic hurtling by within an arm’s-length, nearly being knocked aside by the buffet of air from every roaring semi-trailer. The motorbike itself had been getting sluggish and was often hard to start and if it should need costly repairs he’d be up the creek. He had put his hand out for
another Arts Council grant but would have to survive until the payments kicked-in, that was assuming that his application was successful. It might not be. His image as a bright young talent might be starting to wear thin. And besides, he was now getting a reputation for being politically incorrect. Sooner or later the grants would stop and he’d have to face the inherent brutal fact of his life-after-custody: that he was trying to subsist on a poet’s vocation that wouldn’t keep a bandicoot alive.

He knew if he wasn’t careful he could slip into the old downward spiral of dread and misery. He had to put up a front to himself, pretend to be more upbeat than he was. What was that old dictum of the church that Bro had once quoted to him? *Perform the acts of faith and faith will come*.

It was late afternoon and he was determined to call on the Ellicotts, but as he walked down his driveway Jimmy Sale turned in the gate in the work car with the regional health logo on it. Jimmy said he’d been with distressed clients all day and was frazzled and needed a quiet sit, a dose of *cabin-therapy*, as he called it.

Jimmy too had been trying to stay upbeat. He’d been angry with himself for buying that Red Box from the Intrigue Perfume people and had initially tried to return it and get a refund. But of course they had a dozen smooth comebacks as to why that wasn’t possible and Jimmy gave up and shoved the wretched thing in a cupboard and tried to forget about it. Then he decided that since he was saddled with it he might see if he could at least try to get a few orders for the perfume. The perfume itself was genuine, even if nothing else was. He’d been putting in time after work and on weekends, knocking on doors and hanging about in malls and shopping centres, trying to entice people to sniff his little sample bottles. He did get a few orders. And his son Toby liked doing the rounds with him, so it wasn’t quite as numbing as he’d feared.

The main worry just now, Jimmy said, was that the Regime was homing in on Roger. It was ridiculously easy to do. A community mental health nurse walked a tightrope at the best of times, interacting all day long with depressed, angry, paranoid or whacked-out individuals. A proportion of clients always felt badly done by and made complaints and accusations. It was the nature of the job and the job could only be done at all if the nurse’s colleagues at every level gave steady support, kept to the rule that a complaint must have a high inherent plausibility before it would be credited. The rule had its drawbacks of course, but Tait understood the broad logic of it from his own experience in custody. When he reported that male nurse for bashing
a patient he hadn’t expected the system to take his unsupported word. But several of
the staff had also witnessed the event and all except the superb Erica had chosen to
deny what they’d seen. It was a filthy episode, yet even then Tait hadn’t doubted the
general correctness of the rule. It meant a rogue nurse might get away with a good
deal of mischief, but it also meant that nurses weren’t being strung-up every five
minutes on the say-so of the mad or the malicious. It meant that nursing, per se, could
go on. You have to assume that people are trying to do the right thing, otherwise
society begins grinding itself to pieces. The wear and tear of every human interaction
becomes intolerable. And this of course was the root pathology of the modern era.
Tait had just read a book called Young Man Luther, by Erik Erikson, and had been
deeply struck by a distinction it drew between “basic trust” and that “radical
suspicion” that the Puritan mentality had fostered and let loose in the world. Erikson’s
analysis was very like that of Tawney with his notions of the Sacrament and the
Snare. And Erikson had given an early quote of Luther’s, one that illuminated the
commissarial mindset better than anything. “The more you cleanse yourself,” Luther
said, “the dirtier you get.” There was the whole self-defeating frenzy, the relentless
worsening of the very ills that are supposedly being cured. The assumption that a
nurse can be trusted with a patient was as necessary to a sane universe as the
assumption that a parent can be trusted with their child, or that friends will help each
other, or that your next-door neighbours aren’t planning to murder you. The rule was
to do with wholeness, with seeing the big picture, with knowing the trade-offs
required to keep the fellowship intact and life’s affairs in motion. It was the essence
of gemeinschaft. It was what Shane had defended, what the Seven Samurai had
upheld. Why should they have bothered if there wasn’t an intrinsic goodness there?
They fought the wrongdoers because they had sided with something else, something
that had many faults but was nonetheless in its broad nature the opposite of
wrongdoing. And when wrongdoing clearly occurs you understand it as the exception
that proves the rule, as a departure from the norm, a norm which is then even more
necessary to believe in, so to offset the damage done. That faith in the abiding norm
was beautifully put in a line in The Seven Samurai. Tait had written it down and put it
on the Blue Board. “The wind blows across the land but the land remains.” Being
themselves riders of the wind, Shane and those Samurai could see the truth of it with
peculiar tragic intensity. You could call that kind of tragic intensity honour, the more
tragic the more heroic. It was the essence of an honour-system. The alternative was
the unnatural victory of the wind over the land, so to speak — the demonic whirl, the
pathological chaos, the endless war of all against all, the world as nothing but a crime-
scene, a wasteland of radical suspicion.

There was a quote of Burke’s that summed it up for Tait. Acknowledging the
number of “daring profligates and insidious hypocrites” in circulation, Burke goes on
to ask: “What then? Am I not to avail myself of whatever good is to be found in the
world, because of the mixture of evil that will always be in it?”

But the Regime could betray that principle any time it liked in relation to its own
operatives, just as it was already betraying it in relation to the mass of ordinary people
who were being fitted-up for the crime scene, dehumanized into mere grist for the
mill of Anarcho-Tyranny.

Tait had been gazing out the window, lost in his own thoughts. Now he realized
Jimmy was explaining about Roger’s predicament.

“One of the crazy clients rang the office and said Roger had stolen clothes out of his
wardrobe.”

“What, had pinched his Napoleon uniform?”

“Something like that. Roger was hauled in and given a venomous little pep-talk
about it, about how he needn’t worry, that they were a hundred per cent behind him,
etcetera. It was meant to rattle him. It was a threat. ‘We can’t get you on this piece of
crap, but as soon as something comes along with an ounce of plausibility we’re gonna
hang you out to dry.’”

“And the message was aimed at you as well, no doubt.”

“Of course. If they pick one of us off, the other will next.”

“What can you do?”

“Try to sell more frigging perfume, I guess, so I can leave the system altogether. The
atmosphere gets worse every day. There’s something new brewing just now, a big
new case in the area. But the Hyenas are keeping it very much to themselves. They’ve
smelt the blood of some juicy prey they don’t intend to share.”

Between themselves they had begun to refer to the Hounds of Halifax as the Hyenas
after Mike Kieslowski sent one of his incisive little four-line poems.
THE SOCIAL WORKERS

Hyenas will encourage a stampede
To see which ailing zebra falls behind.
They’re nature’s social workers and inclined
To feel most altruistic when they feed.

“You’ve no idea what they’re up to?”
“Nothing more than an inkling. That’s another way they attack you, of course — by keeping you out of the loop. I’ve had a whisper, though, that it relates to the family that runs the hamburger shop down the road.”
“Really? Hell’s Kitchen, I call that place.”
“Yes, you told me.”
“Talk about dysfunctional. Are they supposed to have abused their brats, or what?”
“Who knows?” Jimmy said with a shrug, probably feeling that he shouldn’t have mentioned it.
“I wouldn’t put anything past those people.”
“I don’t know them. Only what you’ve told me.”
“They’re feral.”
“Well, they’ll be no match for the Hyenas, I can tell you. Nobody is.”
“If it was anyone else,” Tait said, “I’d pity them.”

***

Francesca gave birth to her fourth and last child, another girl, and they called her Clare.

After an heroically long and difficult labour, Caroline Kieslowski gave birth to a son the same week. Alexander they named him, in honour of Solzhenitsyn.

The news of Alexander’s arrival came in a letter that Mike enclosed with a clipping. Sabina Sharpe had reviewed Ground Leave in a trendy lit-crit journal that was of course an organ of the Enemy. The review was entitled “Paranoid Prose” and there was an awful tabloid photo of Tait from long ago. It showed him being led between two coppers down a alleyway outside a court building. He could vaguely recall the
occasion. There had been flashlights going off and yells of “Look this way! Look this way!” His expression in the photo was somewhere between imbecilic and unhinged.

He smoothed the clipping out on the table and then read Mike’s letter.

The first bit was about his pride in his wife’s fortitude, and his joy in his firstborn. “Caroline was superb,” he wrote. “I will never have the words to do her justice. Until you see your own woman go through it you have no idea. As for the babe, he battled his way into the world like a little hero. That’s why we decided to call him after the greatest man of our time. Needless to say my mum and dad are nearly bursting with happiness at becoming grandparents. They’d almost given up hope. My mother sits by the hour talking to the amazing infant in Polish. She wants him to know the sound of his ancestral tongue.”

Then the tone became graver.

“But to turn to quite other realms… You will see from the clipping that the Toxic Razorblade has done a job on your book and on you personally. It appears I might have done you a disservice. She obviously saw my review in Compact and set out to counter it. I feared at the time that I might be drawing you into a firefight that you didn’t necessarily want. Having touted your book as a blow against the whole regime of modernity, I had to expect the other side would come out shooting. But then again, mate, if we won’t pick a fight with these Whited Sepulchers, who will?”

Tait didn’t quite know what Whited Sepulchers meant, but he agreed about the need to be willing to pick a fight. It was a case of, “If not now, when? If not us, who?”

Tait’s poetry, Sabina wrote, could be said to have shown a degree of promise, and even some accomplishment – albeit disturbingly marked, in the view of a number of perceptive critics, by elements of conceptual brutality and misogynist contempt. These darker aspects might nonetheless have been transcended in due course as the shadow of mental disorder and criminal violence receded from the poet’s own life. At any rate, those who cared about the health of our literary culture – and about the humanity of a disturbed individual – had wished him well. It was therefore disheartening to have to report that Tait’s recent move into prose and the short-story form was backward step on a number of grounds.

She spent a few paragraphs outlining the stylistic crudity and poverty of characterization, then moved to the main attack.
Ground Leave, she declared, was a reactionary tract of desperate audacity. Predictably praised by the extreme Right, the book seemed determined to exploit some of the most tragic of society’s victims – the mentally ill – as pawns in an ideological attack on the very concept of human betterment or even the humane impulse to ameliorate suffering.

Solzhenitsyn’s name, she went on, crops up a number of times in the work, and Tait’s stance as a chronicler of the madhouse was not unlike that of the discredited Slavophile nationalist’s pose as chronicler of the so-called Gulag. The bottom line, in both cases, is that the inmates are never the focus of compassion in themselves, but only insofar as they might serve as a stick with which to beat all progressive values. A cruel example was the misogynistic piece about the so-called “Fat Girl” whom the author exhibits in the manner of side-show freak.

Tait’s quarrel with the institution, she continued, is not that it falls short of its own stated mission of growth and healing and empowerment, but that it ever took up such a mission at all. He argues instead for the regressive idea of the “asylum,” a refuge in which the inmates can simply “be themselves” – for the rest of their lives if necessary – and not have pesky modern definitions of sanity or selfhood foisted on them by those he likes to vilify as progressivist parasites.

In other words, she went on, Tait wants something like a medieval village of mindless peasants, content to loll in their dirt and ignorance – albeit with some quaint religious rigmarole, a dash of folk-art and the occasional skip round the Maypole. He yearns for an ancien regime of supposedly benign neglect, run by drunken lecherous lords as brutal and complacent as their serfs.

This book advocates a worldview that would leave humanity in a pigsty forever, she concluded. It is a sort of “blood and soil” dogma, conceived at the most vicious level, and applied to a modern psychiatric institution. Given the setting, it was not inappropriate to call Tait’s latest effort a demented book. Alas, she wrote, it wasn’t even entertaining dementia.

Sabina had awaited her chance. The taipan had struck.

Actually, Tait was impressed that she’d written in normal English, with almost no obfuscating jargon at all. He had to grant her some marks for that. And she wasn’t too far off in the main thrust of her comments. Ground Leave was indeed “reactionary.” It
was meant to be. And her linking him with Solzhenitsyn was the greatest unintended praise he could get.

Narelle was angry though, when she read the clipping, and declared she wanted to “punch the bitch’s lights out.”

“What are Whited Sepulchers?” Tait asked her. “Do you know?”

“It’s from the Bible, isn’t it? Something Jesus said. I think it means ‘hypocrites.’”

Tait had bought himself a Bible when he’d begun going to Mass with Narelle on Sunday evenings. All the actual words of Jesus were printed in red and that helped in locating the reference at Mathew 23:27. Whited sepulchers are tombs that have been whitewashed, so they appear bright and fresh on the outside but are full of corruption within.

It was a good metaphor for hypocrisy, and for modernity too, the hypocritical era to beat them all. And how well it tied in with Trilling’s point about the hulks and the rats and the murder that underlie all the Great Expectations of the age.

Tait thought of how Sabina Sharpe had been on that “Harrassment Task-Force” at Castleton University. Now there was a Whited Sepulcher for you — a rabid enemy of all genuine fellowship glibly crusading against particular breaches of fellowship, hoping to alienate people even more from one another, labouring to propagate more hulks and rats under the guise of another hogwash of Great Expectations. The aim was to bring about a campus and a world where there would be no “harassment” because no one would want to relate to anyone else in the first place, or dare take the risk even if they did want to, where no intimate look or touch could ever give offence because none would ever be offered.

It was like Milosz’s point about the Imperium wanting the whole population locked in separate cells, or like the great defining statement by Tacitus, that they make a desolation and call it peace.

They’d called it a “Task” Force, Tait reflected, but it was really engaged in an “Anti-Task” — the task of nihilism and of communal suicide, of the deliberate sawing-off of the branch we all sit on, the great project of removing the sun from the sky, of forbidding the grass to grow, of abolishing the Windmill and the Wind together.

He recalled his idea of the Rightful Task. Now he saw how the Anti-Task stood in relation. He began thinking of Shakespeare’s character Iago, the psychopath who wreaks total havoc in *Othello*. That play was about honourable people engaged in
their Rightful Tasks of love and duty, but being destroyed by one unremitting agent of the Anti-Task. The boon companion and loyal counselor is in fact a kind of wrecking-machine on legs, or a type of relentless toxic force, like some deadly radiation, or like a plague-germ. Yes, Shakespeare knew all about the Anti-Task, just as he knew about everything else.

It was important to read *Othello* again.

And to have a good long reflective sit in Astrid’s Meadow. It was too long since he’d done that. His mental life was increasingly tense and he felt full of dread.

* * * *

He had finished the poem about Narelle and the little calming routine she followed each night in bed before she turned the light out.

**TO A WOMAN READING THE WIND IN THE WILLOWS**

*Looking through the door an inch ajar*

*I see you curled up with your favourite book.*

*I wonder where precisely now you are,*

*What green, familiar, friendly path you took –*

*Ignore them, the neurotic and the driven,*

*Who’d say your book’s a trivial escape.*

*What harm if an imagined land is given*

*A simpler ethos and a gentler shape?*

*What fitter story could a grown-up find*

*Than one which makes uncomplicated sense*

*Of things like being brave and being kind,*

*Of virtues so important and immense?*

*And just as stories help the young rehearse*

*Their courage at the level they can bear,*
They do the same for us – except we’ve worse
Than boogies in the shadow of the stair.

Our Wild Wood is truly dark and deep,
And no adult who knows it will deride
The fact you find it comforting to keep
Ratty and Mole and Badger at your side.

Tait always tried to dwell as little as possible in what he called Tabloidworld. But there were always tabloid posters on display outside Errol’s newsagency and he had a battle of wills with himself every time he rode past. The posters were often vicious and stupid beyond belief and he didn’t want to pollute himself by even glancing at them. On the other hand, their very viliness gave them a horrifying allure. There was a phrase of Conrad’s in *Heart of Darkness*: “The fascination of the abomination.” It was as though the posters gave off a serpent-like whisper, even when your eyes were turned away: “Come on, just take a quick peek. Come on. You know you want to.” Sometimes he resisted and rode on past without a glance. Other times he succumbed, even though he knew he’d be simmering over it for hours afterwards.

It seemed to him that everything on the posters was either about cheapening the heart or dislocating the mind. These were the two key thrusts of the modern media’s Anti-Task. These were the twin essentials of the Imperium’s agenda. The cheapening was done with items that made a kind of sense, but at the moral level of vomit on a public lavatory floor. Things like: WEEPING KIDS TELL: WE SAW MUM EATEN BY SHARK! And the dislocation was done with bizarre fragments that made no sense but floated in a cuckoo-space of fatuous disconnection. Things like: SHOCK NEW LAW: BABIES TO GO TO SCHOOL! The aim was to make the world both loveless and meaningless, to make it a place where there was nothing left that might threaten the rule of the death-lords of modernity.

On the Monday he stole a glimpse at a poster that yelled: COASTAL LAKES OUTRAGE! PEDOPHILE RING UNCOVERED!

On the Tuesday he flicked his eyes quickly over: LAKES CHILD-SEX RING! PERVERT SCUM!
On the Wednesday it was: LAKES RINGLEADER! WE EXPOSE EVIL “MR SWINGS” – PHOTOS!

On the Thursday he groaned and tried to avert his eyes from, MR SWINGS EVIL BOAST: “I’M NOT SORRY!”

By Friday the references to ‘MR SWINGS’ were all over the place.

In other words it was a standard week of trying to stay out of Tabloidworld, of being aware of a blitz of manufactured rage and hysteria but trying not to allow more than a sliver of it into his consciousness. It was just another week in the twilight zone of modern life where anything is possible and nothing is real.

Tait avoided the news on radio or TV, as always. Nor did he exchange more than a word or two with anyone other than Narelle, and she was absorbed in her own stuff just then, having a new poem on the boil.

“For these few days,’ she’d said to him, sitting on the bed at the cabin, “I only have time for life’s two fundamentals, poetry and sex.”

“In that order?” Tait had asked.

“It depends. Right this minute I only care about the sex, but as soon as I’ve slaked my animal lust on you, the poetry will be right back up there.”

“Oh dear, not more slaking,” he had sighed.

Afterwards they lay in each other’s arms as the night deepened outside.

“Are you okay?” she asked softly.

“Yes. Why?”

“You seem a bit depressed or something”

“Do you ever get filled with dread?” he asked.

“Not so much since we’ve been together. You steady me and give me confidence.”

“Good.”

“Do I steady you and give you confidence?”

“You do,” he answered, hugging her close.

“Things are going to be good for us,” she said. “I’ve got the uni to go to next year at Ridwell. You’ll get another grant and forge further ahead with your work. Remember that good omen of the hawk sitting on the tap? Don’t you see a good future for us?”

“Yes, I do,” he said.

He wished it were completely true.
On the Friday evening he was in Turrawong. There was to be a meeting of the Players sub-committee to decide about the end of year production. He was sure it would give the go-ahead for a program of three of his one-act comedies under the collective title, *Tickle Your Fancy*. The main thing was to block Commissar Mona from being appointed to direct one of them. He wasn’t in the mood for conflict, though, and was hoping that Kelvin would clinch it with a minimum of fuss. Kelvin was going to be available to direct, now that he had broken up with Rory and had obtained a refund on those holiday bookings. That would mean Kelvin, Narelle and Tait in charge of the three plays and sucks to The Moaner.

Narelle had stuff to do at home and would go straight to the Green Room later. In the meantime Tait had three hours to wait.

He wished he didn’t have to go to the Players at all that evening, or give the least thought to plays, his own or anyone else’s. He had a splitting headache and felt drained of energy and only wanted to lie down. He wondered if he had a fatal illness. He trudged wearily to the Plaza and into the supermarket. He thought he saw Jade and Bundle wheeling a trolley and moved in another direction. He was standing in a corner, staring blankly at a jar of asparagus when he felt a touch on his arm.

It was Hester.

She looked awful, like of someone who’s been put through a wringer of misery.

“Isn’t it all just vile?” she said.

“Yes,” he nodded, knowing just what she meant. One part of his mind felt unnaturally clear and acute. He knew that this was not a good sign.

“I still can’t believe it’s happened,” Hester said.

“Its the people at the hamburger shop, isn’t it?”

“Yes, they’re the accusers.”

“They’re the accusers?”

“Yes. Or their dirty rotten brats are, to be more exact.”

“Who are they accusing?”

But he knew the answer already in the unnaturally lucid part of his mind, and the look on Hester’s face confirmed it before she could reply.

The diabolical “Mr Swings” was Mr Ellicott, and his Wicked Paedophile Ring was his elderly wife and his Serbian neighbour.
Tait and Hester talked for a while. She’d been shell-shocked after being questioned by the police. All the neighbours had been grilled, and there’d been fiendish reporters trying to get their foot in everyone’s door. She had come from a long session with her solicitor that afternoon. She had wanted to know about her own position in the event that she was accused of anything. She’d also asked what help she could be to her falsely-accused friends.

“He told me not to be foolish, not to stick my neck out. He said it was the advice he’d give his own flesh and blood. He said that in many categories of alleged offence, now, age-old concepts of justice are out the window. Guilt by association is becoming the rule, and the presumption of innocence is being trashed.”

“All the accusations uttered here are true,” Tait intoned grimly. “We make them true.”

“What?” Hester asked.

“A quote from… um….”

For a moment he’d forgotten who he was quoting. He had lapsed out of the clear part of his mind. Then it came back.

“Orwell. In Nineteen Eighty-Four.”

“And of course,” Hester went on, “there’s the fact that Mavis Ellicott used to have people round for afternoon tea. Now those people are all scared they’ll be accused of something because they visited the house once or twice.”

Tait said he’d only seen the poster headlines of it all and didn’t know any of the details. Where were the Ellicotts and Mr Dragovic now?

Hester said the two men were in custody pending their next court appearance, while Mrs Ellicott had been granted bail and was staying with her daughter in the city.

“I’m trying to keep an eye on the two houses. To see they aren’t broken into or anything. But my solicitor doesn’t want me even doing that.”

They stood for a moment, not knowing what else to say. Tait began to wonder whether the conversation had been as logical as he’d imagined. He suspected it might’ve been quite confused. He wanted to ask Hester if she’d noticed anything peculiar about him.

“Are you shopping?” he asked instead.
“I came to get a few things,” she said. “But I can’t think properly, and can’t be bothered. I think I’ll go home. My son and my daughter-in-law are staying with me through all this. I’ll come back with them in the morning.”

“Take care then.”

“You too.”

She looked at him with her red-rimmed eyes and haggard expression, then turned and went.

Tait stayed staring at the jar of asparagus. The throb of his headache had resumed and the printing on the label of the jar was blurry. He vaguely wondered if the conversation with Hester had been real.

Then he was back in the unnaturally clear part of his mind.

He would ride out to Astrid’s Meadow and lie on the cool grass and gaze up at the stars. He would ponder the great truth he had now perceived — that the wholeness of the world was the sum total of all the Rightful Tasks that were being done, or at least were being faithfully attempted, and that in the same way the disintegration of the world was the sum of all the Anti-Tasks. There was a great War of Paradigms going on all the time. There was the mighty contest of the honour-system versus the crime-scene, and of basic trust versus radical suspicion.

But it wasn’t just a simple clash of pristine Good and unmitigated Evil. It was all made complex by the fact that the good side itself has a darker side, a “shadow.” As Milosz said: “What has no shadow has no strength to live.” But in the Rightful Task the shadow redeems itself and comes to your aid in some way, comes to uphold life and honour. It was like with John McBride in 1916, refusing the blindfold, telling the priest: “It isn’t the first time I’ve looked down their guns, Father.” In those words were the sins of pride and wrath at their fiercest, and yet God must surely have forgiven them, for in that moment they were helping that man to uphold the honour of all Creation. And so with Shane, and so with the Seven Samurai. And so with King Charles the Martyr, who had abandoned his loyal minister Strafford to be done to death by the commissars, and did other bad and foolish things, but who redeemed himself so wonderfully at the end when he exchanged his corruptible crown for an incorruptible one.

Tait saw there was a great consolation in this. It meant that you don’t have to be a paragon of virtue to be on the side of wholeness. You only have to do the best you
can, being who you are, in the fix you’re in, with all your faults. That was the merciful truth of it.

He would’ve dwelt on that mercy and consolation, except the label on the asparagus jar was swimming and blurring again and he felt giddy. He knew he was coming down with flu, and on top of that he was now having the full reaction to Hester’s horrible news. His legs trembled and he gripped the shelves for support.

For a moment he saw himself on the motorbike on the Valley road, riding to Astrid’s Meadow to be healed, being led there by some kindly spirit cutting through the wind ahead of him.

But then that picture faded away and there was nothing but desolation all around. He saw a monstrous visage rise up from the horizon, an enormous mask of blood and lies that dominated the landscape and demanded in a deathly voice: “And what do you think about me?”

END OF PART THREE
Part Four

BURN WHAT YOU LOVE

Chapter Twenty

Three and a half years had gone by.

Tait was standing on Ridwell station, waiting for the train that would take him the ten-minute journey to Turrawong. He was looking at the first red streaks of sunset in the sky above the trees. There were lots of trees. Despite all the new buildings and walk-ways and car-parks, the Ridwell campus was still enclosed by bushland and from the station you couldn’t tell that it was only a few hundred metres away.

He turned from contemplating the sky and looked along the two platforms. He appeared to be alone and this made him a bit uneasy. An elderly academic had been bashed while waiting for a train a month or so ago and for a short while the unsafeness of the station had become a pressing issue. The university wanted the local police to keep more of an eye on it, but Tait had never seen the police there. Yet something had been done. A small section of the platform had been marked “Safe Zone.” You understood the reasoning. A thug bent on mayhem would be stymied when he saw that his intended victim was standing in a “Safe Zone.” You could picture it — the thug slouching away, cursing like the foiled villain in a pantomime, and the spared victim offering a heartfelt prayer of thanks to the wise authorities who’d known exactly what to do.

Tait preferred to place his trust in the length of heavy pipe he had in his satchel. He had named it “Angus Stewart” and always carried it with him. Of course he knew that if it ever actually came to using Angus in self-defence he would be in a no-win situation. If he failed to drive an assailant off he would be bashed or killed or whatever, and if he hurt the assailant he would himself be considered a criminal. This was good old Anarcho-Tyranny at work.

But of course if it ever got to that point, it would be do-or-die. Once it was clear that the threat to life and limb was real, they would go forward with everything they had, he and Angus Stewart. That was how Highlanders did it. You go full pelt at the
bastards and make them think they’ve met the Devil himself — make them rue the
day they met Dundee on the Braes o’ Killiekrankie O!

Tait looked up again at the glowing red streaks in the sky. They made him aware of the
beauty and timelessness of the world and helped him to calm his breathing. He
needed to keep his thoughts positive, if he could. He needed to think about something
pleasant. He thought about the Creative Writing class he had taught that day. It had
gone pretty well. There’d been a couple of good laughs and some moments of real
rapport.

It had been his Wednesday afternoon class for the Community Education Trust,
which used the Ridwell campus facilities. Tait had been running classes for the CET
for two and half years. The pay wasn’t much but if he could do a regular three classes
per week it was almost enough to manage on.

Afterwards he had gone to the student canteen for a quiet sit with a carton of
flavoured milk and a blueberry muffin. That was his little ritual after the Wednesday
class. He also had two evening classes each week, on Monday and Thursday, but they
didn’t end until nine o’clock and the canteen was closed by then.

Each Wednesday he sat at the corner table that he and Narelle thought of as theirs.
They’d used it the whole time that she had been an undergraduate. She had
concentrated on English and Classics and had brilliantly achieved her Bachelor’s
degree, gaining high marks all the way through. Now she had to decide whether to do
Honours and then go for her Master’s. But they didn’t yet offer postgrad degrees at
Ridwell, so it would mean she would have to be based at Castleton.

Tim Niblett was urging Narelle to go on and fulfill her academic potential. Tim had
been a kind of mentor. He had been induced by his colleagues to take early
retirement, but had been roped-in again when the Ridwell campus opened up. They’d
made him the English Department co-ordinator there because no-one else wanted to
be stuck with it. He had quickly noticed Narelle’s talents both as a student and a poet
and had encouraged her.

And it was Tim Niblett who initially got Tait into running the Creative Writing
classes for the CET.

They started off with a young woman who had written a modish novel about the
systematic Vatican-approved violation of disabled lesbian girls in Catholic
orphanages. But Tiffany’s interest in the job quickly waned. This was partly because
it meant inconvenient hours for low pay, but even more because she couldn’t get on with the students. They weren’t like the university students she was used to. They were in fact just the kinds of people the CET had been set up to assist — blue-collar workers, battler housewives, high-school drop-outs, the unemployed, the redundant, the downtrodden. They were people who had been round reality’s track a time or two. “Unteachable” was Tiffany’s word for them. She’d wanted to make the classes a site of radical protest and the writing assignments she set were always framed as a commissar’s instruction to “interrogate” or “deconstruct” something — as in “Write a dialogue between rape or incest victims that interrogates patriarchal codes of sexual violence.”

But one day a class had rebelled. Tiffany was telling them in her best commissar tone how traditional European fairy tales were misogynist tracts, and specifically how the Fairy Godmother in Cinderella was yet another version of the despised and powerless female. Two or three students “interrogated” this assertion and Tiffany had a heated exchange with them. It might have blown over, except that one of the students was an Aboriginal man named Len Mullan. Len made a mild comment that he didn’t find it helpful to have radical politics shoved at him all the time. Tiffany blew her top and declared that this was because Len “hadn’t come to terms with his Aboriginality.” Even that might not have mattered, except that in her pique Tiffany referred to Len’s “Uncle Tom mentality.” But Len wasn’t Uncle Tom enough to swallow that and complained to the CET. Others added their complaints and Tiffany was hauled on the carpet. She blew her top again and declared the students were “unteachable” and resigned on the spot and stormed out.

This was in the middle of the twelve-week course and the CET had to find another teacher at once. They asked Tim Niblett if he knew of anyone and Tim suggested Tait. It was a bit awkward because of his criminal record, but he was taken on as a stopgap until someone better could be lined up. He turned out to have a knack for teaching, and the fact that he was from the school of hard knocks resonated with the students.

So he’d been doing it for two and a half years now.

His train pulled into the station and he got on and settled into a seat and watched the bushland falling away behind. They were passing the new housing estates that had gone up alongside the railway line during the past two or three years, and Tait found
them horribly fascinating. The houses were so cramped together that people could spit into each other’s windows, and probably wanted to. The developers had squeezed the last dollar of profit out of every inch of ground. *Brand new slums,* was how Tait thought of them. The battlers came to these estates. They were the newlyweds and young couples with kids who could never afford the soaring prices in the city and who came to the Coastal Lakes region because it was within commuting distance – if you could cope with three or four hours of train time each day – or because they imagined there’d be lots of work in a booming area like this. Tait had been trying to write a poem about it all. He’d been trying to imagine the initial bright hopes of all those people. They came here with their painfully scraped-up deposit money, determined to pay the house off and make a tremendous go of their lives. But the Pathologies would close in as quickly as the cheap paint began to peel and the tacky fixtures began to come loose. Tait had been struck by a phrase of Sam Foster’s, “the pathologies of the atomized society,” and he visualized these Pathologies as marauding monsters, like in *Beowulf,* that kept coming to this or that house to tear the door off and rip the inhabitants to pieces. These new estates were hell-holes. Even to call them brand new slums was to over-praise them, for they had none of the battler solidarity of the old-time slums, none of the old community of kin to make things bearable, none of the old common bond. The very closeness of the houses was a savage irony, for these estates negated the very idea of the shelter of each other.

Tait wished he hadn’t started thinking about all that. It was making him depressed. He stopped looking out at the new estates and looked instead at the backs of the heads of the weary commuters in the train with him.

He had a first rehearsal to go to at the Green Room that evening and didn’t want his feelings to sink so low that he wouldn’t be able to drag them up again when he needed to. He hadn’t done any major parts with the Players for a while. His evening classes at the campus made it difficult to get to rehearsals. But this time there’d been a small comedy role available and he had taken it, just to keep his hand in. And also because Francesca had a part and it was a longish while since they’d trod the boards together. The fly in the ointment was that Commissar Mona was directing. That had nearly put Tait off, but his role was really just a cameo and she wouldn’t have much call to interfere with him. And besides, Mona pulled so much weight in the Players now that
you either had to adapt to her or resign yourself to staying on the margins of the group.

Mona’s rise had been in proportion to Megan Marchant letting go her old ascendancy. Megan was never entirely well any more and had eased off with the Players and several other bodies in order to focus her remaining energy on her work at the Shire Council, work that was exhausting enough on its own.

He got out at Turrawong and waited for a few minutes to let the commuters clear through the exit ahead of him. The lights of the town were on now in the gathering dark and the headlights of the traffic flowed back and forth past the station. He could see across into the Athena café. It looked cosy and inviting, but there were people sitting in his favourite back booth, so he decided not to go over there. He went out through the ticket barrier and across the station parking area to where he had left his little motorbike. He always felt trepidation when he came back to the bike like this, for he always half-expected to find it vandalized or pushed over or something. That had happened several times lately. The last time was a week ago when one of the rear-vision mirrors had been unscrewed and hurled away. He’d only recovered it by accident when he came back the next afternoon and the sun happened to glint on it where it lay. Now he approached the spot where he thought he’d left the bike and his heart sank when he saw it wasn’t there. He slumped in dismay. But then he remembered that he hadn’t left it at the station. He’d left it outside the Green Room that day because it was a tiny bit safer there. He felt relief, although not as much as he ought to have done. He was too flat and weary to have strong reactions about anything. He wished he could just have a lie-down, so he decided to head to the Green Room and see if he could stretch out on the old sofa for a while before the others began arriving. Neil the Wheel could let him in. Neil had a key and was always there well ahead of any meeting or rehearsal.

He crossed the street and walked along to the next corner. He should have kept going straight ahead. That was the easiest way to the Green Room because it avoided the steep hill that led up to the Plaza. Instead, he turned the corner and began to go up the hill. He came to the shop that sold stained glass. It was his favourite shop, the only one he had ever seen that sold nothing but stained glass ornaments and knick-knacks. There was a workroom at the back and they gave lessons in the whole craft of it. It was one of Tait’s little fancies that he would take some lessons one of these days.
when he had the time and money and energy. He stopped and looked at the items in
the window. It was always pleasing and relaxing to cast an eye over them. It was as
though this odd little shop in a common street was at one end of a vast continuum that
included all the great cathedrals of the world, all that grandeur, all that exalted
meaning of two thousand years. There was a poem in it, Tait knew, and the little
square of paper was pinned up on the Blue Board at the cabin, waiting its turn to be
worked on. He was glad he’d turned at the corner and come past the stained glass
shop. It had reminded him of good things.

As he turned he glanced across the street at the police station opposite. He realized
his error and tried to look away, but it was too late. He had caught a glimpse of the
poster on the front door, the sign he had first noticed about a month ago and had tried
to avert his eyes from ever since.

It was printed in big stark letters, and it said:

CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE IS A TERRIBLE THING – SO TERRIBLE THAT
MANY PEOPLE CHOOSE NOT TO SEE IT.

Tait groaned half-aloud and then walked miserably on, knowing that he would now
have to brood over it again, hash and rehash it through his mind.

That poster was making the twin assertions on which all Commissar power is built.
First, that there is a monstrous wickedness on the loose. Second, that the average
person is at least half-complicit. The first assertion justifies extreme measures and the
second justifies those measures being applied to more or less the whole population. It
means that no action is ruled out and that nobody is immune, except of course the
Commissars themselves and those they choose to protect.

And on that twin base the modern age had built mountains of corpses.

The sign conveyed the Great Commissariat’s whole view of the human condition,
that it was a vast and vile crime-scene in which there could only ever be three basic
elements — police, perpetrators and informers. There weren’t even victims in any true
sense, despite the permanent show of foaming outrage on their behalf. In this
mentality, victimhood was such a pervasive and ever-shifting and all-purpose
concept, one so endlessly reshaped and redefined as agitprop, that it disappeared
under the least real scrutiny. The last thing the Commissars can allow is for the real
nature of victimhood to become apparent. If it ever truly did, they themselves would be dragged out and hung from the lamp-posts for what they have done to people.

The poster on that door was just another of the endless confirmations of what Sam Foster said: “Anarcho-Tyranny isn’t a glitch in the system. It’s the system.” The worst part was the feeling of being the only person who could see what it meant, of being the only sane mind in a madhouse.

In his satchel he had one of Mike Kieslowski’s letters, the one where Mike talked about the meaning of that poster. Re-reading it would brace him, would remind him that he was not wholly alone in the face of it all.

He went to a bench where there was enough light from a street lamp to read by.

“Yes,” Mike had written, “you’re right to see that poster’s implications, to take it as the voice of Iago and the sign of the Anti-Task. Such indicators are everywhere, in one form or another. I have a magazine advertisement on my desk. The ad is for a brand of small car and the pitch is aimed at the young female market. The picture shows the daughter of the house chucking her suitcase into an adorable little hatchback in the driveway. All around lurch members of her disgusting family – the male ones, that is – all looking either vicious or retarded. And the blurb declares: “The two of you only need each other.” In other words, the only bond that matters here is the one between the young woman and her car. Her family are nothing but a pack of shitheads to be left behind as soon as possible.

“Whatever form it takes, the message is always the same one being pumped through the culture, the message of atomization: Renounce your life and your people and debase yourself into a pawn and a lickspittle, a consumer, an informer, an eternal fuckwit in TabloidWorld and AdvertisingLand. Reject everything that is humanly necessary to you, and every human being who might actually give a damn whether you’re alive or dead. Adhere only to the forces that will use you and then discard you as less than a speck of turd in a lavatory bowl.

“Common sense has been cowed into silence or has gone altogether. It’s the Emperor’s New Clothes, except there aren’t any little boys piping up that the emperor is naked. The little boys have all been medicated. Or if a few still remain, you can bet the Regime is hunting them down. Over-alert little boys are a disruptive element, although of course some people choose not to see it.
“The logic of that sign at the police station is that of the Stalinist interrogator: ‘We know that subversive elements are active in every workplace, every apartment building, every family. You operate in a workplace, you live in an apartment building, and you have a family, so you must know who these subversives are. If you say you don’t, it can only be because you choose not to see them! You choose to protect the Enemies of the People. The only way you can prove otherwise is by giving us a few names...’

“Or it can be put in Nazi terms. Himmler used to complain that almost every German had a ‘favourite Jew’ — one they knew at first hand, one they felt was a decent person who ought to be left alone. Even if they agreed in general that Jews were wicked subhumans, they always knew of that one exception. But if all those exceptions were spared there’d be no Jews to kill. So ordinary Germans had to be made to repudiate people they saw as harmless and decent. It’s the same situation now. The atomization of human society can’t be completed as long as people have other people that they care about and believe in and haven’t thought of denouncing. So they must be re-educated, must be made to understand that their natural affections are both folly and treason.

“So the spirit of Himmler hovers near, whispering that a lack of evidence is the best evidence: ‘You’ve never seen your favourite Jew engage in race-poisoning? Just shows how clever they are at hiding it! You have no reason to imagine that your sweet old grandfather has been molesting your kids? Shows what a cunning old swine he must be! Denounce him today!’”

“But of course,” Mike concluded in a wearier tone, “you don’t need me to tell you any of this.”

Tait folded the letter and put it back in the satchel.

He had lost track of the time and the rehearsal was under way when he got to the Green Room. He stood outside the door, hearing Francesca speak some lines. He couldn’t face the thought of going in, of having to change emotional gear so sharply and become the comical character of his role. He wanted to go quietly home and have a session with the cheap wine and the earphones. His not being there wouldn’t make much difference. But Narelle would be worried. She was the prompt for this production and might be inside now, although he didn’t think so because he couldn’t
see her car. She could turn up any minute. He would wait for her and let her know he was going home because he felt tired.

Neil the Wheel came with his torch, flashing the beam across the parked cars. Tait told him what a good job he was doing and you could see Neil square his shoulders, braced by the shred of acknowledgement. Then he disappeared around the corner of the building.

It was poignant how little it took to make Neil feel appreciated.

Narelle arrived then, and they stood beside her car and held each other. She nuzzled his cheek and stroked his hair.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

He explained that he was going home because he was tired.

“And depressed, too, by the look of it,” she said. “Have you been thinking about stuff?”

“Yeah, a bit.”

“Shall I come to you after rehearsal?”

“That’d be nice, although I’ll probably be half-pissed by then.”

“You want to be left alone to play your records?”

“Do you mind?”

“No, sweetheart. It suits me, actually. I’ll come and stay with you tomorrow night.”

“Yes please.”

“I’d better go in and get the Death Stare from Mona for being late.”

“I feel for you.”

“I’ll survive. We both will. We have things to do in life, don’t we?”

“Absolutely,” he said.

They hugged a little more and then Narelle went inside.

Tait didn’t want the noise of the bike to be too loud near the Green Room, so he wheeled it away for some distance. He put his helmet on and straddled the seat and kicked-started the engine.

As he was moving off he glanced back at the square dark tower at the rear of the Court building. He had avoided looking up at it before, because nowadays it always reminded him of the Ellicotts and of Mr Dragovic and of what was done to them.
Mr Ellicott had died in gaol of a massive heart attack. It was while he was still on remand, awaiting trial for being the diabolical monster “Mr Swings” of TabloidWorld.

Mrs Ellicott had been allowed to go free as part of a deal her husband was induced to make with the prosecutors. She had died a year ago at her daughter’s place in the city.

As for Mr Dragovic, he was in a cell somewhere, doing an eight-year stretch for being the Evil Henchman.

* * * *

Ace Video Rental had folded up across the road and the shop was empty again. Frizzy-haired Lynette had bemoaned her dilemma to Tait whenever he popped over for a carton of milk. Her stock of videos was too small to compete with the new franchise-chains, but she couldn’t upscale because she wasn’t making any profit. She would have to spend her husband’s hard-earned wages from the power station, but that was the money they lived on and it couldn’t be made to stretch too far. And they were afraid it would be money down the drain anyway, since the shop was too small to expand in and wasn’t in a very good location. It was the eternal cleft-stick of a struggling small business. You need to spend money to lift yourself out of the hole, but then you might just be digging yourself deeper into it, making the final crunch worse.

“It’s just like bein’ at the tables in some floppin casino,” Lynette lamented, “and not knowin’ what to do for the best. Do you spend your last dollar tryin’ to get your luck goin’ again, or do you walk away while you still can, while you’ve got some floppin clothes on your back?”

So now Tait was back to getting his milk and bread from Errol’s up the road.

He was walking down from Errol’s now, in the mid-afternoon, with some groceries in a plastic bag. Errol had been huffing and fussing fit to burst because the liquor shop next door had been held-up again the previous evening. This time it was a pair of youths with knives. They’d been almost friendly as they stood there. “How’s yer day been?” one of them asked the girl as she hurriedly emptied the till into a bag they’d brought with them.
“How’s your day been?” Errol kept asking in a shrill outraged voice as he attended to his customers. “How’s your bloody day been? Isn’t it marvelous! Now the yobbos are polite when they rob and kill us! Honestly, I ask you!”

Tait knew from Narelle that Errol was increasingly enraged with the neighbourhood and with the business itself. He couldn’t seem to get good help – or maybe he drove the good help away with his endless exasperation – and he reckoned the customers were growing visibly more simian.

“I can see their foreheads getting lower every year!” he declared. “Nowadays half of them can’t even ask for the items they want, they just point and grunt!”

Narelle had had a difficult heart-to-heart talk with Errol and made it clear she couldn’t see herself ever coming back into the shop with him. It would be like claustrophobia, she said. Going to uni had set her on a whole different path, she said, and she and Tait had plans of their own to pursue.

Every now and then when Errol was in a particular huff he would fix Tait with a glare and ask him what the “Big Plans” were.

“Would it be dreadfully bad form to ask what the Big Plans are?” he would say with clipped precision. “Not that one would ever wish to pry. One is only the girl’s parent, after all. One has merely provided the home and food and clothes and care and education. Hardly grounds to be taken into anyone’s confidence, I know!”

At those times Tait just tried to look sympathetic and say nothing. He had no more idea of the Big Plans than Errol did. But he sensed how deep was the bottled-up misery that kept all that surface exasperation bubbling. He wondered whether that unhappiness had come from Errol having his wife die so early, or whether it was just the kind of pain a person is born with. All Tait knew for sure was that it hadn’t come out of mere recent enragement at the state of the neighbourhood.

Tait saw Jimmy Sale’s car in his driveway. It was Jimmy’s own beat-up blue station-wagon, not the white work car from the old days, the one with the regional health logo. Jimmy had left that job three years ago. He’d been so desperate to get away from the whole pack of hyenas that he’d gone back to the institution as an ordinary psych nurse and mostly doing night-duty. He was lucky even to get that, being a marked man in the system, but the charge nurse of the geriatric ward was an old pal of his. The work was basically wiping bums, but he enjoyed talking to the old codgers, or rather letting them talk. One gaunt old bloke had been a stretcher-bearer in the First
World War, and Jimmy was writing down the old man’s recollections so they
wouldn’t be lost. He had come to be haunted by the way an entire life-story simply
disappeared each time a geriatric patient died.

Roger had got out too, after they’d threatened to put him through the wringer for
failing to report something a client had told him in confidence. Under new Mandatory
Reporting laws you could get six months in the clink for not reporting a passing
remark or casual comment. It could be anything at all, anything that might later be
judged to have related to something unlawful or even just inappropriate.
*Inappropriate* was the great catch-all term, and to question the appropriateness of it
was inappropriate. These new Mandatory Reporting rules were another ploy of the
Anarcho-Tyranny. They were meant to generate vast quantities of pseudo-information
and quasi-data to impress TabloidWorld. It was to give the Regime an endless supply
of agitprop statistics. You heard it on the news all the time: *Authorities have received
umpteen zillion notifications of… clearly at crisis level… community at risk…
epidemic proportions… victim-groups outraged… drastic action demanded… tough
new laws promised…*

Roger now drove a van for a courier parcel company.

Jimmy was chatting to Ernie outside as Tait came up the driveway. They were at the
bird-feeding stand Ernie had set up. It had a built-in basin for water and a surface to
scatter crumbs on and many kinds of birds came to it. Apart from his ham-radio, the
birds were Ernie’s main interest now. He saw Tait coming and gave him a wave, then
began to go inside. In the last two or three years he’d become like an old man, white-
haired and stooped, and a bit unsteady on his feet.

“Make you a cuppa?” Tait called to Jimmy.

“Fancy a stroll down to the water first?” Jimmy called back.

Tait put his groceries in the cabin and then they strolled the couple of hundred
metres along the reserve to where a steep path led down to the lake. It had been a fine
clear afternoon but now the sky was clouding over and a wind was rising. The tide
was coming in and the water was starting to froth and heave around the rocks.

They picked their way on to a section of rock that extended fifty metres out. The
water at the end of it was quite deep. It gave Tait a flash of the shark-fear that deep
water always induced in him.
“Ernie doesn’t look too well,” Jimmy was saying, enunciating clearly so as to be heard against the gathering wind.

“No.”

“He was telling me about all the medications he’s on.”

“The pill-factories he’s keeping in business?”

“Yeah.”

One of the ways Ernie had come to seem like an old man was that he said the same things over and over, although he could be dryly funny in the old Australian style. In fact he got drier and more sardonic as he grew more frail. One of his stock lines was how he kept half a dozen pill-factories going, and that when he dropped off the perch they’d have to shut down. For most of his life, he declared, he’d kept half a dozen breweries going, and when he’d been forced off the beer the redundant workers had all gone to the pill-factories. “What’ll the poor buggers do when I cark it?” he would ask with a look of tragic concern.

“Yes,” Tait said after a moment. “I’m relieved each day when I catch a glimpse of Ernie. I’m always half-thinking that he’s pegged-out.”

“Does he have any family?”

“He has a wife, or an ex-wife or something. She lives interstate. I don’t think they get on. And I gather they have a son.”

They stood gazing across the increasingly grey and choppy water.

He was going to ask about Lauren. That week she’d started having a new kind of physiotherapy for her back pain. But the thoughts about Ernie’s predicament had made him remember the Ellicotts.

He turned and looked along the shore towards their house. Normally he avoided thinking about that whole matter because once he started he couldn’t stop. Once you stepped into that mental maze it was hard to get out. There was a line of Conrad’s that caught the mixture of the banal and the horrific, along with the sense of exhaustion, and the element of self-torment: “It was a weary pilgrimage amongst hints for nightmares.”

Mike Kieslowski had urged him not to take it too personally, although of course at the human level it was personal, and the methods of the Great Commissariat always came down to the politics of personal destruction. But on the strategic level, Mike said, it was just a routine process of demonstrating a point, of making clear where the
power resides, and the Regime really isn’t particular about who gets clobbered, as long as a sufficient number do. The Imperium has to make its point and leave the smoking ruins of people’s lives. It was impartial in the way that bombers are when they fly over a target city and slaughter people at random.

“For your own sake,” Mike had urged, “remember the guidance of Comrade Trotsky. War is interested in us, whether we like it or not, and we must learn to be interested in war. Our job isn’t to take the bombing personally, but to master the art of anti-aircraft fire — to figure out how to shoot the bombers down, learn how to turn the death-dealing process back on them, and on those who sent them.”

He had been steadied by Mike’s hard-bitten attitude. And Narelle had been a mainstay, too, in a different way. And a couple of long talks with Hester had helped a bit.

The peculiar thing was that Tait and Jimmy had hardly ever talked about it, even back when it was all happening. Each understood that the other felt gormless and ashamed of what he saw as his own cowardly inaction. Jimmy blamed himself for failing to blow the whistle on his colleagues that first time they’d falsified the regional statistics on child abuse. Tait felt spineless for not pushing himself forward in defence of his accused friends. Of course the backing of an ex-convict and certified mental-patient like himself might not have been quite what they needed, and in fact he hadn’t known them all that well, but he could have offered to tell of the time the four yobbos menaced him and he was forced to take shelter in Mr Dragovic’s house. That had to be significant. But was it? He had talked to Hester about this and she’d told him what her solicitor had said. There was no shortage of evidence about how predatory the yobbos had been, the way they’d blighted the neighbourhood. The police were given chapter and verse. But that wasn’t even remotely the issue. The only issue was the accusation made by those teenage ferals. A few years earlier, they claimed, when they were still children, they’d been “lured” by the yellow swing in Mr Ellicott’s backyard, enticed into his evil hands. That was the detail TabloidWorld had fixed on, and so the diabolical “Mr Swings” bounded into the spotlight, leering with wicked glee, a figure to give you the heebie-jeebies, along with his cackling crone of a witch-wife and his lurching Transylvanian henchman next door.

It really was as mindless as that. It would almost have been comical if it hadn’t been about the crushing of actual human beings. Tait had tried to close it out as much as he
could by not having the TV or radio on at the cabin, but there was no way of avoiding it when he was in town. At the height of it there were people organizing petitions to have the death-penalty re-introduced for fiends like Mr Swings. Tait had been accosted by one of these in the Plaza and given a rigmarole about how the arrests were merely the “the Tip of the Iceberg” because everybody knew that “the Tentacles of This Sort of Thing” reached everywhere. The idea of the tentacles of the iceberg came to signify for Tait the death of all conceptual clarity or common sense.

He had only really got vocal on one occasion. It was at the Green Room the evening after Mr Ellicott had the heart attack and died in his remand cell. The tabloids had been shouting the news all that day, and in tones of outrage. It seemed that dying was the Evil Mastermind’s ploy to “Escape Justice” and “Mock His Victims” yet again. Commissar Mona was lecturing everyone on the iniquity of the thing, how unfair it was that the innocent victims had now been “denied Closure.”

“Yes, you’re right,” Tait had interrupted. “Ellicott got all the Closure, didn’t he? He got the Closure of the prison door behind him! And now he’ll have the Closure of the fucking coffin lid!”

Mona glared at him but said nothing more. Perhaps she read in his eye how much he wanted to smash her in the face. But he knew how much of the rage came out of self-contempt.

For weeks he kept waking in the wee small hours to turn it over and over in his mind. He hadn’t been able to do his work because of a constant headache and fatigue.

He stopped looking in the direction of the Ellicotts’ house. Of course it wasn’t their house any more. It had passed to their daughter and she had sold it. And Mr Dragovic’s place had been sold right at the start. It had gone to pay a top QC, one so eminent that the client was only doing eight years instead of the twenty it might have been. The people of Hell’s Kitchen weren’t there either. They’d moved away, flush with payments from the Crime Victims Compensation Fund and the chequebook journalists.

The water had begun to splash hard against the rocks and he and Jimmy were getting wet from the spray. The sky was now dark and thunderous and the wind whipped their hair and clothes. Jimmy signalled a question: Shall we go back? Tait nodded and they started to pick their way off the rocky outcrop.
Tait wouldn’t have minded staying out there. He welcomed these conditions of cloud and wind and salt-spray, and the sense of an approaching storm of rain. They braced him because they matched an inward state of imagination and therefore harmonised – at least for a little while – the inner and outer worlds.

The inward imaginative state was that of war. Mike had been right. He was always right about things that mattered. You had to see the whole situation as war, and the key was to understand that the vast chaos is only one aspect. Within the apparent chaos something else is at work. You can call it Fate if you want to, or by other names. It is conveyed in phrases like “the fortunes of war” or “the god of battles.” At the individual level it is the power that decides whether a bullet has your name on it or not. It meant that things happen in their due course and according to a logic that we can never fathom but must try to believe in.

If the Ellickotts or Mr Dragovich had sent word that they needed him to testify, he would’ve stepped forward, for whatever use it might have been. He was positive of that. And he was sure Jimmy would’ve stepped up, too, in his own sphere, would have added his ounce of weight against the local Hounds of Halifax, those hyenas. It only needed their systematic wickedness to have come to light through some other means, and that would’ve been the sign. You weren’t expected to be a fool and rush to put your head in the noose, to take on the Regime single-handed, to risk your family. The bottom line was what you did when the sign appeared and the call came.

You need never be in a hurry to be a hero. If you are needed for that, the occasion will find you and let you know. Like with Shane. Shane had been a drifter passing through, minding his own business. And the Seven Samurai had been going about their own affairs. And the same with the Prince’s men in 1745. They hadn’t been straining at the leash for death and glory. The chief of the Camerons was quietly tending his estate when the Prince landed. Lochiel doubted a rising could succeed, and would have preferred not to be involved. But there was the true Prince, standing on the shore, asking for him. There was the Cause, out in arms, and in dire need of its friends.

Like Lochiel, you would be pretty sure to know when fate tapped you on the shoulder, for you would see that there was only one response that would let you save your honour and your soul.
He wondered whether Robert Connell or Francis Townley had thought about it that way, especially after the Forty-Five had begun and the news of events in Scotland was coming through. Perhaps they lay awake in the wee small hours and turning it over and over in their minds: “There’s nothing I can do, no decision I need to make, not right now. And maybe the events will stay a long way off and I will never be tested. *But ah, what if the Prince came to Preston? What then?*”

They probably did lie awake like that. Thousands of English Jacobites must have been lying awake all over the country, searching their own hearts, wondering what they would do if the tide of events came near, if the Prince arrived and asked for them…

Big dollops of rain began to fall as Tait and Jimmy picked their way back up the steep bank. It turned into a downpour that wetted them through within a few seconds. But they did not quicken their pace towards the cabin. Neither of them minded getting soaked. It felt like a necessary cleansing.

* * * *

He was lying on his back in the grass of Astrid’s Meadow, with his satchel for a pillow, looking up into the dense green foliage of the little tree. He was trying to relax and drift off into reverie, but he knew he might not be able to. His mind was too cluttered and distracted lately. That was why he’d come here this afternoon, to medicine himself. He’d got out of the habit of spending proper time here, and that was both a symptom and a cause of what was wrong. Among the things that Astrid’s Meadow stood for, after all, was that dimension where symptoms and causes are one.

“The gods return as diseases,” Jung said. That was the finest example of poetic brevity and clarity that Tait knew of — or at least the finest example in the service of good. Jung’s aphorism was meant to warn us, to turn us from sacrilege and blasphemy, to declare the folly of stripping the altars, of breaking the people’s hoop and blighting the sacred tree. But there was another statement, even more succinct, and it was the coda of the Devil. “*Who Whom?*” Lenin asked. He was saying that the issue is never the actual human fact of what is being suffered and inflicted, but only
the subjective question – that is, the political question – of who is doing it to whom. It was the Devil’s two-word poem of modernity, of the death-camp and the gulag and the killing-field. It was the great anti-hymn to the Anti-Task, to the universal crime-scene and the promise of the dead star drifting in the void.

Nowadays Tait had his Creative Writing classes to worry about, and he was doing regular book-reviews for Compact magazine, and also trying not to fall behind with his own poems and short stories. He felt vaguely harassed most of the time, and sometimes felt as if he was coming apart. He knew he had a one-track mind that didn’t cope well with multiple tasks. He knew he was a plodding Hedgehog that can only know One Big Thing at a time, not a sprightly Fox that can juggle Many Things. He had been wrestling with a short story based on Bro, a character with a life-long sense of being a stranger in the midst and who finally commits himself to love by an act of willpower. But by a tragic fate the love-affair is illicit and can only end badly.

Then he’d been forced to put the Bro story aside in order to write a review of Sam Foster’s latest book, No End To It: New Essays on Anarcho-Tyranny. Mike Kieslowski should have done the review, since he was the expert on Foster and quite equal to the task of doing him justice to the readers of Compact. Mike and Caroline had been in personal touch with Foster for some years now and talked to him on the phone in Tennessee every few months. Foster had been especially impressed by Caroline’s expert knowledge of Union war-crimes against Confederate civilians. Mike once mentioned – with enormous pride – that Foster had referred to him and Caroline in an article as “my Australian connections.”

Mike had urged that Tait be given the review as a treat. Foster’s writing went infallibly to the heart of things. It was like reading Milosz’s The Captive Mind, or Weaver’s Ideas Have Consequences. The moral and intellectual light of the work somehow almost redeemed the desolation that was being described. It was just that Tait felt a nagging mental fatigue nowadays and was scared the review wouldn’t be good enough, that he might let Sam Foster down, and Mike too.

He knew he needed to revive his trust in the flow and pattern of life, in the underlying good of the world itself. That was all that enabled you to look at the actual state of things and not be destroyed by it. Like the Gorgon’s Head in the Greek myth, it had the power to turn you to stone if you didn’t have a way to protect yourself.

Lying there in the grass, looking up into the leaves of the little tree, he did his ritual.
With his eyes closed he stretched his arms out wide, forcing himself not to hold back, accepting the fact that his skin crawled with apprehension. He was trusting that there was nothing bad in the grass, nothing that would harm him. He felt nothing untoward and let his arms and hands rest on the ground. He did this most times he came here now, to demonstrate what he thought of as his will to trust, to trust especially in the guardians of Astrid’s Meadow and all it stood for.

It wasn’t crucial to know exactly who or what the guardians were. The whole meaning of trust was that you didn’t demand explanations of everything. Sometimes he imagined the guardians as Black Elk’s “Grandfathers of the World” and sometimes as more like what Kipling called “The Gods of the Copybook Headings.” Other times the guardian was Jesus, and at those times Tait thought of a line he had glimpsed as he was flicking through the Bible one day but could never find again: “The sheep on a thousand hills are His.” And there were the powers Tait had specifically invoked here, like the symbolic Honeysuckle and the totemic Blackbird, like the spirit of the QO and the sacramental authority of King Charles. And they were also the earth itself, the elemental nature of things, the genius of place.

About a year ago, he had been lying here like this, with his arms extended, and when he stood up he saw there was a black snake motionless in the grass only a few inches from where the fingers of his right hand had been. After a long moment of seeming to look up at him, the snake had moved off without haste, rippling out of sight into longer grass.

It had given him the horrors, of course, but the more he dwelt on it the more he began to feel there was a sign and a meaning there. With great trepidation at first, he adopted the regular ritual of it.

Even if you don’t have total trust, he reckoned, you can demonstrate the will to trust. Perform the acts of faith and faith will come.

He felt his muscles relax, and his mind with them. The fear in the ritual was physically calming through a relief-reaction. It was a precise demonstration of what Jung had meant about being in the right relation to the gods. Tait began to slip into the state of reverie where thoughts drift like clouds of pollen on the air, without strain but rich in the promise of fruition.

The lines of his current Companion Piece floated into his mind. It was Roy Campbell’s poem “The Zulu Girl” with its image of the young mother who has
paused from weary labour in the fly-tormented fields. She has unslung her baby from her back and is feeding him, “his sleepy mouth plugged by the heavy nipple.” But more than milk is being taken in: “Through his frail nerves her own deep languors ripple/Like a broad river sighing through its reeds.”

It seems peaceful enough in its way, but then the poem rises to a pitch and you see what it is really about:

Yet in that drowsy stream his flesh imbibes
An old unquenched unsmotherable heat –
The curbed ferocity of beaten tribes,
The sullen dignity of their defeat.

Her body looms above him like a hill
Within whose shade a village lies at rest,
Or the first cloud so terrible and still
That bears the coming harvest in its breast.

The poem spoke defiance on behalf of all the beaten of the world, and the Zulu girl stood for the Sioux and Cheyenne, for the Poles and the Irish, and for the Cavaliers and Clans and Confederates. She stood for all the lost platoons and straggling bands of the dispossessed. She stood for those like Milosz’s forlorn family in the railway station. She stood for the “rednecks” and the “hillbillies,” all the ranks of the relegated, the unstylish and the uncool. She stood indeed for all the ordinary people of the world, all those who know at some level – though they may have no gift to speak it – that they’ve been broken and betrayed.

And it seemed to Tait that she also stood, and with a particular vehemence, for the falsely-accused.

A mere dirge of lament could not have that thrill of redemptive power at the end. To Tait the poem said that the coming harvest might not be the one the Anarcho-Tyranny expects, that the beaten might not be as beaten as they had seemed, and that the gods of retribution work in mysterious ways. It might yet be the orc-armies of the Imperium that are mown down. It might yet be the Great Commissariat that will feel the scythe, along with all its torturers and lickspittles!
The image of the scythe called up the glint of pikes and he declaimed the words of one of the Irish rebel songs he knew by heart:

*Death to every foe and traitor!*

*Whistle out the marching tune,*

*With your pike upon your shoulder,*

*At the Rising of the Moon!*

Then the tune of the *Battle Hymn of the Republic* came to his mind. That great hymn conveyed all was that brave and noble in the Protestant spirit, and all brave and noble spirits were ultimately on the same side. That hymn had been too often hijacked by the puritan commissars and the vileness of the Sherman’s March mentality, but it could yet prove its true exalted meaning.

He felt filled with the power of these thoughts. They had given him back some courage. He wanted to endure for the sake of the Cause, wanted to be there when the moonlight glinted again on the pikes and the dawn was the day of the tramping of the Grapes of Wrath!

On that day the question of “Who Whom?” would be addressed again. Oh yes, indeed! Make no mistake, you commissars, you desecrators, you enemies of the human race! *That little matter will be very much out on the table!*

He felt the earth of Astrid’s Meadow resonating like a drum beneath his feet.

* * * *

Craig and Francesca’s house could seem bleak in the evenings when the dankness of the hillside came down and enveloped it. It was as though the hillside wanted to seep itself into the mud-bricks and reclaim them. It always felt cosier when they lit the fire in the lounge-room. They had the fire even on nights when it wasn’t cold enough to warrant one. They lit it for the sense it gave of a bright little counter-force against the massive dark of the hill.

Tait sat in an armchair, watching Craig go through the procedure. He always did it the same way, with two sheets of newspaper and two handfuls of twigs to get the flame started, and then several pieces of wood of increasing size to feed it up into full
vigour. Jesse loved helping his dad do the fire, and always knelt beside him to pass the paper and twigs and pieces of wood in their proper turn, like he was doing now. The three younger kids would sit watching the procedure as if it were an arcane rite. And their dog Rocky would watch intently too, as though expecting a rabbit or something to startle out of the fireplace. When the fire was blazing Jesse would say, a bit anxiously, “We nailed it that time, didn’t we, Dad? We nailed it pretty good, eh Dad?” And Craig would confirm that, yes, they had. Then Jesse would go out to the kitchen and report to his mother that it was okay, they’d nailed the fire. And Francesca always thanked him, with a little breath of relief, as though she’d been more worried about it than she’d let on.

Tait came to dinner there every few weeks. Most times Gillian and Ian were there too, and after the meal the five of them played Scrabble. Narelle had come a couple of times, but she didn’t enjoy socializing with Francesca and said she’d rather not. But she didn’t mind Tait coming. Or to be accurate, she said, she eighty-per-cent didn’t mind, and was willing to cop the other twenty per-cent. After all, she did her own stuff with her friend Cathy and their circle, so it was only fair that he that have some socializing of his own.

“But,” she’d added, wagging a stern finger, “if you and her start panting at each other over the Scrabble board, I’ll know about it!”

Ian and Gillian hadn’t come this time. Not feeling well, or something.

Craig normally sat back in an armchair for a while after he’d got the fire going. He would try to be the good host and make some smalltalk. Whenever anyone was coming over, Francesca said, he would ask her for what he called “chat-points” — a snippet or two about their latest doings, so that he could appear up-to-speed and interested. Tait did much the same. He tried to have some little topic ready, something congenial to Craig, that they could spend a couple of minutes over. Tonight he had thought to ask about the plans for the driveway. For years Craig had wanted to put in a proper concrete driveway. It was very inconvenient without one because the slope up to the house was so steep and a bit of persistent rain turned the dirt track into a slippery-slide of mud. Tait was willing to lend what hand he could, though of course the days of the Merry Men were long past. The Funnel-Web Fusiliers would never ride again. It wasn’t only because Bro was gone. Jimmy and Ian were no longer friends. Ian had turned aloof when Jimmy began to oppose the Hounds of Halifax
within the system. He had knuckled-under, had complied with the unspoken order that Jimmy was to be shunned.

This time, having lit the fire, Craig didn’t flop into the chair for the regulation smalltalk. He excused himself and went outside to the work-shed. Jesse trailed after him. The other three kids lolled on the lounge-room floor. One of them wanted to show Tait her jigsaw-puzzle, but he said he had to go and help in the kitchen. He preferred never to stay in the same room with kids without another adult there. There was no telling what could arise out of nothing at all. It was being hammered endlessly in the media that children were most “at risk” from trusted relatives and family friends. The Pathologies were stalking through everyone’s life and mind, and Iago’s toxic whisper was in everyone’s ear. And against all that were just a few quaint outmoded notions. “Ah, love, let us be true to one another,” said Matthew Arnold in his great poem “Dover Beach.” Today, thought Tait, they would drag Arnold in for questioning, would demand to know what he was doing on a lonely beach and who he was with. Any idea of the world as an honour-system had been trashed and there was now only the crime scene. And for every instance where suspicion might possibly have been justified, a thousand life-giving interactions were blocked or poisoned. This could only be the logic of annihilation, the arithmetic of the abyss.

Of course the Imperium saw it the opposite way. The more connections you break the better, for most human interactions are wicked. Like Milosz said, it would prefer to have the entire population in single prison cells and only let out for work and re-education classes.

Tait recalled the rage of defiance he’d felt at Astrid’s Meadow not long ago — those exultant thoughts of the Zulu Girl and the Rising of the Moon and the Coming Harvest and the Grapes of Wrath. But in truth he knew that the forces of the abyss were winning hands down.

Out in the kitchen, Francesca got him to tend the wok of curried chicken on the stove and they talked about the comedy that was in rehearsal, the one Commissar Mona was directing.

They agreed that Mona wasn’t being quite as infuriating as they’d found her on other occasions. They put it down to the effect on her of Brandon Hagen. The glamour-boy of the Melrose theatre group had come back to do another role for the Players. The cut-price Valentino was just the same as ever, preening and posing and showing his
classic profile at every opportunity. But somehow he had the knack of handling
Mona, of blunting her obnoxiousness a little.

“I have a theory about that,” Tait said as he stirred the wok.

“You have a theory about everything,” Francesca replied.

“Not at all.”

“I know you have one about me.”

“Oh, several about you.”

“Are they juicy?” she asked, waggling her eyebrows at him.

“No, that’s the fantasies. The theories are dry as dust.”

“Let’s hear the fantasies then.”

“I’m in theory mode, just now.”

“Damn.”

“The theory is this. Brandon is so completely the sort of bloke Mona would despise
that he has nothing to lose in his dealings with her. He knows he can’t sink any lower
in her estimation, so he doesn’t care what he says to her. And for that reason she finds
him disarming.”

“And she knows he’s an asset to the production as an actor.”

“You’re saying he’s a good actor?”

“Certainly.”

“That’s a turn-up. I remember you calling him an insult to the stage.”

“He’s improved a lot. What about that Cary Grant thing that he wheedles her with?”

“Mona, Mona, Mona,” Tait intoned, in as much of a Cary Grant voice as he could
manage.

“He does Boris Karloff as well?”

Tait chucked a damp dishcloth at her.

“You seem to relish your part,” she said, lobbing the cloth back at him, “brief as it
is.”

“It’s killing me, actually,” he said. “All that falling about over the suitcases. I’m
getting too old for pratfalls.”

“It looks hilarious.”

He was playing the alcoholic chauffeur, Longbottle, who is constantly referred to but
only appears on stage one time. He carries in a huge load of suitcases and keeps
falling all over them. It went on for a couple of minutes and was funny because of the
man’s ludicrous drunken persistence. But each time he rehearsed it Tait felt black and blue all over.

“What about you?” he asked. “Are you enjoying your part?”

“I am,” she said, taking the wok off the stove and putting it in the centre of the table, on the big mosaic tea-pot stand that Tait and Narelle had once given her as a birthday present.

“What about having to be groped by old Octopus Hands in those cuddling scenes?”

“It’s true Brandon makes the most of it, but if that’s the price I have to pay to get out of here two evenings a week, then so be it. Actually, being tortured on the rack wouldn’t be too high a price.”

“And Brandon isn’t quite that bad?”

“I listed the pros and cons on a sheet of paper. I made two columns: Being Felt-Up by Brandon versus Torture on the Rack. It was pretty close but Brandon came out with a slight edge.”

Tait wanted to ask why she felt so desperate to get out to rehearsals, but of course it was hardly a mystery. He himself had times when he couldn’t wait to get to the Green Room and forget himself in the peculiar activity of a play. And he didn’t have four kids hanging off him like leeches. That was her word. “They hang off me like leeches,” she’d groaned one night at rehearsal when they’d gone outside to get a breath of air. When she’d said it, that night, a nasty little voice in Tait’s head had retorted that those who make their beds have to lie in them. But it wasn’t his true self speaking. His true self just wanted to hold her and whisper words of comfort.

The food was laid out and ready and Francesca called everyone to the table. There wasn’t much conversation during the meal, so Tait brought up the matter of the new driveway and asked if Craig was still keen to get it done this year. Craig said he was, but he didn’t quite have the energetic tone that the idea of a major job of work normally induced in him. When they’d finished eating Craig excused himself and went back out to the shed.

Jesse washed the dishes, standing on a box so as to be at the right height to the sink, and Tait dried them. Francesca sat at the cleared table and sipped red wine. Tait stole looks at her as he moved between the sink and the kitchen cabinet to put things away. She was ten years older than when they’d met and didn’t have the same slim grace as before, but she seemed to him to have grown more deeply beautiful.
When the dishes were done, Jesse went into the lounge-room to watch TV with the other kids. Tait and Francesca poured themselves more red wine and went outside on to the timber deck. The night air was still and the stars were out.

“The little platoon of stars that belong to one’s own homestead,” she said, looking up at them. “Remember?”

“Yes.”

“You told me that ten years ago, the night of the Museum being opened. Can you believe that ten years have gone by?”

“I guess I can.”

“Could you have imagined, then, that we’d be as we are now?”

“I guess not.”

“And not just you and me, but all of us who were there that day, that night. All that’s happened since — like Bro getting killed.”

“Bro wasn’t there that day. He came on the scene afterwards.”

“Ah, yes. It just seems as if he was there, doesn’t it? I can see him there that day, coming to our little marquee for a coffee and a biscuit.”

“Me too.”

“What is that? When you start remembering things differently than they were?”

“I don’t know. It must be the way folklore happens. You start seeing the past the way it ought to have been, the way that makes the most sense to you, the way that meets your needs now.”

“Yes.”

“Like subconsciously working on the draft of a poem or a story, trying to make it flow better, trying to make its meaning rounder and more complete.”

“That sounds right.”

They sat down in two deckchairs and talked about some of the others who were there that day.

They talked about Kelvin, whom they agreed hadn’t been his old self since he broke up with Rory. And about Megan, whose health was a worry to everyone but about which no one ever seemed to know any details. And about Marigold, who had always been a secret drinker but had now begun to let it affect her. And about Gillian and Ian’s marriage being very bumpy nowadays.

“I didn’t know that,” Tait said.
“That’s why they didn’t come tonight. Gillian told me they’d had a blistering fight and couldn’t face the task of being mutually civil in front of other people. She said they have these rows all the time now.”

“I haven’t seen Ian for ages. He doesn’t show his face around the Green Room any more, does he?”

“No. Perhaps he’s come to agree with Craig that the Players are a pack of wankers.”

“Craig still thinks that?”

“More than ever. He just doesn’t bother saying it.”

“I wonder if he still paints.”

“Ian, you mean? No, Gillian says hardly ever.”

Tait talked about how Ian and Jimmy Sale had ceased to be friends.

“Yes, Gillian told me there were savage politics going on in the regional health system, but mostly under the surface, so that you can never put your finger on what’s happening. She reckons Ian has gone into an emotional shell because of that, and its getting steadily worse. He won’t speak for hours at a time, and then he’ll go off the handle over nothing. She reckons it’s his reaction to having to knuckle-under at work.”

“I guess it’s to his credit that the knuckling-under bothers him. He knows he has stained his honour, or allowed it to be stained.”

“That’s so like a thing only you would say,” Francesca sighed. “That why I miss you those times when we don’t see each other for a while. Nobody else I know would ever use a phrase like ‘stained his honour’ in total seriousness.”

“We throwbacks do have a quaint way with words.”

“Believing in honour doesn’t make you a throwback.”

“Try telling that to the Regime. But believing in it isn’t the problem. The problem is a practical one of deciding how to react when honour is being dragged down and killed in front of your eyes.”

“Is that what’s happening in the world?”

“Absolutely. When I call up a mental picture of Honour, I see a distressed female figure being torn and defiled — like Marie Antoinette in that tremendous passage of Burke’s:

_I thought ten thousand swords must have leaped from their scabbards to avenge_
even a look that threatened her with insult. But the age of chivalry is gone. That of sophisters, economists and calculators has succeeded, and the glory of Europe is extinguished for ever.”

His voice wobbled a little at the end and he was silent for a moment before he went on:
“She was weak and ill from harsh treatment in prison and was literally bleeding when they took her to the guillotine. But that wasn’t enough. They forced her eight-year-old son to sign a statement that she’d committed incest with him. Now doesn’t that have a contemporary ring! Want to destroy someone? Cook up a case of child sexual abuse!”
Francesca got up and took his wine glass and patted his hand.
“I’ll refill our glasses,” she murmured.
“Don’t mind me,” he said when she returned. “You know what a ratbag I am. No one knows that better than you.”
“You’re not a ratbag, and I’m just enough of a cavalier lady to understand what you feel. Do you remember telling me that I’d make a good cavalier lady?”
“Yes. You’d make a good Countess of Derby.”
“Who was she?”
“Charlotte, her name was, and she withstood the Siege of Lathom House in 1643. Her husband was away serving the King and she held their castle against the Roundheads. It was the last Royalist stronghold left in the county, and she and two hundred volunteers held it to the end. Come to think of it, she’s a personification of Honour too, but in a victorious way.”
“Bravo, Charlotte.”
“She was called ‘Babylon’ by her foes. A local Puritan zealot preached a sermon against her, on a Biblical verse that says: ‘Put yourselves in array against Babylon. Shoot arrows at her, for she hath sinned against the Lord.’ Her ‘sin’ of course was in failing to lick the boots of the commissars. Actually, it raises my morale just to think about it. I’m glad you remembered about the cavalier ladies.”
“I remember lots of things you’ve said to me over the years. That’s because nobody would have said them but you. You’re a one-off.”
“You don’t mean a jerk-off?”
“No I don’t. Well, not right this minute, anyway.”
“Ah, the balm of your gentle praise. Where would I be without it?”

They watched the moonlight glinting on the leaves of the big tree further down the slope to their right.

Then Tait thought he heard a vague pattering sound on the deck near them.

“Hear that?” he asked.

“A rat, I think,” she replied. “The bush rats are all around the place lately. It’s revolting. Rocky does his best to keep them down, but there are too many. We’d set poison baits, but of course we don’t dare — too much of a danger to other animals, and to kids. The key thing is to make sure the rats can’t get at our garbage. As long as they can get a free meal here they’ll keep coming. Craig is making a big wooden cage thing covered in chicken-wire, to store the bags of garbage in until he can run them to the tip each week. That’s what he’s doing in the shed now.”

“So he’s really doing something out there? I thought maybe he was just in a bad mood.”

“Well, that too, But he is making the cage.”

“Is he being a prick, these days?” Tait asked, lowering his voice to just above a whisper, in case it might carry in the still air.

“Yes,” she replied, lowering her voice to the same level. “But he has worries, on top of the daily aggravations here. Worries about work, and about bringing in enough money. And I’m a sullen bitch a lot of the time. I must seem as tedious to him as he does to me. He doesn’t get to see much of the staunch cavalier lady, I can tell you.”

“I’m sorry things aren’t so good.”

“It’s Jesse I’m most concerned about. He’s sensitive to all the undertones. The other kids not so much. Or maybe they are and I’m just not seeing the signs. But Jesse’s at the age where his dad’s his role-model and so he feels divided when there’s a rift going on.”

“I see how he would be.”

“And there’s the strange double-sidedness of living here, in this house, in this place, the light-and-dark of it. Half the time it’s absolutely beautiful. You know how lovely it can be here with the sun shining and the grass rippling in the wind, all that stuff. It lifts your spirits. But then there’s the grim side: the dark coming down off the hill, the sense of the Melancholy Monster gritting its teeth up there all night, the creep of rats and funnel-webs and god-knows-what.”
“Those powers and principalities we used to talk about.”
“The powers and principalities seem to have grouped themselves into two basic
camps nowadays. The beautiful and the creepy.”
“The powers versus the principalities?”
“Yeah, kind of. Except it isn’t really as clear-cut as that, is it?”
“No, I’m sure it isn’t. Even the good powers have their necessary darker element,
their ‘shadow’ side. As Czeslaw Milosz expressed it, ‘What has no shadow has no
strength to live.”’
“What a good insight.”
“And the creepy principalities have their positive aspect. It’s like the world of the
Brothers Grimm, where the creepiness and cruelty and danger serve to point up the
values of wisdom and courage and so forth.”
“You used to call this the Valley of the Brothers Grimm, didn’t you. I’ve come to
see the point of that now.”
“Or,” Tait said, his mind starting to race, “It’s like the Wicked Witch of the West in
the Wizard of Oz movie — that charismatic figure that no one ever quite forgets.
She’s a real nightmare, and yet at some level you can’t help being on her side. Her
charisma comes from the fact that she seems to have more energetic commitment to
life than anyone else in the film, even if it’s a preference for life’s villainy. At least
she wants to keep the world going so that she can go on being bad in it. Most of the
others in the movie would let it fade away, just from their own ineffectualness.”
He realized there was a poem there and strained to get a fix on it before it dissipated.
It was about the importance of the life-force. It’s the life-force that matters, and in the
final analysis it is the Wicked Witch who upholds it, both in the land of Oz and in the
movie itself. How bland they would be without her, how disenchanted. Yes, that was
the word. The Wicked Witch’s brand of enchantment is the dark one, but it’s a whole
lot better than no enchantment at all, or a mere sugary pseudo-version of it.
Disenchantment is death. It is the regime of the nihilist commissar. Suddenly Tait
could see the whole scenario of the poem and grinned to himself at what a neat idea it
was.

The Commissariat wants to take over the Land of Oz. And who do they fear might
thwart them? The bogus old showman of a Wizard? Certainly not. The Good Witch of
the North? Possibly, but it remains to be seen whether she has the down-and-dirty
instincts for this kind of fight. Dorothy, with her pooch and her nervous trio of hangers-on? Hardly. The Munchkins?

The commissars understand that only the Wicked Witch of the West is certain to fight them at their own pitch of ferocity. And the inhabitants of Oz – the ones with any gumption at all – would realize that too, and would flock under her banner for the duration.

They know the Wicked Witch at least tolerates the wholesomeness of the world, with however bad a grace. Being in a symbiotic relationship with it, she cannot do otherwise. She has no taste for the Anti-Task. She’s a fairy-tale Witch, not an Iago. She must defend Enchantment, for she is one of its creatures, albeit a dark one, and cannot live beyond it or outside it.

Yes, that was the paradox. Only the Wicked Witch of the West could save the Land of Oz. Only she would follow the Solzhenitsyn code of fighting the commissars: “The harder you slug them the safer you’ll be.”

The Wicked Witch, even despite herself, is of the Party of Wholeness, of yin and yang, of interplay and balance. The commissars are of the Party of Division, of antagonist Pathologies and Final Solutions. For them there is only ever the dementing cosmic imbalance between the mad zealot purity of their own “virtue” on the one hand, and the unadulterated wickedness of the crime-scene universe on the other, that whole cosmic Babylon which must be laid waste.

The Witch wants to go on as always, wants to haunt the Land of Oz with spells and dastardly schemes, to startle its inhabitants with dire cackles and broomstick-rides under an eerie moon. The commissars want to bulldoze it and sow the earth with salt, and pull down the moon, and put the people in concentration-camps.

It wasn’t hard to see whose side you’d be on when the crunch came.

He knew he could formulate the gist of the poem in a sentence and pin it up on the Blue Board when he got home: Better an enchanted villainy than a disenchanted “virtue.” Or even more succinctly: Better a Witch than a commissar.

He realized Francesca was speaking to him. He had no idea how long he’d been brooding on the poem idea.

“Sorry,” he said. “I was miles away.”

“So was I,” she said. “The starry nights have that effect. But I was just asking how your love life is.”
“Oh, its okay,” he said absently, still not quite untangled from his previous thoughts.
“Am I prying too much?”
“Not at all. If anyone has the right to ask me that question, its you.”
“Well, I like to think you’re having a bit of happiness.”
“Narelle is very sweet and kind.”
“What a relief for you, after me.”
“You were kind too, in your way.”
“I’ll believe you. Thousands wouldn’t.”
“And she’s very clever. She blitzed her uni course.”
“Yes, Marigold was telling me at the Library.”
“Ah.”
“The two of you have been an item for a long time now, haven’t you?”
“Nah, Marigold and I just had the one dirty weekend together.”
“Very droll.”
“It was droll, actually.”
“Let’s return to Narelle.”
“That’s what I said to Marigold at the time.”
“Stop it.”
“Alright.”
“What’s next for the two of you?”
“Next?”
“Plans for the future.”
Uneasy feelings began to stir in Tait. He normally kept this particular issue off in a far corner of his mind.
“I don’t really know about plans.”
“It seems time to formulate a few, doesn’t it?”
“Does it?”
“I know I’m sticking my oar in here, but yes, it does.”
“We do vaguely discuss things from time to time. She has some plans.”
“Such as?”
“To do her Honours up at Castleton next near, then do her Master’s.”
“And what about you? Where will you be, and what will you be doing?”
“I’ll be at the cabin, I guess, like always.”
“The Hermit of the Lake?”
“I’m hardly a hermit. Narelle stays over every second or third night.”
“You’re a hermit in spirit, and that can be just as bad for a person.
“I feel this conversation is leading somewhere.”
“It is. I think you should be taking the relationship to the next level.”
“Which is?”
“Moving into a flat together comes to mind. Perhaps up at Castleton, near the uni.”
“I don’t know if it’d be practical.”
“What’s not practical about it?”
“I have no resources. I can barely keep my own head above water. I can’t be a proper partner to another person. You know that better than anyone.”
“You survive at the cabin, so you could survive somewhere else, with Narelle surviving alongside you. You’d survive all the better together.”
“It’s easier said than done. Anyway, Narelle might not want that, in the final analysis. She might have plans that don’t include being stuck with a loser.”
Francesca leaned forward in her deckchair and Tait could see the moonlight reflected in her eyes and on her hair.
“You aren’t a loser yet. You still have options open. But you might make yourself a loser if you don’t buck up pretty soon and take life in hand. You’re pushing forty, my sweet!”
“I’m Damaged Goods,” he said simply.
There was a certain sad relief in having said it.
“Well, that’s true, yes.”
“Is it?”
He was startled that she could agree so readily.
“But only true in a specific sense. Do you remember what I said to you that time about you not having a proper Safety Valve?”
“I’ll never forget it.”
“That’s still the basic problem. You drift along being a spiritual hermit, making do with a part-time involvement, not having plans, feeling that you’re doomed and that no good can come of anything, endlessly hanging on, hanging on. The Safety Valve should tell you that you aren’t getting your proper needs met, and that you aren’t meeting your girlfriend’s needs either. It should get you so pissed-off with things that
you refuse to endure it any more. It should fire you up to grab hold of your woman and go off and try to be happy. But it doesn’t work like that with you, not with your ability to soak up quiet desperation till hell freezes over.”

“I know you’re right at some level.”

“No, not at some level. I’m just right, full stop. And I’m disappointed that I have to point all this out to you again. It shows I didn’t get through to you the other time. I thought I had. I thought I’d done something good for you – however cruel it might have felt at the time – by setting you straight. I thought I’d helped put you on a path to better things.”

“I know I’ve stayed too much in my own preoccupations. I do know that.”

“Yes, you’re very good at knowing. It’s the doing that’s the problem.”

“So are you saying Narelle is fed-up with me?”

“No, not yet. She still has a lot of faith in you. But she’s twenty-three and she wants a future, and a partner who wants one too.”

“Have you fathomed all this by intuition, or what?”

“Narelle and I may not be each other’s favourite person, but we do exchange the odd word now and then. She opened up to me a little bit the other night at rehearsal because she knows how well I know you. And because I’m older and wiser. Isn’t that a scream.”

“She confided in good old Auntie Frannie?”

“Yes. Depressing, isn’t it?”

“I see.”

“We only talked in generalities for a minute or two. But it was enough for me to give you some serious advice: Get off your backside, and come out of your Twilight Zone, and make things happen for the two of you, before it’s too late!”

Craig came along the deck then. Tait said he was a bit weary and would head off home. And Francesca said she was weary too and that they had to get the kids bedded down. Craig went inside and Francesca walked Tait to the motorbike. They were hidden a bit from the house by the low branches of the big tree.

“This isn’t sexual,” Francesca said softly, putting her arms around him and brushing his lips lightly with hers. “It’s just reassurance of my affection, in case I’ve put you in any doubt.”
Tait returned the hug. It felt lovely. He didn’t want to let go, but she gently pulled away and said goodnight and went back up to the house.

His mind was a jumble as he rode along, but when he made the turn at Honeysuckle Hill he found the moon enormous in front of him and all was bathed in its uncanny glow. He saw the silhouette of the Wicked Witch of the West hurtle across the face of the moon on her broomstick. She was heading out in a cackle of manic glee to take command against the Commissars who were now rolling forward with all their juggernauts of Nihilism and their dead-eyed legions of Disenchantment.

He wished the motorbike could fly and he could follow her to the battle!

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Chapter Twenty-One

Tait had finished his review of Sam Foster’s book. It ran to three thousand words, and he’d sweated over every one of them, wanting the piece to be worthy. He’d sent it off to Fergus Gunn at Compact, and also put a copy in the mail to Mike.

“Terrific job,” Mike had written back. “You said all that I would have said, but with several sharp insights of your own. Specially about the Enchantment thing. Of course it was Weber who wrote of modernity’s ‘disenchantment of the world,’ and he took it up from the poet Schiller. But you illustrate the point very neatly with your Witch of Oz and how the dark side can provide the strength to live. A viable society is on proper terms with its own dark side, its own deep wells of exultation and terror. One sees exactly what you mean, sees exactly why the Wicked Witch of the West is Oz’s best weapon against the commissars. It’s like the ancient Greeks realizing that the bright golden Apollo wasn’t complete on his own, that he needed to be paired with the darker Dionysus. Or even more to the point, the Greeks had Hecate, the dread witch-goddess of the night.

“Our side understands that Enchantment is what holds everything together and that we must therefore adhere to all that is authentic in life and the world and the spirit, not just to the explicitly ‘nice’ things. The rose grows out of rotting manure, and we
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“Our side understands that Enchantment is what holds everything together and that we must therefore adhere to all that is authentic in life and the world and the spirit, not just to the explicitly ‘nice’ things. The rose grows out of rotting manure, and we
must take the flower and the shit together. We are fatuous enough, god knows, and often deserve to be called the Stupid Party – as that smarmy little prick J.S. Mill called us – but in our better moments we do comprehend that our prissy little approval or disapproval isn’t to be made the law of the universe, that we are of the universe and not in charge of it or enthroned in judgement on it. Marcus Aurelius wrote that ‘All things are connected, and the bond is holy.’ And that holy bond is what we can call Enchantment, if we wish, though it can go by other names. And the disenchantment of the world is the breaking of that bond, is the cosmic act of treachery and bad faith.

‘Caroline recently re-read Albert Camus’ The Rebel, and that prompted me to dip into it again. I had forgotten what a brilliant book it is. When I was eighteen it gave me one of the key insights of my life. Camus happens to be talking about 19th century Russian nihilist intellectuals, but his point applies to all who represent militant modernity. He likens them to adolescents who experience both intense doubt and an equally intense need to believe. And so, he says, ‘their personal solution consists of endowing their negation with the intransigence and passion of faith.’ That resolved a question I’d been plagued by. How can our opponents be so committed to such a barren view of life, so dedicated to such a rotten agenda? I suddenly understood why, as Yeats phrased it, the worst are full of passionate intensity. I saw how the Puritans could be so staunch in a bad cause, how the Roundheads could be so sturdy on the wrong side, how the Commissariat could keep on going for centuries with undiminished malice. It was because they ‘endow their negation with the intransigent passion of faith.’

‘And now I’m indebted to Camus for another insight. A sentence leapt out at me after I’d been dwelling on your points about Enchantment in the Foster review:

Lucifer has died with God, and from his ashes has arisen a spiteful demon who does not even understand the object of his venture.

‘That made something click. I realized that, despite ourselves, we keep over-estimating the enemy’s intellect and sophistication. We keep trying to fathom the Satanic subtlety of the agenda, or the Luciferian grandeur of the strategy. But we aren’t dealing any longer with the great fallen angel who warred with God and contended with Him for human souls. We aren’t dealing with the charismatic divinity
we see in *Paradise Lost*. The new spiteful demon is *banal*, is banality incarnate. It doesn’t want our souls — it wouldn’t know a soul if it tripped over one. It doesn’t sit brooding on a throne in Hades, with flames leaping around it and grotesque shadows lurching on the walls. No, this new demon is a nasty little semi-cretin, a commissar-bureaucrat, a Shire Councilor with flat feet and adenoids who chairs the sub-committee for forcing everyone to paint their front door the same shade of puce or be punished. And it is genuinely in favour of the ‘colour standardization of residential entryways’ because its comprehension is so truncated that it actually sees such a scheme as an *end* rather than as the most trivial of *means*. The old Satan might, in some idle moment, have conceived an exquisite plot involving the colour of people’s front doors, but would never have been so pea-brained as to imagine that the scheme mattered apart from it’s efficacy in damning souls.

“One sees how this works in today’s witch-hunts over child abuse or domestic violence or whatever. The old Satan was a great one for raising hysterias, and for putting every kind of stinking-righteous cant into the mouths of inquisitors, but he surely never believed any of it himself.

“It used to be said that ‘*The Devil knows Latin,*’ or that ‘*The Devil can quote Scripture.*’ Satan knew a great deal about souls, and about such things as piety, and love, and loyalty and honour. He had to know about them in order to subvert them.

“The new demon, on the other hand, is too shallow to fathom any of that. It wreaks endless havoc with witch-hunts and hysterias but never appreciates the exquisiteness of the pain and loss being suffered, or the true dimension of harm being done. The old Satan would have had that harm and misery tallied to the last delectable ounce, and would have exulted in it *honestly*, so to speak. But the new demon is actually stupid enough to half-believe its own agitprop. It actually half-imagines that it is ‘protecting the innocent’ or ‘bringing perpetrators to justice’ or whatever.

“As Camus said, it doesn’t understand the object of its own venture. Or one might say that it *doesn’t fully comprehend that it is a demon.*

“In that sense it is even more unstoppable than the old Satan, for there is nothing in it you could ever frankly appeal to. No wit, no depth, no irony, no self-awareness, no largeness of conception. There’s no way you could ever have an intelligent conversation with it, as Doctor Faustus could with Mephistopheles.
“It’s the deadliest form of nihilism, the kind that doesn’t know itself for what it is. Its parodies of virtue are that much harder to fight against because they are not entirely parodies. They are partly the dim sincerities of Councilor Shitbrain in the sub-committee room, contemplating the vision of so many puce-coloured front doors and how much more convenient that will be.”

It was a weight off Tait’s mind, to know Mike approved of the review, to know that he hadn’t let the great Sam Foster down.

Tait mentioned the puce-coloured front doors to Megan Marchant when he bumped into her near the Council chambers a few days later. He had not seen her for several weeks and was taken aback by her appearance. She looked tired and thin and drawn. For the first time he perceived her as an ageing woman with white in her hair. She carried a bulging briefcase with difficulty and Tait took it from her and they walked slowly towards the Library.

“So how are things in Council Land?” he asked.

“Cuckoo Land, you mean? Oh, the place is full of idiotic schemes, as always.”

“For puce-coloured front doors.”

“Say again?”

He told her the gist of it.

“Don’t mention that anywhere near Council, whatever you do. It’ll only put ideas in their heads.”

“At least you’re a voice of sanity.”

“Well, I’m not so sure of that. I think my usefulness there is coming to an end.”

She sounded as if she meant it.

“Does that mean we’d get to see more of you at the Players? You’ve been sorely missed, you know. It needs your hand at the helm.”

“Oh no, the group is bigger and wiser than any one of its members. It has to be, don’t you think? It goes on and on while individual members fall away.”

They had got to the door of the Library. It was just on closing time.

“Speaking of the Players,” she said, “I want you to spread the word at rehearsal. I’ve decided to have a big barbeque out at the Museum, to celebrate our ten years. We’ll make it one Sunday in a month or so from now. And I expect you and that sweetie-pie of yours to be there. Speaking of Narelle, I want to rope her in to helping with the arrangements – or rather Marigold will do the roping, since she’ll be overseeing
things, along with Kelvin – and one of her express duties will be to have you there without fail. I want us to have a few items of entertainment on the day, and I’d like you to read some of your lovely poetry, if you wouldn’t mind.”

“Not at all,” Tait said.

“Good,” she sighed. “That’s one thing arranged.”

But she looked even gaunter than before, as though the strain of it had exhausted her. Marigold came out of the Library then, turning to lock the glass doors behind her. She shot Megan a look of concern and hurried over to take her elbow. The three of them went carefully across the road to Marigold’s car, Tait carrying the heavy briefcase and struck with poignant awareness that he was escorting two more-or-less elderly ladies.

Ten minutes later he met a subdued Kelvin up near the Plaza and said how fragile Megan was looking. Kelvin asked him if he could keep something strictly under his hat. Tait said he could.

Megan had a malignant breast lump and was booked for a mastectomy.

* * *

Tait and Narelle were driving to the Ridwell campus one weekday afternoon. Tait had a Creative Writing class to teach, and Narelle needed to pick up some application forms. He was thinking about the poem he had completed the previous day. It had been sparked off by Mike’s reflections on the new-style demon that had taken over in the world, the banal demon, no longer the charismatic fiend but the smug petty-bureaucrat with shit for brains. That puerile spirit was evident in so much of the evil being done nowadays.

THE VILLAINS

If some great historian looks back
To contemplate the saga of this age,
I fancy he’ll be puzzled at the lack
Of any villain worth a single page.
Evil was the name we used to call
Demonics grander than a petty spite,
And we always assumed a moral fall
Can only happen from a moral height.

A villainy that’s worthy of the name
Is intimate with virtue. In their war,
The devil and the angel have the same
Conception of the soul they wrestle for.

And all the deepest villains understood
That wickedness must be a subtle art,
So cunning a distortion of the good
It wasn’t easy telling them apart.

Those were the evil-doers in their day
Who thought about the quality of sin,
Gifted manipulators who could play
A tender conscience like a violin.

But now an age so furious with hate,
So ready to inflict enormous harms,
Breeds villains so entirely second-rate,
So lacking in the sinisterly charms –

Our curious historian will guess,
On reading the banal record through,
That evil never needed much finesse
When any old pathetic lie would do.

He let the poem drift off out of his thoughts.
“Dad thinks he might sell the newsagency,” Narelle said.
“Really?” he murmured, bringing his mind fully back to the present moment.
“He’s so fed-up with it.”
“I know.”
“He had another encounter with riff-raff outside the shop the other night and called the police, and then had an argument with them.”
“What about?”
“One of them was flippant.”
“Flippant?”
“That was Dad’s word for it. He got pretty heated, apparently. Told them he didn’t pay and arm and a leg in taxes to support a police force of flippant young haircuts in their first pair of long pants.”
“Flippant young haircuts?”
“That’s one of Dad’s sayings. A totally worthless person is just a ‘haircut.’ He was in full-on exasperation mode because of the yobbos, although they’d gone by the time the fuzz arrived. I gather Dad thanked the two coppers with elaborate courtesy for deigning to show up within the week. He said how pleased he was to be able to greet them in a standing position and not horizontal in a pool of his own splattered brain-matter.”
“There isn’t enough of that old-time politeness today.”
“No.”
“It’s a wonder they didn’t haul him off to the clink.”
“I think he was almost daring them to. He’s angry with the cops on principle nowadays, because of getting that ticket. The outrage of it is never far from his mind.”
“Yes, I’ve heard the full saga over the counter.”

One Sunday morning his employee didn’t turn up to start delivering papers, so Errol had to do it. It was five o’clock in the morning. He was edging along in the van, hurling the rolled-up papers into front yards, when a cop came along and gave him a ticket for being on the wrong side of the road. But he was only momentarily on the wrong side, he insisted. He’d just gone a few hundred metres on the wrong side, to do a couple of houses he’d missed. But the copper told him that didn’t extenuate the offence. “I’ll extenuate them all the way to the High Court!” Errol had declared.

“Have you ever heard the like of it?” he’d demanded of Tait. “It was sparrow-fart of a Sunday morning and there wasn’t another vehicle on the road for miles — except of course for the fleets of burglars’ vans loaded with half the population’s household
belongings, which the police haven’t time to chase because of their full work-load of harassing newsagents!"

But when you were tempted to smile at the unwitting comedy of Errol’s manner, you remembered that it came out of real anguish and wasn’t funny at all.

“Do you think he means it? About selling up?”

“Yes, he might mean it. It isn’t only about being pissed-off. He reckons the shop is a waning asset, that the worse the neighbourhood becomes the harder it will be to get a good price. He says he’d like to semi-retire to some placid country town.”

“What are your feelings?”

“That’s what he wants to know — whether I’m determined to go my own way, or whether I’d come back into the business with him. The scenario is that we’d sell the newsagency here and buy another one in a country town. I’d mostly run things and he’d play golf and do gliding. It would have to be an area where there’s gliding.”

“In the sky?”

“Yes, in glider aircraft. He used to do it years ago, and wants to get back to it. He’s been waxing lyrical about it.”

“And what’s your view of that scenario?”

“It’d be tempting, in a way.”

“What way?”

“It’d be a secure future laid out, wouldn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“You agree that it could have a certain attraction?”

“Sure.”

“And country towns can be pleasant.”

“They can.”

“They can be nice places for kids to grow up.”

“So I’ve heard.”

“And there’d be peace and quite for a writer.”

“I imagine so.”

“You imagine so?”

“Yes, I imagine so.”

“Do you mean that?”

“Mean what?”
“What you’re saying.”
“Why do you ask?”
“Because you don’t always mean what you say.”
Tait was becoming tense. He had his Creative Writing class to teach in a little while and needed to be calm.
“I don’t always mean what I say?”
“No.”
“Interesting comment. Is that anything like saying a person is _untruthful_?”
“No at all. Its just saying that a person often expresses agreement in order to avoid real discussion, or to postpone it until they’re more in the mood for it. Except they never seem to be in the mood for it.”
“What’s your opinion of a person like that?”
“Oh good. No-one wants to be strangled in a spirit of hostility”
“I’ll keep you posted on Dad’s plans then, shall I?”
“Yes, do.”
“And at some point we _will_ have a proper serious talk about it all. Okay?”
“Yes.”
“Maybe I should get that in writing.”
“No, I promise.”
“Thank-you, darling,” she said, reaching out and gently touching his cheek.
He was relieved that she hadn’t pressed him any harder just then, but there was a kind of grief as well. He was aware of this a lot of the time now, felt it like an undertone of deep music — like the music of Mahler at the opening of Visconti’s great film _Death In Venice_. He and Narelle had gone to see it at a quaint old cinema that showed movies like that and Tait knew at once that the music expressed the way he felt within himself a good deal of the time. So did the film’s opening visuals of the boat coming in through the sad smoky haze. He felt it most intensely when Narelle was being kind and forbearing, like just now. She had sweetly _thanked_ him because he’d grudgingly agreed to have a talk about their future sometime, the future she was offering him. Anyone else would have snapped “Thanks for nothing!” and given him the flick right there and then.
They had crossed the railway bridge at Ridwell station and in another minute were parked on the campus.

They had half-an-hour before Tait’s class so they went to the campus bookshop. Narelle browsed ahead of him along the shelves and he looked at her rather than at the books. She was so casually lovely in jeans and a plain white top, with her tawny hair fastened back, and her sexy gold-rimmed glasses. She had the look of the beautiful tawny hawk even more strongly nowadays.

Tait needed to fortify himself for the class. He always got stage-fright before he went in. He told Narelle he’d pop next door to the cafeteria. He got two coffees and sat at their usual corner table and she joined him a minute later.

“I just found something you’ll like,” she said laying a large postcard down in front of him.

On the card was a painting called “Windflowers” by John Waterhouse. A Victorian maiden in vaguely medieval garb is out in a windblown flowery meadow, and her long hair and her white dress are billowing in the gust.

“Isn’t it nice,” Narelle said.

“It’s gorgeous. Flowers in the wind. The whole symbolism of that is so evocative to me. It calls up associations, like ‘candle in the wind’ or ‘orphans of the storm’ or ‘beauty in distress’ or whatever.”

“I thought so. And we like Waterhouse, don’t we?”

“We do.”

“I never get over how sexy the Victorians were in their art, despite all we hear of them being so prudish and hung-up. In fact they seem to make it all the more erotic by keeping it respectable, by wrapping it up in myth and classicism.”

“I agree. Some of those women the Pre-Raphaelites painted would get a block of stone horny.”

“Hmmmm, that’ll be useful to know next time I’m out to seduce you.”

“Allow me to suggest a handy addition to your seduction kit. There’s a little number by Burne-Jones called ‘Merlin and Vivienne’ that rather presses my buttons.”

“Hot stuff, is it?”

“Filthy — but in the most elevated way.”

“I’ll make a note of it. And what’s in your seduction kit?”

“I don’t need one. My girlfriend never stops panting for it.”
“Must be a strain on you.”
“It is. I see it as a Victorian painting, ‘Nympho and the Exhausted Poet.’”
“I can see it too, every lubricious detail.”
“Ah yes, lubricious is the word.”
“It isn’t a word I use lightly.”
“No, one wouldn’t.”
“Provoke me and I’ll use it again.”
“You’re pitiless.”
“I try.”
“I’ve just remembered. Your final clash with the Toxic Razorblade was about the Victorians.”
“It was.”
“You fumed over it for days.”
“It’s that look of infinite disappointment she puts on when you challenge her — she’d been generously willing to credit you with slightly more brains than a cockroach, but you’ve gone and let her down.”

Narelle had Sabina Sharpe for two of her courses at Ridwell: ‘Finding the Feminist Voice in Australian Verse’ in second year, and then ‘Theorizing Gender in Modern Poetry’ in third. Sabina had been very taken with Narelle, and for a while Narelle had been slightly mesmerized by Sabina’s personal style – the delinquent waif thing – and her intellectual charisma.

“I have to admit she was a potent lecturer,” Narelle said. “She gave such vivid accounts of how everything in the world is geared to colonizing women that I finally saw how she was trying to colonize me.”

“You were smart enough to see how the trap worked.”
“I think a lot of students would see it if they ever heard any counter-arguments, but of course they never do, not on campus anyway. The Sabina-types have the system sewn-up. Of course I had one big advantage — I knew your opinion of her, and that kept a part of me skeptical, even when I was quite smitten by her charisma. And then, of course, when your name actually came up…”

That was when they’d finally clashed. Sabina had been heaping scorn on Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach” and especially on the poem’s anguished hope that human love might make more bearable the modern loss of religious faith. Narelle had
challenged one or two of her assertions and it became a tense confrontation, with both of them tightly focussed on each other and the other students quiet as mice. Narelle said that trashing the idea of human love was the work of the “diabolic of disenchantment’ and Sabina had asked where the phrase came from. When she heard it was from a poem of Tait’s she remarked icily that Narelle “might need to find better sources of enlightenment.” Narelle replied that, oddly enough, she had that same thought each time she came into Sabina’s lectures.

Tait had written a gleeful outline of the encounter to Mike Kieslowski.

“What a girl!” Mike had written back. “To have bested The Creature in its lair! You’ve got a winner there, mate! Give her a big kiss on the cheek from Caroline and me!”

For the rest of that semester Narelle was either totally ignored or got the taipan’s death-stare, and she received only a Credit for the course. She spoke to Tim Niblett about it and he urged her to seek an independent re-assessment, but she decided not to bother. In the end it was one of only five Credits on her undergraduate record. Every other mark was a Distinction or High Distinction.

He felt a bit less tense now, and it was nearly time for him to hurry to his class. Narelle would go to the registrar’s office to pick up the forms and then do stuff at the library and they’d meet up to go back to Turrawong. They had a dress rehearsal that evening.

As he stood up they heard a familiar voice call out to them.

“Hello there, hello!”

It was Tim Niblett, bustling in with folders under his arm. He had a big grin on his face and advanced towards Narelle with his arm extended for a handshake.

“Well, done, my dear. Well done, indeed! Thoroughly deserved!”

He shook her hand and dropped his folders on the floor. They bent to retrieve them for him.

“I couldn’t be more pleased,” he said, shaking Tait’s hand as well, “though of course I’m far from being surprised.”

“Um, about what?” Narelle asked, mystified.

“Have you not had the letter?” he asked, seeming taken aback. “It would’ve gone into the mail to you some days ago.”

“I haven’t had a letter.”
“Ah, well, no matter. Its now totally official, so I can have the pleasure of telling you myself. They’re giving you the inaugural Denby Prize!”

Narelle stood amazed.

Just the other day she and Tait had been talking about the new award. Rebecca Denby had been Professor of Fine Arts at Castleton for thirty years. She was a world authority on medieval religious art and a noted eccentric. She was detested by the feminists and had had some famous battles with them back in the 1970s. She was known for always wearing her academic gown when lecturing, to signify that she was speaking not in her own person but in the name of Scholarship. On her retirement a couple of years back she had endowed an annual prize to encourage intellectual rigour at the new campus. It was to go to the Ridwell student with the best academic record as an undergraduate.

They’d agreed that Rebecca Denby sounded like an admirable character and that her prize would be nice to win on that account alone, like good old Willie MacLew’s poetry prize.

“Damn,” Tait said, hugging Narelle in congratulation. “My blasted class is waiting. What a moment to have to rush away!”

She was getting over the amazement and starting to smile broadly. She insisted that he go, that they would celebrate afterwards.

He kissed her cheek and hurried off. He glanced back and saw Tim giving her a little personal round of applause, and he heard Narelle giggling with awkward modesty like a child.

He felt a deep surge of love.

The class went beautifully, for Tait’s mood conveyed itself to the students. The world wasn’t all chaos and folly and injustice after all. Rightfulness could still pick its way through and bestow itself in the proper place. It couldn’t accomplish it every time, or even very often, but maybe it couldn’t do that that even in the best times of the world. But it could still do it once in a while, even now. And that was enough to keep the Cause alive and the Party of the Sacrament viable. It meant the Cavaliers were still riding, and the Clans were still out on the heather.

To end the class on the right note, he recited the Spender poem by heart, the poem that was a Jacobite hymn without knowing it, the one about all those who were truly great —
Whose lovely ambition
Was that their lips, still touched with fire,
Should tell of the Spirit clothed from head to foot in song,
And who hoarded from the Spring branches
The desires falling across their bodies like blossoms.

She was still at their corner table in the canteen when he went back there. She and Tim had had a long talk about her academic options. Tim felt it would be a crying shame if she didn’t go all the way to a doctorate.

There was a rather nice old pub on their way back to Turrawong and they pulled in there. To celebrate, they got two shots of Drambuie and took them out to the little vine-roofed beer garden at the back.

“Drat,” Narelle said suddenly. “I forgot those forms from the registrar’s office. It went right out of my mind.”

“We’ll pop back tomorrow if you want, you cute little prize-winner, you.”

“I couldn’t have done it without my devoted fan.”

“Don’t you mean fans in the plural?”

“No, I mean fan in the singular. I mean you. All those times when I had an essay to write, and you’d toss ideas around with me and help me see the key issues. You were so sweet.”

“Sweets for the sweet.”

“You know,” she said, “Tim made an interesting remark. He said its character as much as intellect that makes a true scholar. He cited Rebecca Denby as an example. I think he was implying that I might have a bit of that quality as well. But if I do have any spark of character, it’s mainly thanks to being with you. My Dad has character, of course, but of a different kind. It isn’t the quiet stoical resolve that you have. Some of your quality has rubbed off on me.”

“The other way round, more likely.”

“Don’t try to wriggle out of being upright and honourable. I’ve sprung you.”

She was gazing lovingly at him.

“It really isn’t true, you know,” he said, suddenly wanting to be serious. “I’m like an empty vessel. I seem to have hardly any content of my own. The only honourable
thing about me is that I think a lot about people who really were honourable. Anything that’s remotely good in me has come from thinking of them.”

She leaned forward and kissed him softly on the lips.

“But we’re here to dwell on your wonderfulness,” he said, to get the focus back where it belonged.

He raised his glass to her.

They clinked glasses and took a sip of their Drambuie.

“Ambrosia,” they sighed in unison, smacking their lips, then laughed at how in sync they were.

Before they left the pub they went down a narrow passage to the Ladies and the Gents. They met in the passage again and embraced each other, and the embrace turned into a deep kiss. Tait held her tightly to him, feeling flooded by her softness and warmth. She breathed into his ear that she loved him. He whispered back that he loved her too. It was absolutely true. He did love her.

But his mind remained detached and he was thinking about her rose-coloured view of him. What Narelle saw as “character” and “stoical resolve” was what Francesca had seen through as a Broken Safety Valve and a hopeless inability to get his needs met.

It was awfully nice to have someone over-estimate you out of fondness, but it wasn’t right to let them stake their hopes of happiness on that. It would be like standing by and watching their own goodness work against them.

It would be ingratitude and treachery.

Narelle didn’t deserve that.

The Mahler grief-music rose up in him until it blocked out everything else.

* * * *

Tait sat at his work table, idly looking up at the Blue Board.

He was reflecting on the lay-out at the top. He had pinned the Windflowers postcard next to the Cavalier-hat brooch. The brooch was pinned to a sheet of paper on which he’d printed in capitals the King’s profound words as he faced that kangaroo-court that intended to kill him no matter what: “IT IS NOT MY CASE ALONE.” Those six words could well stand as the eternal creed and motto of the Cause.
A proper distance below was the Trotsky quote: “YOU MAY NOT BE INTERESTED IN WAR, BUT WAR IS INTERESTED IN YOU.” That quote was there because it was such an accurate glimpse of the Enemy’s mentality that he didn’t ever want to forget it. It was like Lenin’s ultimate question: “Who whom?” As long as you remained aware of it you could never be surprised by anything the Enemy did.

He looked down from the Blue Board and back to the typescript in front of him. It was his latest collection of poems and it had just come back from Canopy Press with a letter of rejection. It was the first time he’d had a rejection from them and he had been sitting there nursing the impact. It was a feeling as if the whole of existence had abruptly turned hostile, as though you had just been horribly singled out to be shamed. And it seemed to undercut all you had ever done in the past, as if they’d finally seen you as the fraud that you were.

But looking up at the Blue Board had helped. It was not his case alone. Better men than him had had to tough things out. And better women, too. He got a sudden vivid picture of nurse Erica walking down that corridor with defiant aplomb.

He re-read the letter from Canopy Press. He could see now that it was actually very friendly and forthright. It said they were cutting back their poetry list because of the unhelpful economics of it, but they would be happy to look at another collection of short stories from him, something in the way of *Ground Leave*, which appeared to have found a readership to the extent of covering its costs and going into the black. They felt this readership could be developed. What they really hoped, the letter said, was that he might have a novel to show them at some stage. They strongly urged him to consider turning his prose talents in that direction. There could be financial benefits there which they felt were unlikely ever to accrue from poetry, even poetry as accomplished as his, or from short stories. They spoke of the times being in a cultural watershed, and that new directions appeared the order of the day.

Yes, it was a very decent letter.

He was deep in thought about the cultural watershed when Kelvin turned up at the door.

“I’m just on the way past,” he said, flopping down at the kitchen table, “and hanging-out for a quickie.”

“A quickie it is,” said Tait, hastening to get the jug on. “How’s Megan?”
“On the mend, thank God. She’s getting high-horsed and bossy again, which is a good sign. But she was very glum for a while. Very glum.”

He sounded as though it had shaken him to see Megan very glum.

“A mastectomy must hit any woman hard,” Tait said.

“Yes, it must. But anyway, Marigold’s providing lots of TLC of course, as well as Bruce.”

“Who’s Bruce?”

“Pardon?”

“Who is Bruce?”

“Uncle Bruce. Bruce Marchant.”

Tait went on looking blank.

“The husband,” Kelvin said.

“There’s a husband?”

“Of course. There’s been one for thirty-odd years.”

“I’ve never heard a whisper of him.”

“Well, he is an unobtrusive guy.”

“You can say that again. What does he do?”

“He used to be a stockbroker, but he chucked it in years ago to concentrate on the farm.”

“They have a farm?”

“Ninety acres, out on Ellmore Road. You’ve never been out there?”

“No.”

“It’s a showplace. Bruce tends it with manicure scissors. I think he’d know if one blade of grass bent out of alignment. He’s a very focused guy. He’s into breeding these esoteric animals — Manchurian antelopes or whatever the hell they are. I pretend to listen when he drones on about it but the tedium is lethal. I tell him he’s just a dirty old sod who likes watching things have sex.”

“Well, I must say I’m gobsmacked to learn that Megan is a thoroughly married lady. I suppose I assumed otherwise because of Marigold being around her all the time.”

“You thought they were a couple?”

“No, not really. You told me once that Marigold’s passion was unrequited in that sense. No, I think I just assumed that Megan was so busy in her life that she was self-sufficient.”
“In a way you could almost call them a threesome. The whole thing is quite poignant really. Bruce and Marigold detested each other at first. I mean *fiercely*. But then over the years they learnt to at least tolerate each other’s part in Megan’s life. Then I think they actually came to *approve* of each other, simply because each saw that the other was conducive to the Beloved One’s happiness.”

“That *is* poignant,” Tait said, handing him a mug of coffee.

“I have to give Bruce credit. He isn’t what you’d call an emotionally open guy – he was a stockbroker for god’s sake – but he rose to the challenge.”

“Do they have any children?”

“A daughter, Eloise. My cousin Elly. *Ellyphant*, I used to call her because she was fatter than me when we were kids. But she got thinner and I didn’t. Poetic justice. She’s quite high up in the Air Force nowadays. She was always a total tomboy. She and I used to swap our toys. I traded her my cricket bat for a dolly’s make-up case that I enjoyed for years.”

“So she’s ‘high up in the Air Force’ is she?”

“Yes. Or she might be deeply into submarines. I can never remember.”

“The way I heard it, she wanted to be in the Artillery but wasn’t of the right calibre.”

“At this point,” Kelvin said, standing up and draining his coffee, “something tells me I should run for the door and claw my way out.”

They went out to his car.

“You have final dress rehearsal tonight?”

“We do,” Tait said.

“The Mad Moaner must’ve been hard for you to take all these weeks.”

“I’ve gritted my teeth. I note in passing that you shrewdly weaseled out of this production. Will you be lending a hand on the nights?”

“I’ll sling the punters the odd tea and biscuit if I can. And I’ll be bringing Auntie to at least one night.”

“So what are the prospects?” Tait asked quietly. “Will she be all okay from now on?”

Kelvin didn’t answer for a few seconds, but scuffed the dirt with the toe of his shoe.

“All we know is what the specialist told Bruce,” he said. “*In oncology we learn to watch and wait, watch and wait.*”

“Of course.”
Kelvin stood beside his car and stared across the road for a moment.

Tait wondered if he was thinking of that first time he’d seen Rory at the building-site. Thoughts of love and loss, love and loss.

He wondered what Kelvin’s equivalent of the Mahler grief-music was.

He watched the car go out of sight.

Ernie came shuffling outside just then, to scatter crumbs on the bird-stand, and was glad to hear about Megan being on the mend. He had never forgotten that she’d defended him against the Council’s persecution, and he was bitter that she’d been struck down.

“She probably got sick from the pressure, from havin’ to battle day and night for ordinary people against them Council bastards! But you can bet they’re still hale and hearty!”

Yes, Tait thought, the years of selfless campaigning would have helped to bring it on.

A line of Shakespeare’s came to him and seemed to express a great sombre truth. *Some rise by sin, and some by virtue fall.*

* * * *

Mona’s production was a huge success and morale in the Players had picked right up, for the time being.

Tait had learned that the morale ran in cycles, and he thought of these as the Inward and Outward phases. For a year or two there’d be a flat feeling, a sense that the public was a pack of surly ingrates hardly worth appealing to. The focus would turn strongly inward, and pleasing the paying customers would start to seem the least of their concerns. The audiences would thin down to a few dozen faithful — mostly friends and relatives who would’ve been obliged to turn up and applaud an ensemble reading of the phone book. Directors would then get passionate urges to do Ibsen in order to “extend ourselves artistically” and that would kill off the last trace of outside interest and confirm the dimness of the great unwashed. Cliques and backbiting would increase and a malaise become palpable and everybody would wonder why it didn’t seem fun anymore. Then Marigold as treasurer would start to lament at how the insurance premiums were going through the roof, etcetera, etcetera, they had to make
some money by hook or by crook. There’d be baffled looks all round, as though it was rocket-science, and then some deep thinker would float the idea of putting on a rollicking sex-farce to get bums on seats. The tide would then turn and for the next two or three years there’d be the Outward phase when it all seemed a breeze. Productions would fizz with energy and the hall would be packed and there’d be an influx of new members and the Players would congratulate themselves on being so vibrantly popular, for being true “community” theatre, unlike those pathetic loser groups that fart around with Ibsen.

It had always gone in those cycles to some extent, but Tait now realized how Megan had kept it from fluctuating too wildly. She had always made sure they had one or two hearty rollicks on the programme every year, whether they felt like it or not, because it kept the public attached and discouraged the group from brooding on itself. But with Megan no longer in charge, they were starting to swing between extremes.

By the final Saturday of the run, Tait was black and blue from his falling-over-drunk routine with the suitcases. But he got roars of laughter each performance, and a round of applause as he went off, so he didn’t mind the bruises in the least.

Narelle had the more grueling task as prompt, having to be up with every word of dialogue at the precise moment, having to be ready to save every actor’s arse on stage, or save a whole scene from going down a blind alley from which it might never return. It was hideously difficult with a farce because of the speed and confusion, the ad-libbing and ad-hockery and general mayhem. The prompt had to know not just the dialogue backwards, but the whole flow and inner logic of the plot. Some mishap might occur that the actors couldn’t get themselves out of. The prompt might have to rescue the whole play, the whole night’s endeavour, with only a few seconds to think how to do it. There might be six people on stage, and one of them suddenly losing it and bringing all the others down like a row of dominoes. They might have gone totally blank, or skipped half a dozen pages, or have jumped ahead into the next Act. In a few heart-stopping moments the prompt had to think how to clear up the mess and set things forward again. Then she had to impose her solution on the stricken actors with only the authority of her subdued voice. And she had to do it so smoothly that the audience will barely know that anything was amiss. Tait had prompted for a couple of productions and it had scared him silly. It wasn’t that major stuff-ups were very prone to happen, but that every single moment held the possibility of one. So
even a faultless performance took its toll on the nerves, or at least on those of any prompt who cared about doing a good job.

There were “listening” prompts and “watching” prompts, Tait reckoned. He thought of the first type as the Forlorn Hopes. Being prompted by them was like having a lifebelt thrown to you from the Titanic. They were the ones who sat back passively listening, with no idea of what was actually happening on stage, waiting for a silence to become long enough and deathly enough to warrant intervention — and as often as not when they finally got around to offering a prompt they did it so softly or with such poor articulation that the actor couldn’t catch it anyway. And just for good measure the Forlorn Hopes were prone to go to the opposite extreme as well and prompt so relentlessly that the actors didn’t dare pause for dramatic effect. Like all really good prompts, Narelle wanted to watch. She liked to be right at the edge of the side curtain, just out of the audience’s angle of vision but where she could see the whole stage and spot an uncertain look or hesitant gesture that might signal trouble. Tait studied her for long periods from the back of the wings, noting the way her finger moved across the script while her eyes stayed mostly fixed on the faces of the actors. She knew the pages so well that she could follow the printed lines with her mind’s eye alone. When she was on prompting duty she looked more than ever like a tawny-haired young hawk, poised and focused to the nth degree.

He was carefully storing away that picture of her, adding it to the Memory Bank.

The show’s crackle and sparkle came from the two leads. Francesca being excellent was no surprise, but Brandon had come up several notches from the preening narcissist he’d once been. He was able to lose himself in his character, as Francesca did in hers, and they became more than the sum of their two parts. They melded into a whirl of energy that was beautifully disciplined and yet delightfully unforced.

When the curtain came down on the final Saturday night, there was a sense of triumph all round. The public had redeemed itself by flocking in, and the coffers had been replenished. The only bummer was that Commissar Mona was now riding high on success.

The set was always pulled down straight after the final performance. The hall and the stage were left bare and clean to avoid grizzlies from the Council. It was a couple of hours of collective hard work, but everyone was always so “up” and adrenalin-filled that they tore through it. And there was always a big roll-up of the members on
the final Saturday night. Even if you weren’t involved in that show, you knew to be there to help get the Set Struck and the Hall Clean and the Party Started. Most people had particular tasks that they’d adopted over the years and which everyone knew to leave to them. Taking down the set required handyman skills that Tait didn’t have so he’d steered clear of that. He’d gradually got into the habit of stacking the chairs and wheeling them to the storage room on a trolley. If it had been a “supper” show there would be tables to stack away as well. Now he automatically did it, along with Frank Baxter. Narelle always vacuumed the carpet in the foyer. Gillian and Francesca would scrub the sinks in the kitchen and mop the floor. You’d hear them hooting and chattering together, their voices echoing in the high, tiled space.

A hundred and one things got done quickly and the hall become immaculate again, so bare that it seemed hard to credit an audience had been rolling in the aisles so little time ago.

The Green Room was packed by then, and so loud with talk and laughter that Tait didn’t feel like being in the crush of it. There were scones and sandwiches, so he went in and got some on a paper plate – glancing around for Narelle as he did so – and then went back outside to stand among the knot of smokers. He found Ian next to him and they chatted in a slightly distant way about the show. He felt awkward with Ian now because of Ian’s cold-shouldering of Jimmy Sale at work.

Ian went inside and Tait began listening to a conversation that the smokers were having about the Barak case.

Barak was a police detective. On hearing an allegation that his child had been interfered with by the next-door neighbour, he went and shot the man five times with his police pistol. Barak had shown no remorse for the killing and argued in fact that he had done the right thing and that it was an outrage that he had even been arrested. Now his trial was getting underway. Everyone had views on the case, from the child protection lobby to the police union to the multiculturalists. Barak was of Middle Eastern origin, so there was much public anguish about “our society’s need to empathise more fully with a plurality of value-systems and hopefully avoid such tragedies in the future.” Those were actual words from a newspaper editorial. Tait and Mike Kieslowski now used the phrase “our plurality of value-systems” as a bitter jibe. But Tait felt the case might prompt a return to sanity. Barak would be found guilty of murder and a life-sentence would signal that the madness wasn’t going to be allowed
to run *totally* unbounded. It would be a restatement of the basic principles of civilization, however little and late.

Mike saw it differently. He was sure Barak would get little more than a slap on the wrist — a conviction on a much lesser charge and maybe a year or two in the clink.

“Take it from me, they’ll find a way to sanctify him and make him a stick to beat the rest of us with.”

For once Tait disagreed with Mike’s assessment of an issue. He was sure his friend was being too pessimistic and too dogmatic. Things were pretty bad, but not quite as bad as that.

The talk among the smokers began to degenerate into mindless tabloidese and Tait didn’t want to hear any more of it. He would have moved right away from the door of the Green Room but he was waiting for the Presentation to start. They always had a little ceremony. The director was presented with a gift from the cast and crew, and he or she then thanked each one by name and gave them little cards or trinkets as keepsakes. You were kind of obliged to be there when the director said your name and handed you the keepsake.

He wished they’d get it over with.

Megan come out the door with Marigold.

“It’s so hot and crowded in there,” she said to Tait, “I can’t stay.”

“I know how you feel.”

“If they’d start the Presentation, I’d wait, but there’s no sign of it happening. Anyway, I wasn’t involved with the show, so I don’t really need to be there, and I’ve left my apologies.”

“Mona’s busy bathing in the glory,” Tait said.

“Ah well, credit where it’s due. She did a good job.”

“I guess so,” Tait murmured. “Although I’d rather rip my tongue out than say it.”

“I daresay you aren’t alone in that,” Megan smiled.

“Not by a long shot!” added Marigold grumpily.

Megan said one or two nice things about Tait’s falling-down act as the drunken Longbottle. Then Neil the Wheel hove into view and Megan declared that “yon Sturdy Watchman” would escort her to her car. Neil swelled with pride and led Megan and Marigold away to their respective vehicles by the light of his torch.
Tait moved away from the door and felt a slight breeze. He went further, trying to find the main flow of it to stand in. He went right over to the side of the Court building and sat down on the step of a narrow side doorway. He looked across at the Green Room, at the light spilling out, at the crowded conviviality inside. They’d put music on now and the sound of it came strongly across. It was the old Rolling Stones number “Can’t Get No Satisfaction.” He had vivid memories of it on the radio back when he was fifteen or so, living alone and penniless in the city.

When that song ended, another Stones number came on. It was “Ruby Tuesday” and it conjured up one afternoon in the Botanical Gardens back then. He’d been eating a dry bread roll, crumb by careful crumb, and wondering where to sleep that night. A teenage couple had been smooching on the grass and “Ruby Tuesday” was on their transistor radio. He had been wracked with yearning for what the smooching couple had. But then he was filled with a cold defiance and had squared his shoulders and walked away, like someone accepting his fate with no more fuss than a contemptuous twist of the lips.

He was vividly reliving that moment when the song was wrenched off. They were starting the Presentation.

He stayed where he was for the twenty minutes it lasted. Now and then he got the gist of what was said. Mona made a long speech. He didn’t catch a lot of it, but the unctuous pomposity was unmistakable.

When the Presentation had droned to an end, Francesca came out, laughing, like someone freed from torment. She turned back to ask about pizza. Was ham and cheese okay? Then Brandon came out saying something about anchovies. They were going to the place down the road to get pizza for people.

A minute later Narelle came out the door and looked around. She didn’t see him so he called out to her.

“Hi, Stranger,” she said, coming across. “Whatcha doin’?”

“Wondering where you’d got to.”

“I got roped into packing stuff away under the stage with Kelvin.”

“Sounds sweaty and intimate.”

“It was. There was a lot of heavy panting, although I don’t think I quite straightened him out.”

“Win some, lose some.”
“That’s what I say to console myself.”
She handed him a small envelope with a bulge in it.
“What’s this?”
“You token of thanks from Mona.”
“A poison capsule, is it?”
“A little plastic figurine, I think. That’s what mine was. But she was gracious about
you in your conspicuous absence. She said you had a comic knack.”
“A comic knack, eh?”
“Her very words.”
She told him to move over, then sat down on the narrow step beside him.
“What have been meditating on, out here in splendid isolation?”
“The Art of Prompting,” he said. “I was watching you a lot from the back of the
wings.”
“I know. I was aware of you. I kept wishing we could cuddle.”
A thought struck him and he laughed.
“What?”
“Visualize it. The prompt starts having a pash with someone, starts moaning aloud,
The actors out on stage are bewildered but figure they’d better go along with it, so
they’re all out there moaning orgasmically in unison.”
“Yes, I can see it,” she giggled.
Neil the Wheel came along the side of the hall, flashing his torch and mumbling to
himself, then went round the corner.
“The first really intense conversation we ever had was about prompting,” Narelle
said. “Do you remember? I was fifteen.”
“I remember.”
“You complained about the Forlorn Hope style of prompting.”
“The lifebelt from the Titanic? I ranted, didn’t I?”
“You were so cute when you got all enraged about it. Or rather, half-cute and half-
scary. That was back before I understood that you got angry about the principle of a
thing, the abstract issue, and that it didn’t mean you were angry with anyone in
particular, and especially not with me.”
“I remember how patiently and sweetly you listened.”
“I was already keen on you.”
“I felt that, but didn’t dare believe it.”
“Do you feel that we’ve come full circle in a way? With the Players, I mean.”
“I what sense?”
“In the sense that something has been completed.”
“I think I know what you mean.”
There was a long pause and Narelle put her hand on his knee and kissed him on the cheek.
“We need to have a serious talk,” she said.
“Right now?”
“In the next few days.”
For an instant Tait wondered if she was pregnant. They were always careful, but she wasn’t always on the Pill, and condoms can fail. But he sensed it wasn’t that.
“What’s it about?” he asked.
“Our lives. Yours and mine.”
“Yes?”
“Something’s come up. Not world-shattering in itself, but it indicates the time for certain things to happen.”
“Yes?”
“Cathy spoke to me this morning. She and her guy have decided to get hitched in six weeks. They’re going to live in her house, and naturally they’ll want it to themselves, so I’ll have to move out of my room there.”
“I see.”
“I’ve told my Dad I won’t be going back in the business with him anytime soon, although I haven’t ruled it out for the future. I want to follow up the uni option, the way I’ve discussed with Tim Niblett.”
“Yes?”
“That means being based at the Castleton campus.”
“Yes?”
“I want to get a flat there, near the campus, within the next few weeks.”
“I see.”
“Yes.”
“So that’s what we need to talk about.”
“I understand.”
“We’ll talk it through, okay?”
“Yes,” Tait said.
She put her arm around him and squeezed him and kissed his cheek again.
“Thank-you, sweetheart,” she said, as if he had done her a favour.
The Mahler grief-music was rising in him, but somehow mixed up with the sound of “Ruby Tuesday” coming from far-away and long-ago.

Chapter Twenty-Two

He was riding the motorbike along the Valley road.

It was the Sunday of the tenth-anniversary barbeque at the Pioneer Museum. At two o’clock in the afternoon the day was very hot and humid. Trickles of sweat ran down his face from under the helmet and he had to pull to a halt every so often to wipe it out of his eyes.

Tait wasn’t in a mood to socialize. He wished he could ride to some delicious cool grove and lie down and rest. He’d like it to be a fairy grove where he could have seven years of enchanted sleep and then wake and find only a few hours had passed. And if he woke with a purse of gold in his hand, that would be nice too. Seven years of slumber would give his mind a rest. He’d been thinking too much lately. Or rather, he’d been doing too much of the wrong kind of thinking, the kind that leaves you exhausted back where you started.

For a fortnight it had mostly been about Narelle’s hopes and plans. They’d had several long talks and she’d laid out scenarios. The one she liked best was that they both go to university. With his writing credentials Tait would get in easily as a mature-age student, and he would receive the living-allowance. She had checked it all out and had got all the forms and brochures. While he did his Bachelors degree, she’d be gaining her Masters. In time they’d both have doctorates and the world would be
“So that’s what we need to talk about.”
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their oyster. In the meantime they’d be a happy campus couple with a snug life together in their flat.

What grieved him most was that it was all quite feasible. If it had been pie-in-the-sky he wouldn’t have had the extra pain of seeing genuine chances going past. Because it was achievable his mind kept raking over it to no purpose.

“Tell me truly,” she’d asked at the end of one of their talks. “Is it a sensible, practical plan?”

“Yes,” he’d replied. “It is.”

She smiled, pretending not to notice how sad he looked. And he pretended not to notice that she had noticed.

They kicked it around some more and worked out that there was a six-month gap in the situation. Narelle could begin her Honours course in the middle of that year if she wanted to, and she was keen to get stuck into it straight away, whereas Tait couldn’t commence as an undergraduate till the next academic year. There was also the matter of his Creative Writing classes for the CET at Ridwell. For the time being they were his only source of income. Narelle had some savings and offered to support him until his uni allowance came on stream. But Tait said it would be wasting good money, and besides, he felt he owed it to the CET not to leave them without extended notice.

So the idea was that they’d maintain two bases during that six-month gap, the cabin and a flat in Castleton. They’d have weekends together while doing what they needed to do in their respective spheres. Their two places would only be an hour apart, and an hour was nothing at all.

So Narelle checked the Castleton paper every day for flats, and registered her name and requirements with the student accommodation office up there.

Yes, it was all very sensible and practical.

He went over Honeysuckle Hill, not bothering to glance across at the tree in Astrid’s Meadow. He wasn’t thinking about the Narelle situation now, but about the Barak case.

It had been squatting horribly in the front of his mind for nearly a week, ever since the trial had ended and Barak had walked out a free man.

He’d been found Not Guilty.

It wasn’t Manslaughter. It wasn’t Involuntary Homicide While of Unsound Mind. It wasn’t anything at all along those lines. It was just Not Guilty. There was a corpse
with five bullets in its chest, but the person who’d pulled the trigger those five times was just plain *Not Guilty* of taking the life. Walking into your neighbour’s house and blasting him to death was now an okay thing to do — provided of course that an *allegation* had been made, or was possibly construed, or was perhaps thought to have been vaguely hinted at.

Even Mike Kieslowski’s imagination hadn’t been dark or cynical enough to pick this outcome.

Now Barak was threatening to sue because they wouldn’t keep him on as a detective. In a rare fit of ethical awareness the Police Commissioner issued a statement that under his discretionary powers he had “deemed Mr Barak unsuitable for further employment.” Barak went on TV to express outrage at this.

The Commissioner was of course criticized for being insensitive to our plurality of value-systems. Everybody had an opinion about whether slaughtering the next-door neighbour ought to prejudice a policeman’s career. Ron Dodd, the King of Talk-Back Radio, was on Barak’s side because, as he put it, “*anyone who knocks off a rock-spider is entitled to a fair go.*”

The only measured comment Tait had heard in the media was from a Czech-born senator called Pribik. He said that Barak and his supporters were attacking the very standards of law and public ethics that had made Australia attractive to immigrants from other cultures in the first place.

Tait knew there could be no hope for a world in which Barak walked free. Here was the apotheosis of Anarcho-Tyranny. A mere *allegation* of kiddie-fiddling made you guilty enough to deserve immediate death by gunshot in your own living-room, but the actual *act* of walking into someone’s house and pumping five bullets into them did not render you guilty of anything.

He had to stop raking it over and over in his mind. It was driving him to despair.

He turned in at the gate of the Pioneer Museum.

There were cars parked in the paddock and he saw Narelle’s among them, She’d been there since the morning. There were kids and dogs running about and a big canvas awning had been set up for shade. The awning was of blue and white stripes. The smell of sizzling barbeque hung in the air and someone was playing a piano-accordion very beautifully.
It wasn’t meant to be a public occasion like the opening ten years ago, just a get-together for the Museum helpers and their families and friends.

Tait walked over to the big awning and found about thirty people sitting in plastic chairs in the shade of it. The piano-accordionist was an elderly man he didn’t know. The man swayed in his seat, his eyes closed, playing a sweet waltz-like melody that made you think of the flowing waters of the Danube. Then it reminded Tait most poignantly of the photo he’d seen in Mr Dragovic’s house that time, of the group of ill-fed but smiling young people at the sidewalk café in Belgrade or whatever war-scarred city it was.

He was glad of some music just then. As he’d found so often those late-night sessions at the cabin, it didn’t heal despair, exactly, but it did relate it to something larger, made it integral to the great pattern. He thought how the word “integral” was related to “integration” which was the opposite of “disintegration.” Music was of the party of Wholeness.

The tune came sweetly to an end and the accordionist opened his eyes and put his head back and sighed, as though he too had been lost in thoughts of the flowing Danube.

Conversations resumed. Tait found a chair and sat and looked around. He saw Megan, sitting alongside old Mrs Callander who still looked alert and vigorous in her nineties. Megan was fanning the old lady with a folded newspaper to keep her comfortable. She glanced across and saw Tait and they exchanged little waves. This was the first time he’d seen Megan since she’d had the surgery and he was glad that she looked pretty much her normal self. He found he was next to Gillian who was chatting with Frank Baxter on her other side.

Ian was cooking sausages on a portable barbeque a few metres away. Neil the Wheel was helping him, turning over the heaps of fried onions and tomatoes, and wearing an apron that said “Kiss the Cook.”

An occasional wisp of breeze came along the paddock and under the awning, but did not ease the sultriness. He wiped his sweaty face and Gillian said not to worry, they were getting a fan.

Narelle and Bambi come across from the Museum carrying a big pedestal fan between them. Kelvin came behind, unrolling a coil of electric cord. They set the fan
up under one corner of the awning and plugged it in and it began to dispel the oppressiveness.

“Hi, honey,” Narelle murmured, stroking his hair and bending to kiss him. “Feel like a drink? We blew most of the budget on beer, so there’s plenty.”

“Good thinking.”

“You having a beer? Or us blowing the budget?”

“They’re both excellent concepts.”

Bambi sat down with them, so Narelle fetched three cans of beer from an esky. They pulled them open and clinked cans and said cheers to each other and took long swigs.

It was blessedly cold and utterly delicious.

With beer laid on, Tait thought to himself, and some more of that accordion music, the words of the Solzhenitsyn poem might just prove true: “We may yet survive a little longer.”

Tait chatted to Bambi, asking if Jade had come. No, he hadn’t. He’d dropped her and Bundle off and was due to pick them up around six o’clock. Bambi looked well and you could barely see the scars on her face anymore. In the years since the crash she’d become a key member of the Museum team. Gillian and Narelle had both nagged her to join the Players as well, but to no avail yet. Narelle believed she knew the reason for this. The Players would be one more thing in Bambi’s life that Jade wasn’t part of, and Bambi didn’t want to rub it in.

Francesca and the four kids arrived. Craig dropped them off at the gate and drove quickly away, and you could tell from the body language that no-one was happy.

Tait remarked on the mercy of not having seen Commissar Mona. Narelle told him there was another group of people over at the sheds on the other side of the Museum building, and that Mona was presiding there.

“I think she’s running a kind of rival venue,” Narelle said.

“Does she help out at the Museum?”

“About twice in a blue moon, but of course she behaves as if she owns the place.”

“How surprising.”

“Bambi, in particular, can’t stand her.”

“A good reason to get Bambi into the Players.”

“Yes, I thought of that.”
Some high white cloud began to drift over and the breeze strengthened and the air became a little cooler. There was a game of cricket down the paddock, and Tait and Narelle played for a while, then stretched out on a blanket on the grass.

Kelvin came and sat with them. He was on emotional tenterhooks, he said, because he’d bumped into Rory the day before and there’d been the old tingle. They were going for dinner the next evening and might reconnect. “Cross fingers for me,” he said. “And toes. And any other part of your anatomy that’s crossable.”

“What are we tying ourselves in knots for?” Francesca asked, coming up to them. They explained.

“Well, I sure hope somebody’s love-life starts improving,” she said with a grimace. Tait recalled the body language when Craig dropped her off at the gate. It was plain their marital couch wasn’t a bed of joy just now.

“I can guarantee,” Tait assured Kelvin, “that we’ll all be rooting for you tomorrow night.”

“Oh dear,” cried Narelle in mock alarm. “Will we?”

“If only,” Francesca groaned.

Kelvin began to say that he was hoping to do the bulk of the rooting himself, but he trailed off because Marigold was about to join them.

One didn’t talk lewdly in front of Marigold.

The five of them went into a huddle about the Players. The annual general meeting was coming up, and that meant the annual problem of how to keep Mona from getting in as president. Frank Baxter had been occupying the post, but though Frank’s heart was in the right place he wasn’t what you’d call a dynamic leader and Mona was gradually gaining the numbers. But at least Marigold was still unassailable in the treasurer’s job, and that would keep the some measure of control. Marigold had been handling the money for so many years it was hard to imagine anyone else doing it — although no doubt Mona could picture it easily enough.

There was a slight flurry then because old Mrs Callander had become a little tired and was being taken home. Kelvin and Marigold went to help Megan see her off.

“Thanks for having me!” the old lady called across the paddock in a crackly but still vigorous voice. “See you all next time!”

They watched her being driven away, her thin hand waving out the window.

“Do you think any of us will be that perky at that age?” Francesca wanted to know.
“I’m not that perky now,” Tait said.

“Me either,” said Francesca grimly. “But another beer or three would help. And I suppose I should check the whereabouts of my offspring. Could they have been carried off by gypsies?”

“How much did you pay them?”

“The gypsies? Not enough, I fear.”

“There they are,” said Narelle, pointing. “They’re with Gillian.

“Oh good,” Francesca said. “I can concentrate on the beer then.”

She went off to find an esky.

“She doesn’t seem like a happy camper,” Narelle observed.

“Tensions at home, I guess.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

They decided to stroll down the road to the old cemetery. They met Bundle mooching alone near the paddock gate and he came with them. He was about eleven now, a quiet kid with dark hair and big thoughtful eyes. As they walked along they asked him about school and stuff and he gave brief, intelligent answers.

The cemetery looked the same as always, except for the signboard trumpeting how this was a Shire Heritage Site, one of fifty sites being “protected for the enjoyment of future generations by your local Council authority — For People Who Are Going Places.” Then followed a list of Penalties for various Offences and underneath was another Council slogan: “Working to Meet Your Expectations.”

They walked among the headstones. Bundle seemed to go into a reverie over the one of the “Darling Boy” who “Fell Asleep” in 1912, so they left him there and walked further up the slope. They stood looking down at the Museum, at the paddock, at the big striped awning and the parked cars.

“It’s going to seem strange, being up in Castleton,” Narelle said, “and mostly on my own for that first six months.”

“You’ll soon be so busy you won’t have time to think about it.”

“Still, it’s going to be crucial that we have all our weekends together.”

“I know.”

“Let’s look for a theatre group to join, shall we?”

“Good idea.”

“And we could socialize with Clarion and that circle, if we wanted to.”
“We could.”
“Although I’m not sure I’d want to.”
“Same here.”
“Not after they took that attitude about Eucalyptus Temple.”
“But my dear,” Tait lisped in a snotty tone. “It was sheer pastiche.”
“Frightful!”
“Appalling!”
“Unmentionable!”
“Then again, it is destined to be the hit of 1954.”
“I hope so.”
“I can hardly wait.”
“Me either.”
“Speaking of Tim,” Narelle said. “Did I tell you the latest? That he thinks his days are numbered at Ridwell?”
“No.”
“He reckons they won’t renew his position there. He says his appointment was meant as a gesture of derision, but now that the Ridwell campus is fully on its feet, they want somebody they approve of.”
“Does it worry him?”
“Not hugely, as far as I can gather.”
“Good.”
They went back down the slope and collected Bundle and walked back along the road.
“By the way, Tait asked Narelle. “Was I supposed to read a few poems at some stage today? Megan told me I was.”
“I hadn’t heard that. When did she tell you?”
“Weeks ago. Before she went for the operation.”
“I’ll check with her.”
“No, don’t. It might’ve been forgotten. Let’s hope so.”
“Are you sure?”
“Yes, very. I feel quite tired, actually, and wouldn’t mind going home soon.”
“Shall I come for the night, later?”
“Yes, do.”
When they had nearly reached the awning, Tait saw a large dog some distance away. It looked a lot like Lance Lassiter’s dog, Chieftain.

He pointed it out to Narelle.

“Yes,” she agreed, then added, pointing, “And there’s the man himself!”

Tait saw the mane of white hair.

Lance Lassiter was being escorted across the paddock towards the awning. On his left was Harry Dunn, the Bush Bard of Turrawong Shire and creator of the immortal Masturbating Swaggie. On his right was Mona. She held Lance by the arm and was bringing him along like a trophy she wanted to show.

They’d made a campfire in front of the awning and it was starting to wink and glow nicely as the daylight grew more subdued. Neil the Wheel was fetching odds and ends of wood to build it up. The accordionist was playing a slow poignant tune and someone else had a guitar and was strumming along with him. A few people had picked up on the tune and were singing the words of “Swing Low Sweet Chariot” very softly. Several people had lain down on the tarpaulin on the ground and were resting their heads on pillows, or on each other. The long day and the heat and the oodles of beer had made everyone very mellow.

Lance was led into their midst and Mona began loudly introducing him. It seemed he was staying at Harry Dunn’s place for the weekend and Harry had brought him to the barbeque. He’d been there all afternoon, over at Mona’s rival venue. Now he was being shown to the Meganites.

“He’s been reciting some of his wonderful poetry to us!” Mona gushed.

“Ah, how lovely,” said Megan, remembering. “Yes, we were going to hear some poetry ourselves.”

She glanced around, as if to see if Tait was there.

He was standing right at the back of the awning and tried to inch out of sight behind Narelle. He wasn’t in the mood to perform. He wanted to lie down on the tarpaulin and listen to some more of “Swing Low Sweet Chariot.”

Megan didn’t see him. She turned back to Lance.

“Would you possibly favour us with some of your poetry? I know we’d all love to hear it.”

“He’d be happy to,” Mona declared.
Lance looked momentarily dismayed, as though put dreadfully on the spot. “One hates to impose,” he muttered, “although of course one tries to oblige if at all possible… to offer something from one’s humble store… the few rags of verse one has to cover one’s nakedness… It’s little enough, lord knows… As Chaucer put it: *The life so short, the craft so long to learn…*”

As always, the initial show of modesty was charming. It made you warm to him, made you pull for him to overcome his humility. He muttered and shuffled and smoothed his hair, and as he did so he moved as though absent-mindedly over to the fire so that that the flicker and glow of it would play on his face.

“But you know,” he said, his voice gathering strength, “being here, with these deep wooded hillsides all around and the sun going down, I’m reminded of the first time I camped alone in the bush at nightfall. It was long ago, in what was to become my Spirit Country, and I was a brash young man with a careless manner. But the Bush can resent an interloper’s arrogance, can be offended by an unfeeling heart. And, although I didn’t know it then, the Bush has its own methods of *severe correction.*”

On “*severe correction*” his voice dropped to a harsh uncanny whisper and he glared at the listeners with the fire-glow in his eyes.

It was enough to give you goosebumps.

“There I was, crouched at my campfire,” he went on, “when I became aware of an oppressive stillness. My spine prickled. I could not rid myself of the sense that *something was approaching.* Then I thought I heard the snap of a twig…”

He was into a powerful piece about the dreaded Getcha Man. He went on to string a dozen or so poems together with connecting anecdotes and his vivid body-language, so that it became a wonderfully rich evocation.

Everyone was riveted. The people who’d been lying down had all sat up so they could watch as well as listen.

Tait was impressed all over again by Lance’s power and presence. He wasn’t any kind of intellectual, and didn’t claim to be, but he was a Bard for sure and could’ve earned his keep in some kingly mead-hall of the dark ages, or as a wandering troubadour, or even in the Music Halls. You could see him on the Edwardian stage in a derby hat and checkered suit, putting over florid monologues about ruined parlour-maids and tragic sailor-lads and sorrowing grey-haired mothers watching at the cottage door. Lance would have them all sobbing in the aisles. That was the real
Bardic gift — not sticking only to grand exalted themes, but taking the humble and the hackneyed ones and showing the true hopes and tears that are in them too.

That was the insight that Tim Niblett had put at the heart of *Eucalyptus Temple*. The characters he depicted were not nihilist intellectuals but *populists*. For all their faults and follies, they did not despise the world and did not mean it harm. Lassiter might once have taken a bucket of blood to fling at a military parade, but that was an emotional over-engagement with *life*, not a bid to hasten the Great Death in the name of the Imperium. Types like Lassiter were held in contempt by the intellectual commissars who made use of them. They were what Lenin called “useful idiots,” the kind who cheered on the revolution for silly sentimental reasons and were due for a bullet in the neck as soon as their usefulness had passed.

Tait had been very aware, in the first couple of minutes, of Lance’s age. He was in his mid-seventies now and thinner in the face, and he had more of an old man’s deliberation in his movements, but when he got into the flow he became somehow ageless — or rather he seemed to be whatever age he meant you to imagine him as.

The dog Chieftain, lying beside the fire, was about fourteen years old and looked gaunt and introspective, though still not a creature you’d want to tangle with.

The applause was heartfelt when Lance finally stopped and gave a low courtly bow. He did the bow with the poise of the ballet dancer he’d once been, and the mane of white hair hung gracefully loose.

Megan went forward to say some words of thanks, while someone pressed a can of beer into Lance’s hand and Mona took him by the arm to re-assert ownership.

Megan caught sight of Tait up at the back and held her hand up for some quiet.

“Of course,” she said, “there’s another published poet and writer here, one of our colleagues from the Turrawong Players, and I want to ask if he’d also kindly share some of his work with us.”

Tait shook his head and gestured “No” with his hands, to squash it at once. Lance had done everything that was needed. It should be left on that note.

But Megan didn’t catch his gesture. She called him to come up to the front. She was being her kind and polite self, wanting to give him his proper due. He gestured “No” again and shook his head harder. People were turning his their chairs to look at him and one or two started urging him to come forward. His eyes happened to meet Kelvin’s and Kelvin raised his eyebrows to ask “What’s the matter?”
He felt Narelle’s hand on the small of his back.

“Are you going up?” she whispered.

In another few moments it would be totally embarrassing. He was starting to look ungracious, or as though he was in a huff or something, or was a prima donna who expected to be coaxed. He had to cut it off now. He took a big breath and called out to Megan.

“Thanks very much for asking me, but I don’t really have anything prepared. Also, I must say that I think Lance has given us such a lovely experience that it ought to be left on that note. Personally, I’d be glad to hear some more of that beautiful accordion music now.”

Megan got the idea and said something graceful about Tait entertaining them another time. Then she said what an excellent thought it was about the accordion music and asked the chap if he’d favour them again. So the accordionist began playing again, a tune soft and slow.

Tait went and chatted with Lance for a minute or two when Mona had let go of him and was out of sight. After the first exchange of pleasantries there wasn’t much to say. Tait asked after Clarion and whether they still played “Pick the Poet” around the teak table. Lance replied that it was all much the same. Tait excused himself when he saw Mona coming back.

He left ten minutes later, feeling so tired he had to grit his teeth to face the long ride home.

It was dark by then.

He left Narelle sitting with Bambi. Jade had not turned up at six o’clock to collect her and Bundle as they’d arranged, and Bambi was worried that he might’ve got stewed at the pub in town, or at least as stewed as his funds would allow. She was increasingly worried about his drinking, it seemed. When Narelle arrived at the cabin at about nine o’clock she reported that Jade had turned up, a bit tipsy but okay.

But Narelle seemed to have something on her mind and Tait asked her if anything was the matter.

She looked at him.

“It’s completely stupid.”

“What is?”

“I wouldn’t even mention it, except that you might hear it from someone else.”
“Hear what?”

“And also I suppose a person has a right to know what someone’s saying about them.”

“Tell me.”

She took a breath and told him.

“Lance Lassiter started badmouthing you after you left. He was telling everyone that you resent him and hate his guts. He said he lives in fear of you coming after him with a gun. He said you’re a menace to society and highly unstable and shouldn’t be walking around loose.”

“I see,” Tait said, taking it in.

Narelle looked so glum that he felt he should make light of it all.

“But otherwise he thinks I’m a heck of a guy?”

* * * *

He was at Jimmy and Lauren’s place a few days later.

He and Jimmy were sitting in the backyard, talking about Alf, the stretcher-bearer from the First World War whom Jimmy had got to know in the geriatric ward and whose recollections he’d been writing down. It could be hard going, at times, Jimmy said, because Alf often got angry or peevish and waved him away and did not want to talk any more. When he was in the flow, though, it was so vivid that Jimmy had to prompt himself to keep jotting things down and not just sit and listen. Alf’s memory jumped about a lot. One minute he’d be sinking in the mud at Passchendaele with shells going over and severed arms and legs lying about. Next minute he’d be a little hungry child, blue with cold on the cobbles of Belfast. Then he’d be with his bride, walking down the steps of the Brisbane registry office one sweltering day in the Depression — with one ten-bob note in their pocket, and a baby on the way, and no job and nowhere to live. They’d slept in the park that night, along with a few hundred others. But Alf remembered it as the best night of his life because he had his wife in his arms, and the people in the park were safe and kindly with each other, and there was grass instead of mud and the shellfire had stopped.
“Alf’s generation knew the full measure of life,” Tait said. “The bitter and the sweet. It had supped full with horrors, but it also knew comradeship in a way we’re never likely to, the kind that was there in that camp of the destitute.”

“It’s like they saw the last true gleam of the shelter of each other.”

“Heard the last notes of that melody.”

“The last lilt of that tune.”

“Aye, and there’s an end of an auld song.”

They were silent for a moment.

“Can you imagine what a crowd camped in a park would be like nowadays?”

“Alas, I can.”

“It’d be the law of the jungle. Of course many of the people would still have decent instincts, and would be comradely if given half a chance, but the spirit of the times would defeat them.”

“If you weren’t mugged for your last five-cent piece, you’d get Aids from the dirty needles in the grass.”

“Yes.”

“Unless we’re being too pessimistic?”

“You think?”

“I don’t know.”

“Let’s hope we’re never forced to find out.”

Lauren came into the backyard just then to say that Narelle was on the phone. She’d just been to the cabin to look for him, she said, when Tait took the receiver. She was phoning from Errol’s. She’d heard from the university accommodation office about a flat that was about to be vacant. She was going to drive to Castleton to look at the place and would pick him up in twenty minutes.

“Things might be starting to happen,” Jimmy said.

“Could be. She sounded very positive.”

“How about you?” Lauren asked.

“I’m positive too.”

“Liar,” said Lauren flatly.

“What?”

“You’re wearing the face of someone who’s about to be garrotted. You might want to change it before Narelle gets here.”
“I will.”
“So, just for the record,” Jimmy asked, “why aren’t you feeling positive?”
“In a real sense I am feeling positive. I’m pleased that Narelle is moving towards what she wants to do in life.”
“And what are you moving towards?” Lauren asked.
Tait gave a slight shrug of his shoulders.
“What a marvellous answer,” Lauren said crisply. “Thank you so much.”
“I don’t have any answers,” Tait said. “I’m just stumbling along, doing the best I can, playing it by ear, trying to keep the shit from hitting the fan any sooner than it needs to. For everyone’s sake.”
“You’re generously looking out for Narelle’s interests?”
“You don’t have to put a sneer in your voice.”
“I think I do, actually,” Lauren retorted.
“You don’t understand.”
“Explain it to me.”
“Alright then, there’s nearly a twenty-year age difference between us, and I’m a fugitive from the loony-bin, with no resources or prospects. I can’t take care of myself, let alone anyone else. It’s only because of a tolerant landlord that I have a roof over my head. The idea that I could be a proper lifetime partner is ludicrous. And even if I was heartless enough to put the burden of myself on Narelle, I draw the line at putting it on the poor wretches of children we might have. Be totally honest, Lauren. If you were Narelle’s mother, would you rejoice to see her tied to someone like me?”
“Have you said these things to her?”
“Not in so many words.”
“Why not?”
“Because it wasn’t required. For three years a whole lot of stuff was on the back-burner. It wasn’t posing any urgent questions and therefore there wasn’t any need to address it. She was busy getting her BA at Ridwell, and it was always likely that she’d go on and get higher degrees. She’s been in transition. She’s been passing through. Our relationship belongs to that context. Don’t you see?”
“Ships in the night?”
“No, not ships in the night, not in the sense of being fleeting and superficial. I’ve simply known that at some point she’d move on towards her proper future. When that moment came, some very painful adjustments would have to be made, but in the meantime there was no need to upset the applecart. Don’t you see?”

“Doesn’t it amount to toying with her affections?” Lauren demanded. “Letting her grow to love you when you know there’ll be a cruel parting?”

“My affections are in for a pretty bad kicking too,” he replied, his voice wobbling. “I’m not exactly made of stone, you know.” He was starting to feel grief-stricken, starting to hear the Mahler music inside him.

He wanted to complete the point though, and went on in as steady a tone as he could.

“There’s a future waiting for Narelle. There are people waiting and yearning for her to walk into their lives. But no-one’s waiting for me. I’m not anybody’s future dream-come-true. Narelle will move on to better things and I’m the one who’ll be left on my own. I’m not asking for any sympathy here, but I don’t quite see why I’m being picked on.”

He didn’t want to talk any more because he couldn’t trust his voice.

Lauren looked at him sadly.

“I didn’t mean to pick on you,” she said in a softer tone. “I just wanted to find out what on earth you think you’re doing. If I knew anything helpful to say at this point, I’d say it. But all I can think of is the old adage that positive makes positive and negative makes negative, and I know you’re aware of that already.”

“Yes, I am, painfully.”

She looked sadly at him for another moment.

“Well,’ she sighed. “I’ve got things on the stove I need to see to.”

She patted him on the shoulder and went inside.

Tait and Jimmy remained silent. A black shiny crow flew over the backyard, cawing loudly, then came back and alighted on the ground. They watched it go about the lawn, hunting for insects. It made Tait think of the Jacobite emblem of the Blackbird, and of lines by Andrew Lang about the rightful King in exile, the King who has no worldly dominions any more, but has realms of another sort:

*White roses under the moon*

*For the king with no lands to give,*
But he reigns in the reign of June
With his Rose and his Blackbird’s tune,
And he lives while Faith may live.

Tait knew there was something important there, something he ought to dwell on. It was something about the different kinds of realms that might belong to you. And it connected to other lines that were often in his mind, two lines by William Morris which had struck him as beautifully applicable to all who had suffered for the Cause, regardless of rank or degree:

And they changed their lives and departed,
and came back as the leaves of the trees.

But he felt too glum to pursue it just now.
The Andrew Lang stanza had given him the title for the new collection of poems that Canopy Press had recently rejected. The Blackbird’s Tune, he’d called it.
“I told you, didn’t I,” he said after a while, “that Canopy Press knocked back my new collection.”
“Yes,” Jimmy said. “Will you offer it somewhere else?”
“Maybe, but I can’t think where. Canopy is about the only place that isn’t a nest of commissars.”
“What will you do?”
“They urged me to write a novel, and I think they’re right.”
“Do you have an idea for one?”
“I do, actually. It would be about the Forty Five.”
“Sounds good.”
“I already know the beginning. It would start off one day in the town of Preston in Lancashire.”
“Great.”
“With a man wondering what his life amounts to, and what his moral duty is.”
“Terrific.”
“I’ve been trying to map it out in my mind. It’d be a fundamental project for me. I’d want to put everything into it.”
“Sounds like a labour of love.”

“That’s exactly what I’d want it to be. Or am I really talking about a substitute for love?”

“Could be,” said Jimmy sadly.

They might have talked about it, but just then a horn tooted at the front of the house. Narelle was there. Tait went and got into the car.

It was just on dark when they pulled up outside the flat across the road from the Castleton campus.

They were let in by the tenant who was soon to depart. She was a law student and showed them about while her boyfriend stirred spaghetti on the stove in the kitchenette. The flat was small and quite shabby, but there was a little balcony at the back and you could see right across the city towards the ocean. There was a lot of traffic noise from the main road in front.

“The noise can be a pain in the butt if you’re trying to study,” the tenant said, “but these help.”

She held up a set of earphones that lay beside the record-player.

“It’s really only a one-person flat,” she told them, “but two can get on all right if they don’t mind a bit of a squeeze.”

She called out to the boyfriend.

“We managed, didn’t we, baby?”

He waved the spaghetti tongs in agreement.

She kept looking at the two of them, and you could tell she was wondering about the age difference, trying to work out if they were a couple or what.

“We don’t mind a squeeze, do we?” Narelle said, stroking Tait’s arm, to clarify it for her.

“All in favour of it,” he replied.

They left the flat and crossed the busy main road with some difficulty, blinded by the headlights of the traffic, and went on to the campus. There were large tracts of bushland there, with winding paths and strings of little lights hung above them almost like festive decorations. They looked pretty and restful after the traffic’s onrush.

They saw a notice that these paths should be used with caution after dark. It reminded Tait that he had Angus Stewart with him in the satchel.
“What’s your verdict on the flat then,” she asked as they strolled along through the trees.

“It’s wonderfully handy to the campus.”

“It’s a bit cramped of course, for two people.”

“Very.”

“We’d be forced do a great deal of squeezing, like she said.”

“An indecent amount, I’d say.”

“D’you think they’ll charge us extra for that?”

“Very likely.”

“They’ve got us by the throat. We’ll just have to pay.”

“We have no option.”

“Okay then. I’ll phone the accommodation officer first thing in the morning and secure it. Shall I?”

“Yes. It seems snug and safe and handy. I’d be happy to think of you there. My only worry is these paths after dark.”

“I won’t use them after dark, if you’d rather I didn’t.”

“And crossing that road in traffic is a bit of a menace.”

“I’d use the pedestrian crossing further down.”

“Well, it seems perfect then.”

“I could be in the flat by next week, probably.”

“Fingers crossed.”

“And you’ll stay with me the first night. To christen the place. Well, to christen the bed, I suppose I mean. We’ll make sure I move in on a night when you don’t have a class to teach at Ridwell. Okay?”

“Absolutely.”

They saw the big library building up ahead. All its lights were on and they looked through the glass front doors at the people inside. The Student Union was just nearby and the lights were on there too and rock music was coming out.

They felt like having a drink at the Union bar, but decided to walk a little more first. They went past the Drama Theatre where Tait had seen Equus that time with Clarion and Lance Lassiter and Sabina Sharpe.

The English Department was further up and Narelle wanted to show him the scene of their future endeavours. As an undergraduate she had enjoyed Classics and held a
higher opinion of the Classics lecturers than the English ones. But you really needed
to get into Latin and Greek to do Classics at the higher levels, and that seemed a bit
too much to take on. So she would do her Masters in English and had already begun
to think about her doctorate. She’d hit on the excellent idea of utilizing her old
interest in geography. For the doctoral thesis she intended to look at the way writers
use geographical settings to convey ideas and meanings. Like Conrad, for example,
and the dark heart of the African jungle. They had kicked the topic around together
one night and Tait was taken up with how interesting it sounded, and how much he
was going to enjoy sharing the interest of it with her — until he remembered with a
harsh little jolt that all of that belonged to the better future she’d be having without
him.

Most of the lights were off and the front office area was locked, but they were able
to stroll around the corridors. They passed the open door of a tutorial room where
some people were sitting in a circle in a dull drone of talk, but otherwise they didn’t
see a soul.
The office doors had names on them — Dr. So-and-So, Prof. Whatsit, and most of
them had notices and clippings pinned to them, or beside them. Notices about when
essays were due, stuff like that. They came to Sabina Sharpe’s office in an especially
bleak stretch of corridor.

“I think we are in Rat’s Alley, where the dead men lost their bones,” Tait declaimed
mournfully, stopping in front of the door. Narelle had walked on and was looking at a
noticeboard at the end of the corridor.

To Tait’s utter dismay, the door opened in front of him and there was the slight,
leather-jacketed figure of the Toxic Razorblade herself. They stared appalled into
each other’s eyes for what seemed an eternity, then Sabina flicked her light off and
pulled the door shut with a bang and walked past him and briskly away.

He was trying to recover from the fright, and beginning to get a first faint sense of
the black comedy of it, when he heard Narelle calling him to come and look at
something on the board.

It was an item cut from the Castleton newspaper of two days earlier, and was headed
“Sudden Death of a Poet.” Lance Lassiter had collapsed and died in Clarion’s
backyard at the age of seventy-six.
They stood holding hands for comfort against the sudden cold shadow of it and read the clipping over several times. It was difficult to take in, having seen the man himself at full flight in the Valley so little time ago. Then they remembered that they had meant to get a drink at the Union bar and they decided to make it a drink in his memory.

The bar area was not pleasant. Rock music blared from a TV video and there were lurid or garish posters for rock bands all around the walls. The bands had names like Spermgun or Auschwitz Holiday or PsychoMilk.

Lance wouldn’t have liked it any more than they did.

In his final years, his Castleton years, he had hung around too much with the dregs of modern life, with academics and the literati and the gentrified classes. But he was never really one of them, and they secretly despised him. For all his faults he was a Bard to the bootstraps and therefore of the Party of Memory. He belonged at the court of some Irish earl back before the Wild Geese had flown. He’d have been happy then, with his energy and ego fully stretched, with endless refills of drink and a string of hearty wenches as his understood entitlements. Lance had always loved “The County of Mayo,” the old poem about sailing into friendless exile, lamenting the doom of the old lords and patrons. Tait had first become aware of the poem when Lance declaimed it one night on the footpath outside Peppercorn’s Bookshop and the passers-by had stopped to listen, spellbound.

They got their drinks from the bar and went out on to a terrace where the rock music wasn’t quite so loud.

“I wonder if Lance is with Declan Dooley right now,” Narelle mused, “discussing how to save the soul and culture of their country?”

“With Patrick Duhig, you mean. ‘Declan Dooley’ was the character’s name in Eucalyptus Temple.”

“I tend to think of Lance’s life in terms of that show.”

“Not a bad way to think of it.”

“What do you suppose made him badmouth you the way he did, painting you as a dangerous enemy?”

“At the Valley? I haven’t a clue, except that no doubt he had a very vivid fantasy life.”

“It made me really hate him at the time, but I guess there’s no need for that now.”
“None at all. Shall we offer a farewell toast?”
“Yes, let’s.”
“What shall it be?”
“You decide.”
They lifted their glasses.
“To Lance Lassiter,” Tait said. “Gone back to the Spirit-country, where all has been redeemed.”
The clinked glasses and drank.
Alf, the old stretcher-bearer, died peacefully in the geriatric ward that same week.

* * * *

Mike Kieslowski was amused to hear of the weird little encounter at Sabina Sharpe’s office door, although he realized, as Tait also did when he began to think about it, that it wasn’t really an amusing matter.

It depended on what Sabina had made of it, whether she saw it as just one of those peculiar accidental things that happen, or whether she thought he might be stalking her or something. “Stalking” was a new big hysteria, a new focus of fear and suspicion for the Anarcho-Tyranny to exploit, another way to set the Pathologies loose. “Stalking” was not seen as a mere harmless peccadillo like pumping five bullets into your neighbour on the basis of an allegation. No, it was a matter for Zero Tolerance and Tough New Laws. If he hadn’t had Narelle to vouch for what he’d been doing in that corridor just then, he’d have been a little worried.

His best hope, Mike suggested wryly, was that Sabina hadn’t quite believed her eyes and had taken him for a nasty hallucination. Maybe she put it down to some bad curry she’d eaten!

But Mike had his own worries just then.

He had raised another furor with an article in Compact magazine and this was even fiercer than the one over his piece about Boast and Whine Feminism. This time it wasn’t the Sisters who wanted him roasted over a slow fire but the Patriots.

Mike had suggested it was time to stop the public commemoration of Anzac Day, or at least that it should be renamed Betrayal Day.
“I meant it partly in the Swiftian spirit of a Modest Proposal,” he explained to Tait. “A vain exercise, of course, with a zeitgeist that’s never heard of Irony. But I was also being totally serious.”

He knew Mike had been fretting for years about the ever more parlous plight of the old Anglo-Celtic Australia, the trashing of its cultural symbols and ethos, the crushing of its morale. He had once sent Tait a four-liner called “On Australian War Memorials” —

As the last generation that will care,
We should destroy them all before we’re gone.
But, being the kind of people that we are,
No doubt we’ll leave them to be spat upon.

He hadn’t published the piece, although Fergus Gunn would’ve run it in Compact. Not being an Anglo-Celt himself, Mike felt he should tread with care. The old Aussie ethos was being vilified every day and he didn’t want to appear even momentarily to be on that stinking bandwagon, to be any kind of ally of the commissars of MultiCult. Of course, even as bitter as the poem was, its pro-Aussie standpoint was obvious, but you couldn’t depend on the obvious any more, not in the age of both Dumbing Down and Pseudo-Intellectualism. As with Anarchy and Tyranny, those two seeming opposites had joined in a vast pincer movement. “Pincer politics” was in fact Mike’s term for that whole technique of rogue power.

With every year that passed the Anglo-Celts were more despised by their own elites, and more beleaguered by immigration and multicultural policies which amounted to a form of “ethnic cleansing” against them. Since World War Two, Australia had taken in more migrants than almost any other country, but Australians were given no credit for that. They were vilified as racists and xenophobes who had been dragged into compliance by their enlightened elites and who had to be kept under constant regulation lest their ingrained viciousness break loose. The elites had now decided to follow the sardonic advice of Bertolt Brecht and “elect a new people” more to their liking. So Mike felt he had to jump in boots-and-all with his new article. But this time he stressed his non-Anglo heritage and turned it into a positive.
His own parents had defied both Hitler and Stalin, he declared, and his every instinct revolted against the totalitarian project to abolish the old Australia. As an ancestral son of Poland he knew in his bones what it felt like to have the very life of your culture and homeland at stake. And as a born and bred Australian, he would battle the same evil forces on his native-ground as his parents had done on theirs.

His parents didn’t come here in search of MultiCult utopias, he said. They wanted to get away from utopian mentalities. What they came for was what the old Anglo Australia offered them — a chance just to live, the casual assumption that you were entitled to be let live, that a mass grave wasn’t being dug for you, that you generally get to stick around long enough to know your grandchildren. And as a bonus you might attain a measure of material comfort if you were conscientious and had luck on your side. That was all. That was the whole package. The migrants had something crucially in common with the old Anglo-Celt population — they had modest expectations, and therefore the capacity to value and appreciate things. Neither set of people were prone to what would come to be called the “culture of narcissism” or the “culture of complaint” or the “adversary culture.” The last few decades had seen these pathologies run amok, Mike noted, but whatever was still good and viable in Australian society came mostly from the old ethos, the one the migrants had embraced and to which they had added a tang and flavour and vibrancy of their own.

One pair of paradigms in the “modernity wars” of the last few centuries, Mike wrote, was that of the Modest verses the Grandiose. Australia’s current culture-war wasn’t a racial divide between the Anglos and the Others, although the commissars did all they could to paint it that way, with the Anglos as the racist oppressors. It was rather between those who were still loyal to the old Community of the Modest and the zealots of the new Anti-Community of the Grandiose. The zeitgeist and the elites were backing the latter up to the hilt, and this meant there was less and less open resistance to the trend of events.

It was the “spiral of silence.”

The spiral occurred when people sensed the social climate was turning hostile to their beliefs and values. They began to hesitate to express their views, then began to keep their opinions to themselves. Those least likely to keep quiet were the abrasive or volatile types who could be dismissed at ratbags. Or else they were unabashed underclass types who knew that their trendy “betters” were the scum of the earth and
weren’t averse to saying so. The expression of certain attitudes came to seem the mark of primitives and lowlifes, of rowdies and rednecks, as beyond the pale and therefore to be criminalized.

That was how things now stood. Morale was at the point of collapse, resistance fading. An enforced silence covered the rapid march of Political Correctness. Every day you heard of things that were utterly outrageous, but which no-body dared to challenge. A recent example had been the government promising to re-educate judges in feminist theory to ensure that rape trials always had the required outcome of a Guilty verdict. (And of course “rape” had become one of those words – like “oppression” or “abuse” or “harassment” – that meant whatever the commissars chose it to mean.)

Mike wanted to deliver enough of a shock to stir response. He had cited Czeslaw Milosz: “In a room where people maintain a conspiracy of silence, one word of truth sounds like a pistol shot.”

Mike’s thinking had been invigorated by something Sam Foster wrote about the drive to outlaw the Confederate flag in the present-day South.

The Enemy wanted that symbol purged from all the state flags and insignia, and banned from any form of official display. Foster had surprised many loyal Southerners by declaring that this might not be altogether a bad thing. He noted that the Stars and Bars was never a political banner. It was the battle-flag of the Confederate Army, and all its connotations were of valour and honour and fidelity. That sacred emblem should not be anywhere near politicians, he wrote, especially not the criminals, cowards and traitors who now slime their way through the corridors of power.

His point was that good Southerners must be ready to relinquish their flag in the public sphere – now under enemy occupation – in order to keep it unsullied in the private space of the heart. Yes, Tait thought. It was as Solzhenitsyn said: “We have only our hearts and what we have lived through.” It was a case of relinquishing a thing not because you have ceased to love it, but because you love it more than ever and will not see it debased. And it would be just as bad, Foster argued, if the power-structure actually paid lip-service to the Confederate flag, for then that great symbol would be no more than another of what he termed “the impious frauds built into the regime and its public formulas.”
Tait saw that this same point was implicit in Mike’s four-liner about the war memorials. Even if they aren’t being actively defiled right now, the very fact of them being tolerated amounts to a mockery of all they stand for.

But of course the active defilement would not be long in coming. The trashing of sacred symbols would never let up, for the commissars of today are the spawn of those Puritans who set out to smash every panel of stained glass in every church in England. They are root-and-branch fanatics who cannot be bought-off or appeased, for they are playing out their own mad psychodrama of the death of the world.

Mike took this idea of relinquishment, this concept of “sacred renunciation” and applied it to the issue of Anzac Day.

For decades the elites and gentrifying classes had had two modes of behaviour towards Anzac Day observance. They openly mock and deride it, or they sneeringly condescend to tolerate it, the way you might tolerate the antics of primitives until you can either re-educate them or wipe them out.

Each of these behaviours signifies a profound shame and defeat for rank-and-file Australians, Mike argued. The first shows that they are so cowed and spineless that they’ll allow their own dead heroes and forebears to be publicly despised in their own land. The second shows that they are so tamed and clueless that they’ll conduct the most sacred observances of their society by the contemptuous leave of its internal enemies. And of course it served the Anarcho-Tyranny’s purpose for people to be given a false reassurance that the old values were still somehow in place. In the light of all this, taking any part in the sham event could be seen as an act of “collaboration,” however unwitting.

Whichever way you looked at it, Mike declared, Anzac Day had become something perilously close to a badge of shame and dishonour. It was time to consider a great act of “sacred renunciation.”

Far better to stay at home on the 25th of April. Better to remember the Dead in your own private way, or in small personal gatherings, and to reflect that their graves are now being spat on, that the Australia they died for is now being abolished. Far better to spend that day visualizing those traitor elites dangling from the lamp-posts. Let the day be marked in future by empty streets and an eerie silence. That would give the commissars pause.
Renouncing Anzac Day in the public sphere would be like the “scorched-earth” policies that people often adopt when they’re invaded. You burn what you love to keep it from the enemy, but you save it all undamaged in your heart. You relinquish it in the World, so to speak, in order to retain it in the Spirit.

Among the many memorable statements of King Charles the Martyr was a comment he made after he was captured by his foes: “We are sensible into what hands we are fallen; and yet (we bless god) we have those inward refreshments the malice of our enemies cannot perturb.” That was what it was all about — having resources inside yourself that the enemy cannot touch.

And there was something Hemingway said in A Farewell to Arms. The world breaks people, but afterwards ‘many are strong at the broken places.’ We might need to break a beloved thing ourselves, to ensure it will be strong at the point where the break was made.

Letters poured in to the editors of Compact, and there was a big flurry in the tabloid media as well. A few of the responses were from people who saw Mike’s essential point about sacred renunciation. But the bulk of them were from the type whose only answer to any question is to Bring Back Hanging and/or Conscription and who reckoned a good flogging and a stint in the military would straighten this Kieslowski bastard out. The majority of letters were from the kind of people who tell you they feel Sickened and Disgusted. And a number were from officials of the Ex-Service Clubs, dim old farts who saw themselves as Keepers of the Sacred Flame but were in fact just keepers of booze and poker-machines.

The best response was from Senator Pribik, who agreed with Mike about the virtues of the old Community of the Modest, the community that so many migrants had been glad to become part of. He noted also that in the captive nations of Eastern Europe people had come to despise the public realm as demeaned and fraudulent. They nurtured their true values and cultural heritage in private, or among circles of like-minded friends. What Mike was advocating was a similar kind of self-defensive tactic. Kieslowski may have over-stated his case in order to focus attention, Pribik wrote, but he was clearly a sincere Australian who deserved credit for raising difficult and even distressing issues.

Fergus Gunn was gratified. Once again his “Polish cavalry” had galloped through.
Tait himself had already come to feel painfully ambivalent about Anzac Day. For a couple of years now he hadn’t even bothered to switch on the TV coverage of the march. The so-called “expert commentators” – the various brigadiers and brass-hats – were all so utterly fatuous, so pathetic in their bumbling eagerness to be politically correct, that Tait was sure they were chosen to help bring the occasion into contempt. In any case, the fact that they’d risen to senior rank showed that they had long ago agreed to lick the hand of the Imperium.

But that was just a side issue. He had doubts that were far more fundamental.

Take the First World War, for instance. Sixty thousand Australians had gone and got killed for the country and the “civilization” that was now so keen to vilify and disinherit their grandchildren. Sixty thousand dead out of so small a population was a rate of heroic sacrifice seldom seen, and almost comparable to that of the Confederacy. And now their graves were being spat on. And the same betrayal was happening in all the other countries of that “civilization.”

Australians had done too much of going off to die in some foreign field at the behest of the Regime, and not enough of fighting the real war against the Regime itself. Tait wasn’t given to admiring Lenin, but Lenin said at least one true thing: “The main enemy is at home.”

Rather than parading up the street every April, making an empty show of homage, people should sit and think about their real obligations to the Sacred Dead, not to mention the as-yet-unborn. These hadn’t been dwelt on enough. Not nearly enough.

What was needed, Tait saw, was a powerful dose of Jacobite realism.

The Jacobites were ridiculed as people prone to romantic illusion, but in fact they always had to confront the most brutal realities, the same ones that apply today. That the rightful order has been overthrown and cruel usurpers rule. That the loyal are in exile, or are as aliens and fugitives in their own land. That the only option is counter-revolution against great odds. That in sober truth the only comfort the Cause is likely to bring you is the knowledge that at least you suffered on the right side.

No ethos could be more fitting now than the old Jacobite one, for it accorded with the great truth of our time, the fact that we now have only our hearts and what we have lived through.

Which was Mike’s essential point, of course, and Sam Foster’s too.
Kelvin and Rory had been reconciled after their meal that evening. Or at least they were seeing each other again. But Rory also appeared to have other attachments. Kelvin would phone him, for example, and another man’s voice might answer, and not always the same man. Rory wasn’t willing to discuss it.

“I know he’s a trollop,” Kelvin sighed. “But I don’t dare make waves. I’m so relieved to have got even a part of him back.”

“What part of him have you got?” Tait asked. “And more importantly, where do you keep it?”

“That’s for me to know and him to worry about!”

But it wasn’t a joking matter. Kelvin was in anguish, his heart rent by jealousy. They were sitting at the coffee lounge across from Kelvin’s record shop in the Plaza.

“Think of another topic,” Kelvin groaned, “to take my mind off all that.”

“I’ll have to go in a minute. I have a class to teach at Ridwell.”

“Talk to me about that then.”

It was only a bit after five, and the class wasn’t till seven, but he liked to be at the campus well ahead of time and sit in the cafeteria and think about things. This evening he wanted to reflect on his new little idea about the four elements — earth, air, fire and water.

He started telling Kelvin about it.

When he took over the classes from the unlamented Tiffany, he ran them the way she had structured them because he didn’t know any better. But it was a bad method and too grimly didactic and he’d gradually devised his own approach, his own curriculum, his own handout materials. One of his best moves was to bring in the Jar of Symbols. He wrote out a large selection of them on tiny slips of paper — things like sword, star, wheel, ship, tree, cup, ring, mirror — and put them into a jar. At the start of a new semester the jar was passed around and each member of the class took a symbol at random and it became that person’s particular sign. Tait urged them all to think of their symbol as their own personal “key to the cupboard” of creativity, and he required them to use it — in whatever manner they chose — in everything they wrote for the course.
It worked a treat and the students loved it, especially in the early stages when most of them were still timid and their minds a blank. Having a Symbol allotted by fate gave a helpful sense of being guided or prompted, for every symbol was rich in associations of all kinds, from the magical to the mundane. And a symbol is flexible and will adjust to anything you want to do, will go anywhere you choose to take it.

“Give me an example,” Kelvin said in a peevish tone.

The tone was because he was trying to listen and get Rory out of his mind, but Rory wouldn’t go.

“Okay. The first assignment I read after I introduced the Symbols was a little story about two uncertain lovers who kept searching each other’s faces, each trying to discern how the other truly sees them. That student’s symbol was “mirror” but the word was never mentioned. The lovers were using each other’s faces as mirrors, you see, seeking their own image there. That student had taken her symbol and made an implicit metaphor of it.”

“Yes, groovy, but must you torment me with talk of lovers?”

“Sorry. Well, now I’m thinking of adding another layer of symbolic association. I’ll assign each student one of the four elements — earth, air, fire or water. They’ll each have a Symbol and an Element to conjure with. Good thinking, eh?”

“What suicide method is least painful, d’you think?”

“Buck up. Here comes someone who’ll talk your ear off.”

Narelle’s friend Cathy was approaching. She was an outgoing girl at the best of times, but now that she and her bloke were getting hitched she was almost manic with plans and arrangements. She and Kelvin knew each other.

Cathy sat down at their table and chattered non-stop about various things, but she addressed Kelvin and hardly gave Tait a glance. He began to sense he was in her bad books for some reason.

Cathy’s fiancé Owen had a kombi-van and was going to transport Narelle’s belongings to the Castleton flat. She would officially move in before the end of the week and Tait would stay with her the first couple of nights.

He got up and took his leave. Cathy gave him another glare but did not acknowledge his going.

He walked around to the Plaza newsagency and saw Narelle behind the counter, dealing with a last-minute flurry of customers before closing. He would’ve said a
quick hello but she was too busy. He knew she’d be hurrying down to the Green
Room as soon as she knocked-off. The Players were having one of their periodic Big
Clean-Up Nights where they hauled all the costumes and everything out of the
cupboards and filled the place with a dense cloud of dust and must and lint and
mothball-smell. Tait couldn’t bear the Clean-Ups. They gave him dreadful hay-fever
and most times he cried off.

Narelle particularly wanted to help at the Players tonight, she’d said, because she
would soon be gone and would miss the old gang so much.

He stood and watched her, stabbed with awareness that here was something else for
the Memory Bank. How beautiful she looked, and how poised and efficient she was,
even under a flurry of pressure, with her gold-rimmed glasses perched on her nose
and her tawny hair pinned back. And you could see how good she was with people.
Customers might seem bored or weary as they waited, but as soon as she gave them
her attention they’d smile and perk up. It was something about her eyes especially, the
calm intelligence that you saw focused on you. It made you think, even if only half-
consciously: I’m in safe hands with this fine young woman.

Anguish gripped him and he almost gave a sob out loud. The Mahler music began to
swell. He hurried out of the Plaza and down the hill towards the railway tracks, taking
care to avert his eyes from the door of the police station as he went by. He went along
the main street, passed the Athena café, and stopped at the pedestrian crossing
opposite the railway station.

As he waited for the lights to change he looked towards the Railway Hotel further
along and saw a lanky, denim-clad figure in the middle of the footpath. His back was
to Tait but there was no mistaking Jade Mustang. The lights changed, but Tait did not
cross. There was something odd in the way Jade was standing. Then he staggered
sideways towards the kerb. He banged up against one of the pub’s verandah-posts and
stopped and got his balance a little. Then he staggered the other way, towards the door
of the pub. Somebody came out the door and cried “Whoa there, mate!” and steadied
him and walked on. Jade staggered sideways towards the kerb again but this time
didn’t meet the verandah post, He flopped over the kerb and sprawled on the road, his
thin limbs flailing. There were angry toots from vehicles pulling up.

“Fucking idiot!” Tait thought, as he ran down. He hated any kind of public scene or
exhibition, and hated even more being involved. He resented being forced into this.
Jade was so stick-thin and light that Tait was able to lift him quite easily to his feet. There was a reek of liquor off him and he was calling out to the cars not to worry, that he was “orrright.” Tait walked him back onto the footpath and sat him down on the step of the pub door.

Jade gazed blearily up.


A bloke came out to the doorway and said he was the publican. He was ruddy-faced, with large ears and bushy eyebrows. Tait did not frequent hotels but he recognized the man. He’d seen him at the supper-theatre comedies with a large blonde woman. He had a deep guffaw and she had a high-pitched giggle. You often got to know regular patrons by the way they laughed.

The publican looked down at Jade and out at the busy road and frowned. There were soon to be draconian new laws that made you liable if someone got hurt staggering away drunk from your hotel. If those had been in force, and Jade had just been run over, the publican would’ve been up shit creek. And so would the innocent motorist. Everyone would be held accountable except the idiot who’d actually done the wrong thing, who had got himself pissed and made himself a public menace.

“Wassamatter, squire? I’m orright! You orright?”

“You a mate o’ his, at all?” the publican asked Tait.

“Sort of.”

“In the theatre group is he, at all?”

“No.”

“I seen you in a few shows.”

“Thanks. Um, what can we do with our Legless Boy here?”

“Could bung him in a cab, maybe. Know his address, at all?”

“Its way out in the Valley.”

Jade was sitting quietly now, staring up at Tait’s face with as much focus as he could manage. It was as though he was perplexed and trying to figure something out.

They were a bit reassured by the fact that he wasn’t being difficult to manage.

“I s’pose we could sit him out the back,” the publican said, ‘see if it wears off him.

He was drinkin for a fair while and seemed okay, then he got putrid all of a sudden.
Maybe he’ll get sober just as quick. I don’t know his habits, at all. I see him round the
town now and then, but he don’t normally drink here.”

They took Jade through the corridor and out into the back yard where there was a
little beer-garden that was closed-off just then. They sat him down on a bench that he
could stretch out on if he chose. He was still gazing up at Tait.

“I have to get going,” Tait said. “Will he be okay, d’you think?”

“Who knows?” the publican shrugged irritably, and you could tell he was thinking
about the new laws. “I’m givin the silly old coot yard-space, that’s all. And that’s a
damn sight more than I should have to do. If people can’t handle their grog they
shouldn’t be bloody- well drinkin. It’s that simple. Is the whole world supposed to
play nursemaid to ‘em? I mean, listen, I’m partial to a bit o’ chocolate, but if I go and
gorge meself on two dozen Kit Kats I don’t expect anyone else to take the blame for
me havin a belly-ache! And I don’t go tryin to sue the shopkeeper for sellin me the
bloody things! What’s the world comin to?”

“Its called Anarcho-Tyranny,” Tait said.

But the publican wasn’t listening. He was too stirred with the iniquity of it all. He
shook his head in disgust and went back into the bar.

Jade sat quite passively, but Tait got a picture of him staggering back down the
corridor and out under a ten-ton truck. Or lurching off to find the yellow Mini and
trying to drive it. The new laws weren’t in yet, so the publican was safe. Tait
wondered if he ought to stay and play nursemaid. But he had his class to teach.

There was a pay-phone in the corridor.

He thought he might have Bambi’s number written down in the back of his notebook
with the other numbers he kept. But it wasn’t there. He had the Plaza newsagency
number though, so he rang that, hoping Narelle hadn’t left.

She answered, and said she’d literally been walking out the door. He told her what
had happened and asked whether someone should phone Bambi.

“I’ll call her now,” Narelle said. “Are you okay, baby?”

Tait said he was, that he was running late for his class, and that they’d see each other
tomorrow.

“Kiss kiss,” she said.

“Kiss kiss back,” he answered.
When he went back into the yard he found Jade’s bleary gaze on him again, but the look of perplexity had deepened even more.

“Will you stay there, Jade?” Tait asked him. “Maybe stretch out and have a doze?”

Jade said nothing. He looked very gaunt and worn and old just then, with several days of white stubble on his face.

“Right then,” Tait said. “I’m running late and have to go.”

He turned to go along the corridor but was stopped by Jade calling out.

“Hoy! Jush a minute!”

He turned back.

Jade was glaring hard at him, as though he had finally pinpointed the issue at hand, the enigma.

“Listen, answer me this,” he slurred. “Why’d ya pinch a man’s fuckin *hub-cap* and never give the bastard back? That’s what I wanna know, squire. Why’d ya pinch a bloke’s fuckin *hub-cap*?”

* * * *

Lance Lassiter was bade farewell at the Castleton Crematorium. He had no living relatives, but Clarion and Tim Niblett and a dozen or so others were there— including several of Lance’s old girlfriends. Narelle heard about it later from Tim. The girlfriends had their hankies out and cried as the coffin moved along the conveyer-belt and then went out of sight.

“The Muses wept at his passing,” Tim said, “as was proper. Well, they were ex-Muses I guess, to be precise. But it was no less touching for that.”

It was planned to hold a memorial occasion sometime soon, perhaps one Sunday afternoon in the concert hall at the Conservatorium. Tim was trying to get it organized and said he would let Narelle know when the date was set. There would be readings of Lance’s work, and various kinds of music – including at least a couple of numbers from *Eucalyptus Temple* – as well as tributes and reminiscences.

As the local ranking expert on Australian poetry, Sabina Sharpe was asked to write the obituary for the Castleton paper. She couched her view in fairly oblique terms, and if you weren’t up with the current codes of derision you might not have caught on
that the dead poet had been an aesthetic clod, a social fascist and a heterosexist predator.

The dog Chieftain was at Clarion’s place, refusing to eat and rapidly pining away. Tait sat at his work table. It was late Friday afternoon and he had finished the day’s stint of work on a poem. Narelle was due to pick him up at five to drive to the Castleton flat for the first night there. She had taken her things up with Cathy and Owen in the kombi-van the day before. Now it was move-in time.

On the table in front of him was the not-so-fresh manuscript of *The Blackbird’s Tune*, the collection of poems that Canopy had rejected. He had made a list of other publishers he might offer it to. There were only a handful and he cringed at the prospect of bothering any of them. A knock-back dents your faith in the work, even though you tell yourself it shouldn’t. He figured the best way was to pick the first name on the list and just whack the parcel into the mail without dwelling on it. He could even have it ready to post on the way to Castleton this evening. That’s if he could fix his attention long enough.

The problem was that his thoughts kept slipping away towards the idea of the Novel. He wanted to let his mind float around the concept of it, wanted to allow his subconscious do the necessary groundwork. There were basic matters to work out — like whether Robert Connell should be an enigmatic figure or a fairly transparent one. And how much of his previous life might need to be explained? Or does nothing really matter prior to the day the Prince came to Preston?

He was getting a headache from having an over-cluttered mind. He glanced out the other window and saw Ernie near the bird-stand. That prompted a new set of thoughts, starting with the fact that he was a fortnight behind with his rent. That wasn’t especially serious in itself. It was nothing compared to how far he’d been behind at various times over the years. He knew Ernie wouldn’t be worried, and might hardly even be aware of it. But it reminded him again how close to the brink he lived. Not long back he’d had to fork out hundreds of dollars for repairs to the motorbike to get it re-registered. The repair bills were getting heavier each year as the bike got older and needed more upkeep. He lived in dread of something really serious going wrong with it and nursed it along as gently as he could. He didn’t ride out to the Valley so much now, because he was trying to spare the bike. Anyway, those repairs and the rego fee had wiped out his last reserve of money after the long end-of-year
trough when there was nothing coming in and he had to eke his way on what he’d saved from the teaching income. He was employed as a Casual, and the classes only ran for 24 weeks of each year and he had somehow to stretch that income over 52 weeks.

It was often a wonder to him that he survived at all.

Narelle helped in various ways. She insisted on paying when they ate at the Athena café, and she often brought a bag of groceries with her when she came to the cabin. For Christmas and birthdays she gave him practical gifts, things he was in need of — like a new electric jug, or a new set of earphones for the record player. She was always willing to give him some cash if he wanted it, and in fact he’d accepted a hundred dollars from her to help make up what he needed for the bike-repairs. But he knew to keep a tight lid on that. If he turned into a sponger now there’d never be an end to it.

He looked back at the manuscript of *The Blackbird’s Tune*, and then at the jotted list of places he might send it. The thought of a little money spurred him to action. He put the manuscript into the big brown envelope he’d bought and addressed it to the first publisher on the list. He didn’t insert a covering letter. Fuck them. He wasn’t going to lick their arses. Let the work take its chances.

He sealed the envelope and put the stamps on.

If they accepted the collection they would pay at least five hundred dollars advance. That’d be months away at the earliest, and by then he might be nothing more than a pile of whitening bones, but at least he could set the possibility in motion.

He heard a car come up the drive, and then saw Narelle chatting to Ernie at the birdstand. She wore a pleated skirt and a crisp white blouse and her long tawny hair was loose around her shoulders. Ernie liked Narelle very much and found the odd chat with her was like a tonic.

“She’s a bonzer girl, that lass o’ yours,” he had said to Tait a number of times.

She finished chatting and came towards the porch of the cabin, looking so lovely. Tait went to unlatch the flyscreen door, full of a sudden wonder at having such a splendid woman in his life.

“But of course,” he sighed, remembering, “that’ll all be finished soon.”

The anguish of that thought must’ve been on his face, for she looked anxiously at him and asked if he was okay.
He could not bring himself to speak much in the car and she squeezed his hand and asked him again if he was okay. He smiled and replied he was just a bit tired and headachey. In fact he was repeating some words in his mind and being deeply stirred by them. They were from *The Skye Boat Song,* and their very bleakness was somehow consoling:

*Burned are our homes. Exile and death*

*Scatter the loyal men.*

Yes, that was the thought to cling to. It had been that way all his life. It was the vision of defeat, of ruin and desolation, that invariably steadied him and gave him whatever backbone he had. He might be a total dud at optimism, he told himself, but at least he would need no blindfold at the end: *It isn’t the first time I’ve looked down their guns, Father.*

By the time they got to the outskirts of Castleton he felt quite composed, even content.

He got her to pull up at a letter-box. *“Good luck,”* he told the parcel, and put it down the schute.

He stayed the weekend with her.

The first night they bought heaps of sausages and eggs and butter and crusty bread from the nearby shopping centre. They cooked themselves a big meal and sat out on the balcony with their plates on their knees and a couple of bottles of beer between them. The traffic noise was loud from the busy road in front, but they had the winking lights of Castleton to look at, and a nice breeze coming in from the ocean three or four miles away.

They became pleasantly tipsy and went to bed about ten o’clock and cuddled a little before drifting off. They made love in the morning. Then they showered and went out to the shopping centre for breakfast. After that they dawdled through the day, ending up strolling on the beach in the evening, down near the old Art Deco baths, with a glorious sunset.

Back in the flat they ate Chinese take-away, and sipped white wine. Narelle put a cassette on.

*“Guess what this is?”* she asked, grinning at him, before she pressed the start button.
“You singing a big aria at La Scala last year?”
“Damn, you found out.”
“I sensed there were things you weren’t telling me and I put a tail on you.”
“A private dick?”
“Yes.”
“Was it Joe Filthy?”
“Sleazy. The name is Sleazy.”
She pressed the start button.
It was the cassette version of the record of South American pan-pipe music that he had at the cabin, the music they’d listened to that first night they came together. It was “their” music.
“I’ll play it whenever you aren’t here and I want to feel close to you,” she said.
They sat on the little sofa and cuddled and smooched while the music circled in its own high thin air like the flight of condors, and then they drifted to bed.
The next day after breakfast they walked across the road to the campus.
The Library building was open from ten till four on Sundays and was cool and quiet inside so they explored the place from top to bottom. The building had an old-fashioned feel. There were staircases and lots of nooks and crannies and whole floors given over to endless rows of tall bookshelves that gave off a pleasantly musty scent. Narelle insisted on checking the Index for any of Tait’s books and they eventually found all three of them on the shelves — Good Neighbours, Ground Leave, and The Freedom of the Air. Lance Lassiter’s dozen or so books were nearby and they sat browsing through them for a long while, feeling as if they had a person’s whole life there in their hands.
“What’s that line of Auden’s on the death of Yeats?” Narelle asked. “‘He has become his books.’ Is that it?”
“Something like that. I can’t bring it precisely to mind.”
“Well, we’re in the right place to check.”
They tracked down Auden’s Collected Poems and Narelle read out the last part of the stanza:

_The provinces of his body revolted,_
_The squares of his mind were empty,_
Silence invaded the suburbs,
The current of his feeling faded; he became his admirers.

“That’s quite different, isn’t it?” Narelle said. “Becoming your admirers is a whole other thing from becoming your books.”

“A more realistic idea, I guess. Admirers are living minds and hearts, whereas books are mere lifeless objects.”

“It’s a bit dicey, though,” she reflected. “If you can become your admirers, you might as easily become your detractors.”

“Depending on who’s running the culture.”

“It’s the victors who write the histories.”

“Or the obituaries.”

“Yes, Sabina’s thing in the paper was pretty cold-blooded.”

“And horribly snide. I think I’ll call her ‘Sabina Snide’ in future.”

“I’ll be having her in Honours. She teaches the unit called Feminism and Structuralism.”

“Oh dear.”

“I know.”

Narelle told him about the other parts of the Honours course, and they all sounded just as repellent.

“But that might not be a bad thing,” she said. “I’ll take an oppositional stance, the way you encouraged me to do at Ridwell. Remember what you used to tell me in First Year, when I was so taken aback by the political slant that was put on everything? ‘Don’t get depressed, get argumentative.’ Half the reason for my good outcome at Ridwell was that you taught me always to look for the line of resistance to what they were telling me. So I was always had the impetus of that to energize my brain.”

“Now you might want to bump that up to the level of spitting rage,” Tait said.

“I’ll set the dial at ‘furious contempt’ to begin with, then hike it up accordingly.”

“Good plan.”

The thing about the victors writing the histories suddenly made Tait think of something. There must be books here about the Jacobites. They’d mostly be a load of Whiggish lies, of course, but there might possibly be one or two of what he thought of
as the Sacred Texts, books he knew about and had long wanted to read but had never remotely come across.

At the top of his list was *The Lyon In Mourning*, the collection of first-hand accounts of the Forty Five. It was compiled by a clergymen called Forbes who had been arrested on his way to join the rising at the very start. He was held prisoner by the Regime that whole fateful year, but for the rest of his life he went about asking all kinds of people for their recollections — most of which were sad enough to have broken his poor Jacobite heart all over again.

Tait viewed that collection as one of the great examples of a Rightful Task well done. Forbes had served the Party of Memory better with his little notebook than he could ever have done preaching for it in a pulpit or fighting for it with a sword. It made you wonder whether Fate had kept him out of harm’s way for that very reason.

Another fine service was James Hogg’s *Jacobite Reliques of Scotland*, the early 19th century collection of songs and verses. It was mainly thanks to that book that so much of the minstrelsy of the Cause was gathered and saved and handed down.

And another was the memoirs of Lord Elcho, the young man who had been the Prince’s main cavalry leader. Tait had never forgotten a poignant detail he’d come across — that Elcho’s horsemen were the last out of the town that day when the army left Preston to take the road north.

They’d been in the Library for three hours and felt like some fresh air. Tait decided to leave the search for the Jacobite books till the next visit. They went outside and lay down on a lawn under a shady tree. They caressed each other, then dozed off into a delicious half-sleep. When they stirred they felt like a drink. The Union bar was open and pleasantly quiet and empty and they got two glasses of light beer and went out to the terrace. A lovely breeze rustled through the branches that overhung the terrace balcony.

The only jarring note was a riot of hectoring posters and graffiti-slogans on the wall beside them. A great many were from the “Wimmins Alliance,” more or less asserting that it was rare for a typical female student to get through a day unraped. Others were from the “Queer Collective” implying that it was rare for a typical gay student to get through a day unbashed — presumably by the typical straight male who’d somehow found a minute to spare from the raping.

They rolled their eyes at each other.
“I’m starting to pine for the Ridwell campus already,” Narelle sighed. “It felt like Down Home, compared to this.”

“This is Style City, sweetheart,” Tait said, trying to do a tough Bogart voice but wobbling all over the place. “This is where everybody carries a plastic Gentrification Card and shops at the Grievance Boutique.”

Narelle burst into laughter at how bad the accent was.

“I know, I know,” Tait groaned. “I don’t think Bogart was meant to speak words of more than two syllables.”

“Yes, ‘gentrification’ was your downfall.”

“Ah well, the Library here is nice.”

“I’ll find my own little nook in there, to study in.”

“It’ll be nice to think of you there.”

“In a few months you’ll be in the adjoining nook, won’t you?”

“Sounds good,” he murmured, taking care not to meet her eyes, and casting about for a change of subject. “Are you hungry?”

They went for pizza at the nearby shopping centre and then bought some cheap wine they liked and took it back to the flat and spent the evening relaxing. The sat on the little balcony and watched evening fall over the city and lights begin to wink and glow.

Narelle had to see someone at the campus office next day, and her father was coming for a meal at the flat the next evening, so Tait said he would get the train home in the morning.

The weekend had felt good, as if they were a real couple with a real future in a new place together. He hadn’t dwelt on the longer term but had tried to stay fully in the moment. And their being together had helped her settle in. That was the main thing. She’d never lived on her own before and might have been a little spooked and depressed without him.

Sipping the wine and looking out at the lights, he thought about the scenario of the next few months. Unlike him, Narelle had good social skills. She’d quickly gain a new circle of friends. She’d be having a social life. She’d be meeting some nice young guys her own age. She’d be studying hard. The ties between them would begin to slacken. He would ease-off his visits until he was only a marginal figure in her life.
The break, when it came, wouldn’t be too bad. Maybe she’d be the one to initiate it. That would be best.

He thought of it as the Program. The Program would happen by its own logic and he had only to go along with it. He could do that, he felt. He could cope with that. It would just require him to Shut Down his feelings. Yes, he would do a careful Shut Down operation.

On her side there would be the Program happening more or less of its own accord, and on his side there would be the careful Shutting Down.

It struck him that maybe he could obtain a prescription for some tranquilizer tablets, just a little something extra to fall back on.

Just to help with the Shutting Down.

Narelle was out on the landing of the stairs, chatting with the girl from the flat above. Tait could hear how well they were connecting. The girl was telling about the wide range of social life on campus. Already the Program was underway.

Then another train of thought came. It was about Elcho’s horsemen being the last out of Preston, and what the army’s order-of-the-day had said. Stragglers who stayed after the rearguard had left would so at their peril, for they would not be waited on. And no one would have misconstrued the meaning of that. They’d be on their own, with every thug for miles around eager to do a bit of patriotic killing now that the coast was clear—not to mention a spot of torture and mutilation beforehand. All that had started happening to stragglers as soon as the northward march began from Derby.

That summed it up so perfectly, Tait thought. At the heels of the withdrawing Jacobites was the coming world of the hyenas.

He found himself framing the questions on which he knew his life’s meaning now depended, and he murmured them half-aloud, as if the winking lights of the city might return the answers:

“What exactly is my situation? Am I staying after the rearguard has gone? Is that what I’m doing, out of sheer blithering stupidity? Or am I part of the rearguard?”

* * * *

Commissar Mona was now president of the Players.
There hadn’t been a huge roll-up at the annual general meeting and that had favoured Mona’s faction and she’d snuck in by a handful of votes. The absent members were ones who would have voted to block the abomination by keeping Frank Baxter in for another year. Tait had a class to teach at Ridwell that night and Narelle had trouble with her car. Megan herself was unwell, and Kelvin was out of the area for some reason. Gillian and Ian didn’t make it either. Caught up in their marital woes, they’d been distant from the Players lately.

Tait got an account of the meeting from Francesca when he bumped into her at the Plaza supermarket.

He saw her first in the aisle and studied her face for a minute before she glanced over and noticed him. She looked as beautiful as ever, with her long raven hair curving down, but she had a sort of clouded expression, they way people do when they have large issues going on.

She spoke of the meeting in a slightly listless and distracted manner.

“It was our own fault,” she said of the outcome of the meeting, “we didn’t organize very well, although Marigold tried to phone around to rally the forces. Megan not being there was an absolute gift to the other side. Mona kept looking around the room, like a fox in the chook-house, and could hardly believe her luck. Of course Megan would have come in an iron-lung if she had to, but apparently Bruce put his foot down. He only does that once in a blue moon, but when he does its decisive.”

“Ah well,” said Tait. “Mona’s day had to come sooner or later. She’s been inevitable, like death and taxes.”

“Old age and senility.”

“Dry rot.”

“White ants.”

They started moving along the shelves together then, shopping side by side, although Tait only needed a couple of items.

“Where’s the ankle-biter?” Tait asked.

Clare, the youngest child, wasn’t at school yet.

“Bambi’s minding her while I shop.”

“Nice of her.”

“No, it’s her livelihood. She babysits all over the Valley.”

“Of course. I knew that.”
Tait told about Jade being legless drunk and falling on the road that day.

“Yes, Gillian mentioned it. She drove Bambi into town to pick him up and bring him home. He seems pretty much of a no-hoper.”

“I keep thinking he’ll come good. That the dream of resurrection will be fulfilled.”

“I’d say you were being optimistic,” Francesca said grimly, “if that wasn’t almost a contradiction in terms.”

“You exaggerate.”

“I can only hope so. I hear your lady-love has moved up to Castleton.”

“Yes.”

“How do you feel about it?”

“Optimistic.”

“Yeah, sure.”

It occurred to him to ask Francesca how one obtains a prescription for tranquilizers. He knew she’d been on them at various times.

“How are things with you?” he asked, to change the subject.

“God, don’t ask,” she said, rolling her eyes.

“Things tense at home?”

“Put it this way: In between raging fights we don’t speak at all.”

“I saw Craig drive past the other evening. I don’t think he saw me.”

“Did he look like he had a bouquet of thistles up his bum?”

“Somewhat.”

“Actually, you’ve reminded me. He wants you to know if you’re still willing to lend a hand with the driveway.”

“I guess I am,” Tait said, cautiously.

“It’s no skin off my nose either way, believe me.”

“He must be reasonably upbeat if he’s still keen to do the driveway.”

“No, he’ll do it out of rage and spite.”

“What a happy prospect then. I can’t wait to get involved.”

“Oh, don’t worry. He’ll be civil to you. The hatred is reserved for the evil Italian bitch and slut he’s married to.”

“Italian seems a bit uncalled for,” Tait said.

She smiled for the first time.

“But what’s brought all this on,” he continued, “if one is allowed to ask?”
She looked surprised at the question and searched his eyes as if to gauge whether he’d asked it seriously. Then she seemed about to confide something, but he saw the impulse fade and she turned away with a toss of the head to grab a box of corn flakes and fling it into the trolley. They went through the checkout and Tait wheeled the laden trolley downstairs to the carpark.

“I’ll phone Craig one of these evenings about the driveway,” he said.

“You and I don’t see each other enough anymore.”

“No, we don’t.”

“It’s a crying shame.”

She gave him a hug and a kiss on the cheek and he watched her drive out of the carpark.

He stood thinking of the poem he’d written a few weeks ago after seeing her in the supermarket. On that occasion she hadn’t noticed him and he was able to stand and watch her for some time. The poem wasn’t meant to be totally personal – even a heartfelt poem has to be an objective piece of work that can speak to anybody – but it did seem to bring out and clarify some of his deepest feelings.

THE BELOVED

I saw my one and only love today,
Pushing a trolley in a crowded store.
I stood and watched her from an aisle away
– A queen engaging in a mundane chore.

And yet how little note the others took,
As though that beautiful and pensive face
Could barely draw them to a second look
And she was just a shopper in the place.

Somehow they found it natural enough
That she, who is to me the moon and sun,
Should browse amongst that ordinary stuff
The way that any woman might have done.
And the checkout attendant’s baleful glare
Said plainly, as my goddess fumbled through,
That this was not a Vision of the Fair
But only someone holding up the queue.

And I stood all astounded at the thought
That love could be a kind of private myth,
And that the world accounts as nearly nought
The aching glamour I invest her with.

He went back up to the main floor and passed the record shop and saw Kelvin and Rory in there. Kelvin waved him over. He looked happier than when Tait had seen him last. That meant Rory was being nice to him, for the time being. Rory had his head down and was flicking through a bunch of cassettes, but he looked up and said hello. Tait had got over Rory’s good looks, especially the big smile that used to seem so beatific, and now viewed him as a cold-hearted swine, as his friend’s tormentor. But he was still the moon and sun to Kelvin.

Tait told Kelvin about Narelle’s new flat, and they talked for a minute about the debacle of the Players meeting and the enemy’s hideous triumph. But Kelvin was only going through the motions and could barely take his eyes off the Adored One.

Tait understood. The bliss was fleeting and it had to be savoured while it was there.

He left them to it.

He hoped it wouldn’t be too bad when the downswing came. He paused and looked back. Even from a distance Kelvin’s body language said it all, the way he moved his great bulk so gingerly around Rory, as though desperate to minimize the offence of that proximity.

* * * *

Cathy’s wedding took place in the backyard of her house in Turrawong in front of thirty guests. It was meant to be very easy and informal. The celebrant was a tall
black man in a colourful caftan. He was a dancer when he wasn’t marrying people, and Cathy and Owen knew him from way back.

It was a fine clear day and they’d borrowed thirty white plastic chairs from the Players and set them up on the lawn. There were tables of food and drink waiting on the back verandah. Tait was glad it was a casual turnout because he didn’t own a suit. He didn’t really want to be there. He had been invited for Narelle’s sake, and for her sake he’d come, but he felt out of place. It wasn’t because he knew Cathy had some sort of bone to pick with him. It was deeper and more poignant than that. It was something to do with knowing your proper post.

He loved the idea of the occasion and his heart went out to the bride and groom and to everyone present. Here were people upholding the shelter of each other, and pledging themselves to it by actual vows or by the act of witnessing. Tait loved them for it, really loved them. Something precious and sacred was being asserted in the face of all odds, and he had a lump in his throat as the vows and rings were exchanged. But he knew he didn’t belong at the scene.

“I should be out on the heather,” he kept thinking in a ballad-like cadence, “should be out on the heather with bonnet and feather, should be out on the hill keeping sharp-eyed watch.”

In his mind’s eye he could see this backyard down below him in a green glen, and this happy scene taking place, and himself on a high hilltop keeping guard against danger. Someone had to stay out on the stormy heather so that others need not. Someone had to go from home so that others could bide at home. Someone had to abandon shelter to give others a chance of keeping it. It was a matter of knowing your Rightful Task.

“You okay?” Narelle asked him, squeezing his hand.

He nodded and squeezed back.

She looked lovely in a simple green cotton dress and her tawny hair flowing loose down her back.

They were sitting in their chairs on the lawn while people began helping themselves to the food and drinks. There was a buzz of talk about how nice the ceremony had been, and how beautifully the celebrant had conducted it in his deep rolling voice, and how happy and lovely Cathy had looked in a flowery dress with daisies in her hair.

“Did you think it was nice?” Narelle asked.
“It was wonderful,” Tait said.

His voice wobbled with emotion because he was still so moved by the idea of it all — the assertion of something precious against the odds.

Narelle saw how moved he was and became moved herself and leant and kissed him tenderly on the lips. He tasted tears in the kiss but wasn’t sure if they were hers or his.

Music was playing and the beer and wine was flowing and the mood was becoming jolly. The celebrant, very still and dignified when he was on the job, had turned into the life of the party. He was showing them how to do a Cossack dance, the kind where you kick from a squatting position. He had hoiked his caftan up around his waist and they saw he had bright red polka-dot shorts on.

Tait had only had one glass of light beer. As a mostly solitary drinker he never really understood the social side of being pissed, and by the afternoon he was feeling the irritation that comes from being the only sober person in a gathering. Even Narelle was tipsy. He was willing to stay as long as she wanted to, he just wished he could go into the house and lie down quietly on a bed for a while.

Narelle was busy talking to someone on the other side of the yard when Cathy came up to him. She had a glass of Scotch in her hand. Some of the flowers had fallen out of her hair and she was a bit disheveled from doing a wild dance with the celebrant.

She glared at him and poked a finger at his chest

“Listen,” she said. “Don’t you muck that girl around! D’you hear me? Just don’t, that’s all. You’ve got her in such a state she doesn’t know whether she’s coming or going, and its not right! D’you hear me?”

“Yes.”

“She’s the best girl you’ll ever find!”

“I know.”

“See that you do then. You’re always so bloody closed-up or stuck-up or fucked-up or whatever it is that a person doesn’t know where the hell you stand.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“Well then, do the right thing by her. Let her know where you stand, that’s all. Just let her know where you stand.”

“I will.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”
They saw Narelle heading back towards them.

“All right then,” Cathy said, with a final glare. “I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt, this time.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

Mike Kieslowski had interesting news.

He’d been approached by someone on Senator Pribik’s staff about doing some research work, and the odd bit of speechwriting. The approach had been cautious, and they’d stressed that the job would be on a casual basis and poorly paid, but Mike felt he should do it, and Caroline thought so too.

Mike explained the context.

“There are huge tensions in the ‘ethnic’ sector now, whipped up by the rise of radical multiculturalism. MultiCult is of course just as deadly a threat to the value-systems of traditional ethnic groups as it is to those of the old Australian mainstream. It can ‘talk the talk’ of cultural continuity but in fact it has no interest in the continuation of anyone’s authentic past. The mavens of MultiCult have only one agenda — the same old stinking agenda that the Commissariat always peddles in one form or another. They hate and fear the workings of human memory and seek to stamp it out, and the first step is to control it by claiming to speak on its behalf. Like most of modernity’s enforcers, they derive from Puritanism. They are never the guardians of altars but only the rabid strippers of altars. They are desecrators, first, last and always, and they stand in the exact same relation to anyone’s ethnic past as the Puritans stood to the church windows of England.

“The conflict is between pietas and nihilism, enchantment and disenchantment, the natural shelter of each other and the manufactured menace of each other. In other words, it’s the old war of the paradigms, Cavaliers and Roundheads. The only change is that the Enemy has now got to pitches of derangement that would flabbergast our
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“The conflict is between pietas and nihilism, enchantment and disenchantment, the natural shelter of each other and the manufactured menace of each other. In other words, it’s the old war of the paradigms, Cavaliers and Roundheads. The only change is that the Enemy has now got to pitches of derangement that would flabbergast our
ancestors. As Allan Bloom says, we now have to confront ‘extremisms beyond the imaginations of all previous ages.’

‘Pribik’s forebears have been Czech patriots and devout Catholics, and there’s no doubt which side he’s on: he’s a Cavalier.

‘We had a two-hour talk on the phone yesterday, to get a sense of each other, and we agreed that ‘ethnic’ Australia is in deep trouble on a number of fronts, even aside from the affliction of MultiCult itself.

‘One big problem for the ethnics is that their young people are being captured by the zeitgeist like everyone else’s. They too have their souls rotted by television. They too go through the schools and universities and come out the other end heartless and mindless — or in other words, as the creatures of the Commissariat.

‘But what most worries him right now is the shocking passivity of Old Australia. The commissars wage relentless war on it and yet it never lifts a finger in its own defence. This leaves traditional ethnic groups in the lurch. How can you make common cause with people too inert to defend their own existence? But if the Anglos would only show a bit of backbone and moral fibre, would only defend their heritage like honourable people, all the traditional ethnic groups would support them, for they understand that this is a war to the death and there are only two sides — the one that respects the human past and the one that wants to spit on its mass-grave.

‘That’s a certain sheer relief in talking to someone like Pribik. It’s what I get when I talk to my parents’ Polish friends. It’s because they know the score. Use a term like ‘mass grave’ to Anglo-Australians and they think you’re being ridiculous and rhetorical and over-the-top. They have no sense of mass-graves as real things and true possibilities. Unlike a great many ethnics, they don’t have relatives in mass-graves and therefore don’t feel it ‘on the skin’ as the Europeans say.

‘It was his growing dismay at the tameness of the Aussie mainstream that made Pribik write that letter in response to my piece about Anzac Day. He understood that I was trying to jolt people awake. But endorsing my comments, even in a guarded manner, was a courageous thing for him to do. He could’ve copped a shitload if the patriot-cretins had decided to go after him.

‘Of course there’s a vast irony in the present situation. It was the very lack of political intensity that made Anglo-Australia a refuge for migrants who had barely
escaped alive from political intensities elsewhere. Now that same trait may well be the undoing of Anglos and ethnics alike.

“The pay is a pittance and poor noble Caroline will have to bear the brunt of keeping us fed, but I reckon the job with Pribik is worthwhile. Of course I’ll have to keep a lowish profile. The man has courage, but he remains a politician and I’m not a connection he’d want to shout about from the rooftops.

“My first piece of advice to him was to read Camus’s *The Rebel*. I’m pleased to say he already knows Milosz’s *The Captive Mind*. And he can quote Vaclav Havel backwards.”

Good advice about Camus, Tait thought. He had begun reading *The Rebel* himself and was engrossed by it. Or at least as engrossed as he could be with so many other things on his mind.

* * * *

It was the Sunday afternoon of the Lassiter tribute. Tait and Narelle were sitting on a bench in the park across the street from the Castleton Conservatorium. They could see people arriving and standing about on the front steps of the building.

It was a nice park with flower-beds and big old shady trees. For a hundred and fifty years it had been called Captain Cook Park and until three months ago there’d been a statue of the great navigator right in the centre where all the pathways met. But the statue had been removed because Cook was a Dead White European Male and no longer to be tolerated. The park had then been renamed Tolerance Park and a new statue put up. It was composed of jagged lumps of raw steel in a circle and these jagged lumps were said to represent the women and children of all races and creeds dancing in a ring. Tait couldn’t see it himself, but then he didn’t claim to be an Artist of Conscience like the bloke who designed it. The bloke’s picture had been on the front page of the Castleton paper back when the Council first hired him. The headline read: “A Caring Council Commissions Artist of Conscience.” Apparently the vision of the jagged lumps had been inspired by a memorial the Artist had seen on the site of the torture-pits at the Belsen concentration camp. “It took my breath away,” the Artist was quoted as saying, “especially after I learned that the sculptor had only recently died of AIDS. I knew I wanted to create a work deeply transgressive and confronting
in order to indict the genocidal history of racist Australia and rub their noses in it.” At the same time, he said, he hoped the work would convey “the joy of our common humanity.”

“Should we be head across?” Narelle asked.

“We have ten minutes,” he replied, gesturing towards the clock on the Town Hall further along the street.

“It’s nice here.”

“Yes, Captain Cook’s park is very pleasant.”

Narelle glanced across at the jagged lumps of steel and gave a slight grimace of distaste.

“I wonder what’s become of the old statue,” she said.

“They probably broke it up with jackhammers in a frenzy of spite. The Tolerant are like that.”

“What about the spirit of it?

“The spirit of it has gone to join the rightful King in exile.”

“That’s a lovely thought.”

“All the good old things go there sooner or later when they get displaced.”

“Of course they do.”

“I’ve been trying to formulate a poem about it, but its all wispy fragments that won’t cohere.”

“It’ll come.”

They sat silent for a minute or two.

“It’s no big deal or anything,” Narelle said quietly, “but I’ve been meaning to ask. Did Cathy get a bit stroppy with you the other day at the wedding?”

“Um, what about?” he asked cautiously.

“About you and me and where we’re heading.”

“Oh, only vaguely,” he replied, still being cautious.

“She blurted out that she’d given you a ‘talking to.’”

“No, it wasn’t that strong. She just made a comment in passing.”

“As long as she didn’t browbeat you. Cathy hasn’t a hostile bone in her body, but she can be hectoring at times.”

“She cares about your well-being. And she finds it off-putting that I don’t say much.”
“It always bothers her when someone isn’t as open and verbal as she is. I don’t think she understands that some people are just introverts and that they aren’t deliberately withholding.”

“Does it bother you that I’m not more transparent?”

“I try not to let it.”

“But does it?”

“Sometimes I wish I had a clearer picture of what’s in your mind and heart. There’s a line from Les Miserables that I often think of in relation to you: ‘Perfect happiness does not laugh, and utter grief does not weep.’”

“Good line.”

“You never really laugh or weep, do you? Not fully. Not out loud.”

“I’m never sure which one is appropriate.”

“Same here, I guess.”

“You know what I think it is?”

“What?”

“A fundamental unclerarness about the balance between Structure and Agency. Whether your life is your own to decide about, or whether it’s there to be made or marred by larger forces.”

“Maybe that’s over-intellectualizing.”

“Yes, probably. How do you reflect on it all?”

“I write odd neurotic little poems by the dozen.”

“Like Stevie Smith? ‘Not Waving But Drowning.’”

“Not remotely as good as that.”

“I’d like to see them.”

“They’re too crappy to show anyone. I tear them up.”

“Ah.”

“Anyway,” Narelle said, “I just wanted to let you know that whatever Cathy said had nothing to do with me. I mean I didn’t put her up to it.”

I know.”

They leaned in and hugged each other.

“Time to head over.”

They stood up.
“Listen,” Tait said with sudden feeling. “I know how hard it is to be involved with a weirdo like me. You’re so sweet about it all. Too sweet for your own good.”

“You put up with me just as sweetly.”

Tait knew this was a suitable lead-in to the discussion they would have to have sooner or later. But they had to go. And besides, he wasn’t sure he was ready to cope with that discussion right then. He would need to be properly braced for it.

“Yes, I do put up with you,” he declared in a different tone. “And god knows how I manage it. Talk about a bumptious hoyden!”

“Talk about a bad-arse honky!”

“Do you think we might be on the path to mutual understanding here?”

“I think we’ve stumbled on it.”

“What is a honky, exactly?”

“You want the Shorter Oxford definition? It’s a guy who’s horny for a hoyden.”

“That’s me. And a hoyden, according to the Shorter Oxford, is a gal who’s hot for a honky.”

“That’s me then.”

There wasn’t a huge turnout for the Lassiter tribute because there hadn’t been time to advertise it as fully as Tim Niblett would have liked. The academics had been given word of course, but they were notably absent. Only about a third of the seats in the hall were occupied. The ex-Muses were there though. Tim acted as a kind of compere and gave a graceful opening talk about the Life and Work before introducing the various segments.

An actor read some of the early poems. He was done up with bowyangs on his trousers and corks around his hat, a parody of the knockabout young swagman Lance had been, and he sat on a fake log while his billy boiled on a pretend campfire. It only looked absurd for the first minute or two and then you found yourself drawn in by the verse itself. It didn’t have the same power as when Lance delivered it, but it held up pretty well. This was how it would be from now on, now that Lance had become his admirers.

After the swaggie came a group of chamber musicians playing classical music that Lance would’ve known when he was with the ballet company.

Then two Aboriginal students from the university came on and told a couple of the Dreamtime stories that Lance had collected and popularized. This was in fact a touch
provocative because in recent years Lance had been attacked in some quarters for his myth-gathering. It had begun to be viewed as Cultural Genocide.

There was a bush-band with fiddle and banjo and those instruments made out of tea-chests and broomhandles with bottle-tops attached. They played and sang “The Banks of the Condomine” and “Springtime It Brings On the Shearin’.” Then they finished off with a piece to represent, they said, Lance’s old Fenian Irish ancestry. It was “Boulavogue” and unbearably poignant:

At Vinegar Hill, o’er the River Slaney
Our heroes vainly stood back to back…

The mood was lightened with some personal recollections. Various people who’d known the poet told fond anecdotes of him. Tim had rounded up a group that would illustrate Lance’s egalitarian instincts. One was the mechanic who’d been servicing his car for years and who told of his comic bamboozlement with any kind of mechanical gizmo. Another was a nursing sister who had looked after him during a stay in hospital and described how he kept the ward entertained with poems and yarns and impromptu ballet routines.

There was no interval because Tim was anxious to keep it tight and not overdo things.

The final part was a sequence of excerpts from Eucalyptus Temple. They were done in a more ad-hoc way than in the actual show, but by the same people and the singing was just as good and the dramatic elements of the story came across very well.

The whole thing ended with footage on a screen. It was from a TV program that Lance had featured in a few years earlier. In it he recited a poem about the final crossing of the “one-strand lake” of death. At the close he threw his head back and carefully smoothed his mane of white hair with both hands, like a man about to engage with something. He looked directly at the camera and gave a wry smile and a quick salute of farewell. Then he walked out of the shot and the viewer was left with the panorama of sea and sky that had been behind him. It was as though the footage had been made for this occasion, and Tait wondered if that thought had been in Lance’s mind at the time. A born showman knows you need a clincher of an exit.
Chatting for a moment with Clarion in the foyer, they learned that the dog Chieftain had pined to death and been buried in the backyard where its master had died.

A moment later he felt a touch on his arm and turned to see Deirdre, the probation officer from County Limerick, the one who’d prompted him to stand up to Bristol Dick. She had loved the tribute, she said, and couldn’t help shedding a tear when they played “Boulavogue.” Tait confessed it had made him bit teary too. He asked about Bristol Dick and learned that he’d left the job under a cloud. Some sort of allegation had been made. Deirdre didn’t elaborate.

They caught sight of Tim Niblett in the foyer. He was with a youngish flashy-looking man and they heard him introduce the man to one of the ex-Muses as Chris. Then they heard someone remark that the man was Chris Cordwell the whiz-kid theatre promoter. They wanted to tell Tim what a good job he’d done in putting the tribute together, but he and Chris appeared to be deep in conversation and they felt they shouldn’t interrupt.

A large group of people were going somewhere to have a few drinks and continue the mood of remembrance. Tait and Narelle could have gone with them but decided they’d rather go back to the flat.

They put on their Andean pan-pipe music, and sat on the little balcony and sipped the cheap wine and watched the evening settle over the city. At about seven-thirty a fierce storm came in from the ocean and lashed the balcony with rain. They went to bed then and listened to the sound of the wind.

Lying snug and warm beside her, Tait knew he was only making things harder for them both. Every sweet moment like this only made it tougher. He liked to tell himself that he was just trying to ease the process for Narelle. Oh, how noble of him. But in fact it was just a reluctance to give up the sweet comfort.

He knew his rightful post. He was meant to be out there, out on that frozen December road north from Preston, out on the windy moor, out in the storm on the heather.

“What are you thinking about?” Narelle softly asked during a lull in the noise of the wind and rain.

He kept his eyes closed and his breathing regular so she would think he’d gone to sleep.
* * * *

He gave Jimmy Sale a full account of the Lassiter tribute. Jimmy had wanted to go but there’d been a chilly response from Lauren when he’d mentioned it. The atmosphere at Jimmy’s place was often a bit tense now. There were the money worries, and worries about the kids. And Lauren’s back pain was more disabling than ever after a chiropractor had done something to her neck.

It was made worse for Jimmy by the knowledge that the Hyenas – his former colleagues – were keeping an eye on him. He knew how interested they’d be if any kind of family “dysfunction” ever came to official notice. And there was a full-blown informer-culture in place now that enabled anyone to ruin anyone else’s life with an anonymous allegation.

“If you suspect ANYTHING, a television campaign urged the public, ‘phone this number!’”

The Pathologies were now completely on the loose, like whole packs of Grendels bent on mayhem, and no Beowulf anywhere.

It was the Saturday after the Lassiter tribute and Tait and Jimmy were heading out to the Valley, to help Craig with the first bit of work on the new driveway. They weren’t very much in the mood for it. The days of the Merry Men seemed very long ago.

Narelle had come down from Castleton to spend the day with her father and was to stay at the cabin that night.

Talking about Lassister had led to the topic of Alf, the old stretcher-bearer who’d died in the geriatric ward at nearly the same time and whose recollections Jimmy had written down. Those three exercise books were now the only place where the man’s life still existed and Jimmy had become haunted by them.

“It nearly knocks me over at times,” Jimmy said. “Just three cheap exercise books, and yet the vast of what they contain!”

“Do you reckon they have literary merit?”

“I think so. Alf was an instinctive poet at times, the way he spoke, and I tried to take it down word for word.”

“So what will you do?”

“I want to type the material up into presentable form, for one thing.”

“And then?”
“You can read it and tell me I’ve done a good thing by not letting the life-story die with the man.”

“That goes without saying. The Party of Memory salutes you.”

“It might be a foolish notion, but I’d like to try get the stuff published. That’s why I want your advice on the literary side.”

“Length could be a factor too,” said Tait. “Even if the quality is there, it needs to be either long enough or short enough to suit a format.”

“If I won the lottery I’d publish it myself, in a deluxe edition with all the trappings.”

“With a brilliant Preface by a certain staggeringly gifted local writer?”

“D’you think he’d be willing to do it?”

“It might be touch and go. He has a busy schedule.”

“Damn.”

“But you might be able to talk him into it. I can see the cover now: With preface by Harold (Harry) Dunn, Bush Bard of Turrawong Shire.”

“But if he refused, I could fall back on you.”

“Dream on, baby.”

“Seriously,” said Jimmy. “Am I being all soppy and whimsical about this? Is this another one of my Robin Rainbow episodes?”

“Let’s ask Beadle Brimstone.”

“No, let’s not. I know what he’ll say.”

“You might be wrong. He’s mellower than he used to be.”

“How come?”

“He’s been battered in the shit-storm like all the rest of us.”

Craig was home by himself with the four kids. Francesca, he explained, was having her Saturday Break. She insisted on having Saturday afternoon and evening for herself and would go off in the car after lunch to do her own thing. It was understandable, he said, awkwardly making coffee for them in the kitchen. Everybody needs a bit of relaxation from the daily grind. She mostly went and hung out with people in her Mothercraft group. She socialized with them in various parts of the Valley and got home quite late.

There was something forced and artificial about what he was saying.

Or maybe he was just distracted by the kids. They were being very fractious, whining and arguing and trying to hit each other.
He had marked out the new driveway with wooden stakes. It ran from the edge of the road, through the front gate, then up the slope to the carport beside the house. Seeing it out-lined like that made you realize the extent of the task. Craig explained that the whole ground would need to be dug out to a certain depth in order to lay a secure foundation for the cement surface. On a steep slope like that it had to be deep-set to be secure. There’d be torrential rain. He mentioned torrential rain several times, as if it was preying on his mind. The job was only worth doing if it was done well, he said grimly. He’d busted his guts to build a top-notch house and wasn’t going to have a shonky driveway.

Tait felt his heart sink. He hadn’t volunteered to help dig the frigging Suez Canal. He could tell Jimmy was having similar thoughts.

The three of them were down near the gate and there were howls of conflict from the kids in the house. Craig excused himself and went to settle them.

When he came back his attitude to the driveway seemed to have changed. He wasn’t sure whether to go ahead with it, he said. Winter was getting closer. They might be plagued by weather. There could be floods.

The kids howled again as though murder was being done and Craig went back up the house.

When he came back he was in gung-ho mode again. The provision of all-weather vehicle access was a critical issue. He hadn’t killed himself building a first-rate house only to leave the issue of all-weather vehicle access unaddressed. He had his family’s long-term well-being to consider.

The kids ran out onto the deck howling and trying to hit each other with sticks. Craig went yet again to sort them out, his body-language full of repressed rage.

Tait and Jimmy exchanged rueful looks.

When he returned he had got negative again. The work of digging out by hand would be a total nightmare. He’d need to hire a bulldozer. The expense would be prohibitive. He wasn’t made of money. Bugger the driveway! Why should he bother?

The next bout of screaming came from the house and they saw a red flush rise in Craig’s face. It was hard to tell if it was more rage or misery. Telling Craig to take a breather and let him see to it, Jimmy hurried up the slope and into the house.

Craig leant on the gatepost, but not in a relaxed way. He leant like a stricken man who needed the support.
“Are you okay?” Tait asked. “You don’t look a hundred per cent.”

He made a slight noise like a groan and Tait felt alarmed. It could a heart attack.

“Answer me,” he said, moving to where he could see the leaning man’s face. “Are you ill?”

“No,” came the dull reply.

“We don’t need to call anyone?”

“No.”

“You don’t look the best.”

“I’m not.”

“Should we at least call Francesca? Have you got the number where she is?”

“Yeah, I know his fucking number!”

“Whose?”

“His!” he groaned with an intensity that alarmed Tait all over again. “Mister Brandon-fucking-Hagan! The bloke who spends his Saturday afternoons routing the bitch’s brains out!”

Then he seemed to be crying, silently, with big heaves of grief going through him.

He had stopped when Jimmy came back down. They didn’t talk any more about the driveway but went up and sat on the deck and had another coffee or two and talked normally about trivial matters. Jimmy had got the kids reasonably settled in the lounge room watching cartoons on TV.

Tait was waiting for a chance to let Jimmy know what Craig had said. But he himself was still trying to adjust to the stab of shock and pain. It hadn’t so much been the words. The stab had come when the mental picture formed.

At five-thirty Craig said he should start making a meal for the kids. He appeared to have returned to his normal self.

Jimmy said he had promised Lauren he’d be home by six, so they took their leave.

As soon as they were in the car Tait told him what had happened and wondered if they ought to have stayed as moral support.

But just then Jimmy was being the hard-bitten veteran psych-nurse who knows how truly little anyone can do about anyone else’s woes, other than to try not to make them any worse.

“Things are tough all over,” was all he said.
Nor did Narelle turn a hair when Tait told her about it later that night at the cabin. She was only surprised that Tait had been surprised.

“You didn’t know about her and Brandon?”

“No exactly,” Tait said, conscious of seeming an utter fool. “Not as such.”

She looked at him and asked with genuine puzzlement in her voice:

“What planet do you live on?”

* * * *

He was in the cafeteria at the Ridwell campus with two of his students.

He had his afternoon class to teach in half an hour or so and he also had to pop back to the CET office to see Priscilla, the lady in charge. There’d been a note in his pigeon-hole asking for a word with him. She’d be in the office a quarter of an hour before his class commenced.

Normally he’d have sat brooding over a note like that, imagining all the bad things it might mean. But Katie and Ben had shyly approached to ask about an assignment and he’d got talking to them and that had taken his mind off it.

They were both twenty and lived in the same caravan park. They came to class together and held hands under the table. Both were quiet but Ben had a speech impediment which discouraged him from speaking except when he had to. In the language of the Gentrified they were “trailer-park trash.” They were neat and clean but their clothes were tacky and Katie wore somewhat garish make-up and big plastic bangles on her wrists. Ben’s front teeth were gone and he always put his hand up in front of his mouth when he stammered out a comment. Katie had part-time work in a fish-and-chip shop and Ben was mostly unemployed but his ambition was to train as a greenkeeper.

Katie had been writing little stories ever since she was a child, but had never shown them to anyone. Until Ben came along there was no one she could show them to. He’d been into classic comics all his life, ones like Prince Valiant and The Phantom, and so had respect for the art of story-telling.

Katie had saved the hundred and twenty dollars for the Creative Writing course, and Ben had somehow scraped his money together as well. He was there partly for his own interest, but mostly because of Katie. Neither of them had happy memories of
school and he was worried that people in the class might give her a hard time and he wanted to be there to stand up for his girl. It was poignant enough to wring your heart, Tait thought: Prince Valiant with bad teeth and a stammer.

He had also been touched by Katie’s writing, and by the way she took in every word of his praise and advice, like a deprived flower suddenly getting the sun and rain it needed. She had especially loved being given a particular symbol to work with. Hers was star and Ben’s was tree and this led to Tait telling them about Tolkien and *The Lord of the Rings*, and about one scholar’s view that what he called “the myth of trees and stars” was central to the book. This set both Katie and Ben to reading it and afterwards they told Tait it had changed their lives. They had understood about the trees and stars and saw that it could be their own sustaining myth.

They were exactly the kind of people the CET had been created for.

The Trust always offered an eclectic range of courses. You could learn Yoga or the History of Steam Locomotion, Poultry Management or the Mysteries of the Pyramids. It just depended on who was available to teach and how many takers there were for the course. In general terms, though, there were two streams of activity and Tait had had them explained to him when he first began. There were “Interest” courses and “Catch-up” courses. The “Interest” courses could appear frivolous and were often taught by people who seemed on the fringe of ratbaggery, but they weren’t to be underestimated. A course on how to read Tarot Cards might seem a bit marginal, but for someone of limited means it could be the key to many years of interest and fulfillment. Ditto with bird-watching, say, or the Japanese art of paper-folding. The “Catch-up” courses related to the formal education process. They enabled high-school drop-outs to get their diploma and so forth. “Interest” courses could be taught by anyone with known practical expertise in that field, but “Catch-up” courses had to be in the hands of credentialed teachers.

Priscilla was in her office when Tait got there and he saw from her face that it was bad news for him. She gave him the gist as succinctly as she could.

Now that the Ridwell campus was fully on its feet, new arrangements were being brought in. Tim Niblett’s post would cease to exist at the end of the semester and there would be a new position of Undergraduate Director. The new person had already been appointed. She was a Senior Lecturer from the main Castleton campus. Denise, her name was. Did he know her? Tait said he didn’t think so.
None of this appeared to have any direct connection with the CET, but the next part did.

For the CET’s purposes, Priscilla went on, Creative Writing had always been seen as belonging in the “Interest” category, but now that it was gaining ground as a subject in universities, it was to be placed in the “Catch-up” category. That meant it had to be taught by someone academically qualified. And there was a double whammy. The university had ruled that people who did the CET Creative Writing course would be able to claim some points towards Mature Age entry to undergraduate studies. This meant that the university, in the person of the new Undergraduate Director, expected to have a say in who taught the CET’s course.

“I’m sorry,” Priscilla said, looking sadly across her desk at him. “You’ve done a wonderful job for us, but my hands are tied.”

“I understand,” Tait said.

“If only you had the academic paperware, to go with your literary expertise.”

“Yes.”

“We’ll, at least nothing will change until the end of the semester.”

“Yes, that’s good,” Tait said.

But the end of semester was only a month away.

“I’m not sure what else I can say,” Priscilla murmured, twirling a pencil in her fingers. “Perhaps you might want to have a word with Denise, to get her angle on the situation.”

“I don’t think so. Her hands must be as tied as yours. But thanks for the thought.”

He was about to go when Priscilla cried out.

“Ah, here’s the woman herself!”

She beckoned to someone through the glass partition.

“At least you can meet Denise,” she said.

The Drama Queen walked in and gave Tait a look of utter malignant triumph, then acted as though he wasn’t there.

He excused himself and hurried away to his class.

And of course the class felt different now. It was suddenly imbued with the poignancy of something coming to an end.

Katie talked about the myth of trees and stars while Ben nodded agreement. The other students appeared very struck by the whole concept. And Tait was glad to be
reminded of it. In a month he’d be without an income, and soon after that he’d be homeless. Right now he needed the myth of trees and stars pretty badly himself.

* * * *

He didn’t tell Narelle that his teaching work was about to end. She would urge him to leave the cabin and move up to the flat all the sooner. To mention it would put the whole issue out on the table again, and Tait needed to choose that moment himself, to try to ensure the least amount of misery all round.

She was settling in well at the Castleton campus. She spent most of each day in the library, reading the set texts and getting the background on the four topic areas of her Honours course. She’d found a cosy nook on the third floor right next to the relevant rows of shelves. It was beside a narrow window. Just outside the window and sometimes rustling against the glass were the topmost leaves of a tree and you could look down through the leaves and see the front steps and people coming and going.

She went to the Sports Union building most afternoons. They had a swimming pool and gymnasium and squash courts and a climbing-wall and other facilities. She’d been a terrific swimmer as a child and now felt the urge to get back into form. And at the pool she’d met two nice girls who played women’s soccer and had started socializing with them as well as kicking a ball around on the sports oval. She’d also made some contacts in the Student Union bar, especially an eccentric chap named Milo who was in both the Poetry Club and the Berserkers. The Berserkers were into Viking lore and they held a regular “Pillage the Village Night” where they drank mead while wearing plastic horns on their heads. Narelle found the Poetry Club types confrontational and didn’t fancy getting involved. But the Berserkers were polite and sweet.

The highlight, though, had been lunch at Rebecca Denby’s house near the campus. The retired Professor had wanted to meet the inaugural winner of her prize. It was just the two of them with a bowl of salad and they got on well, at least after the first few minutes. Rebecca Denby had an abrupt manner and a peculiar staccato way of speaking that was intimidating at first. But it was clear, Narelle said, that she was kindly towards anyone she felt had the makings of a scholar. She made Narelle promise to keep in touch with her, especially if she had any run-ins with the lecturers
or the system. The Professor appeared to have a low opinion of her former colleagues. “Don’t you sit still for any of their silly rot!” she’d admonished, wagging her finger over the salad bowl. “I never did!”

It was good to know that Narelle might have a useful ally against people like Sabina Sharpe, if ever she should need one. And it was good to know about the other new friends. It would make the break easier.

It was Saturday afternoon and they were sitting at the two adjoining desks in Narelle’s nook in the library. She was making the last few notes from a tome on “Structuralism and Feminist Literary Theory” and softly groaning with the awfulness of it. Tait was making notes from a book called *The Jacobite General*, about Lord George Murray, the man who might well have led the good side to victory in the Forty-Five if he’d been allowed a free hand.

Tait had checked the library catalogue and found a number of books about the Jacobites and wanted to look at them all before the end came. He knew he had to hasten the break-up with Narelle. He had to face it sooner rather than later. And once they had parted he would not come any more to the Castleton campus. He wouldn’t infringe her territory. He reckoned he would be penniless in about six weeks from now, so the parting had to occur within that time frame.

Tait had just made note of something Murray said at Culloden, a remark to Elcho in the last moments before the battle began. Murray commanded the right wing, the part of the army that would blaze with extreme heroism that day.

He had seen straight away that it was the wrong ground for Highlanders, but his objection was overruled. It was an ill-fated field in every way. Not only were they heavily outnumbered, but everyone from the Prince down was faint with exhaustion after the Night March, the aborted attempt to take the enemy camp by a surprise dawn attack. Their lines, too, had been poorly organized, with the left wing set too far back and on waterlogged ground that was difficult to advance over. This was fatal, for a Highland army depended on the impetus of a headlong charge of its whole line. But that wasn’t all. The McDonalds had been placed on the left of the line and were deeply upset, for ever since Bannockburn they had claimed the senior position on the right. Highlanders fought on *élan*, on heart and pride, and the great fighting spirit of Clan Donald had had the edge taken off it that day by what was felt to be an insult. And yet pointless in retrospect to deplore such touchiness. Had it not been for an
acute sense of honour the Cause would never have come into being, could never have sustained itself through nearly sixty years of exile and war, of endless heartbreak and disappointment. In the end it had to live or die by its own code.

And on top of everything else, the whole of the Prince’s army was standing under murderous cannon fire.

But when the moment came the Highlanders on the right would charge with incredible furious valour, and among them were the Stewarts of Appin with their little sept of the MacLews. They would run through walls of musket-fire, taking terrible losses, but would reach the enemy line and break it and then crowd through the gap in a ferocity of hand-to-hand fighting. And at that point, and for the next few indescribable minutes, it would look as if they might win the day. And Murray would be magnificent in the midst of it, in the midst of all that delirium of the brave, bloodied and gashed, with a broken sword, straining every nerve to make the Cause prevail against all calculation. And yet superbly cool and collected as well: when the battle was utterly lost he would get the remnants of his forces off the field in good order.

Murray would show the purest kind of courage, the kind that is without hope. Just before it began, Elcho asked him what he thought their prospects were.

“We are putting an end to a bad business,” he replied.

The words resonated in Tait’s mind. He too had to put an end to a bad business, and as bravely as he could manage.

Of course the bad business for Murray wasn’t the Cause itself. The struggle was sacred and would always be so. And even if it hadn’t been sacred in the beginning, it had been made sacred by so much valour and so much grief, had been consecrated by the Flame and the Dark. No, the bad business of it was in the sheer run of circumstance, the tangle of actual events. And Tait knew the same applied to the bond he’d had with Narelle. It was a good and lovely thing in itself, and so it would ever be. The bad business of it was just mundane and circumstantial, though no less tragic for that. It was the wrong ground. There was such a thing as the wrong ground in love as well as war.

Elcho too had been heroic that day, on that wrong ground. He and his hard-pressed horsemen had held off far superior numbers of enemy cavalry and had saved the whole army from being encircled.
“I’m nearly done here,” Narelle said, arranging her pages of notes in a folder. “How about you? Feel like getting a sandwich?”

He nodded distractedly, emotion still whirling in him.

“What are you dwelling on?”

“Tolkien’s myth of trees and stars,” he said. It had just come into his mind.

“Ah,” she sighed, “what a contrast to the crap I’ve been wading through.”

Narelle too had been captivated by the trees-and-stars idea when he’d first mentioned it a few months back. He was thinking of it now because he had just realized how it related to the whole matter of putting an end to a bad business.

The trees are the dark wood, the tangled forest, the thorny thicket. In among the trees our perspectives are shortened or cut-off altogether and we are oftentimes confused and confounded. Our paths go awry, our plans falter. But high above are the stars bright and fixed, symbols of sureness and direction and of beauty beyond this world’s power to damage. If the trees are the Wood of the World and dim with ill-fatedness, the stars are the Lamp of the Spirit and they gleam with the light of our true-fatedness. If the Wood is bewilderment and dismay, the Lamp is clarity and calm.

Of course trees have many positive connotations as well, especially in Tolkien. It was just that in this great myth or metaphor of his they serve to symbolize the element that so often thwarts us. Yet even then they still have a positive aspect, for it is the very tangle of the trees that makes a glimpse of starry sky so wondrous and so welcome. We seem to need a degree of dark confusion in order to know clarity when we see it. It was Milosz’s point again, about things always needing to have a shadow in order to have strength to live.

Or it could be expressed another way, as when Hermine says to the poor befuddled Steppenwolf: “Ah, Harry, we have to stumble through so much dirt and humbug before we reach home. And we have no guide but our homesickness.”

Hermine is evoking something very like the myth of trees and stars, with the stars being the homeward guides of our yearning.

“Whatever home you are sick for,” they seem to say, “we will lead you there in the end.”

Murray’s grim words about putting an end to a bad business meant an end of the dirt and humbug, an end of our stumblings in the Wood, the falling and grappling and tearing and vexation. But there is never an end to the Lamp that shines above. That
was how it was in *The Lord of the Rings*. Those on the good side are required to brave their way through so many mazes of peril and despair, and their hearts would fail them if it weren’t for the glimpse of what is high and pure and everlasting.

It was like Katie and Ben stuck all their lives in a trailer-park of poverty and relegation. Yet that wasn’t their true home. That was just the dirt and the humbug, just the dark encirclement. But at last they’d looked up and seen the guiding stars.

They left the library and went to the Union bar and bought a sandwich each and a big pot of tea. They sat out on the terrace, enjoying the feel of the sun and the breeze after the hours inside. Narelle sat at an angle to him and he could look at her face without her being especially aware of it. She had slipped her shoes off and was caressing his ankle with her toes as she concentrated on the food and drink. The touch was sending little tremors of pleasure through him. He stared at her throat and at the lovely little ripple it made when she swallowed. Here was a precious moment for the Memory Bank and he needed to note every detail vividly.

But then a stab went through him and he almost groaned aloud. He’d got an horrific flash of the melee at Culloden, of that little killing-field where Murray’s men began to be trapped after they had broken through on the right, after they had almost prevailed. The enemy was able to bring up reserves to close round the Highlanders and pour volley after volley into them. But the Highlanders had no reserves to bring up. They’d already given it everything they had. It could end only one way.

He put his hand in front of his face so that Narelle would not see his expression, and he hoped she would not want to talk for a little while because he didn’t know what his voice would sound like.

It was easy to prattle in your mind about putting an end to a bad business, but the actual doing of it was something else. The doing of it would rip you to shreds and you had to be a hero to face it. But that was the whole point about Murray and his men: they were heroes, the equal of any that were ever heard of. How ludicrous to imagine himself even in the same breath with them, to think he could make them his exemplars. But he could stop deluding himself if he wanted to. The option was right here, being freely offered. Instead of charging at death he could walk away from it and be alive and happy. He could stay with Narelle and go ahead with what they’d arranged and agreed on.
He gave his senses up to the feel of the sun and breeze and the pleasure of the touch of her toes. There was Death and there was Eros, and he could choose Eros. There was no “bad business” here to be ended. He saw that now. There was only the sweet business of life and love to be carried on.

How could he have been such a fool? He was like Harry Haller, the Steppenwolf, trying to summon the will to cut his own throat with a razor, when what he truly needed to do was find Hermine and learn to dance. Narelle was his Hermine. He’d found her years ago and yet the penny hadn’t dropped until now. It was pathetic.

They decided to go back to the flat for an afternoon snooze. They would get naked in bed together. Tait was suddenly filled with a fierce wish to make love. Making love now would be the pledge of his choice of Eros over Death. Narelle sensed his excitement and was pleased and slightly surprised. He had been trying to gradually curtail their sex-life lately, but without making it too obvious. He’d wanted to make it easier for them both when the break came.

She touched the front of his trousers and smiled at him.

“What’s brought this on?” she asked.

“You being in that body,” he smiled back, so relieved to have seen the light.

“Well, you can be in this body too,” she grinned.

“Is that a promise?”

“Yes, we’ll be in there together.”

“Just the two of us?”

“If anyone else shows up we’ll demand an explanation.”

“That’s only fair.”

“Let’s hurry.”

They followed the path through the trees, past the signs warning that the place was unsafe after dark, then crossed the busy road and began to go up the stairs to the flat.

He didn’t see exactly how it happened. She was a couple of steps ahead of him, fishing for the key in her bag, and all of a sudden she missed her footing and her legs went from underneath her and her face hit the banister when she tried to grab for it. She ended in a heap against his knees.

She was holding the right side of her face and taking deep breaths as if to control the pain and fright. Tait lifted her and walked her up into the flat, murmuring what comfort he could. He gently took the hand away and looked at the bruise that was
forming. She said there was a pain in her eye. He took a closer look. The bruise area was just below the eye and didn’t appear to connect to it. He fetched a mirror and she gingerly examined herself. The skin wasn’t broken and the eye showed nothing amiss and she began to recover her composure. She wanted to be held, though, so he put his arms around her and they gently rocked on their feet to create a little rhythm of comfort.

The pain of the bruise increased over the next couple of hours, but Narelle coped with that. What worried her was that she kept getting a throb in her right eye. They decided to have it checked by a doctor and went to the nearby Mall where they knew there was a surgery.

It was nearly closing time and the reception area was empty. A white-coated woman was doing something behind the front counter when they entered. She had red hair cropped very short. They went to the counter and the woman took no notice of them at first, then she looked up and saw the bruise and became very interested. Narelle started to say that she’d banged her face on a banister and was concerned about a pain in her eye, but the doctor took her by the elbow and said brusquely, “Come with me,” and began to lead her along a corridor. Tait started to follow, not quite sure if Narelle expected him to remain with her.

The doctor turned and gave him a cold look and snapped:

“You wait!”

He sat on a chair in the reception area. The walls were covered with dramatic posters about Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault and Child Abuse and other things. Tait stared at one poster in particular. It was black and had big red writing on it. It declared that EIGHTY-SIX PERCENT OF FAMILY VIOLENCE IS NEVER REPORTED! and it demanded that people BREAK THE VEIL OF SILENCE ABOUT THIS HIDDEN EPIDEMIC OF ABUSE!

He felt swept with nausea and with contempt. The Great Commissariat no longer bothered to make its agitprop even remotely plausible. Any mindless drivel now sufficed. As he had written in that poem “The Villains,” any old pathetic lie would do. Hundreds of people must gaze at this poster every week. How many of them ever think to ask how something can be “hidden” and “unreported” and “veiled in silence” and yet still be known to such a point of exactitude?
Learn from your betters! Learn from the all-knowing Regime, the all-wise Imperium! It isn’t eighty-five per cent of the Invisible Secret Horror that goes unreported, and it isn’t eighty-seven percent. They’ll have you know that it’s precisely eighty-SIX percent, right on the money, right on the nail. And if you become aware of an odour of fraudulence like the gagging stink of a dead elephant in the room, well, you’ll keep your fucking mouth shut if you know what’s good for you.

Tait slumped wearily. A society where shit like this could be paraded on doctors’ walls was a madhouse in which anything could now be done to people. It was like that poster on the front door of the Turrawong police station. It was proof that the enemies of the human race were now in absolute control. And how could it be otherwise? For two and a half centuries there’d been too few heroes who would stand and fight them to the death. The Regime’s triumph was assured when the Highlanders went down in that little killing-field on the right of the line.

He stared again at the black and red poster. It seemed to him that it began to flap on the wall like some huge carrion crow streaked with blood, like an obscene buzzard that had feasted in the aftermath of Culloden.

Narelle and the doctor came back, and Narelle looked unhappy.

The doctor gave Tait a hostile glare. She looked as if she meant to say something harsh to him, but instead she turned back to Narelle and said brusquely:

“Remember what I said.”

They went out and the doctor stood watching them through the glass door.

“What is it?” Tait asked Narelle worriedly as they walked on. “What did she say about your eye?”

“She thinks it’s alright. She thinks the throb is just referred pain from the bruised area.”

“That’s a relief.”

“She said to come back if it persists.”

“Yes, you should.”

“I’d go to some other doctor. She’s horrible.”

“What happened?”

“She kept trying to get me to say you’d hit me.” Narelle said angrily. “I told her you hadn’t. I told her that nobody had hit me. But it wasn’t what she wanted to hear. It was as if she knew better than I did what had happened, as if her version was more
legitimate than mine. Somebody had hit me, and if it wasn’t you it must be some other bloke. She kept telling me about Battered Woman Syndrome and how I didn’t have to put up with it. She said she could make a “Notification” to the authorities.”

Tait felt his heart shrivel. Yeah, that’d be right. The Intimacy Police would soon be knocking on the door.

“I told her not to do anything of the kind or I’d make a complaint about her. She saw in the end how pissed-off she’d made me.”

“She was Himmler demanding that you hand up your ‘favourite Jew’ to the Gestapo. No doubt she bullies her women patients like that all the time and gets away with it.”

“That’s what struck me. There she was, supposedly so concerned about my rights, and yet giving me no credit whatever as a person in my own right. She didn’t need to respect anything I said because I wasn’t her equal. It’s like the feminist version of Animal Farm, with the women overthrowing the wicked men, and then finding there’s a new slogan: ‘All women are equal, but some are more equal than others.’”

They didn’t feel much like eating but they went into an almost empty Chinese café and had some soup, just so they could sit in a quiet dim place for a while and calm down. There was gentle Chinese music playing. It sounded like wind-chimes. They held hands across the table. Narelle said her eye had stopped throbbing.

“You just needed to get calm.”

“No, it was getting angry that did the trick,” she said. “Getting seriously pissed-off can be good for you.”

“It concentrates your focus?”

“Yeah, like that.”

That night in bed Narelle recalled that they’d been on their way to make love when the mishap had occurred. They could take up where they left off, she whispered. He put his arms around her and cuddled her gently for a longish time. But now he didn’t want to have sex. The urge to side with Eros against Death had gone. He had seen that it wasn’t so simple a choice.

Narelle drifted off to sleep and Tait got up very carefully so as not to wake her. He went out on the little balcony and looked up, hoping to see some stars, but the sky was all dark rolling cloud. So he sat and thought about a passage in The Rebel where Camus reflects on the paradigm wars of the age, and gives names of his own to the
two opposing sides: “In the kingdom of humanity, people are bound by ties of affection: in the empire of objects, they are united by mutual accusation.”

* * * *

The sky of the Valley blazed with sunset and Tait was filling his eyes and spirit with the golden-red light. He felt strengthened by the grandeur of the scene, and peaceful in his mind.

This peace of mind had grown in the last hour or so as he’d sat in Astrid’s Meadow. He had reflected on certain matters and something had come clear to him, and then the full glory of the sunset arrived to cap it off.

There was something he’d known for years but which had never clicked into place. Now it had clicked and he could see where he stood in his life. And he could see his way with the novel too. It was like that one piece of a jigsaw puzzle that all of a sudden clarifies the big picture. You might have been aware of having that particular piece, but you didn’t see until now that it was the key to what you were trying to put together.

It was to do with the different kinds of Jacobites.

Tait loved and revered the Highlanders. They’d been the sword-arm of the Cause for generations and had suffered in proportion to their bravery and loyalty, which meant suffering beyond measure. But the Highlanders were pre-modern people. They were as tribal as the Sioux and Cheyenne and dwelt as much in their own immemorial realm of land and spirit. They still had intact what Richard Weaver would call their metaphysical dream of the world. By the time of the Forty-Five some of the leaders had become more gentrified, but by and large the Highland people were still integrated human beings. They still had the shelter of each other. They still had gemeinschaft, and that was what gave them their élan. Their Eden was bleak and demanding in many ways, but at least they hadn’t yet been cast out of it. They were not yet homeless and leaderless and demoralized.

Many lowland Scots were Jacobites too, and in the Forty-Five they came out in large numbers for the Prince, but for logistical reasons they couldn’t be brought to bear on the main events. And then the luck begun to evaporate and it was too late to save the Cause. Those lowlanders were more of the “modern” stamp, more worn down by
dislocating forces, and yet they still had some of the sustaining fabric of a close-knit society around them. Scotland was a smaller place than England and fitted more snugly round a person’s life.

It was the English Jacobites who suffered the full existential crisis of it all. They were individuals marooned in a time and place officially hostile to all that they valued. Even in Lancashire, that notorious nest of disaffection, the Cause’s adherents were always in a precarious way. The Regime had been too strong for too long and the old order was too broken, too attenuated. It was a hundred years since King Charles had been axed, and more than fifty years since King James had gone into exile. The kingdom of humanity had become the empire of objects. The world as honour-system had become the world as crime-scene. Even if an English Jacobite still had the old fire in his belly he had to guard his tongue and watch his demeanour. That was a time when you could easily be hanged for poaching a rabbit, let alone for Treason. Even influential figures had little scope to act. A local magnate was nothing like a Highland chief. He had no devoted following of warrior kinsmen to spring to his call. He had no remote glens for sanctuary. What was he to do? Get up one morning and invite his servants and tenants to commit suicide by following him into rebellion against the governme
Tait now understood that different kinds of Jacobites had experienced the Forty-Five in very different ways. For Robert Connell it wasn’t a tribal surge of collective energy and élan, followed by collective mourning. His Forty-Five was so much lonelier and more personal. Unlike the clansmen, he was Damaged Goods and must have known that he was. Like Francis Townley, the one local gentlemen to step forward at Preston, he had to weigh the issues of fear and fate and sacrifice in the lonely silence of his own lacerated heart.

Tait now saw that the true poignancy of the Forty Five in England was not the decision to turn back at Derby. It was the secret anguish of so many decent people...
who wished the Cause well but either could not find the nerve or could not find an opportunity. The great irony was that the very speed and brilliance of the Prince’s march into England must have worked against him. It gave his supporters too little time to think and organize, to collect themselves and bolster each other to put their best foot forward. As in the myth of trees and stars, so many of them must have felt encircled in the dark Wood and unable to see the guiding clarity above.

And now Tait had remembered something else from The Lord of the Rings. There was the following exchange:

“What doom do you bring out of the North?”

“The doom of choice.” said Aragorn.

Yes, it was the doom of choice, in at least two senses. Everyone was doomed to make a choice, in one form or another, and every choice carried its own kind of doom. And that doom of choice came on the English Jacobites too quickly, and gave them too little time to search the innermost heart for those last reserves of courage and honour that were surely still there.

Of the four hundred or so who did step forward, most were recruited in Manchester. They were grouped into a makeshift unit called the Manchester Regiment, of which Francis Townley was made colonel. This unit was left to hold the fort at Carlisle when the rest of the Prince’s army withdrew back into Scotland, intending to return with fresh forces. Holding Carlisle was a desperate mission because the Regime could bring up heavy cannon and pulverize the walls. The outcome was that the Manchester Regiment was captured, its officers were put to death and its rank and file were sent in chains to the American plantations.

Robert Connell was almost certainly in the Manchester Regiment. If he volunteered in Preston on November 27, and was taken prisoner at Carlisle on December 30, he would have been out in arms against the Regime for a little over one month. The novel would cover that month or so and Tait had already given it a working title in his mind: Paths of Glory. It appeared to him that the story of those English volunteers was somehow all the greater for being so brief and lonely and so seemingly beside the point. The physical war of sword and sinew was mostly waged by the gallant Scots, and the martial honours were theirs forever, but the inner war of soul and conscience was fought most valiantly by those few Englishmen who stood up to be counted.
The sun had gone down and the Valley was in darkness. Tait left Astrid’s Meadow and headed back into town on the motorbike. Thoughts drifted through his mind as he went along. They were mostly about the hunger for love, the neediness of the human creature, and the various permutations of it in even the little circle of people he had known in these years — Kelvin and Rory, Francesca and Brandon, Marigold and Megan, Bro and Bambi, Lance Lassiter and his bevy of tearful ex-Muses, himself and Narelle. And that was only a partial list. But in another part of his mind he was waiting for something. He was in that state of awareness when all your faculties are poised and ready for a poem to show itself. You know by instinct that its there and that if you can just get a fleeting glimpse you’ll have it for sure.

Passing a side street at the edge of the town, he saw a figure in some kind of long garment like a greatcoat. In the mere moment it took him to pass by, Tait saw the figure turn a corner and disappear with a little flick of the coat’s hem. That was all. It was so vague and brief that it could have been a trick of the light, but Tait knew he had what he’d been waiting for.

He just needed to do the work on it.

There was a letter in the box at the cabin. He took it out and held it in front of the bike’s headlight. It was from the publisher to whom he’d sent his new collection of poems. He opened the envelope quickly and read the brief letter in the headlight beam.

They’d accepted The Blackbird’s Tune for publication.

He let out a deep sigh of satisfaction and gratitude, but did not have time to savour the moment. Ideas about the long-coated figure were starting to flow in his mind and he needed to get inside to his work table.

He worked on the poem for much of that night and most of the next day. The next evening he went in to Turrawong Plaza to distract himself and give his thoughts a rest. He bumped into Kelvin who was feeling happy because Rory was being sweet to him that week. They chatted about the Players. Kelvin said that Commissar Mona was raising the matter of the Mission Statement again, and that she would no doubt force it through now that she was president. But Kelvin was too happily in love to care just then, and Tait too had other things to dwell on.

He worked on the poem again that night and the next day and it had nearly come right.
It would be best, he thought, if he could finish it before the weekend. He would go to see Narelle on the Saturday and somehow find the nerve to set her free of him. He would put an end to a bad business. He might be alright afterwards. He hoped he would be. But he couldn’t be sure. He might in fact be a hopeless mess and not be able to get his focus back on the poem. And in any case he would soon be homeless and destitute and that might be the end of his writing altogether. He was trying to avert his mind from that, though, in order to keep his spirits up in the interim.

Actually he was pretty sure that Narelle was a step ahead of him. She didn’t come down in the last shower of rain. She was probably keen to have the charade over and done so she could get on with finding a real partner, someone her own age, someone with a future. She was just being very kind and patient, letting him make the break in his own time.

He’d play it by ear when he saw her, but in the meantime he tried to rehearse the gist of what he might say. The thing to keep clear in his mind was Mike Kieslowski’s point, the one partly prompted by Sam Foster, the one about “sacred renunciation” and being ready to “burn what you love” to keep it from the enemy. It applied to Anzac Day and to the war memorials and increasingly to the whole of life. The most basic human relation-ships were now being invaded and occupied by the Anarcho-Tyranny. There was nothing for it but a scorched-earth policy. Leave the commissars in possession of a wasteland.

Of course most people wouldn’t agree. Most would cling to their relationships, hoping they’ll be lucky, hoping the law of averages will be on their side and that the Intimacy Police will never knock on their door, or hoping at least that the knock won’t be fatal if it does come. That outlook was perfectly understandable. An entire population can’t take to the hills and join the Resistance. Most people had to make Vichy-style accommodations and hope for the moral fibre not to betray anyone except themselves.

And some people would be lucky. They’d get a fortunate spin from the law of averages and would manage to have a halfway decent life. He hoped with all his heart it would be like that for Narelle in the future.

But those accommodations weren’t for him. Not when an ancestor of his had stood up in broad daylight in the town of Preston in the famous year of 1745 and said to the whole power and might and malice of Modernity: _Fuck you!_
The poem was finished by Friday afternoon.

He typed it on a clean sheet of paper and pinned it to the Blue Board and stood staring at the pattern on the page. The whole clutter of thought and emotion could now be tidied away like a pile of splinters from around a completed carving. He could look at the clean lines for what they were. He could start to read them coolly and see what they said, as distinct from what he’d been struggling to say.

THE JACOBITE

Eternally a threadbare Jacobite,
   He passes like a shadow through the town,
Accustomed to the exile of the night
   And loyal to some wholly other crown.

Seeing the place, how cosily it lies,
   He fleetingly imagines he could stop,
Adopt another name, a slight disguise,
   Marry and settle there and run a shop.

But instantly there comes a bitter pride
   That draws him on again without a pause.
To live would seem contemptible beside
   The tragic beauty of a beaten cause.

The folly was so long persisted in,
   And its defeat was so perversely brave,
He scorns the lesser battle he could win,
   Disdains the little realm that he could save.

This is the only faith he has to keep
   As he continues on his destined way,
No longer seeking anything but sleep
With sword and pistol by him in the hay.

And he will dream a golden day of June,
While all about the Cause unruined goes,
Freshly arisen in a blackbird’s tune,
Forever undiminished in a rose.

He saw that it was mostly about the English Jacobite experience, the loneliness of loyalty, the pain of adherence to a cause whose worldly prospects are gone with the wind. It was about being Damaged Goods, and knowing that you are, and clinging all the more stubbornly to those forms of wholeness that remain to you, perverse as they may seem to others.

The poem wasn’t specifically about Robert Connell, but Tait now saw that the novel had to end with his ancestor somehow escaping capture at Carlisle and disappearing forever. He had to become an eternal wandering shadow in the mind. “He was never heard of again,” Auntie Annie had said. But that didn’t mean he wasn’t there.

He could’ve been the fleeting figure in the long coat in Turrawong town, the figure that might’ve been no more than a trick of the light. He might’ve been heading out to the Valley to find a haystack to sleep in, with the stars glinting above. He could have been heading for Astrid’s Meadow, not knowing what it was but being mysteriously drawn to a spot where the Honeysuckle and other symbols had been invoked, a place that had been consecrated in the name of the QO and by the everlasting authority of King Charles the Martyr.

That afternoon there was a letter from Canopy Press. It said that Mayhem Films had been in touch again, out of the blue. They were eager to secure the film rights to Ground Leave and were offering eight thousand dollars for an option on it.

So he would not be destitute and homeless after all, at least not for the time being. And his new collection of poems was to be published. And he had the novel to devote himself to.

He must’ve done something right, he reflected, to have brought these boons on himself. Or maybe they were the rewards for what he was about to do. Fate knew he was serious and would not back out. Tomorrow he would free Narelle, would cut the albatross from around her neck, would put an end to a bad business.
But right now all he could think of was a long session with the wine and the earphones. He wanted to hear the raging of the storm on the heather. He wanted to hear the rolling thunder of the pipes and drums beating out “The White Cockade,” the way it must have sounded when it swept the Wild Geese to victory at Fontenoy on the eve of the Forty-Five.

And after that he would want nothing but to sleep, with sword and pistol by him in the hay.

END OF PART FOUR
Part Five

GHOST DANCE

Chapter Twenty-Five

Three years had passed.

Tait was sitting at the little table in his kitchen, sipping coffee and staring through the window at the dim light and drizzling rain. The wintry cold made him shiver a little and he thought he should put his cardigan on but he could not be bothered getting up to find it. It was about five-thirty in the morning and he felt bleary-eyed and unwell. The coffee wasn’t as strong as it should have been because the jar was nearly empty and he’d had to decide whether to make one really strong cup or two or three weaker ones. He had stood next to the boiling jug, holding the coffee jar and trying to get the alternatives clear in his mind. Finally he’d opted to have two or three weaker cups so as to help pass the time.

Part of the reason he’d found it hard to focus was because he was waiting for the dog to bark again. The dog next door had been the bane of his life for over two years now. It had woken him this morning as usual with a mad burst of high-pitched barking at around five o’clock. It hadn’t made any sound since then, but Tait knew that when the light increased and people began walking about the barking would take up in earnest and continue more or less non-stop through the day. The stress never let up, for even if the creature wasn’t barking right then, you were waiting for it, your nerves taut, your stomach churning and your heart ready to jump into your mouth.

The vacant block next door had been sold and cleared and a large house had been built. The noise and disturbance of that work had gone on for what seemed like forever. Then a couple with a young son had moved in and there had been relative peace for a couple of months. Tait had exchanged the occasional nod or word of greeting with the husband or the wife and they had seemed alright. But then they decided to get a dog and that was when Tait gained his first inkling that they were not alright. The pup they acquired was a pure kelpie, a working breed, a lean brown bundle of nervous energy that needed to be kept busy, that needed to be out all day herding sheep. But they wanted it to sit in a yard all its life, to exist for no purpose
other than to be an occasional toy for their kid. But the brat lost interest as soon as the cute puppy stopped being cute and a puppy and Tait had never seen it paid a moment of real attention after that. It had never once been taken for a walk, had never once left the yard. The barking had started slowly and grew more shrill and unremitting as the dog grew more neurotic.

For a while he clung to the hope that either the dog would settle down or that the owners would get rid of it, but then grew an awful certainty that neither of those things was ever going to happen. When sheer stoicism could bear no more he decided he had to stand up for himself.

His first move had been to write a letter to the dog’s owners. He’d laboured over it for three weeks, as if it were a poem, putting it in the form of a list of eight separate points for their consideration, and trying to convey the exact balance of calmness and urgency. He placed the letter in their box one night after dark and waited on tenterhooks. A week later came a note of reply. It was from the wife and began in a polite but slightly baffled tone. They were frankly a little surprised at his complaint, she said, since their dog could not be considered a nuisance to anyone, especially since it was a gentle and affectionate creature and a cherished family pet. She then explained in what circumstances the dog might perhaps occasionally utter a moderate bark or two — such as in its capacity as a watchdog when a stranger entered their front yard. The tone there was of helpfulness, as though she was addressing someone who clearly hadn’t been fully acquainted with the facts but who was now being given the information that would put all his concerns to rest.

Of the weight and heartfelt seriousness of his appeal to them there was not an iota of acknowledgement. It was a textbook example of what in Jimmy’s Sale’s work-jargon was called “discounting.”

His next move was to approach the husband in person. Again he spent weeks distracted from his proper work, endlessly rehearsing what he would say, wanting to present just the right tone and manner. He called out to the man one evening and they stood at the fence and Tait talked earnestly to him for ten minutes, Or at least as earnestly as he could with the dog’s barking drowning out half of what he was saying. He felt that if he just could put the matter with enough clarity the bloke could not fail to understand. So he outlined it again, point by point, as he had done in his letter. He explained that the dog was quite the wrong breed for a yard dog and was being made
to suffer. He explained that the walls of the cabin were thin and that every bark came through loud and clear. He explained that he had done his best to live with the problem by keeping his ears stuffed with cotton-wool and wearing earphones over them. He explained that he worked at home during the day and the noise interfered with his work and thus his livelihood. He explained that he was being deprived of sleep and his health was affected. He explained that a person is legally entitled to have what the law calls the “quiet enjoyment” of their premises. He explained that he himself took care not to inflict noise on others and should be able to expect equal consideration. And finally he tried to convey the whole principle of the thing by framing a scenario in which he himself had a faulty car-alarm that kept going off at all hours.

“Just imagine how quickly you’d get fed-up with that and request that I alleviate the nuisance,” he said.

“Yeah,” the bloke agreed pleasantly, as though they’d been making small-talk about the weather, “that’d be a pain in the posterior, for sure.”

Tait saw that nothing he said had registered. He might as well be talking to the fence-post.

This was doubly horrible because it confirmed what he’d known at the back of his mind from the start: that there was something in this whole situation even worse than the actual noise of the dog. It was the utter blank mindlessness of the human beings, the closed loop of their incomprehension. If these were people you could talk to about the problem there wouldn’t be a problem in the first place. Tait remembered that sinister vision he had got a few times in the wee small hours, back years ago when next door had still been a vacant lot. That vision of alien and vaguely unspeakable figures sitting there in the long grass. It struck him now that it had been a premonition.

A few weeks later he tried one more time to talk to the man, but this time the reaction was brusque. It was clear the man had now heard about his past on the local grapevine.

“What’s the matter with you?” he demanded in a tone that was part sour hostility and part smirking amusement. “Haven’t you taken your Mad Pills today?”

And finally there was an occasion when Tait even felt desperate enough to phone the Shire Council, to ask what remedy might be available under the local regulations. But
nobody appeared to know whose province a noisy dog fell into and he was passed from one ill-mannered clerk to another. The fourth and final one demanded in a voice of shrill outrage to know who had informed him that she was the Dog-Catcher. He replied that no one had told him anything of the kind, only that she might be able to answer his query. He said he thought the chap’s name had been Brett.

“Well you can tell Brett from me that he’s a smart-arsed prick!” she yelled and slammed the phone down.

He finished the first weak cup of coffee and made himself another and stood at the open door looking out through the flyscreen wire. He was assessing the drizzle, trying to judge how soaked he would get if he set out for Turrawong on the bike now. He knew he had to go, though, regardless of the rain. He had to go before the dog began in earnest. Another burst or two of barking and his mental equilibrium would be destroyed for the entire day. He had to get to his refuge at the Green Room where there was peace and quiet, where he could do his work, and where he could snooze on the sofa and so make up for the lack of proper sleep at the cabin. He had a key to the Green Room now and could let himself in during the daytime when it was deserted.

He put some necessary items into his satchel, the main one at the moment being his copy of Sam Foster’s new book, *The Wreck of the West*. He was to do a review of it for Fergus Gunn at *Compact* and was still reading through, underlining passages, making notes. He needed to keep a steady focus on the task, otherwise he might let Fergus down, and let Sam Foster down. His review was one of several being done by different people, including Mike Kieslowski. They would be run together in a special issue of *Compact* later in the year. Fergus Gunn felt *The Wreck of the West* was the most important new book in years and deserved close attention, especially since it was bound to be ignored or ridiculed by most other journals. He had asked each of the reviewers to focus on some particular angle.

One brave soul was covering the demographic crisis that Sam Foster had laid out in chilling detail, the collapse of white birthrates to far below replacement levels. This was occurring all over the world and was a death-warrant for the entire European strand of the human race. But of course you weren’t supposed to talk about it, or to question the trend in any way. White populations were now scheduled for history’s rubbish-bin. They were painted by the Great Commissariat as *evil by definition* and it was criminally “racist” to imagine that their extinction could be anything other than a
universal boon. They were now required to believe in the benefits of their own
destruction. As Sam Foster noted, this had been the conscious program of the modern
world, the final aim of its engineers of the soul — to bring human beings to such a
point of submission and bewilderment that they’d actually thank you for liquidating
them. It was all part and parcel of what he called “a kind of public conspiracy –
entirely unprecedented in the annals of history – whose end is the total deconstruction
of a civilization by the elite responsible for its welfare and survival.”

Mike was covering the book’s broad political philosophy, while Tait had been asked
to focus on the issues of law and order and crime and punishment, matters that were
central to the way the Anarcho-Tyranny worked.

So, he would go the Green Room, have a strong coffee to get his brain activated,
read ten or twelve pages of the Foster book and make notes, then flop on the sofa for a
catch-up sleep.

After that there was the other thing he had to do that day. There was the Valley
thing. But he wouldn’t think about right now. He’d forget about that until after the
snooze. By then he’d be feeling more up to it.

With his satchel slung behind him and a plastic raincoat on over it, he closed the
cabin door with infinite care, and then shut the flyscreen door, holding it so it
wouldn’t squeak on its hinges. He had to be totally quiet. If he caught the dog’s
attention there would be a frenzy of barking. The thought induced a whole new flash
of rage and misery. After more than two years the animal still barked frantically at the
next-door neighbour! That fact in itself ought to convey something to its brain-dead
fucking owners! But nothing could get through their fatuous vacancy. After all, they
had ears on their heads, and if the barking itself didn’t bother them, why should any
other aspect of the matter?

He stayed motionless outside the door for a minute, trying to calm his mind.
The tricky part would be unlocking the shed door and bringing the bike out. If he
could do that quietly enough he’d be okay. He would then walk the bike carefully
down the driveway, hoping the dog wouldn’t spot him, and then jump on and
freewheel down the hill and only start the motor when he was well out of sight.

Rain was trickling down his back as he unlocked the shed door with infinite
slowness. He began to bring the bike out, but caught his fingers between the
handlebar and side of the laundry-basin. He agonized in silence, breathing on the
fingers to warm them and ease the pain. He finally got the bike outside and wheeled it quickly down the drive, expecting the barking to start any moment.

He freewheeled to the bottom of the hill and started the engine and set off. There was another dog that lived near the bottom of the hill and that sometimes rushed out of its yard to menace him, but he was so relieved at having got away from the cabin cleanly that he almost didn’t care. He reflected on that as he rode along. It showed how one misery can drive out another.

The door of the newsagency was just being opened. Errol wasn’t there any more. He’d sold up and bought another business in a beautiful country town down south in the mountains, a town known for its carpets of alpine flowers in the spring and its people of upright pioneer stock. As he said to Tait before he left, rolling his eyes and waving his hands in that exasperated manner: “I know I’m being ridiculously fussy in this day and age, but I prefer to be among people who don’t walk with their knuckles dragging on the ground!”

Tait envied his escape.

As always, the first thing he did on entering the Green Room was to make sure that Mona’s Mission Statement was turned to the wall. That spiel of hectoring drivel had been printed and framed and hung up in a commanding position and it was only when it was no longer visible that Tait could begin to relax. Whenever he turned it to the wall he whispered a little formula to cleanse the room of its pollution.

“The QO cancels thee.”

He got the urn boiling and made a lovely strong coffee and set himself up to do some reading and note-taking. He had a desk-lamp that he’d bought for almost nothing at the op-shop and which he kept hidden in a costume cupboard. With the lamp set up on a small table in the corner he had a proper little workspace with a good light to see by.

When he’d gone through twelve more pages of the Foster book he let his mind slacken and lay on the sofa and drifted to sleep.

It was nearly ten o’clock when he woke and made himself another strong coffee. He thought about the Valley thing and what he had to do.

He had promised Francesca on the phone the previous day that he’d take some supplies out to her and the kids. They needed milk and bread in particular.
They’d been flooded-in for four days and the water would not be subsiding any time soon. The rain was no longer the torrential downpour of a week ago, but the drizzle was relentless.

Locking the Green Room door behind him, he trudged through the drizzle and up the hill to the Plaza. Passing the Council Chambers he thought again how menacing the building looked and how it was only Megan Marchant’s presence there that gave it a hint of human decency. But Megan had been worn down so much by ill-health. Her second mastectomy, a year ago, had taken its toll.

Marigold was still in charge of the Library across the way but was due to take retirement soon. Everyone knew she was hitting the bottle pretty hard nowadays. It had begun to weaken her position as treasurer of the Players, which of course played into Mona’s hands.

Tait went into the Plaza and passed the newsagency where Narelle had worked. The thought of her always gave him a stab of regret, even though he knew it had been for the best. He pushed the feeling away by looking at the news posters outside the shop. As usual they were shouting something about Beth Hendon. Hardly a day went by without a new screech of hysteria. Beth Hendon was the media’s great hate object. You’d imagine she had horns and a tail and eyes that glowed red as coals.

As he headed towards the supermarket entrance he glanced across at Kelvin’s old record shop. Someone else owned it now, for Kelvin had sold it and bought a plant-nursery up near Melrose. This was to please Rory who was very into plants, or said he was. Rory had seemed okay for a while but then went back to his old game of going after anything in trousers. Tait didn’t see much of them now, but he knew Kelvin was mostly miserable in between the brief interludes of rapture when Rory was being faithful and kind.

In the supermarket he carefully counted his money. He had enough to buy six litres of milk and two loaves of bread for Francesca. That wouldn’t stretch very far but it was the best he could do. She always said she would pay him back for these little expenditures but she seldom did. They added up and he had learned to be careful about what he spent on her behalf. He reproached himself for this, feeling that it showed meanness or lack of love. But he just didn’t have the funds. After the milk and bread he would not even have enough to spare to buy himself a new jar of coffee. But that was okay. He would purloin some from the Players.
Back at the Green Room he fished out an old canvas knapsack and put the milk and bread into it, with the bread on top so it wouldn’t get too crushed. Then he put on what he thought of as his Flood Suit — an old pair of sandals and a pair of shorts and a t-shirt. He put the plastic raincoat back on over them. He squeezed his proper shoes and clothes into a tight bundle which he forced into his satchel, then shoved a towel in on top. The satchel bulged and would barely fasten, but at least the things would stay more or less dry inside it. When he was set to go he put his desk-lamp away and turned the Mission Statement face-out on the wall again, trying not to look at it.

He headed out on the Valley road until he came to the first water that was too deep to take the motorbike through. He felt quite chilled already from the wintry air and having so few clothes on.

He left the bike near a gateway, hoping that it would not appear too unattended. He fitted the chain and padlock, but tried to make them unobtrusive so that it might look as if the owner had just popped into the nearby house for five minutes and would be back any moment.

The water was only knee deep but fairly wide and he waded carefully through, testing each step a little in case he put his foot into a pot-hole. He also kept a sharp eye on the surface in case any creepy-crawlies came floating along. You never knew what might be loose in floodwater, even floodwater that had become still like this, with only the ruffling of the breeze across it.

With the first water behind him he started walking in a steady rhythm, partly to squelch the moisture out of his sandals and partly because he felt weighed-down by the satchel and the knapsack and knew he would need to get a steady rhythm going in order to cover the distance. The drizzle had now stopped and there were a few patches of blue sky. The breeze ruffled through the long grass at the roadside. The irritation of being wet and clammy began to wear off and he started to enjoy the beauty of the scene and the rhythm of his body.

He wondered, as he always did, if this was anything like the way it was for the Prince’s men. Of course they’d had far more bitter conditions, but perhaps the rhythm of the march was a bit the same, and the general feel of being cold and wet but intensely focused.

The next stretch of water was waist-deep and Tait’s shorts flapped wetly as he waded out on the other side. Again he set himself in the rhythm, remembering that the
Prince’s army was renowned for the speed of its movement and mostly ran rings around the heavy-footed forces of the Regime.

The next two flooded stretches were chest-deep and he had to hold the satchel and the knapsack up on his shoulders as he felt his way through, moving his feet with great care. Having the water round your chest made you aware how cold it really was. Then when you came out into the sharp breeze you got another rush of chill through you.

But Tait felt happy, happier than he had for a long time. It was because he felt close in spirit to his heroes. He could almost feel their ghostly presence around him, feel his own rhythmic strides chiming with theirs. Robert Connell might be the man just ahead of him, one of the English volunteers who were determined to hold their end up by matching the pace of the Highlanders.

A dark-coloured bird flew in a low arc across the road and Tait raised his hand in greeting and salute. It was, he felt, the symbolic Blackbird, an emblem of the Cause flashing by in a gesture of encouragement. He quickened his pace a little more and soon came to Honeysuckle Hill.

There was one more body of water to get through and it was the deepest. Last time it had come up to his throat and it might be even deeper now. Tait’s mood had changed. The happiness had faded and he had begun to brood on the prospect of that final stretch of water and then reaching Francesca’s place not too far beyond. Francesca was the love of his life. No-one else would ever mean as much to him. And yet a lot of the time he didn’t like being around her, especially not out at the house. Not these days when she was often a kind of dark spirit, a ball of anger and sarcasm.

It was nearly three years ago that Craig packed his bags and walked out over Brandon Hagen. And then Brandon, forced to make a decision, had opted to stay with his own wife and kids.

Tait had meant to go out to the Valley to ask if there was anything he could do. But somehow he kept putting it off and putting it off. He was trying to work on his novel, and trying to cope with the pain he’d been left with after the parting from Narelle. At times it came as a sickening wave of regret, at other times it was a dull ache of bereavement. For days on end he hardly left the cabin. When he wasn’t at his work-table he was mostly seeking release in the cheap wine and the records and the earphones. He wasn’t doing anything with the Players and felt out of practice at being
social, or even properly human. And in any case he didn’t think Francesca would especially need him. There were lots of people who’d rally round her. That went without saying.

Of course her best pal Gillian wasn’t there anymore. Gillian and Ian had split up and sold up and were gone from the area. But there were lots of others who’d be supportive.

When he did finally call out to see her he was shocked. She was gaunt and dull-eyed and listless and hardly spoke, and when she did speak it was with a sharp flippancy that was devoid of humour. The house was in a filthy state and the property overgrown with long grass. The kids were getting basic food and care and were made presentable for school each day, but otherwise they shifted pretty much for themselves. Jesse was old enough now to keep the other kids in some degree of order while their mother drifted distractedly about the house.

Tait told Jimmy Sale about it that evening and the two of them went out to the Valley the next afternoon. Jimmy reckoned that Francesca showed all the signs of having been clinically depressed for weeks, and that she needed “support,” meaning medication. Nowadays Jimmy spoke words like “support” in inverted commas, to indicate they were part of the system’s drivel-talk, but were nonetheless the terms one was obliged to use.

It turned out that Francesca was already taking anti-depressant pills that Bambi was giving her. Bambi had a prescription for them and was the only person who’d been calling in, the only one who’d known how bad things were. Jimmy knew the pills and said they were more or less the correct ones and that it was a stroke of luck that Bambi could provide them on the sly. If Francesca had to go to a doctor in such a depressed condition there was no telling what might ensue. The doctor might make a “notification” and the local hyenas would get the blood-scent of a family in trouble and come ravening for the kill.

The depression would run its course, Jimmy said, and with luck the hyenas might be kept out of it. Francesca’s main need was just for one or two caring friends to pop in as often as possible, to help in practical ways, and to draw her out of herself with ordinary talk and contact. So Tait had set himself to be the Faithful Knight. He rode out there every afternoon to do chores and to encourage her to chat over cups of tea. And Bambi called in every few days as well, and Kelvin turned up now and then to
bring what cheer he could. And so Francesca gradually became less gaunt and
distracted and more of her old self.

But the sarcastic moods and the flippancy remained and grew more savage.

It could stop you in your tracks at times. It was especially unbridled when she was at
home and didn’t have to keep up a social pretence, so Tait tended to get the brunt of it
when he called in. There were times when he felt almost flattered that she spoke so
coldly in his presence. It meant he was so much her intimate that she didn’t put up
any screen of false politeness. But at other times it cut him deeply.

The whole problem of their relationship was summed up in the awkwardness of the
Hugs.

During the intense period of being the Faithful Knight, Tait came around three
o’clock each afternoon and left around five-thirty when she was making dinner for the
kids. She would walk out to the deck with him and most times would give him a
quick parting hug. Sometimes she did it with a frown on her face, as if aware that she
hadn’t been as civil as she ought to have been and was making amends, but still
without much grace. As she did so he would screw his courage up and put his arms
right around her and give her a quick squeeze in return, then let go. It began to be
their parting routine.

Those hugs were important to him, even when they were so tinged with ill-grace,
and he began not only to look forward to them but to crave them. Having her in his
arms for even those few moments felt so nice that he began trying to make it last a
fraction longer. That was okay when she was in her better moods, but when she was
 cranky she seemed to resent it and would mutter “Bye then,” and pull out of the
embrace with a blank look on her face.

His yearning to hold her clashed with his fear of provoking the cold response.

Since then every visit had become an emotional strain for him because he kept
thinking about the Hug and anticipating it, wondering if it would be the slightly more
extended moment of bliss or the abrupt little gesture coldly terminated. He wished he
could talk to her about the whole thing. He wished he could ask her straight-out for
longer Hugs, for Hugs that lasted a whole minute, or two minutes even. Two minutes
of being held and caressed wouldn’t kill her, he thought angrily. It wasn’t that much
to ask in return for all the chores he did, all the lawn-mowing, all the disposal of
garbage, all the scouring the hillside for dead timber to chop for firewood, all the piles of dirty dishes he washed up.

Then again, he knew he didn’t deserve consideration after leaving her alone in distress all those weeks. Of course he hadn’t known how bad a time she was having, but that was no excuse.

The thing was, he knew she’d agree to longer Hugs if he insisted, if he laid it on the line and said: “This is what I need from you.” Even in her moods of cold sarcasm she was still Francesca. He was even pretty sure she’d go to bed with him if he asked her. And it wouldn’t only be for his sake. She had needs too. She’d spoken about it once or twice in passing. She’d said how it much it gnaws at a person when they’ve had a partner and a sex-life and then they don’t have them anymore.

“We all have our raging hormones to cope with,’ she’d said. “You must find it difficult without Narelle.”

She’d given him a searching look at that moment and he had glanced away awkwardly because he knew she was challenging him to express exactly what he felt and what he wanted. The challenge had come at the wrong moment and had panicked him. He saw her searching look change to a brief sarcastic grimace, as if to say: “Ah yes, Mister Broken Safety Valve, as always.”

But he knew what the right moment would be. If they could stand on the deck in the muted light of evening and just quietly hug for a couple of minutes, if he could have his face in her hair and feel her breathing and the pressure of her breasts against him, he would begin to melt into her. He would whisper that she was the only love of his life and could they please oh please go to bed.

He came to the final floodwater just past Honeysuckle Hill. He calculated from the marker-posts that it was still about neck-deep in the middle. There were clumps of debris floating on the surface, sticks and bits of vegetation. Tait hated that. It made him worry about snakes. His constant fear when wading through deep floodwater was that a snake could swim right up to him and bite him on the face. A lot of snakes got washed out of their holes when the floods came and were loitering about in a bad mood.

He began to worry even more as he waded in. He realized how utterly frozen his body felt. The vigour of the walking had not been enough to offset the deepening inner chill. He remembered that he was in his forties now and a bit long in the tooth.
for this kind of caper. The water was up to his waist and he stopped and carefully hoisted the knapsack onto his right shoulder and then the satchel on to his left. His right arm began to tremble at once from the strain of supporting the knapsack with the cartons of milk inside it. He figured he should hurry before his arm gave out. But he was afraid to go too fast in case he lost his footing. As the water reached shoulder level he lifted the knapsack and the satchel and held them clear. The strain on his right arm was becoming acute and he could feel the arm starting to cramp. At the halfway point the water was lapping his chin. He was desperate to make haste but if he moved too fast he would create a wash that would bring the water up into his face. Then he saw a mass of floating sticks and vegetation inching towards him, set in motion by the disturbance he was making in the water. He got a vision of it crawling with funnel-web spiders, or with an angry snake coiled on it. If he kept moving forward his face would come right up against it. He stopped and tried to change direction a little, to pass to the right of the debris, but was worried that he was already too close to the ditch at the road’s edge. His right arm wouldn’t take the strain much longer and the chilled feeling in his chest had become distressing. For a few moments he feared he was about to die of drowning or heart-failure. But then a thought came to his rescue. To cross back into Scotland, the Prince’s army had to go through the icy, flood-swollen Esk river. It was touch-and-go and could have been a disaster, but they did it by keeping a steady nerve, and when they were safely over the pipers played merry reels and the Highlanders danced themselves dry. “I’ll dance on the other side of this water!” Tait declared in as loud a voice as he could summon out of his frozen chest. He felt new strength go into his upraised arms and his heart beat stronger and the floating debris did not seem as menacing. He felt that the Blackbird was near and urging him on. He moved forward with new energy. When he came out on the other side he kept his promise. He put his burdens down and tried to caper a little with his chilled limbs, humming through his nose what he hoped sounded like a Highland reel.

Bending to pick up the knapsack and satchel again, he heard a voice.

“What do you do for an encore?” Francesca called out from a little way down the road.

He hadn’t seen her there. She and the kids had come for a walk to check the state of the floodwater.
He was in the Green Room one afternoon. He’d been there all day. First he had read a dozen or so pages of *The Wreck of the West* and made careful notes for his review, then he’d had a couple of hours sleep on the sofa, then he’d written a few hundred more words of the novel. He knew they weren’t very good though and he finally tore them up. After three years he nearly had the novel finished. It only needed the final couple of chapters, but that was the hard part because he still wasn’t completely sure how to bring off the ending. But he couldn’t focus on the problem while he had the Sam Foster review to worry about as well as various other things. It was always the same. Having too much on his mind made him feel fragmented and off-balance.

There were to be auditions that evening for the new farce, and Tait intended to hang about until then and try out for a small role. Therese was directing and he always got along okay with her, despite the fact that she belonged to Mona’s camp — the victorious camp, as it was now. These days he only ever wanted very small roles, roles that would allow him to be part of the camaraderie of a show but which weren’t too great a burden to bear.

Another reason to stay for the audition was that it would delay his having to return to the cabin. His nerves were frazzled not only by the barking but also by the Kafkaesque feeling of the whole predicament, the fact that he seemed to be the only person who felt that anything was wrong. He had tried to enlist Ernie to support him in another protest, but Ernie said he wasn’t especially bothered by the noise himself. Tait knew that Ernie’s hearing wasn’t the best, and in any case he avoided confrontations. He wasn’t going to be an ally. So now Tait took any excuse not to go home until he had to, or at least not until the deep of night when the kelpie had mostly barked itself out and would usually keep to its kennel until first light.

He had the local paper spread on the table and was searching for some scissors. He wanted to cut out the photo of old Mrs Callender to keep. There she was on the front page of the *Coast Chronicle*, grinning broadly over the big birthday cake that marked her hundredth year.

The scissors eluded him, so he went and sat back down and stared at the photo and thought about what it would be like to be a hundred years old and still sharp as a tack like Mrs Callender. How would it feel, to have a hundred years of memories in your
head? How would it feel to be the only one of your generation still kicking, the only one left to remember all the others? The old lady looked cheerful enough in the picture, but there must surely be moments when being the last of your generation would crush you with grief.

Tait knew there was a poem there, and tried to fix on the gist of it, but found his mind pulling away from the effort. That was a bad sign. It was only when he was particularly stressed and fragmented that he resisted the impulse of a new poem. Right now it seemed like too much trouble. It was just another load of mental clutter. He forced himself to jot down a couple of key phrases so that the idea would not be entirely lost, then he let his eyes range over the other items on the front page. He had lots of time to kill, and intended to have another long lie-down on the sofa before the evening.

The headline item was about Ron Dodd, the King of Talkback Radio. He had acquired a rural retreat up at the exclusive end of the Valley, and commuted to and from the city by helicopter. Ron was being quoted on how friendly the region was, especially those good folk at the Shire Council who had been so co-operative about the road-widening and the other things he needed done. It was Local Government At Its Best, Ron said, and he for one would always give credit where it was due. There was no hint that him being vastly rich and influential might have any bearing on the Council’s behaviour.

Ron Dodd’s power on radio was now invincible and even Premiers and Prime Ministers were wary of getting on the wrong side of him. He had lately branched into television with a show that Tait occasionally watched on Thursday nights. It was mostly show-biz interviews, but there was also a mock talent quest where eccentric people did things they weren’t very good at. They did ventriloquism, or they juggled, or maybe bent themselves backwards to prove how double-jointed they were. And though it was all a send-up, Ron was good at being poker-faced, at least when he was talking to the contestants.

The item underneath was yet another story about the railway stuff-ups. For years now the region’s rail services had been plagued with interminable track-work and by chaotic timetables. And there were never enough carriages provided, so commuters to the city couldn’t get a seat and had to stand for hours every morning and night. People couldn’t get to work on time, or even get to work at all on many occasions. There had
been years of protests and petitions, but it never made any difference. Now all the railway platforms were festooned with official posters about a government drive to achieve “gender equity” amongst railway staff. This involved “breaking down the male culture” of the railways and “creating attitudinal change” and “transforming values” so as to accomplish “A Fair and Progressive System for Everyone.” There were endless pictures of laughing bright-eyed women and men in railway uniform, all nearly peeing themselves with the unbridled joy of it all. They were people of all colours and ethnicities, except of course that there weren’t any Anglo males. They were now non-persons and subject to ethnic-cleansing and gender-cleansing in every field.

Tait did his best to avoid the railway stations now. The posters enraged him with their blend of tyrannical menace and fatuous cheer. The railway commissars were going to transform the world and transfigure the human soul. Just don’t ask them for an actual train to take you to work so you can earn a living.

It was yet another aspect of Anarcho-Tyranny, and in _The Wreck of the West_ Sam Foster had laid out the whole logic of it yet again and in even more compelling terms than before.

The most interesting item, though, was the continuing drama of Len Mullan. Len was the Aboriginal man who had been Tiffany’s downfall in the Creative Writing class at Ridwell. Since that time he’d become a figure of stature in the region. A plumber by trade and a former local football star, he was active in various organizations and served as the articulate Indigenous Person the media could go to for a handy quote on almost any issue. He had a vivid turn of phrase and a solid core of common sense and he stuck up for the battlers of all persuasions. He had begun to be wooed by the local branches of both big political parties as a likely candidate for the State seat. Both parties knew how good and virtuous it would make them look, nowadays, to have someone of Len’s complexion on their ticket.

But Len had disgraced himself in the eyes of the great and good. He’d been active in setting up a local branch of Beth Hendon’s Nation First Party. Now he was announcing that he was to be the Party’s candidate when the next Federal election was called. This was very awkward for the opponents of the Hendon movement. It was daily denounced as unspeakably racist (among other things) and here was a black man throwing his lot in with it. They were still trying to figure out how they could
vilify Len Mullan without appearing to be racist themselves. You could sense their dilemma from the way this item about him was positioned. It was on the front page, but down in the bottom corner like an afterthought. The editors were treading the finest line they could.

What made the whole thing such a deadly stick of dynamite was the stunning outcome of the recent election in Beth Hendon’s home state. In its very first venture the Nation First Party had won ten seats and been instrumental in ousting a state government. The Hendon movement had shown its electoral clout, and all over the country the elites were now scared shitless of what might happen at the next Federal poll. When Beth Hendon walked back into the Federal chamber for the first time after that state election, there was an utter silence. All the politicians looked as if something lethal had crawled from under a rock and into their midst. But the silence was broken when the people up in the public gallery burst into cheers and applause. For the first time in living memory there were real forces at work against the Regime. Millions of battlers took heart while the commissars foamed at the mouth.

Tait made a mental note to cut the item out and enclose it in his next letter to Mike Kieslowski, although Mike probably already knew about the local situation. He was very well up on all the doings of Nation First right across the country. He had become friends with Beth Hendon because of working for Senator Pribik. Pribik agreed with many of Hendon’s ideas and greatly admired her pluck. After she’d made her freakish leap into Federal parliament as a fiery populist independent, Pribik had decided to be discreetly helpful and Mike was the main contact and go-between. But Pribik had lately started to backpedal in deference to his own party bosses and this had alienated Mike. His meagre salary came from the Senator, but his heart was in the Hendon camp.

Tait expected to hear anytime that Mike had broken with Pribik. Caroline was a keen Hendonite and was urging her wavering spouse to tell the Senator to stick his pittance up his jumper. Better to starve than be on the wrong side now. That was Caroline’s view, even though they were expecting another child and they hadn’t a penny in the bank.

Tait felt remiss in not having tried to join the local branch of Nation First as soon as it was formed, but he was held back by a couple of factors. One was his constant feeling of being unwell, of being fragmented, of never getting enough sleep. He
scarcely had the energy to get through the days. He couldn’t see how he could be of any use. The other factor was that his criminal record surely made him a very dubious asset. They would probably knock him back anyway.

He’d wondered if he was being over-sensitive about his past, but he’d broached the matter with Mike and Mike had agreed that it could indeed be a problem in that kind of context.

“That the Hendon movement can find enough people to sit at meetings or hand out leaflets,” he’d written back. “What it can’t find so easily are gifted writers. That’s your field of action, mate. Even if all you do is to continue to write as you’ve always done, you’ll be doing your bit.”

Mike was right of course. It was a case of the cobbler sticking to his last. Yet still Tait felt that he ought to be doing something at the grass roots level. For a while he thought he’d hit on it. He would get a big Nation First poster and display it inside his front fence. He’d at least be hoisting the colours. But he was known along his street as a nutcase. The poster would be tainted by association with him. He knew that was true, yet he wondered if he was just finding excuses to avoid putting himself on the line.

It strengthened his insight into the Forty-Five, the way so many people back then had wished the Cause well but felt too entangled in their circumstances to make any move when the moment came. What bitter self-reproach there must have been in thousands of hearts when the news came from Culloden that it was all over. And especially in the hearts of all those English Jacobites who did not rise when destiny called them. Many must’ve spent the rest of their lives grieving for the effort they hadn’t made, for their sense of their own lost honour. And each of them must have wondered if they might’ve made a difference, whether in some fateful way they could even have been the feather that tipped the scale.

Tait thought often of the servant girl at Dunblane. He’d found the incident mentioned in a book. It was a few weeks before Culloden. As “Butcher” Cumberland rode by in the street with his troops, a servant girl threw boiling water at him from an upper window. It missed by only an inch, but caused the horse to rear and the Butcher to be thrown to the ground. That could’ve made a difference. With an ounce of luck the fall could’ve been fatal. It appeared that the girl got away, but she had risked her neck to do something for the Cause, had dared the risk of being summarily shot or
hanged or beaten to death with rifle-butts. She did what little she could, and came within an inch of maybe tipping the scale.

It was the principle of being loyal and brave in your own sphere of action, however limited it seemed. He wished he knew the girl’s name so he could call the principle after her as a mark of respect — like the Mary McTavish Principle, or whatever.

He stretched out on the sofa, hoping to ease his headache with an hour or two of sleep. As he tried to relax his body he brooded on what a pity it was not to know the name of the heroine of Dunblane. But then again, the principle she’d acted on already had a name.

It was called the Rightful Task.

* * * *

He was standing in the doorway of the Green Room a couple of weeks later, looking up at the square tower of the Court building. The dark was gathering and there looked to be a light on in the holding cell. He knew there had been trials that day, for he had seen the prison van come and go. It was a huge lumbering box of a thing. Tait had ridden in ones just like it, with the handcuffs on, and knew what they felt like. As the van pulled out he had heard screams of defiance coming from it. At least he hoped that’s what they were. They might equally have been shrieks of despair.

He had a clearer idea about the tower now. He knew that prisoners were held in the cell for periods during the day but weren’t kept there overnight. If a light was on in the tower it was only by an oversight. He had been told this by a nice woman called Peggy Dean who had recently joined the Players. She was in the Salvation Army and was often on duty at the Court helping prisoners and other people in trouble.

Courts and prisons were strongly on Tait’s mind. He had been working on his review of the Sam Foster book all that week in the Green Room, and especially on the parts about the growth of “the penal society” and the “prosecutorial state” and the whole “culture of incarceration” that was putting the population behind bars at rates never known before. The American figures were frightening, and they were the world’s future. “The whole wrecking-ball of terminal social pathologies,” Foster wrote, “travels nowadays in the baggage of the American empire.”
Equally frightening was the way the truth was twisted by TabloidWorld. So-called “plea-bargaining” was an example. It was depicted as a scandalous leniency that allowed smirking criminals to escape their just deserts. In fact it was mostly a device to convict the innocent. It was a weapon created by the relentless expansion of the criminal code, together with ever more draconian sentencing guidelines. This gave prosecutors the power to terrorize people into making confessions. Wrote Foster: “Plea-bargaining is a form of psychological torture in which innocent and guilty alike give up their right to jury trial in order to reduce the number and severity of the charges that the prosecutor brings.” The method was stark. You arrest virtually anyone, with as little evidence as you like, and then you pile on charge after charge until the poor quaking wretch is looking at 300 years in the penitentiary. Then you make him an offer. “Plead guilty to one charge and we’ll drop the others. You can do 5 or 10 years and then have your life back. Or you can tough it out in court and risk going down forever. It’s your choice, pal. Are you feeling lucky?”

In some American jurisdictions now, Sam Foster wrote, the rate of “Guilty” pleas was over ninety-five percent. Even Stalin’s prosecutors couldn’t have done much better than that.

As Orwell said, alluding to the methods of Big Brother: “All the confessions uttered here are true. We make them true.”

Actually Tait would have preferred not to have to dwell on the subject, for a couple of reasons.

The first was that it raked up thoughts of the Ellicotts and of Mr Dragovic, thoughts he tried to keep sealed-off in a remote corner of the mind. But then Sam Foster knew all about that kind of horror. He had long championed the so-called “Atlanta Twelve,” a group of kindergarten teachers and parents convicted by an hysterical court of running a paedophile ring. He had written many eloquent articles to get the case retried, and the convictions had eventually been reversed. All through that time he was flooded with hate-mail, including dozens of death-threats.

The second reason was that Tait’s only serious doubt about the Nation First Party was its rhetoric of law-and-order. There was a horrid whiff of TabloidWorld in some of what it said, a streak of the rabid mentality that would have a whipping-post on every corner. In its best and truest vein, Tait believed, the Hendon movement wanted to reaffirm the world as an honour-system, a place where people could again trust in
the shelter of each other, but in this particular realm of policy it too often endorsed the Enemy’s picture of the world as a crime-scene. There was an intellectual dimness there, and a moral crudity. Urging the Regime to take ever more draconian measures in law and order was hardly the way to defend the ordinary population from the Regime. That so transparent a point could escape them was worrying. But then he reflected on a point Samuel Johnson made. Any party’s platform is like a bundle of sticks, some sound and some rotten. All you can ever do, said the great sage, is try to choose the one with the fewest rotten sticks in the bundle.

There was a clumping sound.

Neil the Wheel was coming through the chilly evening towards the Green Room, treading heavily in big boots and wearing a camouflage jacket with a belt around it. A long black torch hung from his waist in a leather pouch that he had made himself. They were rehearsing the new farce that night and Neil had come to do his tireless rounds of the building.

The torch was Neil’s pride and joy. It was the top-of-the-range model called the Nightfinder. It was stainless-steel and had cost eighty dollars and had been the occasion of Tait’s last clash with Commissar Mona. Neil had confided one evening that he’d begun saving up to buy a Nightfinder because it was the best one for “doin securidy” with. He was putting aside a dollar a week, he said, so he would soon have the “proper quipment for the job.” At the next committee meeting Tait moved that they buy the torch and present it to Neil in token of the years of dedication he’d put in. He expected it to go through without a peep, but for some reason Mona took peevishly against it and it was rejected by her followers on a show of hands. Megan wasn’t there to use her influence. She rarely came to meetings now. Nor was Marigold there that night, and it was her absence that was decisive. If she’d been on deck as treasurer to support the spending of the eighty dollars, it would have gone through. Where money was concerned Marigold’s word was still final, whatever Mona said. But Marigold was no longer always around when you needed her.

Neil got his heart’s desire, though. When Megan heard what had happened, she called in at Neil’s place and presented him with a beautiful new Nightfinder as a personal token of thanks for all the times he had escorted her to her car. As well as the torch he carried Megan’s card around – the one that said “In appreciation of our
Faithful Watchman” – and proudly took it out to show whenever her name was mentioned.

Tait had figured out the reason for Mona’s peevishness. Neil had always revered Megan Marchant, had seen her as the ultimate source of authority and pattern of all wisdom, and to him she was and would always be the rightful leader of the Players. And in his quiet way he made his estimation of Mona fairly clear. If he’d known what the word meant he might have called her a usurper who had seized the place of the true queen.

As Neil came up to the lighted doorway of the Green Room he made a big show of adjusting the Nightfinder in its pouch.

“By gosh, Neil, you look well set up,” Tait said, nodding at the torch.

“Yeah,” he nodded gravely and proudly, patting the long heavy barrel of it. “I can do secudiy good now I got the proper quipment.”

“Nobody’s arrived yet. Why don’t you put your feet up for ten minutes before you start on the job?”

So Neil sat on the sofa with his big boots and camouflage jacket and the superlative torch in its holster. He stared straight ahead and gave a big sigh every now and then, as though to psych himself up for another arduous tour of duty.

There were flashes of headlights outside and the room began to fill up. Peggy Dean was first, then Therese, then Frank Baxter, then various others. Neil the Wheel got up and clumped outside to begin doing his patrols.

Then Francesca arrived. Tait hadn’t been sure if she would. It was embarrassing because she hadn’t got the part she’d gone for at the auditions. She hadn’t got any part at all. It was the first time in fifteen years that she’d been completely passed over and Tait knew she felt it like a kick in the face. She’d decided, though, to make a show of not minding and offered to help with costumes and make-up. Now she was chatting and laughing a little too brightly with various people. Tait wished he could take her outside into the shadows and hold her and comfort her. She’d never been vain about her talent, but her reputation as the group’s hotshot actress had been a resource to fall back on when she needed something to feel good about. Now even that was being eclipsed.

Tait’s mind was diverted by the arrival of Saskia, a buxom girl of seventeen in her final year at Turrawong High. She had been in many school shows but this was her
first venture with the Players. Saskia had a very friendly manner and it was hard not to like her, especially if you were male. She had a certain way of relating to men. She tended to lean close and to keep her big blue eyes wide open, as though you were such a fascinating person that she needed to get her fill of looking at you. And her way of chatting with you was kind of intimate, even if you were only discussing the weather. This was only the second rehearsal but Tait was starting to like her a lot and to feel stimulated by her mere presence. Right now he was wondering if she would feel the need to take her jumper off again tonight. At the first rehearsal she’d suddenly announced that she felt hot and had peeled her jumper off over her head and chucked it across the room. She was wearing a skimpy singlet that didn’t do much to hide the amleness of her breasts.

They began reading lines and devising moves and Tait had to get into character as Sir Percy Pratt. This was the idiot from the Foreign Office who provokes the farce by picking up the wrong briefcase — the one containing the Ambassador’s randy love-letters to the Cockney chorus-girl instead of the draft of the new treaty with the republic of Gombolia. The part was larger than Tait had wanted, but dithering fools were easy to play and gave a lot of scope to improvise. And there was another inducement. At one point Sir Percy is discovered in a broom cupboard with Saskia’s character who is clad only in her bra and panties. Tait would normally have felt nervous about that, would have shied away from it, but there was something about Saskia that melted your inhibitions.

He found it hard to get into the initial swing, though, with Francesca there. It felt wrong for him to have a part when she’d been denied one. And anyway he was, as usual, feeling a bit wrung-out and headachey.

At the coffee-break they went outside together.

“Are you okay?” he asked, wanting to take her by the hand but not quite daring to.

“Why wouldn’t I be?” she asked, a bit curtly.

“No reason,” he said.

He had already found that she didn’t want to talk about her failure to get a part.

“I think I’ll go home,’ she said. “It’s too bleak and cold to be out.”

“Yes,” he said, to be agreeable. “I’d go home too if I could.”

“Is that dog still barking its head off?”

“All day and half the night.”
“Better stay here then. Besides, Sasquia might get naked any minute.
“There’s always hope.”

“Oh Sasquia, you’re so squishy and squashy,” Francesca crooned in a mock state of entrancement, “like an adorable quagmire!”

At the first audition Saskia had explained about her name. You could pronounce it with a “q,” but she didn’t like that, she said, seeming to smile at all the men in the room at once, because it made her sound “squishy-squashy.” She preferred the “k” because it was tighter. Francesca had referred to her as Sasquia ever since.

“You men are such dills,” she said.

“So we’re constantly being told. Either dills or creeps or arseholes, or all of them at once. That’s half the attraction of a good-natured little flirt like Saskia. She strokes men and lets them feel they’re okay, and good to have around. She lets them feel, at least for a minute, that they aren’t the scum of the earth after all.”

“How do you know she’s good-natured?”

“Time will tell.”

“Yes it might.”

“I think I like the idea of the Saskia type. I approve of it for socio-political reasons.”

“Of course.”

“No, I’m serious. A warm-hearted hussy is doing the work of Eros in the world — like Hermine in Steppenwolf who leads the misanthrope back to his human self. Or, come to think of it, like a certain person we know who used to be so nice to the boys behind the bike-shed at school. Eros is the basic social cement, the foundation of the shelter of each other and of the world as an honour-system. Or something along those lines anyway. I’m too frazzled nowadays to have thought it through.”

“That’s all very elevated. And here I was thinking you were just goggling at her chest.”

“Well, I wouldn’t discount her chest altogether.”

They saw the extra-powerful beam of the Nightfinder torch flashing round the corner and Neil the Wheel hove into sight.

“I’ll leave you to your socio-political concerns then,” Francesca said. “I’m going home. I wish I didn’t have to put my head back inside to get my bag, though. For some reason I’m suddenly mortified about not being cast in the play. Isn’t that funny? Suddenly a chink opens in you and the hurt rushes in through the gap.”
“Neil can get the bag,” Tait said.
They grabbed him as he was clumping past in his big boots and sent him inside for
the bag. You could see him square his shoulders with determination, the way he
always did when assigned a duty.
Tait felt able to take Francesca’s hand now. The touch felt lovely. She seemed to
return his squeeze ever so slightly and his heart fluttered with relief.
“So, have you wasted a night’s baby-sitting fees?”
“Oh its okay. Bambi gives me a cut-rate. Although actually even then the cost of
getting out can be a worry.”
“Ah,” Tait murmured.
Francesca’s finances was always a mystery to him. Craig sent a certain amount of
support, and there were the government allowances for the four kids, but the money
never appeared to stretch far enough. Once or twice Francesca had been forced to get
a box of food from the Salvation Army.
“By the way,” she said, as they waited for Neil to return, “Bambi said Jade’s been
invited to go on that Ron Dodd show on TV.”
“Really? How did they get on to Jade?”
“Ron Dodd heard about him being in the Valley, and remembered him from years
ago. Bambi said they knew Dodd when he was starting out on country radio and she
and Jade were still doing the Show circuit.”
“Small world.”
“Yes.”
“Jade must be chuffed.”
“He wants to wipe his arse with the letter.”
“Sorry?”
“According to Bambi, he said ‘They can shove it!’ and hung the letter up in the
dunny. She reckons he’s dying to do it but is too scared of the challenge. He’d have to
sober up and shape up.”
“It’s a bit of a freak show, actually. They get people on in order to make fools of
them.”
“I’ve never watched it.”
Neil the Wheel came back with Francesca’s bag. He handed it to her and clumped
away in the dark without a word.
They walked across to her car and there was a slight awkward pause. He became anxious about the Hug. He really wanted one. He couldn’t bear to let the moment pass. He touched her on the forearm and she touched his arm in reply.

“Hug, please?” he whispered.

She leaned into him and he put his arms around her. The warmth of their two bodies together felt lovely in the cold night air. He thought how warm a kiss would feel. He could hardly remember the last proper kiss they’d had. It was years ago. He bent his head and it seemed to him that she lifted her face a little towards his. But then he wondered if he’d only imagined it, and that one moment of negative thinking was enough to make him falter. They began to unclasp.

They pecked each other on the cheek through the window as she edged the car into motion.

“I’ll come out tomorrow afternoon, shall I? To replenish the firewood?”

“Yes, do.”

Grieving for the kiss he might’ve had, he watched her drive away. Then he went back into the Green Room.

Later he heard about Saskia’s little number with Neil the Wheel.

When Neil went in the door to get Francesca’s bag, Saskia had just stripped her jumper off, and on the spur of the moment she draped the jumper seductively across his shoulder and did a little stripper’s bump-and-grind routine, rubbing up against him and shimmying her breasts inside the skimpy singlet. Apparently it was a very clever bit of improvisation and had drawn a round of applause.

They weren’t sure what Neil made of it though, for his face was a blank mask the whole time.
Chapter Twenty-Six

Mike had made the break from Senator Pribik and was now fully committed to Beth Hendon’s Nation First Party. It had been struggling to get its weekly newspaper up and running and Mike was put in as editor. He was working day and night, writing articles under several different by-lines, battling to build up the paper as a hotbed of exciting ideas and slashing commentary. The pregnant Caroline was also writing articles as well as doing her normal day-job to keep the family fed. And that wasn’t all. Mike had great belief in the power of political cartoons and was keen to have some in the paper. So Caroline took her slight knack for drawing and her fine maverick intelligence and became “Caro” the cartoonist.

They had to contribute so much themselves because virtually no writer or journalist of any standing would touch the Hendon paper. It would be social and professional suicide. It would be to throw away the rewards of a lifetime of lickspittling to approved opinion, of decades of doing so well in what Mike always referred to as the “dog obedience trials” of political correctness.

Tait had contributed a short poem. It had been prompted by a comment of Mike’s about one of his aims for the paper. It was crucial, he said, to revive an awareness of honour, to show it as central to the value-system of the Hendon movement. But how do you convey the idea of honour in a contemptible age, and to a public that’s been taught to picture it as something ridiculous? How do you explain that it isn’t about foppish idiots slapping each other with gloves and demanding Satisfaction? They had to convey the idea that honour was part of everyday life, as well as something that can be high and rare. And they had to show its continuity with the past, with that brave and beautiful heritage of resistance that most people nowadays had never even heard of.

So Tait tried to make a start by offering a definition, and by connecting it to the best-known of all the old Jacobite symbols:

**THE WHITE ROSE OF HONOUR**

_It’s the plant that flourishes anew_

_Whenever human love is proven true,_
An emblem of the cradle and the hearth
As well as of the high heroic path,
A blazon for the many and the few.

It appeared in a box on the front page as a kind of credo. Tait had given Mike discretion to print it without any name attached, if he felt that was best, but Mike declared that if Tait was willing to wear the public odium of a link with Hendonism, Hendonism might be able to bear the infamy of a link with him. Mike was particularly struck by the ending.

“What richness in that last line,” he wrote back, “with so much being said in just eight words.”

Tait liked the line too and felt shyly grateful to whatever Muse had allowed it to come through to him. There was a flurry of letters to the editor. Most approved of the poem, but a number of others, obviously bristling opponents of the Hendon movement, declared the colour of the rose was a “white supremacist” message.

Tait felt he should be contributing more. Not that Mike had asked him to, for in sober truth it was no joke to have your name linked with Nation First, not now that it was a real threat to the Regime and had to be destroyed by any means fair or foul. But Tait thought he might offer to do book reviews. He knew Mike was eager to build up the review page, to give coverage to books that wouldn’t get reviewed elsewhere, or would automatically be trashed on political grounds. The ultimate aim was to make the paper broadly populist without being tabloid, and highly intelligent without arid intellectualism. In that spirit Mike was eager to print more good poems, if he could get them, and Tait was tinkering with a new one that he thought he might offer. It was about somebody turning a hundred and being the last of their generation left alive. It was about the way that “the shelter of each other” has a poignant meaning over the span of time as well as just in the here and now.

The recent news was that an “anti-racist” group had got hold of the Nation First Party’s membership list for the entire state and released it to the media. That was a week ago. There had been reports of people on the list being victimized in various ways, from being menaced in the street to having their homes or cars vandalized. The best-known case was that of a school teacher having hot coffee hurled in her face by outraged colleagues in the staff-room. The initial response in the media had been that
the victims were getting what they deserved, that they were lucky they hadn’t fared worse from a justifiably angry community. After all, “Racism” was so unspeakable a thing that it could cause anyone to blow their top and lash out at the perpetrators. Tait half-expected to hear that the great Barak had joined in the good work by emptying his pistol into someone. But now there was at least a slight backlash. There were starting to be notes of criticism of the “anti-racist” group for violating people’s right to confidentiality. A prominent Rabbi said he found it disturbing that a whole group of people could be named in public as fair game for persecution. It reminded him, he said, of the atmosphere he’d known as a teenager in Nazi Germany.

A spokesperson for the “anti-racist group” was quoted in reply, and the reply’s tone and method of attack had a very familiar ring. As a Jew, especially one who’d experienced the Nazis, the Rabbi might be hard to nail in terms of racial politics, but as a clergyman of a “patriarchal” religion he could be vulnerable in terms of the politics of gender. It was worth a try:

*Given the enormous contribution that feminist activism has made against the terrible tide of racial intimidation in this country, we cannot afford to ignore the frightening evidence of religiously inspired heterosexist misogyny in the recent orchestrated attacks on anti-fascist women’s groups — which means of course that yet again women are forced to walk in terror in our streets.*

It was expertly done, with the high-sounding obfuscation giving way at the end to the sudden tabloid-speak of women/terror/streets. Tait could see the cropped hair and the leather jacket, could hear the very voice churning it out.

It was Sabina Sharpe.

The Rabbi’s reference to Nazi Germany had prompted a line of thought for Tait and he knew there was a poem in it. In his mind’s eye he could see one of those old photos of Jews being made to scrub the footpath or whatever, with the passers-by looking on and grinning. Those onlookers were what you’d call “normal” and “ordinary” and “decent” people. They would never themselves force a Jew to his or her knees on the pavement. They weren’t vicious in that kind of way. But if it was happening they would look on with equanimity. They would behave like that because they had a kind of blankness at their core, the blankness that doesn’t register the real
meaning or implication of what is taking place. It was the blankness of the space that
*Imagination* ought to occupy. It was the same blankness his next-door neighbours
had. No torment of his would ever register with them. He was the Jew scrubbing the
footpath. He knew he could literally *die* there in the cabin from the stress of their
dog’s noise and the meaning or moral implication of that would make no impression
on their minds. He saw both the contrast and the likeness between the yobbos at
Hell’s Kitchen, with their ferocious Doberman, and the people next door with their
neurotic kelpie. The hoodlums of Hell’s Kitchen would set their beast on you
deliberately, for the filthy pleasure of it, for they were the Vicious. The people next
door would stand by and let their creature kill you by infinite degrees of misery, for
they were the Blank. The Vicious were mostly recognizable for what they were, but
the Blank had the outward form of normality, and that made it worse because it made
your own confusion work against you. It got you going round in circles trying to
fathom their behaviour and being dumbfounded by it. You could brace yourself
against an outright assault or humiliation, but how do you brace against the empty
mind of the onlooker who doesn’t see anything wrong? Tait reflected that whenever
the topic of the Holocaust came up, the question was always raised of how much the
ordinary population knew about it. He now realized that was the wrong question
altogether. It isn’t whether you *know* about something, but whether you comprehend
it as a *problem*. Most of the cruelties of the world are known about, but in that
peculiar closed loop of the Blank there doesn’t seem to be anything amiss.

Of course we all have some of that same blankness, and each of us no doubt exhibits
that awful equanimity in the presence of someone’s torment. And there, Tait
perceived, was the sixty-four thousand dollar question to ask oneself: “Who is your
Jew scrubbing the pavement?”

* * * *

Tait and Francesca were on a train to the city. It was just after midday and they had
the carriage to themselves. They were going down to the offices of Mayhem Films for
a so-called “script conference.” To occupy the time he was bringing her up to date on
Mike’s doings.
Mike reckoned that what had happened up till now was just kid-stuff and that the real shit would hit the fan if Nation First made a big impact at the next federal election. The Regime would then be in a mood to do whatever it took and it’d be open slather for the politics of personal destruction. Beth Hendon knew the peril she was in and was writing a statement to be made public if she was assassinated. Mike was helping her with it. It had to be eloquent. It had to be a ringing cry from beyond the grave, a call to others to pick up the fallen banner and keep fighting.

“Politics is so horrible.” Francesca said. “Why are we even talking about it? Let’s talk about something positive.”

“Like your portfolio?”

“Okay.”

“Well, I think it’s terrific.”

“Yes,” she smiled. “It isn’t bad at all. And I’ve brought it with me, just in case.”

“Excellent,” Tait said in a positive a tone.

But in fact he was worried that Francesca had a false idea about this visit to the Mayhem Films office. It was just another consultation on yet another draft of the screenplay of *Ground Leave*. He feared she was over-estimating the glamour of the Mayhem people and what they did.

It had taken a while to overwhelm her, but Francesca had been knocked for a loop at not being cast in the new farce for the Players. Tait had feared she was lapsing back into the “clinical depression” mode of before. He rode the bike out to her place each afternoon, to replenish the firewood and to give her someone to talk to if she felt like it. The situation was made worse because Jesse was starting to be very wild and disobedient and the other three kids were following his example. Jesse was thirteen and full of inarticulate anger about his father and all of that. Tait had long felt uncomfortable near children, even just passing them in the street, but with angry and misbehaving children he felt genuinely afraid. Many people felt that way now, with the brave new stalinoid empire of Child Protection, so much a part and parcel of the Anarcho-Tyranny. But it wasn’t a feeling that people dared to express out loud. Sam Foster had a chilling account of the subject in *The Wreck of the West*, a section entitled “The Great Child Terror.” There were times when Tait drew the motorbike to a halt near Honeysuckle Hill, thinking he wouldn’t go on to Francesca’s place that
day. But he always did go on. *Love is stronger than fear*, he would tell himself. *I am the Faithful Knight and will not forsake her.*

Then Francesca had bounced back from the doldrums. She had decided to take charge of her life and destiny. She had only one asset, she declared, her talent as an actress. She had to have faith in that talent no matter what the Players might think. For the sake of herself and her kids she had to think positively. She would actively pursue her dreams. She’d put a portfolio together. She’d get an agent. She would seize the day!

She’d had some nice professional photos done and had got her clippings together from all the years with the Players. She asked Tait’s advice about which photos and clippings were best for the portfolio and he had tried to be helpful and not show any misgivings.

When Mayhem Films notified him about having another “script conference,” he had asked Francesca if she fancied going along. It wasn’t any big deal, he said, just a chance to meet some film people for whatever it was worth. They all seemed like screwballs to him, he said, but she might just hit it off with them. Maybe they’d know the names of some agents.

She had jumped at the chance, and so here they were together on the train.

Tait’s feelings about Mayhem Films were very mixed. On the positive side they had been his financial savour over the last few years, paying for film option rights, then paying again to renew the rights for another period. They even took an option on his volumes of poetry because they had the notion of having some of it recited as a voice-over in certain scenes of the movie. He could not have kept his head above water without Mayhem and he was truly thankful. On the negative side, though, they kept showing him screenplay adaptations that appalled him in their crudity and shallowness, and which bore less and less resemblance to his book.

The train reached the city suburbs and Tait became more ill at ease. It was always the same. He told himself that going to the city would be a refreshing jaunt, a stimulating visit to the bustling heart of things, but the closer he got the more fragmented he began to feel, the more desperate to get his business done and get out of there. He saw the tall buildings of the city skyline and he tried to calm himself by thinking of the breeze ruffling the grass of Astrid’s Meadow.
On the other hand, it was nice to be with Francesca in a whole new setting like this, away from the kids and from everyone they knew. She looked beautiful in a red flowered dress that showed off her arms and shoulders and legs. The red of the dress went superbly with the raven curve of her hair. There was an energy in her step as they went along the platform of the terminal and then out into the city street. He could see the determination in her body language. She was here to seize the day.

The Mayhem offices were in the seedier part of town, set between a bordello and a gambling den, or at least that’s what Doug May always said. It was a stock joke of his. “There’s a brothel on one side of us and a two-up school on the other. But that’s okay, they’re not fussy.” He was a short tubby man of about sixty with a scraggly beard. His business partner Alicia Hemming was very tall and languid. She wore flowing caftans and strings of beads and looked like someone who’d do your astrology chart. Tait had never seen the two of them together. Either one or the other would be there and would seem to conduct matters in complete ignorance of what the other thought or might have told you on another occasion. The only source of order and consistency appeared to be their secretary, Gretel. Only Gretel appeared to know both their minds. Thus Doug might call out in relation to the matter he was discussing with you, “Hey, Gret, where’s Alicia on this?” And Gretel would give a quick outline of Alicia’s view. Or Alicia would ask, “It that a hurdle for Douglas, d’you think, Gretel?” And Gretel would say why it was or wasn’t a hurdle for him.

Today Doug was there. With him were three other people who he said were profoundly committed to getting *Ground Leave* on to the screen in its full artistic integrity. They just wanted to change the title to *Ground of Madness* or perhaps to *Insanity Leave*, so as to make it clearer to the “demographic” what the movie was about. Doug introduced the three people. One was the screenwriter who had done the latest version of the script, another was a young man in wrap-around dark glasses who was apparently an exciting new movie director, and there was his girlfriend, a stunningly gorgeous actress called Chloe who’d been a regular on a TV soap-opera but who’d recently been killed-off. Chloe would be perfect, Doug said, in the co-starring role of the protagonist’s beautiful schizophrenic love-interest, the one who sparks the full-scale inmate uprising when she disembowels the Chief Psychiatrist. Tait was about to mildly remark that there wasn’t any such character in the *book*, but
then remembered that he was really only here to get the “consultation fee” for turning up.

Doug started talking about other aspects of the script. The screenwriter was sitting directly opposite Francesca and Tait could see his eyes going up and down her legs. He didn’t especially blame the man. They were awfully nice legs. But the ogling went on for a long time and Tait knew it must be making Francesca uncomfortable. To deflect the man’s attention he started to comment on one of the many aspects of the script that he had found off-putting. The screenwriter took it amiss and got huffy. Doug jumped in to defend his colleague and Tait expanded on some of the points he had made and the discussion became slightly heated. Doug then changed the subject by enlisting over a possible “window of opportunity” with regard to tax write-offs. He never failed to mention this “window of opportunity” and the tax write-offs. It was a kind of mantra. The brilliant young director remained still and silent and might have been asleep behind his dark glasses for all Tait knew. The gorgeous Chloe looked unhappy and got up and went and sat on a sofa on the far side of the room. Francesca went over and joined her and they got to talking quietly between themselves.

At about four o’clock the “conference” broke up. The screenwriter was in a huff and the brilliant young director was vaguely awake. Doug seemed pleased with how it had gone. He seemed to think they had all spent the afternoon in a ferment of creativity. As Tait and Francesca were leaving he pressed an envelope into Tait’s hand.

“Thanks again for the great input,” he called from the doorway, “We’re heading in the right direction! Oh, and Alicia will be in touch with you about the other thing.”

“The other thing?”

“The um, er, thingammybob,” he said, twirling his finger in the air as though to conjure whatever it was. “The um, you know!”

Tait hadn’t the least idea.

They heard him ask Gretel what the thingammybob was that Alicia was to get in touch about, but they didn’t catch Gretel’s answer.

It was beginning to get grey and overcast and a gusty wind had risen. They went into a pub that was dim and quiet and bought two shandies and sat in a little red-plush booth beside a window and looked out at the windy street.
Tait counted the notes in the envelope. On previous occasions there’d been two hundred dollars. He found it was the same again.

“I reckon I’ve earned this,” he said.

“Yes,” she agreed in a low voice. “What they’re doing with your book is a scandal.”

“I told you there wasn’t anything glamorous about those people. The whole business is just kind of silly and sleazy. And not even sleazy in a titillating way.”

“We should’ve gone next door to the bordello or the gambling-den,” she said in the same low voice.

He became aware that she was deeply downcast.

She drained her glass and looked across towards the bar.

“Another?” Tait asked.

“Could I have a large brandy, d’you think?”

“You can have anything that two hundred dollars will buy. Are you feeling alright, though?”

“I’m totally fucking depressed, actually.”

“Tell me,” he said, wanting to put his arms around her.

“Get the brandy first.”

Big drops of rain were sploshing against the window when he came back with the double-brandy.

“I’m such a fucking fool!” she said, vehemently, after she’d taken a swig.

“What’s the matter?”

“I’m nearly forty. Do you realize that?”

“I don’t know. I suppose so. Why?”

“Because I’ve only just realized it. I mean fully realized it. Sitting in that room with that bloke looking me up and down, I could tell what he was thinking: ‘Yeah, passable, I guess, for mutton dressed up as lamb, for a middle-aged abandoned housewife and mother of four.’”

“He doesn’t know you’re a mother of four.”

“But I fuckingwell know!” she said, draining the brandy. “I felt like a sleepwalker who’s woken up on a window-ledge, thinking ‘What the fuck am I doing here?’ There I was, in my slut dress, batting my eye-lashes, trying to look like a smouldering fucking siren, like god’s gift to the silver screen who’s about to be discovered by
some cigar-chomping mogul. Talk about pathetic. How could you have let me walk into that?”

Tait must’ve looked hurt or stricken because Francesca immediately reached across and patted his hand.

“No, that’s not fair. It wasn’t your fault. You always see me through rose-coloured glasses, and I’m grateful for that. I’ve depended on that more times than you probably imagine. No, I went out on the window-ledge of my own accord.”

Tait fetched her another brandy from the bar.

“Chloe was good to talk to,” Francesca said, taking another sip and seeming more philosophical. “She’s quite famous, you know, from her time on that soapie. And she isn’t a bimbo. She’s an intelligent girl, a classically trained actress. She said how rotten a life it is most of the time, and how demoralizing it is to be so eager to please people you have no respect for and who have none for you. She said she’d been to seven auditions in the past month and barely got a polite nod. She says the acting profession is a Darwinian struggle where the top few get to be Tyrannosaurus Rex and the all the others just get to be food.”

“That’s the cruel nature of the arts in general,” Tait agreed, his mind beginning to engage with the whole idea. “Its a Depression-era labour market that never recovers but goes on eternally. There are always a thousand applicants for every opportunity and the whole dynamic operates by exploiting not only the worst qualities in people, like the tendency to kick and gouge each other for advantage, but also some of their best and noblest attributes — like their willingness to go on ‘paying their dues’ and keeping their hopes up in the face of fantastically bad odds. It is horrific when you think about it. The system feeds on good as well as on evil. There’s Modernity in a nutshell.”

“Well, I don’t know about the cosmic politics of it, but look at Chloe as an individual. She’s still only in her twenties, smart, trained, famous and a ravishing beauty — and she can’t get work. Puts my pretensions in their place, doesn’t it! Me with my yellowed clippings to prove how well I did in the church hall at Dingo Flats.”

“But didn’t you normally perform in the sheep-shed?”

“I did, actually. My mention of the church hall was pure affectation.”

“Your Lady Macbeth was unforgettable.”

“With the shearers cursing in the background?”
“And twelve thousand sheep bleating outside.”
“The shed was double-booked, you see. Just one of those mix-ups.”
“But you went on like a trouper.”
“The reviews were a travesty.”
“Not at all. They all agreed the wool-clip was excellent.”
“A mention of the play would’ve been nice.”
“Oh god, the Thespian ego!”
Francesca reached across and stroked his cheek.
“What would I do without you to keep me anchored in absurdity?”
“I dread to think,” he replied.
The rain was beating heavily against the window now and they sat and watched it while they brooded on their thoughts.
“Do we need to get to our train?” Francesca asked eventually.
“We could try, but I thought it’d be best if we let the peak-hour rush subside. The trains would be a nightmare just now. We could go and have a meal somewhere. Or see a movie. Anything to take us out of ourselves a bit.”
“Whatever you feel like is fine.”
“You don’t have to be home at a certain time?”
“No, Bambi will stay the night, so the kids are okay. Bundle is there with her too.”
“This is just a thought, but we could go and see Eucalyptus Temple if you wanted to. It’s on again, at the Adelphi Theatre.”
Ever since the show had become a big success a couple of years ago, Francesca had been curious to see it.
“Do you fancy going?” she asked.
“I think I do.”
“Will it cost the earth?”
“Who cares? I have two hundred smackaroos in my pocket, remember.”
“You shouldn’t waste it.”
“I don’t intend to.”
“Then I’m in your hands.”
“Excellent. Another braaandy, my dear?” Tait asked, waggling his eyebrows and leering like a top-hatted Victorian seducer.
“Any more and I’ll be legless. Let’s see if the rain eases off, then get a bite to eat.”
They sat watching the streams of rain down the window and Tait stole glances at her face. It was the loveliest face in the world, as far as he could estimate, and it filled him with wonderment that she was nearly forty and that he had somehow not understood that until today.

They were on edge for the first part of the train journey home. There were yobbos hooting and yelling in another carriage and Tait was worried that they might come through. There’d been a recent spate of late-night bashings on the trains and they’d gone to the last carriage to sit near the guard’s compartment. That was the official advice: if concerned about your safety, travel near the guard’s compartment. But the guard’s door was heavy and locked and the guard not to be seen. And in any case the guard was just another railway employee and might, under the new enlightened system, be a disabled grandmother who didn’t speak any English and therefore wouldn’t understand a cry of “Help, I’m being murdered!” even if they could hear it through a heavy steel door. And there had never been a single mention, in all the news reports of bashings, of the guard intervening or being of any help whatever. And being in the last carriage meant you were trapped if trouble came. Tait had “Angus Stewart” with him and once or twice he reached into the satchel to feel the reassurance of the cold hard metal. But the yobbos got off at one of the intermediate stations, bawling obscenities and banging on the windows as the train moved out. The station was of course festooned with posters about the new culture of equality and joy in the railway system. With the menace gone, Tait immediately blamed himself for having been spooked. That in itself, he knew, was part of the way the Anarcho-Tyranny worked on people. In your relief at escaping harm you reproach yourself at having got into a tizzy. Instead of becoming even more determined to see the blood of the commissars run in the gutters, you cringe at your own apprehensions. He wondered whether Francesca had known how rattled he was by the thought that any moment he might be the only thing between her and a pack of yobbo assailants. He was very grateful when she squeezed his hand and said how glad she was that she hadn’t been travelling alone.

They leant against each other for the remainder of the journey and tried to recover their spirits by talking about Eucalyptus Temple and reading through the glossy program they’d bought.
A photo of Tim Niblett showed him with his hands in the pockets of his rumpled tweed jacket, looking bemused at the way everything had turned out. The key factor had been Chris Cordwell, the young man in the flashy suit who had been at the Lassiter tribute that day. The whiz-kid promoter had heard about *Eucalyptus Temple* and had driven up in his pink Bentley to look at those three or four musical numbers, to get the vibe of the whole thing in actual performance. He’d seen the commercial possibilities and the show had run for months in its initial season, with the professional critics panning it from a great height and the public flocking to it anyway, drawn by word-of-mouth. The grapevine said it was a good old-fashioned show with a solid human story and catchy songs. After touring the various state capitols it was in revival at the Adelphi was doing good business. It hadn’t made Tim Niblett a millionaire, but he would never have to see the inside of a university again.

Of course his former academic colleagues were livid that *populist pandering and neo-fascist pastiche* had carried the day. More than one commentator had drawn a connection between the success of *Eucalyptus Temple* and the rise of the Hendon movement. They’d cited the show’s populist outlook, and the fact that while “Declan Dooley” and “Ross Rossiter” were depicted as poets, they were also shown to be working-class heroes who despised the elites and the intellectuals and dared to have their own vision of redemption for their country and their culture.

Tait had no idea what Tim Niblett thought about all that, but he himself was deeply pleased by the success of the show and what it stood for. It was a win to be gratefully chalked up on the right side of the board.

They were feeling cosy and sleepy by the time the train pulled into Turrawong station. The chilly breeze in the parking lot made them hurry to get the heater going in Francesca’s car and they drove sedately towards the cabin. It was well after midnight.

The kelpie barked a couple of times when they pulled into the driveway, but then went quiet.

“Well, here we are,” Francesca said, switching off the engine and the headlights.

“Yes.”

The heater was going full-blast and they sat motionless, not wanting to break the seal of the warmth and closeness by opening a door.

“It feels a bit like old times. Remember our Thursday shopping-days at The Inlet?”

“The temptations of the Bedding Department.”
“The delights of the Unguent Shop.”
“You mean the uunnnguent shop.”
“That’s the one.”
“Back then you were the Indian brave, Horse Feathers.”
“Hey, it was Hawk Feather, if you don’t mind!”
“Ah, that’s right. And I was the beautiful squaw, Wet Between the Legs. Remember?”
“How could I forget?”
“And every time I dropped you back here there was all that awkwardness about sex. I’d promised Craig to be sexually faithful, and I worried that I was being cruel to you, leaving you frustrated.”
“I remember.”
“And now there’s awkwardness again.”
“Yes.”
“Except that now there isn’t any promise to Craig.”
“Or even any Craig.”
“Nothing to stop us going inside and getting into your bed right now.”
“Not a thing.”
“You feel it’s an option?”
“It would have to be called an option, yes.”
“And it wouldn’t have to be a big deal.”
“It could just be physical.”
“We could confabulate like bunnies tonight, then forget about it in the morning.”
“I daresay.”
“You think you could do that?” she asked.
“Not really.”
“Why not?”
“I can’t be casual about your body. You must know that by now.”
“Yes, I do know it.”
“I can anguish for hours over a quick hug with you, let alone full-on sex.”
“I know. You should see your face sometimes.”
“Pathetic, eh?”
“No more so than any other piece of human behaviour. Including mine in particular.”
“I remember every detail of the last time we made love. I remember what every inch of your body felt like.”
“Ah yes, that rather nifty body of thirteen years ago. Whatever happened to it?”
“It went on being gorgeous. And yes, it was thirteen years ago.”
“That’s a lot of water under the bridge.”
“Too much to be casual about.”
“So where does that leave us?”
“If we had sex tonight I’d want us to go on having it. I couldn’t just switch it off afterwards. I wouldn’t be able to live without you, as they say in the classics.”
“You’re saying we’d need to be long-term partners?”
“Something like that.”
“And how would you rate our prospects in that regard?”
“Probably about nil.”
“Sounds pretty right.”
They sat silent for a moment.
“We’re in a bind then,” she said, “You’d be made unhappy by a casual night of lust, and to try to make it anything more than that would be folly.”
“So you do agree we aren’t partner material for each other?”
“The impediments are rather obvious.”
“Like the hopeless economics of my life.”
“I wasn’t thinking of that.”
“Are you going to mention my Broken Safety Valve?”
“No. I was thinking of other things. You not liking the kids, for instance.”
“It isn’t a matter of not liking them.”
“I used the wrong word. You’re not comfortable with them. It comes across. They’re aware of it.”
“It’s the times we live in.”
“The Gestapo at the door.”
“Yes.”
“I dread it too. But actually they’ve already come, or at least one of their trainees did.”
“What?”
“A couple of weeks ago. Cassie had a rope-burn on her arm from playing on the swing, and someone at the school reported it. A woman came to check if I’m heavily into tying my kids up.”
“Of course there’s lot of that about.”
“Naturally it wasn’t put in those terms. The woman had an official rigmarole that she had to say by rote. You could see her straining to remember how it went.”
“What happened?”
“She had a look around and said she could tell it was a ‘happy house’ and would make her report accordingly. Then she had a cup of tea and told me all the woes of her life. I counseled her as well as I could and she went away.”
“Sounds weird.”
“It was. By some fluke I got the least harmful person in the entire Gestapo. But it shook me because it could so easily have been otherwise.”
“And there’s been nothing since?”
“No. I assume she put in a good report like she said.”
“It creeps closer all the time,” said Tait, with a deep unhappy sigh, thinking of that chilling chapter in Sam Foster’s book.
“I didn’t mention it,” Francesca said, “because I knew it would worry you.”
“It’s better to know about things, especially nowadays, otherwise you find the hyenas ripping your throat out with absolutely no warning.”
“I’ve begun to wonder if I should sell up in the Valley and give myself and the kids a fresh start somewhere else.”
“Where?”
“No idea. I’ve only started to think about it.”
The thought of her going away was a whole new enormity to cope with. He felt his mind spinning.
He was suddenly desperate to take her to bed. It was all so fleeting. Thirteen years had gone in a flash. He could have her to his heart’s content tonight. This one little night could be the nearest thing to paradise, an erotic joy to solace him in the darkness to come. He could have the memory of it always. It was being handed to him, being offered on a plate to the poor mangy Steppenwolf. Quick, before another thirteen years has gone! The next years would be harsher and lonelier than ever before. And
the years after *that* would be even worse, if he was still alive to endure them. And there was something else too — a sense of the rage and humiliation he’d felt on the train, that he felt most of the time in one way or another. Lust would dissipate some of that, just for a little while at least. His heart was thumping and he felt frantic with desire. He began to say, “Let’s go inside,” but felt too choked. He decided to get out and go round to her door and draw her out by the arm without a word.

The chill air hit him after the heat of the car. He heard the rustle of branches and saw the dark width of the lake. He looked at the tall shapes of the trees along the bank, then lifted his eyes and saw a handful of stars through a gap in the cloud. He gazed up at them for a long moment. Down here was all fret and confusion and dread and denial and squalor and injustice. It was endless regret for yesterday and endless dread of tomorrow. It was what Thomas Hardy called “the modern vice of unrest,” and it had ravaged so many lives, had made damaged goods of so many people, had turned them into a Jude the Obscure or a Tess of the D’urbervilles, to be sported with by cruel powers. Above all it had made them homeless in the world, with only a few able to understand that their homesickness could be their guide. But up above the tree-line were the everlasting stars in their clarity. “*Let your fever be quieted,*” they seemed to say. “*All can still be well, if you don’t panic and you don’t despair.*”

The stars glinted as he gazed at them, and it seemed to him that they glinted a message, like the pulsations of a celestial Morse-code: “*Have faith in us. From on high we can see the whole pattern laid out. Whatever home you are sick for, we will lead you there in the end.*”

He went round to her side of the car.

“Anything wrong,” she asked, winding down her window.

“No,” he said, leaning down to her. “I was just thinking about things.”

“What?”

“Trees and stars and water under the bridge.”

The kelpie had been stirred out of its kennel again by their voices and there would be a frenzy of barking any minute.

“So we’re going to our *separate* beds, are we?”

“It’s the best thing.”

“Seems a waste. We might never pass this way again.”

“I know.”
“Kiss me goodnight then,” she said, putting her face right up to the window. They kissed more deeply than they had for years and Tait went weak from the intensity of pleasure.

“Sure you want me to go?” she asked huskily as they drew their lips apart. He stood there on shaky legs trying to get his voice back. He thought of the melodrama characters they sometimes adopted when they needed to lighten things between them.

“There is no other way, Cynthia,” he said.

“How noble you are, Reginald!” she replied.

“You think me hard?”

“A hard man is good to find.”

“Go, Cynthia, quickly.”

“Yes, Reginald, if you’re quite sure you aren’t up for a hump.”

“Go, dearest, go.”

“Well,” she said in her own voice, starting the engine and switching the headlights on, “this has been a day to remember.”

She sounded wryly philosophical. She squeezed his hand one more time and then let it go and began backing the car down the driveway.

Afterwards he stood on the little porch in the dark. The pleasure of the kiss went on rippling through him and was at least some consolation for a missed night of paradise. But then it began to wear off and he grieved for what he’d given up. He looked up at the stars and muttered, “I just hope you know what you’re doing.”

The kelpie hadn’t barked. That was a mercy.

But he knew it would be barking madly at five or six in the morning and he would be slumped bleary-eyed at the kitchen table, sipping the dregs of his coffee, in despair at the injustice of the world. Or he’d be at the window, unable to bear the provocation a minute longer, shrieking at the top of his voice for them to shut that fucking bastard of an animal up. He’d done that a couple of times lately, but it had no effect whatsoever.

* * * *
The shop across the road was to be a take-away pizza place. Two young blokes named Tony and Joe were working day and night to get it ready. Their girlfriends were helping them paint. The girls were called Natalie and Serena and they had done a big sign on the front window in green and red letters: PRONTO PIZZA. Under that was a cartoon figure of a little man in a chef’s hat running in a whirr of legs with a steaming fresh pizza balanced on his upturned hand. WE DELIVER, it said, and there was a phone number in large letters. It looked excellent.

Tait knew their names because the four of them were often out on the footpath talking while they worked – painting or sawing bits of timber or whatever – or you heard them calling out to each other from inside. At least you heard them in the intervals when the kelpie’s mad din wasn’t drowning everything out. They seemed like pleasant people.

Tait felt even more inclined to like them when they got tired of the endless barking and would call every now and then in exasperation for the dog to give it a rest. It was the first time he felt that he wasn’t totally on his own against the poor mad creature and the inhuman vacancy of its owners.

He was chatting with Ernie at the bird-stand one day at about noon. There were many small birds fluttering around their heads. Tait would normally have been at the Green Room, doing his work in peace and quiet and taking naps on the big old sofa to catch up on lost sleep, but this time he’d lingered. He was desperate to go though, for the kelpie hadn’t stopped its din all morning.

Ernie was becoming more stooped and frail, and increasingly hard of hearing. You had to articulate clearly to him. They had been chatting about the shop across the road and its latest incarnation. They could see Joe outside on the footpath with a big roll of metal sheeting that gleamed when the light hit it at certain angles. Tait sensed that Ernie had something to tell him and was working up to it slowly because he hated unpleasantness.

The rent was only a couple of weeks behind at the moment, so it wouldn’t be about that. In any case, Ernie had never dinned him for rent and surely wasn’t about to start now. Maybe he’d decided to sell the block the cabin was on. That was always a possibility, considering what it was worth. It was a long double block and these days any measly patch of waterfront fetched a fortune. The cabin would be what they called a “knock-down,” something to be bulldozed out of the way.
Ernie had scattered all the crumbs and seeds for the birds and was ready to shuffle back inside.

“Oh,” he said, as if it had just remembered. “Just while I think of it… The bloke from over there…” He indicated the house where the kelpie was. “He came to have a word with me yesterdee while you was gone, because he knows I’m your landlord.”

“Yes?”

“He reckons you’ve been makin threats against his wife and kids.”

“What!”

“He reckons you been shoutin out threats and bad language. He says his family’s livin in fear of what ya might do.”

“That’s ridiculous! The man’s a cretin! I’ve shouted out for them to shut their fucking dog up, that’s all! What am I supposed to do? I’ve tried to reason with the fucking moron, but to no avail!”

And even in saying that Tait had to raise his voice to be heard over the kelpie’s frenzied burst of noise.

“Well, I told him its none o’ my business. It’s for you and him to sort it out. Anyway, just thought I’d mention it to ya.”

You could tell Ernie was anxious to drop the subject and go back inside, so Tait let him go. But the old man stopped in the doorway and turned around and spoke firmly:

“I told the bloke you’ve always been a very good tenant and never given anyone any trouble. I told him you just write your poems and stuff and mind your own business.”

Then he turned and went in.

Tait felt a rush of gratitude. From someone so averse to taking sides in a conflict, it was a strong endorsement.

Then he felt rage at the cretinous bastardry of the neighbour. Then he began to feel a horrible knot of anxiety in the pit of his stomach.

He had to talk to Jimmy Sale about this. Jimmy would know exactly what danger he’d be in if the Cretinous Bastard made a complaint to the police. Perhaps he already had. Perhaps the knock on the door was due any minute. Yes, he must talk to Jimmy as soon as possible.

But right now he needed peace and quiet. He needed to get to the Green Room and lock himself inside. Of course there was no chance of being able to do his work. He was now too frazzled. He’d been trying to complete the poem about someone
becoming very old and being the last of their generation left alive, but now there’d be
days of inner stewing before he felt tranquil enough to get back to it.
That was if the stinking jackals of the Regime hadn’t come for him in the meantime.
He thought of the big old sofa in the Green Room and the bliss of stretching out on it
and going to sleep. He would go and lie down on the sofa and strain every nerve to
relax enough to get forty winks. Half an hour of oblivion would be a godsend.
He got his satchel from the cabin and mounted the motorbike and rode down the
driveway and on to the road. Joe gave him a slight wave from the footpath, and he
lifted his fingers from the handgrip in reply.
As he gathered speed he kept swallowing, trying to dislodge a little sliver of food or
something that he felt in his throat.
He could hear the high-pitched bark of the kelpie for a long way down the road.

* * * *

It was a Thursday night and they were rehearsing the farce.
Tait had just done a bit of dithering idiocy as Sir Percy Pratt from the Foreign
Office, and was sitting in a corner watching Saskia and Peggy Dean go through the
scene that followed. Saskia was stimulating to have around, as usual, with her good
looks and good spirits and her undisguised pleasure in being the focus of attention.
But she’d begun to be a slight worry, at least to Tait and to Peggy Dean. Her habit of
being half-undressed had gone a bit far. Like now. She wore a very skimpy singlet
without a bra and this left her breasts bare at the sides. It was enjoyable to see but a
bit too much of a good thing to be comfortable with. That was Peggy’s way of putting
it when the topic arose between her and Tait one night as they stood outside in the
coffee-break.

“It’s nice to see a buxom lass,” she said, “but there can be too much of good thing. A
certain degree of modesty is just good manners. It’s a form of consideration for
others.”

They felt someone should have a quiet word with Saskia, but Peggy didn’t feel she
was the one. She was known to be in the Salvation Army and it might be taken as
religious intolerance. A Christian only had to blink to be accused of intolerance now.
Peggy had confided that many church people – those who had to function at what she
called “ground-level” – nowadays felt beleaguered from two directions. They were disdained as “Bible-bashers” by increasing numbers of the public, and they were having Political Correctness forced on them from above by their own organizations. And of course Tait couldn’t say anything to Saskia about the way she dressed. It had to come from a woman. Therese, the director, was the obvious one, but she didn’t appear to find anything amiss. Tait had thought of asking Francesca to say something, since she had so often rolled her eyes over Saskia’s exhibitionism. But she’d now adopted a distant attitude to the Players. She was still helping with costumes and stuff, but came and went at her own convenience and with a defiant air.

Right now Francesca was at home getting ready to watch Jade Mustang’s live appearance on TV. Jade had accepted the invitation to go on the Ron Dodd show and had been practicing his old act intently. Bambi and Bundle would be watching at Francesca’s place.

It was ten to nine. Tait had arranged to leave the rehearsal for half an hour to watch Jade at Neil the Wheel’s house just up the street. Peggy Dean knew Bambi well from the Pioneer Museum and was curious to see the show also. Saskia said she wanted to come too, so the three of them went outside and saw the powerful beam of Neil’s torch coming towards them. “Lead on, MacDuff,” Tait told him. He squared his shoulders and got a fresh grip on the barrel of the torch and clumped ahead in his heavy boots to where he lived.

It was a fibro cottage with holes in the walls and a few dead shrubs in the front yard. The rusty gate hung off its hinges. Neil led them into a narrow passage. There was an acrid smell of old cooking and bad plumbing and general unkemptness. Neil had never known his mother. He lived with his long-widowed father who was some kind of semi-invalid. The father had already gone to bed. Neil led them to the tiny lounge-room where the TV was and switched on to the Ron Dodd show. It had been going for a while and the “Talent Quest” section was always in the second half.

They sat on the sofa and waited for Jade to come on. The room was very bare, without ornaments or photos or books.

Neil asked awkwardly if they wanted anything to drink. Tait and Peggy declined but Saskia asked what he had. He said there was lemonade. Saskia said she’d love some. He hurried into the kitchen as though on a supreme mission and returned with about a third of a bottle of lemonade but no glass. He got flustered and started to go back for a
glass, but Saskia told him it was okay and took a swig from the bottle. “Yum, yum,” she said, looking up at him and smiling. Tait had moved to an armchair so there was some more room on the sofa. Saskia patted the space beside her and told Neil to squeeze in. He sat down, very slowly and carefully, his face a blank, and Saskia said “There we are, aren’t we snug?” She casually rested her arm across his knees and took another swig of the lemonade.

Later she told them the lemonade was horribly flat and unappetizing, but for Neil’s sake she hadn’t let on. Exhibitionist or not, her heart was in the right place.

First up in the “Talent Quest” was a man who claimed he could burp the national anthem and many other tunes. The second was a lady who had taught her cat to put a little bonnet on its own head with its two front paws. After trying to run away several times the cat actually did it very nicely. Ron Dodd was brilliant at keeping a deadpan manner. It was only the odd flicker of an eyebrow or purse of the lips that gave it away. Of course that made it all the funnier.

He gave Jade a good introduction. He said they were old mates from the days when he started out in small-town radio and Jade was a star of the country show circuit. He said that old-time showmen like Jade Mustang were a national treasure and he called for a big welcoming round of applause. There was no twitch of the eyebrow or purse of the lips and Tait thought that maybe he was being genuine.

Jade was in his full regalia of cowboy boots and embroidered costume and enormous white hat. He looked lean and fit and focused. The studio band went into the William Tell Overture and Jade began doing rope-tricks, twirling a lasso around himself, stepping in and out of the circle, then doing it up in the air and on either side. He let out yells and yah-hoos as he twirled. It looked awfully good. Then he flung the rope down and took a whip in each hand and started flicking a row of candles out. He missed one or two but quickly went back and got them after another few tries. It looked okay because he kept the pace up and you didn’t get time to start to worry. His hat fell off at one point but he kicked it away as if he’d meant to get rid of it, so it didn’t look too bad. He also lost his balance a little but recovered very well. He burst a row of balloons one after the other, and didn’t miss any. Then a studio assistant hurled streamers into the air and Jade cut them into lengths before they hit the floor. He ended with a tremendous fusillade of whip-cracks and cowboy yells and then he was bowing low to a big burst of applause.
Tait breathed easy. He imagined the relief Bambi and Bundle must be feeling. Jade was obviously perfectly sober and had risen to the occasion.

Ron Dodd didn’t normally come back on-camera with the contestant after the act was finished, but this time he did. He gave Jade a big handshake and called for another round of applause. He said what memories it brought back to see one of the great old-timers from the tent-shows he’d loved as a kid. He sounded sincere and it was rather touching to see this other side of someone so hard-boiled. Ron was saying how much he’d always loved seeing whip tricks, like when they whip a cigarette out of someone’s mouth…

“Tell you what!” he cried. “Let’s do that! Let’s do it right now! Quick, anyone got a cigarette?”

There was a flurry off-camera and a technician handed him a cigarette.

“Where should I stand, Jade?” Ron asked eagerly.

“Anywhere you like, mate,” Jade replied in a laconic drawl, flicking his whip, making a few practice motions.

“I’ve always wanted to do this, folks!” Ron declared to the audience. “Okay, here we go! Drum roll please!”

He put the cigarette in his mouth and stood side-on to Jade and pulled his shoulders back and his stomach in.

There was a big roll of drums as Jade peered intently in Ron’s direction for a couple of seconds and then the whip uncoiled through the air and came down with an evil sound across the top of Ron Dodd’s head. He let out an animal moan of pain and astonishment and bent over double and grabbed his scalp in his hands.

Within a few seconds the screen went blank and then a station-identification message came on. But in the tiny moment before they lost the picture, they heard Jade’s laconic voice with perfect clarity.

“Sorry, Squire,” he said.
Chapter Twenty-Seven

Nothing more had happened with the Cretinous Fuckwit next door. After days of half-expecting to be arrested for uttering threats, Tait began to calm down. He did not scream out the window in despair any more, did not shriek out in the early dawn for them to shut their fucking animal’s noise. And he kept as much out of their line of sight as he could. There’d always been an old section of wooden lattice folded behind the door in the little shed. Now he dragged it out and brushed the cobwebs off. When he opened it like a concertina it was just the right height and width to block the gap between the cabin and the shed. He threaded it with twigs and small bits of leafy branch so that it could hardly be seen through at all. The dog barked insanely at him the whole time he was setting the lattice up. But when it was done it meant that he had the whole length of the cabin and the shed as a solid barrier. He was shielded from the eyes of the Brainless Bastard and also from the dog. Or at least partly from the dog. With the cabin being up on concrete pylons the dog could see underneath it, could see Tait’s legs walking about. He tried to think how to block off the view underneath but it seemed too difficult. It couldn’t be helped. The important thing was never to have to see the Moronic Arsehole or his dirty scum of a family, and never to be seen by them. Except for coming and going along the driveway, Tait would be invisible. Of course it meant not venturing out past the corner of the cabin on the lake side. It meant losing his access to the lake edge. He could not go and stand there and gaze out over the water any more. Or at least not in daylight hours. He felt enraged by that, but knew it was the kind of renunciation one makes to thwart the Enemy. And the more he brooded on it the more bitter satisfaction he felt.

_Burn what you love!_

He was also trying to follow Jimmy Sale’s advice.

He had talked to Jimmy about what Ernie had said, about The Arsehole claiming he’d threatened his wife and kids. They’d been sitting in Jimmy’s backyard in the evening but it hadn’t been a very lucid conversation because Lauren was having her worst-ever bout of back-pain and was prostrate in the bedroom and Jimmy was very concerned about her. The money worries had also got worse. And in addition their daughter Josie was going through a phase of emotional upset at home and at school and Jimmy was worried that the Hounds of Halifax could get a whiff of blood.
Nowadays you never knew who might be making a “notification” about anything at all. If someone thinks your kid looks too sad or too happy the hyenas can be on you in an instant. And Jimmy knew how eager they’d be to get their snouts into his family affairs in particular.

So the advice he gave was a bit rambling and disjointed, but Tait was able to piece it together.

The main thing was to *document* the dog’s noise and the long-standing failure of the owners to “abate the nuisance” of it. He needed to be able to prove there had been a genuine problem, that it wasn’t just a figment in the head of a former mental patient who’d gone off his trolley again and menaced the neighbours. These things, Jimmy said, always came down to how the problem was *defined*, and Tait saw the truth of that at once. That was why the goons of the Anarcho-Tyranny could mostly do whatever they liked — they were the ones who defined the problem. They could define it up or down or sideways, or turn it inside out. That’s when they weren’t simply *inventing* it out of thin air. But if you understood in advance that the definition was the key, you could prepare some input of your own. They never expected the average poor fool to be prepared, to have any sort of case organized. They were so accustomed to trampling over the meek and pitiable.

Video footage would be the best thing, Jimmy said, the actual sight and sound of the dog going full blast at some ungodly hour of the morning. Tait racked his brains but could see no way to beg, borrow or hire a video camera. In any case he wouldn’t know how to use it. He would have to have someone else come there at five in the morning with a camera and do the actual filming of the dog. Arranging that was no more within his power than flying through the air. Brooding on all that intensified his sense of how helpless he was. He even found himself resenting the casual way Jimmy had suggested the video thing, as if Jimmy had shown a careless insensitivity to the true direness of his plight. That was what gave Tait back some equilibrium. He saw that the System *wanted* you to harbour such notions, wanted you to conceive silly grudges against the few friends and comrades you had, people as hard-pressed as yourself.

But at least he was keeping a record of the early morning barks. At least he was doing that. He kept a pencil and paper on the kitchen table and would jot down the times of the barks as he sat slumped over a coffee, feeling like death warmed up from
the headache and the lack of sleep, and trying to get focused enough to ride to his refuge in the Green Room.

Some of the time now he was also aware a slight discomfort in his throat, as though a tiny sliver of food was lodged there.

* * * *

He had begun to tinker again with the poem. As with all worthwhile poems when they start to cohere, it seemed to set its own direction and to have a soul of its own. Instead of depicting a figure in extreme old age, the poem chose to see it from the other end, from back when the person was in their heyday, with their whole generation alive around them. The scene was a Sunday picnic out in the Valley maybe seventy-five years ago. The voice in the poem might be that of Mrs Callander in her young womanhood, or it might be someone else.

THE LAST OF US

Someday one of us will sit alone,
In that last isolation nothing mends,
Remembering this long-lost afternoon
And all the vanished faces of the friends.

The women, milky-breasted, beautiful,
Watching their children toddle on the grass,
The men cavorting with a bat and ball,
All easy in the sun, with time to pass.

Decades on, this sun will re-emerge
With aching clarity in someone’s mind,
To shake and grieve them in their senile age
And burn the brighter when the eyes are blind.
For one among us will outlive the rest
And weep to think, perhaps at ninety-five,
About this knife-edged brilliance of the past
When all of us were happy and alive.

And therefore let us cling together now
Against the future that we cannot see,
With all our love and tenderness endow
Whichever one of us it has to be.

He posted the poem off to Mike Kieslowski to use in the Nation First paper if he wanted to.

Everybody said a federal election couldn’t be too far away and you could feel the whole system gearing up, feel the air heating up with hatred and recrimination. There were new black and red posters around Turrawong and all over the country. They were put up by a new national body called SNARL whose aim was to incite and coordinate all the student radicals from all the campuses, all those many thousands of young firebrands who could be utilized against Beth Hendon and her movement. SNARL stood for Student National Anti-Racist League and Sabina Sharpe was its face and voice in the media. She was on TV all the time, giving “soundbites” and looking terrifically righteous and radically chic in her delinquent-waif style, with her black leather jacket and cropped hair. The public assumed she was herself a student rather than what she was — a well-paid and tenured academic manipulator of student angst.

There was a tenacious battle of the posters going on around Turrawong. Len Mullan had galvanized his Nation First people to meet the SNARL offensive head-on. They would fight it out toe to toe. So everywhere you saw the black and red SNARL posters being jostled and obscured by the green and gold Nation First ones. Or you’d see the green and gold ones being obliterated by the black and red. It kept see-sawing. You’d come back a day later and that patch of brick wall would have been lost or regained by one side or the other. But of course you never saw the process actually happening. It was done in the deep of night.
It wasn’t a close fight elsewhere because other towns and localities didn’t have a Len Mullan. The SNARL activists were students who had the energy of youth and very few responsibilities. The typical Hendonite was older and mired in all the daily obligations of work and family and society. Very many of them were battlers just trying to keep their heads above water. They weren’t people who could spend the wee small hours running round the town with armfuls of posters and buckets of glue.

The poster war in Turrawong even reached the Green Room.

Tait had ridden to town to spend the day working and dozing in his refuge. When he unlocked the door he saw the black and red obscenity sticky-taped on the wall near the Mission Statement. He tore the poster off and stuffed it in the rubbish bin, then turned the Mission Statement to the wall as usual so he wouldn’t have to see it. He wondered who had put the SNARL poster up, who’d had the gall to bring partisan politics into the very sanctum of the Players like that. Of course it was something Mona would do, or would order done. It was the inevitable next step after the imposition of the Mission Statement.

Actually, Mona had announced at the previous meeting that they’d be changing their Mission Statement to a Vision Statement. This was now the trend. The Commissariat had perceived a chink of vulnerability, a loophole that needed closing off. In the ordinary meaning of words – to which the average mug still gave some credence – a “Mission” is a relatively concrete thing, a set of aims and intentions in the actual world. There was the danger that fascist pigs and other troublemakers might want to measure the Mission against reality. A Vision was a much better thing to posture with. There was less in it that could ever come back and bite you. A Mission Statement might be 98% crap, but a Vision Statement was total crap, stuff that nobody would ever think to demand an accounting of.

There was a rehearsal that night and Saskia was one of the first to arrive at the Green Room. Only Tait and Neil the Wheel were there. She saw the SNARL poster was gone and asked what had happened to it. She had put it up the previous night, she said, when she was there to help paint some backdrops.

“I took it down,” Tait told her.

“Why?” she asked in all innocence.

“It was offensive.”

“How do you mean?”
He explained that it wasn’t polite to bring partisan politics into a social setting where there was a cross-section of people with a range of differing views. She looked at him blankly at first, but then seemed to get at least an inkling of what he was on about. Tait in turn got a glimpse of her picture of the world. It had never occurred to her that an “anti-racist” poster could be partisan politics or that it could offend anyone — anyone other than the “racists” of course, and she knew there weren’t any of those in the group. She’d never seen any of the Players put on a white sheet with a pointy hood and dance around a burning cross and torment black people. Those things went on all the time of course, out in the suburbs where the rednecks lived, the dummy white trash who were mostly dole-cheats and child-bashers and who talked in the same repulsive low-class accent as Beth Hendon. Beth Hendon was of course the queen of the white trash and hated blacks and migrants and gays and women. Saskia knew all this because all the teachers at Turrawong High said so every day in class. It was just something everyone knew, like $2 + 2 = 4$.

Tait mildly asked how it was then that the local head of the Nation First Party was an Aboriginal. She looked at him vacantly. She’d never heard about that. For some reason it wasn’t one of the things her teachers harped on.

It shook him that a perfectly intelligent teenager could have such a cartoon view of reality. And she must be typical. Whole cohorts of young people were being taught to imagine the common population as Nazi brutes, as vile primitives, as inbred Deliverance types, as homicidal geeks from the Louisiana swamps of 1906.

He’d had an unexpected glimpse into one of the darkest pathologies of the time, the pathology that Sabina Sharpe and SNARL were inciting and mobilizing on campuses all over the country.

For a moment Tait went watery in the pit of the stomach, the way people do when it dawns on them that they are facing a monster of infinite strength.

Neil the Wheel had been watching their faces all the time, especially Saskia’s. He retrieved the torn and crumpled poster from the bin and declared he would fix it for her, would smooth it out and make it good again with sticky-tape. She said it was wonderful of him but that the poster didn’t matter and that she didn’t really want it any more. But Neil was avid to serve her. He said he would take the poster home and fix it up real good.
The others arrived and rehearsal began. They did the scene where Tait and Saskia’s characters are found canoodling in the broom cupboard. It was a coldish night and the radiator wasn’t working so Saskia kept all her clothes on. She still felt awfully nice to cuddle, though, even just for the few seconds each time as they did the scene over and over. She didn’t appear to bear him any grudge about the poster. She hugged him back with no inhibition and always waited for him to take his arms away first, to let him know she didn’t find his embrace unwelcome or unpleasant. He knew she’d have done the same for any man she was playing the scene with. He thought how sweet of her to give that little reassurance each time.

She’d been criminally let down by her teachers, and by the elites whose bootlicks they were, but she was a kind girl in all matters where her natural impulses could flow. Tait liked her more and more, though not as much as Neil the Wheel did.

Their trusty Watchman was in love.

* * * *

He was sitting in the back booth at the Athena café, reading a most interesting letter from Mike Kieslowski. He hadn’t had a meal at the Athena for a long while because he needed to eke out every cent of his money. It was a cheap café to eat at but for the price of a meal there he could buy several tins of economy-brand soup or spaghetti or baked beans and keep himself going for a couple of days. But this evening he’d had a yearning for a plate of his old favourite sausages and eggs, and because he’d been very frugal that week he felt he could afford to splurge. And he just felt like sitting again in the old back booth and looking at the large and badly-painted figure of the goddess Athena on the wall. The old back booth held a lot of memories.

He had the letter flattened out on the table beside his plate and read it slowly, between mouthfuls.

Mike had been very glad to take “The Last of Us” for the Nation First paper. He said it was just the kind of material he was looking for. It wasn’t high-brow or low-brow but just a well-made piece of work accessible to anyone who cared to take a minute to read and reflect.

He was under a lot of pressure, he said, to tabloidize the paper but was holding out against it. His argument to Beth Hendon was that TabloidWorld was part of the
system they were fighting against and that they mustn’t become like the enemy. Tabloidism had only two ways of approaching the general population — as a brutish mob to be incited or as a broken rabble to be despised. If the Hendon movement was about anything, he said, it was about giving ordinary people their dignity back.

“I keep telling Beth,” he wrote, “that we aren’t out to beat them at their own game. We’re out to beat their game. Otherwise their game goes on being played forever.”

There were conflicts in the inner circle of the Hendon movement, mainly between what Mike wryly described as the “operators” and the “mystics.” The former believed it was all about being hard-nosed and doing clever deals in proverbial smoke-filled rooms. The latter were the culture warriors who believed it was all about the blaze of ideas whose time had come, the symbolic, the emblematic, the inspirational. Of course both factions had a crucial part to play and they needed to work in tandem.

Tait reflected that all this was a bit like the strain between the Prince and Murray. What a tragedy that was. They were the Cause’s two necessary elements, and if only they had figured out how to work together, how to combine the dashing charisma of the one with the dour competence of the other, the outcome would’ve been very different. But events had whirled so fast it was hard enough just keeping up with the tumult of each day. In all of history there can hardly have been a year that flashed by as intensely as what they call in Gaelic Bliadhna Thearlaich, Charlie’s Year, or the Year of the Prince. Murray’s task, Tait reflected, was to slow it all down, to allow cool heads to function. The Prince hoped to accomplish it all with dramatic flourishes. They were both conscientious men and both were right in their different ways. That was the pity of it.

His thoughts came back to Mike’s letter.

Beth Hendon herself sowed a certain amount of conflict within the movement, Mike confided. She tended to be convinced by the person she spoke to last, and neither side ever quite knew where it stood with her.

“Beth is tremendously brave and honest,” Mike confided. “But she has a blind spot. She thinks leadership is all about giving the nod to one faction or the other, one argument or the other. She doesn’t quite catch on that the leader’s real task is to synthesize — to take two streams of thought and create a third one which embraces both to the best effect, and which lets everybody feel they have a share of her
approval, even if it isn’t as large a share as they’d like. Maybe she’ll learn. She’d 
better, for all our sakes, or the movement will start coming apart.”

The federal election would be called any day now, Mike reckoned, and at least for 
the duration the two factions would come together, although they’d have quite 
different views of what was actually at stake.

For the “operators” it was nitty-gritty politics with the culture war as a mere 
bagatelle. They were decent people, most of them, but being worldly-minded they had 
an eye to the perks of success, to things like parliamentary seats and salaries. And if 
success did not come they were likely to drift away. For the “mystics” the political 
operation was only a means to advance the culture struggle, and it might not bring any 
perks at all in the normal sense.

Mike explained what he meant.

“The “mystics” take what I call the “Easter Week” view. Pearse and Connolly and 
the others understood in 1916 that their fight was above all a spiritual one, and that 
their own ultimate role was sacrificial. Yes, they had a practical military task, and that 
was to make their uprising a serious enough proposition to get everyone’s attention. 
They knew they had to hold the GPO and other sites in Dublin for a reasonable time. 
They had to give the British Army a bloody enough stoush to put themselves beyond 
the pale. They had to force the Regime to show its bare fangs for all to see. And that’s 
precisely what they succeeded in doing. When the Easter Week leaders came into that 
prison yard to be shot they were robed in victory, not defeat. The Hendon movement 
has to see itself in a similar way. It can’t defeat the Regime politically, any more than 
the Easter Rising could defeat the British Army militarily. But it might well galvanize 
hearts and minds, and change the climate of the culture, and create a new solidarity, a 
new will to resist. Its political task is to make a strong enough electoral showing to 
make the Regime lose its cool and show itself for the vile thing it is. The aim of the 
“mystics” is to achieve the moral victory. We are only incidentally in the business of 
worldly politics. We are primarily in the business of what Sorel called redemptive 
myth.”

Tait had come to the end of the page.

He looked out at the street. It was getting dark and the passing headlights were 
starting to go on. He looked over the roofs of the railway station at the patch of distant 
sky. There was a streak of cloud there, lit by the last glow of the setting sun. There
was something visionary in that glowing streak of red. He thought about Easter Week and its blaze of what Yeats called “terrible beauty,” but he knew that wasn’t quite it, wasn’t quite the vision that he was getting an inkling of. Then he seemed to hear a faint sound of far-off rhythmic drumming and the chanting of human voices. He could picture a landscape in the far distance underneath that red-glowing cloud. He could see figures moving there, sad figures, partly of this world and partly not. They were dancing.

It was the Ghost Dance.

Black Elk told how it had arisen in the year 1889 when the tribes were sick and starving and broken and in despair. A holy man of the Paiutes named Wovoka had a revelation given him by the Great Spirit. It was a vision of renewal and redemption, of a world where, in Black Elk’s words, “all the dead Indians were alive, and all the bison that had ever been killed were roaming around again.”

Wovoka told the people they must put on sacred red paint and dance to make the vision come true. And that year the Ghost Dance spread like wildfire through all the tribes as they endeavored to bring it true.

At first Black Elk did not know whether to believe or not, but he heard that people who had danced had seen their dead relatives and talked to them. “So I got on my horse and went to this ghost dance on Wounded Knee Creek…”

And he found that the answer to his own early vision was in the dance, the vision he’d had from the Six Grandfathers when they’d shown him the broken hoop and the withered tree: “the circle of men and women holding hands was like the sacred hoop that should have power to make the tree bloom again. And all at once great happiness overcome me, and it took hold of me right there.”

Yes, Tait thought, the Easter Week idea was a beautiful analogy and exactly right. But there was another aspect, a dimension that would seem to have more in common with the Ghost Dance. The ordinary people of the Western world were in nearly as bad a way as the tribes had been in 1889. There was a vast mad machine of lies that went on trying to spin-doctor the whole of reality through itself every five minutes, but the truth was that all was faltering and failing, all was grief and loss and disintegration. And it was made worse by the fact that many did not see their malaise for what it was. They were locked in the despair that does not even know it is despair. They were the ones who become the informers and lickspittles of the Regime, the
ones most likely to live in TabloidWorld, in the crime-scene world where there’s a pervert round every corner and only the cruelest measures will suffice. If they are young and fit and degenerate enough they became the Anarcho-Tyranny’s rank-and-file thugs, its loitering louts, its predatory bands of orcs. They became its blue-bellied looters and burners in the new version of Sherman’s March that is meant to devastate what is left of human society.

Like Black Elk’s people, the people of the West needed to restore the sacred hoop and make the withered tree bloom. They needed to bring their dead back to life and to talk to them. They needed to have back their own version of the buffalo herds — the sacramental gifts of nature that came from the Great Spirit and which had sustained them since the beginning of time. They needed to have a home in the world again. They needed the shelter of each other in the most profound and supernatural sense.

Yes, the Hendon movement had to be an Easter Week Rising, but it needed even more to be a Ghost Dance.

Tait turned to the second page of the letter and was startled. “Of course,” it said, “the Hendon movement is also a kind of Ghost Dance…”

Mike had anticipated his own line of thought almost word for word, even to the mention of repairing the sacred hoop. Jung called it “synchronicity” when people’s thoughts were attuned like that and Tait reflected that for thirteen years now the synchronicity between him and Mike had hardly ever failed. And that kind of attunement was the greater part of what was meant by the shelter of each other. It was the shelter of each other’s hearts and minds, and it came from being in the same story. Tait had understood for a long time that people’s truest and most lasting home is in a story, and that it was people belonging to the same story that made them neighbours and kinfolk, even if they lived ages and oceans apart. Or you could call the story a poem, as Northrop Frye did when he declared that Revolution and Counter-Revolution were ultimately “poetic creations.” They were the enormous poems that people live in, for better or worse.

Towards the end of the letter Mike drew a link between Black Elk and Sam Foster. Yes, you could see that was exactly right. Dwelling in different times and places they were nonetheless neighbours and kin because they lived in essentially the same story, the same poem. And someone from as long ago and far away as Confucius was their
kinsman too, and never more so than when he wrote: “I detest glib tongues
overturning kingdoms and clans.”

And to go from the sublime to the ridiculous, Tait thought bitterly, he and the
Brainless Bastard next door were literal neighbours and yet on opposite sides of a
chasm so wide that no word of comprehension could cross.

He finished Mike’s letter and put it in his satchel to read again later. The red glow
had gone from the streak of cloud in the distance and now there was only the endless
dark out there. He turned and looked into the forceful eyes of the figure of Athena on
the wall. Badly-painted or not, it was good to have it there. It was part of the reason
he’d always liked this cafe. A place where they had a figure of ancestral wisdom and
piety on the wall was his kind of place.

The very fact of it being there was the sign of a hunger for redemptive myth, for an
ultimate story to be at home in, for the great living poem of Counter-Revolution
whose hour had to come soon or there’d be nothing left to redeem.

And now Tait could’ve sworn that the goddess began to sway and move on the wall
as though responding to some deep rhythm, as though to take up and encourage the
Ghost Dance of the lost and broken people.

* * * *

Emmet the Melancholy Monster was looking the worse for wear. Jesse had taken to
it with a tomahawk, bashing-in the stubby bonnet that was its nose. Now it looked less
like a bunyip than like some bleary-eyed old reprobate, like a broken-down boxer
who’d taken too many whacks on the schnozzle. Tait trudged past and climbed further
up the steep slope.

It was late afternoon and the drizzle had stopped. He was looking for firewood along
the hillside. He had long ago got all the dead timber near the house and nowadays had
to look further. That made it tiring, for he had to drag the dead branches back to the
house to cut them down to size, so he either had to fetch as much as he could in one
go, or make another trek up the hill.

He was very cold and damp, from riding out to the Valley in the chill rain, and his
shoes were sopping wet. His legs ached from the exertion but he forced himself to
keep climbing. There was no firewood left at the house and he had to replenish the wood-basket or Francesca and the kids would be cold. A fire was a kind of psychological necessity too, for the house got so depressingly dank and brooding in the evening without one.

He came to a scatter of old dead branches, ones thick enough to burn well despite being wet but light enough to drag down the hill. He rested for a minute and thought to have a look at the paper that was now damp and crumpled in his back pocket. He’d picked the copy of the *Coast Chronicle* up from his driveway as he’d left and had noted two items in it that he was keen to read. One was about Len Mullan and the Nation First campaign now that the Federal election was well and truly on. The other was about Jade Mustang being among the local star attractions at the forthcoming “Winter Festival” at the Ridwell campus.

The paper hadn’t mentioned Len Mullan for a long while, but the editors must have felt they had to make a pretence of even-handedness, now that the election was underway. Nobody knew for sure how much support the Hendon party really had and the editors couldn’t calculate how many people they might be alienating if they didn’t appear to give Nation First a fair go. Of course the two candidates from the two major parties got wall to wall coverage.

As for Jade, he was now a weird sort of celebrity. The morning after he’d whipped Ron Dodd across the head there were photos of him on all the front pages, and it had been that week’s big novelty story on all the TV current affairs shows. And Jade’s laconic “Sorry, Squire” had become a catchphrase overnight. You heard people say it if they stepped on someone’s foot or poked them in the eye or whatever: “Sorry, Squire.” It meant some-thing like, “*I do regret your pain, but on the other hand, its pretty entertaining.*” And of course Ron Dodd had to make a joke of it to save face. He had a patter of wisecracks — like how he now had a whole new reason never to put a cigarette in his mouth again, or how he didn’t need enemies because he had mates like good old Jadey. And the very word “whip” was charged with wry hilarity whenever it came up. And those who hated Ron Dodd complained that Jade had botched it by not finishing the mongrel off.

Jade had got his “profile” back, and then some.

Tait started to fish the paper from his back pocket to have a quick skim-through of the two items before the light got too bad. It was already very dim and gloomy among
the trees, with the sky a thunderous grey. It began to drizzle again though, and he hurried on with the wood-gathering.

As he dragged two long branches back towards the house he heard the kids yelling, having some sort of fight. He thought he would finish up as quickly as he could and then get on his way. Francesca’s place had become more and more off-putting to him, with Jesse’s bad behaviour and the constant squabbling of the younger kids and Francesca slipping back into her dark moods. Often now he felt that his presence was just being tolerated, and that struck him as a bit much, seeing that he was wearing himself out on her behalf. He didn’t really want to come there any more, but there was no-one else to do the heavy chores. In fact no-one else ever came there now, except Bambi to do the odd bit of child-minding when Francesca was desperate to get out. Bambi always tried to bring Bundle with her, as company for Jesse. But from what Tait gathered, Bundle was fed-up with Jesse’s behaviour too.

He dragged the timber to the back verandah of the house and began cutting one of the long branches into lengths with a handsaw. His muscles were aching from the exertion on the hillside but he knew he shouldn’t take a rest or the cold and damp would begin to sink into him. He wanted to get home to a hot shower.

Francesca came out on the verandah. She looked glum and pinched and had her arms tightly folded across the old cardigan she wore. She stood and peered at the rain that was now falling heavily. Water streamed off the edge of the verandah roof and plopped into the mud. The kids were watching cartoons on TV and you could hear the loud irritating cartoon voices and the bang and crash of the action. The sounds added to the squalor of the scene.

“A penny for your thoughts,” Tait said after a while, just to distract himself from the sound of the TV.

“I was thinking about rats,” she replied, hugging herself tighter and coming over to where he was sawing. “They’ll be scampering around all night again. Last night I felt one of them ran across my bed. It’s giving me the horrors. And the kids too.”

“It would anyone.”

“It wasn’t quite so bad when we had the dog in the house at night. It seemed to keep them at bay a bit.”

“Still no word or sign of the dog?”

“No.”
Rocky had disappeared a week ago. It had wandered once or twice before and had come back, but a week was a long time for it to be gone. It had a collar-tag with Francesca’s phone number on it and someone might still call to say they’d found it, but it seemed less and less likely.

“The thing is,” Francesca said. “When you start listening for things in the night, you start hearing more than you bargained for.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. Footsteps. Tapping at the window.”

“Do you think there’s actually anyone there?”

“I don’t think so now, but in the middle of the night, in the middle of nowhere, one isn’t so sure.”

“You poor thing,” he said. “Is there anything I can do?”

He wondered whether he should offer to stay the night, stretch out on the lounge-room sofa. His heart sank at the prospect of it, but the thought of her truly scared or in danger was pretty hard to bear.

“No, no,” she said squaring her shoulders. “I’m just depressed about a whole of things, that’s all. I get spooked when I’m depressed. I’ve learnt that.”

Tait thought guiltily of that couple of months when she’d first been alone with the kids here and he’d stayed away, not knowing that aside from Bambi she was friendless. How spooky the nights must have been for her then. No wonder she’d looked so thin and haunted when he finally came to visit. And how brave of her to cope.

“So what else is depressing you?” he asked, resuming his sawing so as to keep the mood on an even keel.

“Oh, Jesse being a constant shit, and the car giving trouble, and how to make the money stretch far enough, and whether we’ll be flooded-in again. Things like that. Life’s rich tapestry.”

He kept sawing the wood and the sawed lengths fell with a thud on the verandah boards.

“Of course it’d be even harder without you. All the effort you make to look after us. To make sure we’ve got a warm fire. I do appreciate it, you know.”
He felt a wave of emotion go over him, because of what he’d done that time, leaving her in distress like that. The fact that she seldom expressed much thanks for his help, nowadays, made it all the more lacerating when she did.

“Anyone would lend a hand.”

“No they bloodywell wouldn’t.

“Don’t be bitter, Cynthia,” he said, in the melodrama voice, trying to lighten the mood.

“I’m not bitter. I’m realistic.”

“I know you are.”

“Anyway, I’m grateful,” she said, and then lightened her tone. “Of course I’ve nothing to offer in return except my poor scrawny body, and we know what short shrift I got last time I made that offer.”

“And now that I’ve taken my final vows, it’d be quite unthinkable.”

“What name are you adopting again?”

“I thought ‘Brother Immaculate’ has a nice ring to it.”

“It’s you, its absolutely you.”

The rain had eased a little.

“I have to think about my future,” she said, more pensively. “And the kids’ lives. Specially now that I’ve shed my lunatic fantasy of making good as an actress. I’m thinking I could go to university part-time. It’d take a few extra years, doing it part-time, but it’d be something to do. And I could become a teacher and have a way of earning a living.”

“Overnight success in showbiz might still be a possibility. You could horsewhip Ron Dodd in front of a few million viewers.”

“Yes, isn’t it amazing? Bambi said she’s been dumbfounded by it all. As you know, she and Bundle were here with me when Jade did the thing on TV and she half-expected he’d be thrown in the clink or something. Instead it’s been the re-making of him. From what she tells me, he’s been getting all sorts of offers to advertise things or appear at venues or whatever. He gets fan mail. No doubt it’s only a nine-days-wonder, but still. Isn’t life bizarre?”

“Sure is,” he agreed. “But your idea of going to uni sounds good. The Ridwell campus is pretty handy.”

“Mmmm,” she murmured dubiously, staring out at the soaked and darkening hillside.
“You don’t fancy Ridwell?”

“Oh, I don’t know what I fancy,” she said abruptly, pulling her cardigan even more tightly around her. “Do you think there’ll be floods? I don’t know if I can stand being trapped again.”

“It might not flood. The rain’s been steady but not torrential.”

The kids started having a fight, shrieking at the tops of their voices. Francesca sighed deeply and went to sort them out.

He finished sawing the branches and replenished the wood-basket and stacked the rest neatly on the verandah. He went into the kitchen where Francesca was making the kids’ dinner. She asked if he wanted a cup of tea, but he said he really ought to head home. She turned from slicing carrots and offered a hug.

“Leaving the sinking ship, eh,” she said against his shoulder as they came together.

“So would anyone with any brains.”

He didn’t quite know what to reply, so he didn’t say anything. And in the next moment he was overcome by how blessedly warm and soft her body felt and he didn’t ever want to let her go. But then the kids were screaming again and he felt her clench with irritation and start to pull away and he remembered how much he wanted to be out of that atmosphere.

He eased the motorbike down the slope to the front gate. The mud was very slippery and the bike kept slewing to the side. It really needed the all-weather driveway that Craig had envisaged. It occurred to him how easily Francesca’s car could slide out of control one day and slam into the gate-post.

The rain fell heavier as he headed for home.

* * * *

There was a gala opening of the pizza place across the road. It was a fine Friday evening. The front of the shop was decked with balloons and streamers and there was a big flood-lit sign at the road’s edge saying “Free Pizza Tasting.” Passers-by could stop and try a slice of all the different flavours and toppings from a table on the footpath. Tony and Joe presided in tall chef’s hats and the girlfriends Natalie and Serena handed out little plastic glasses of wine and fridge-magnets with Pronto Pizza’s phone number on them. A lot of their friends were there to help make a party
of it. Tait went across to get a free slice or two. He didn’t mean to stay long because the kelpie was at the front fence barking the whole time at the flurry of people. He wanted to get back inside the cabin and put the cotton wool back in his ears and his headphones on over them. As usual, nobody else seemed bothered by the dog’s noise. They behaved as though they couldn’t hear it, which left Tait with the awful Kafkaesque feeling of being the only one conscious of the horror. He was thankful and relieved when Serena looked irritably across at the dog and snapped, “Oh, do put a sock in it!”

That proof that he wasn’t totally alone allowed him to relax a tiny bit and he began to enjoy the atmosphere. It was friendly and good-natured and both Natalie and Serena gave him fridge-magnets. But then it was spoiled again. As he was eating a slice of pizza a police car pulled up and two sour-faced cops got out and inspected the scene as though looking for something to find fault with. They declared that the big flood-lit sign was a traffic obstruction and had to be moved off the roadside. Tony and Joe responded pleasantly and made haste to move it up on to the footpath. The cops said that obstructing the footpath wasn’t allowed either but that this time they’d let it go. They curtly refused the slices of pizza offered to them and drove away. Again, Tait felt he was the only one aware of the full horror. This harmless little gathering had just been casually shown the knout of state power, the filthy skull-grimace of Anarcho-Tyranny that has the right to find fault whenever it chooses and to ignore whatever it chooses. For weeks now a dozen or so of the local yobbo hoons had been going along the street each garbage night, over-turning the bins and strewn the trash on the ground. They chanted as they went, “We are the Garbage Gang, we are the Garbage Gang!” You didn’t see the cops swooping on them. Of course not. The police were now only there to intimidate the law-abiding. It made Tait feel suddenly angry with Tony and Joe. What kind of world did they think they were living in? Did they somehow imagine it was still a world where you can stage a happy friendly occasion out on the public street and it not be spoiled or interfered with in some way? This little shindig of theirs had only encouraged a mad dog to bark itself silly and two cops to exhibit their contempt for decent people. Didn’t they understand this? What fucking planet were they living on?

He felt the full rage welling up and tried to calm himself.
He went back over the road and up his driveway. He saw Ernie outside. Ernie asked what they were doing and Tait told him there was free pizza if he wanted some. Ernie said he wouldn’t mind but that he didn’t quite feel up to walking over there. Tait offered to go back and fetch him some, but Ernie said not to bother. He’d been getting heartburn a lot lately, he said, and pizza probably wasn’t a good idea.

Inside the cabin, Tait stuffed the cotton wool back in his ears, put the headphones on over them, and turned a record on loud. That muffled the barking just enough for it to be almost bearable.

He made an effort to relax his muscles and his mind. He also kept trying to swallow so as to clear his throat. There seemed to be something lodged there. It felt like the tiniest fragment of peanut, except that he hadn’t eaten peanuts for ages. It must be something else. He knew it wasn’t a sliver of the pizza from tonight. He’d been aware of it for weeks, off and on. He tried to forget about it.

He needed to go on with what he’d been doing earlier, jotting ideas for the ending of the novel. He still needed to work out why Robert Connell wasn’t captured at Carlisle with the others, how he become a shadowy figure like the one in the poem, the eternal Jacobite wanderer, forever “loyal to some wholly other crown” and “accustomed to the exile of the night.”

For a while he thought he had the answer. Robert Connell would be outside the town doing some last-minute foraging before the Regime’s forces arrived to besiege the place. He would be shot by a sniper and roll unconscious into a ditch. Later he would wake and stagger away and somehow find shelter and treatment for his wound. But that seemed too contrived. And too passive. Because of his lingering rage about the cops, Tait wanted to make it more a matter of deliberate defiance. His ancestor had chosen not to be caught in the surrender.

A memory niggled, a fragment of dialogue from a movie, but he couldn’t quite get hold of it. He just knew it was from a Western. Was it *Shane*? Did Shane say something about never surrendering? Or could it have been it the beleaguered marshal in *High Noon*? Then a strong, distinctive voice began to come to his mind’s ear. It was the voice of John Wayne’s greatest character: it was Ethan Edwards in *The Searchers*, that hard and brave and deeply damaged man. Tait could see the scene clearly now, and remembered the dialogue. Ethan is talking to an old friend and Civil
War comrade who is now a captain of the Texas Rangers. He wants to swear Ethan into the Rangers temporarily, but Ethan says no.

“A man’s only good for one oath at a time, and I took mine to the Confederacy.”

“I didn’t see you at the Surrender.”

“I don’t believe in surrender. I’ve still got my sword, and I haven’t turned it into a ploughshare, either.”

Yes, that was Robert Connell’s outlook too.

The garrison at Carlisle held out for nine days as the Regime’s heavy cannon pounded the fortifications to rubble. Francis Townley had urged that they fight to a finish and not be taken alive, but he wasn’t in overall command of the garrison and didn’t have the final say. That gave Tait his solution and he rapidly jotted down some notes. Just before the surrender comes on December 30, a secret escape route is discovered, an old drainage tunnel, but only a handful can use it. With Townley’s blessing about twenty or so of the Manchester Regiment – the ones most vehemently opposed to capitulation – manage to get out. Townley of course remains behind. As their colonel he is honour-bound to stay with his men, to try to gain the best terms he can for them.

Yes, that would leave Robert Connell at large after the fall of Carlisle, when the whole garrison was being led away in chains, to suffer all the torments prescribed for “rebels” and “traitors” and “outlaws.” Those who made the decision to surrender had imagined the Regime would treat them as legitimate prisoners of war. In the final analysis they had not understood the nature of the fight. They hadn’t seen the big picture. The penny hadn’t dropped that this was the long war to the death against the Great Commissariat, the contest that people like Thomas More had seen from the very outset and which King Charles had understood so clearly.

They were fighting an Imperium that spits on the very name of honour or mercy or fellowship. They were up against the great modern malignancy, the great demonic poem of Revolution with its frenzy of what it likes to call “creative destruction.” They were locked in combat with what Camus described as “that immoderate and mechanical murderer.”
“Nothing human is alien to me,” wrote the ancient poet Terence. The Jacobites were fighting the exact opposite assertion, the whole creed of the commissars: “Nothing human has any claim on me.”

Francis Townley must have understood that when he urged they fight to the finish. The other commanders at Carlisle should have understood it too. They should have seen there were only three options — win, or die, or escape to fight another day. Surrendering was stupid.

Tait had made enough notes. He’d seen his way towards the end of the novel and that was a good evening’s effort. He wanted to get pleasantly drunk on the cheap wine and then collapse into bed. At about midnight he walked unsteadily outside to look at the sky and get the feel of the breeze from the lake. The kelpie was silent. He looked and saw the shop was closed and dark, but the party had moved out to the backyard and he could hear some gentle music and the vague buzz of conversation. He didn’t feel as sleepy as he’d expected and he half-wished he could go across and sit with Tony and Joe who were such pleasant fellows, and with their good-looking girlfriends who’d given him two fridge-magnets.

* * * *

It was the final week of the election campaign and the whole country was at a fever pitch of hatred and lies. Beth Hendon had been campaigning hard but her meetings were often broken up by howling mobs of students mobilized by SNARL. The TV networks ran endless footage of riot-scenes and the message was always that the mayhem was Beth’s fault, that it was her and her jackbooted cronies who were causing all the trouble. Tait didn’t watch the news if he could help it, but whenever he did he was staggered yet again by the blatancy of it all. You’d see rioters shoving their hate-crazed faces into the camera and screaming DEATH TO BETH! DEATH TO BETH! DEATH TO BETH! DEATH TO BETH! But the commentary would be feeding you a totally opposite line, as though these were the tender young faces of tolerance, bravely confronting a Nazi juggernaut. The assumption was that viewers were so unspeakably stupid that they would not believe their own eyes and ears if you put another spin on the picture. There was always only the one official line being spewed every minute from every outlet — that Beth Hendon was beyond the pale of human decency.
Tait’s poem “The Last of Us” had appeared in the Nation First paper and Mike had sent him a copy. It sat well on the page, and there were no misprints. Misprints are the first thing you look for and if their aren’t any you breathe a huge sigh of relief, as if you’ve just escaped a fate worse than death. The print was a bit smudgy, but there was always a lot of that. Mike had endless problems on the production side. No major printing firm would touch Nation First with a barge-pole, either because they were politically hostile themselves or because they understood there would be repercussions, so Mike had to use a little struggling outfit that badly needed the contract.

“You are now a dead man,” Mike wrote sardonically in his note. “Publishing work with us is tantamount to having bull’s-eyes painted on your chest and back. The Enemy reads every word we print, and no doubt someone like our dear Sabina has got you in the cross-hairs already and is tickling the trigger. Good luck!”

“I’ve been a dead man all my life,” Tait thought to himself in the same sardonic spirit. “So what else is new?”

That edition of the paper had a piece about Len Mullan on the front, with a big smudgy photo of him sitting on the fire-escape of his flat. He had his sleeves rolled up and was grinning broadly and holding a big photo of Beth in one hand and a Nation First how-to-vote leaflet in the other. “Bring it on!” the caption said. On the Thursday came news that Len had been set upon and bashed the previous night and had to be taken to hospital with bad facial injuries. It had happened in the street outside his flat. The words DEATH TO RACISTS had been painted across the front of the building.

Tait heard about it from Peggy Dean who was the first to turn up for rehearsal that evening. It hadn’t been in the media. The news had got around by word of mouth. But Tait could picture a headline: EXTREMIST USES FACE AS WEAPON: ATTACKS TOLERANT BYSTANDERS.

He had been at the Green Room all day and had hardly put his nose out the door. There was steady rain and he was glad to be safe and cosy inside with his table and his desk-lamp to work at and the big old sofa to snooze on. He had been working solidly on the novel, the part about Robert Connell’s escape from Carlisle just before the surrender, and had been deeply in the imagined world of it. But there was a certain anxiety too. He had an odd feeling that he was working against a deadline, but he didn’t know what deadline it was.
There weren’t many rehearsals left and the whole cast and the prompt were supposed to be there without fail each time now. Francesca was now the prompt, the previous one having dropped out. She reluctantly agreed to do it after Therese moaned and groaned that there wasn’t anyone else they could rely on. They needed someone with lots of stage experience.

Tait encouraged her by pointing out what havoc she could wreak if she wanted to.

“The Devil has sent you this chance,” he said, “so don’t be ungrateful. You can get revenge on the whole pack of them for not being cast in a role.”

“Gosh, you’re right. And I could do it with exquisite subtlety, turn the whole play into a shambles without them quite realizing.”

“That’s where your stage experience will be such a help.”

“I can see them now, out there on the night, full of innocent trust in their prompt.”

“Little dreaming she means to crucify them.”

“Poor fools.”

“Um, there is one thing.”

“Yes?”

“I’ll be out there too.”

“I wouldn’t do anything to you. Not specifically.”

“I’d just go down in the general collapse?”

“Yes. Do you mind?”

“I guess not.”

“Tell you what I’ll do as a sweetener. I won’t start the mayhem until after you’ve had your cuddle in the broom cupboard with little Quagmire, or Swamp, or whatever her name is.”

“Saskia.”

“Yes, the one who’s allergic to clothes.”

“Its a deal.”

“Okay, I’ll be prompt then,”

But now she hadn’t shown up and they were well into the rehearsal and having to make do with different actors prompting ad hoc when they weren’t in a scene.

Saskia shed her gear again and kept bulging out of her flimsy singlet, but they were getting used to it and didn’t entirely notice any more. Except for Neil the Wheel. Neil looked in at the door every so often as he did his rounds of the building, expertly
flicking his torch off as he did so and twirling it into the home-made holster on his belt. If you didn’t know him very well you wouldn’t necessarily know how emotionally charged he was. He stood at the door like a typical security guy who’s just casually checking things out, but whenever Saskia was doing a scene he put on the completely blank expression that meant he was churned up inside.

Francesca didn’t arrive at the Green Room at all that night and Tait went to the phone box next morning to call her. He thought there’d most likely been some slight car trouble. He knew her car had not been easy to start lately. It needed a tune-up but she hadn’t had the money to get it done.

She answered the phone and her voice quavered as she told him what had happened. She’d got in the car to come to rehearsal. She’d been keen to get out and accelerated too much on the slippery clay and the car had spun sideways and slid down the incline with frightening speed and slammed into the gatepost.

It was exactly what Tait had foreseen.

Bambi was there to babysit and had come running at the sound of the crash. She helped Francesca to climb out of the car and walk back up to the house on trembling legs. Bambi was pretty shaken too, for things had come rushing back to her.

“Are you hurt, at all?” he asked over the phone, going cold at the thought of her being injured.

“No, or at least I don’t think so. Maybe I’m hurt but haven’t felt it yet.”

She still sounded a bit shocked. The quaver in her voice squeezed his heart.

“No,” he said. “Don’t think like that. You’ll talk yourself into it.”

“Alright, I won’t,” she said, like a little girl doing what she’s told.

He felt his heart being squeezed again.

“The thing is, though,” she said. “The car’s an absolute mess. The whole side is bashed in. What am I going to do without the car? What am I going to do?”

The distress in her voice made him ache to reach down the phone line and hug her tight. She needed to be held and soothed by someone who loved her totally and would always love her no matter what.

“There, there,” he said, his own voice quivering now, “there, there.”
Chapter Twenty-Eight

Beth Hendon and her movement were the moral victors in the federal election. Demonized and harassed at every turn, the Nation First Party still received just on one million votes. But it gained no parliamentary seats. Its support was spread too evenly across the country. In practical terms it would’ve been better off if its entire support-base had been in a single city or region. In many seats it won around fifteen per cent of the vote and Len Mullan pulled in twenty-two per cent. Beth made a great fight of it in her own constituency and won a stunning thirty-eight per cent, but it just wasn’t enough. The two major parties of the Regime had joined forces to recapture the seat. They didn’t care which of them got it, as long as she was ousted and some bootlick of theirs installed. As usual, Sam Foster had said it all in one of his American articles, and it applied in full to Australia: “We have a two-party system. There’s the Evil party and the Stupid party, and sometimes they join forces. That’s what they call bi-partisanship.”

In actual fact, Nation First did win a seat. It got one in the Senate, because the vote for that was calculated en masse rather than by constituencies. But even before the election process was cold the Regime had set to work. It must’ve had its agents put every detail of the man’s life under the microscope. It found he had migrated from Yorkshire at a time when the citizenship rules were being adjusted years ago. There was an abstruse technical question of whether he could legitimately sit as a member of the Australian parliament. The whole thing was a blatant device to set aside the will of the electors. It was, in effect, Lenin’s principle of “Who Whom?” If the Commissariat doesn’t approve of the way a vote has gone, it simply rejects it. Only “racists” and “xenophobes” would ever vote for Nation First, therefore any Nation First candidate who wins is by definition a creature of the damned and not to be tolerated. The totalitarian nature of all this was clear, but it was hard to fight against, for the Regime had the time, the money, the lawyers, the media, the power and the unremitting self-righteousness. All the Hendon movement had just then were huge debts and total exhaustion after fighting so gallantly above its weight.
The outcome strengthened Mike’s “mystic” view of the movement’s role and destiny, the “Easter Week” idea. They could never hope to beat the Regime in toe-to-toe political combat, or in rotten chicanery either. But that wasn’t the task. The task was to rattle the Regime’s nerve by a show of heroic defiance. And in winning a million votes they had secured its full malignant attention. In the clenched brains of the commissars some new slither of fear had surely been awakened, some icy streak of awareness that there is no ultimate safety in this world and that even yet they could dangle from the lamp-posts.

Yes, Mike was right about the Easter Week analogy. Beth and her rag-tag fighters had seized the GPO. It was now a question of what would happen next.

Tait saw some of the election night coverage on TV at Francesca’s house. He left fairly soon though, because Jesse was being a shit and shouting and slamming doors. Francesca shouted back at him while the other kids whined and grizzled. She had recovered from her shaking-up with the car slamming into the gatepost but was still not her proper self. She was trying to figure out how to get another vehicle straight away. They were trapped and helpless without one.

She rang Craig. She didn’t expect him to lift a finger for her sake, she explained, but only for the good of the kids. But Craig had his own burdens. He was with a new partner and she had two children from a previous marriage, so he was struggling to provide for two households. Francesca should apply for a bank loan, he said. She arranged for Bambi to drive her into town to see about it. The interview went badly because the loans officer had a supercilious manner. She looked down her nose, as though regarding Francesca as a feckless slattern. Those were Francesca’s own words, “a feckless slattern.”

“Had me summed up pretty well, eh?” she said bitterly to Tait.

He wished he had a magic wand that could make all her miseries vanish.

She had to make another appointment at another bank and arrange again with Bambi for a lift. Then that interview had to be put off and set up again. Then she found she needed all sorts of documents relating to the title of the house and other matters. And she needed written consent from Craig who was still co-owner of the property that the loan would be secured on. Every little thing took time and effort and the process dragged out.
The kids got a lift to and from school with the mother of a classmate who lived along their road. Francesca had never got on with the woman and felt that the help was being given in a condescending way, that this woman also viewed her as a feckless slattern. Francesca was trapped at the house. The drizzle came back and hardly ever ceased. The dampness found its way into everything. The sound of trickling water grew maddening. The scamper of rats was audible. And then she came down with a virus and had a cough and throbbing headache that wouldn’t go away.

Tait rode out in the rain every afternoon to see to the firewood and do what he could for her morale. It was starting to seem like a losing battle with the firewood. He had to go further to find the fallen timber and strain harder to drag it back through the scrub. The footing was all the more treacherous in the wet and he knew how awkward it would be if he broke his ankle or something. And he knew the exertion couldn’t be doing him any good, for there were times he felt such a cold squeeze in his chest that he had to stop and get his composure back lest he fall over.

And yet there was a strange kind of piercing happiness, even in those moments when he leant desperately against a tree thinking he might be about to have a heart attack. Maybe happiness wasn’t the right word. He didn’t know what the proper word was, but he felt he was in touch with something profound. This bit of stress was nothing compared to what the Prince’s men had gone through, or what their women had endured for the Cause. But still in some small way it linked him to them, and to what he had come to think of as the “Jacobite trinity” of Love, Risk and Memory. You risk yourself because you love something or someone, and to honour the memory of all that has been. Each person has to find their own way to that trinity, has to find the door that circumstance leaves open. It was like with the little servant-girl of Dunblane. What terror she must have felt. But probably in all her life she had only that one single blow to strike for the Cause, and she did not shirk it.

Yes, it was Love, Risk and Memory. That was the Easter Week trinity too. That was what stalked through the GPO and created a terrible beauty. That was the trinity that had battled the Great Commissariat for five hundred years and saved a shred of honour for us all.

* * * *
After the first week Bambi was no longer available to give lifts into town. She and Jade and Bundle had booked a holiday at a resort. Jade had recorded a series of TV ads for a beer company and their finances were suddenly looking a whole lot rosier. Tait started giving Francesca the necessary lifts into town and back on the motorbike. She wore an old battered helmet from the Green Room costume cupboard. It was a longish ride with two people in drizzling rain, and hard work for a lightweight machine that had seen better days.

She was no longer the prompt for the play. Therese had phoned her to ask if they could rely on her to be at the final few rehearsals. But Francesca didn’t care for the snippy tone and told her to stick the prompting up her jumper. The Players were now a thing of the past, she declared flatly. Craig hadn’t been too far wrong. They were a pack of wankers.

Often she and Tait sat across from each other in the gloomy kitchen for half an hour at a time without speaking, hearing the trickling water outside, just staring at the big mosaic teapot-stand in the middle of the table. Those times were bleak and numbing in a way, but there was a deep sense of intimacy too. It came from her knowing that he was the one person in the world who truly grieved for her troubles and felt them as his own, and from him knowing that she knew it.

The only light relief was when they saw the first of Jade’s television ads for Bedlow’s Beer. It was really very funny because it was so over the top. A forlorn-looking bloke stands at a hotel bar, counting some coins in front of him and wishing he had enough for a glass of beer. Suddenly there is a cry of ‘Yahoooo!’ and an evil-looking black whip comes down across the man’s head. Stricken and shocked, he turns to look. Jade steps into view, dressed in his flash cowboy gear and still holding the whip. “Sorry, Squire,” he says to the man in laconic tones. “Listen, let me make it up to you with a Bedlow’s.” The man breaks into a broad smile and brushes the whip off his head as though it were nothing. “Too right, mate,” he enthuses. “You can whip me for a Bedlow’s anytime!” And as two brimming glasses are set down, Jade and the man shake hands and turn in unison to savour the delicious brew. As the camera pans away from them you hear Jade ask laconically, “Eases the pain, does it, mate?” And you hear the man reply in deep contentment, “Sure does, Jade, sure does!”

They could tell it was going to be a popular ad, and it was. “Eases the pain, does it?” became as famous a catchphrase as “Sorry, Squire.”
The hitches and delays with the bank loan went on and on, and the rain kept drizzling day after day. The water began to inch across the Valley road at two or three places. It was only a few inches deep and they could still get through on Tait’s motorbike, but it was enough to throw Francesca into a whole new pit of despondency.

It was Jimmy Sale who broke the impasse by helping solve the car problem.

He was friends with a chap called Dave, of Davo’s Used Cars, an old client from when he was a community nurse. Back then Dave had been going through a dreadful divorce and custody ordeal, being crucified by the system, with his wife allowed to accuse him of horrific things without ever needing to prove an iota of it. It was the same for thousands of men of course, but it didn’t feel that way to Dave. It felt to him as if the universe was dedicated to his personal torment. He had acquired the shotgun to kill himself with when Jimmy came along. Jimmy helped him back from the brink, not so much by official methods but just by being a decent fellow human being who would lend an ear to the woes and give commonsense advice — the sort of advice people used to get from their grandmothers as a matter of course but which has been put down the Memory Hole like so much else. In the years since then, Dave had got back onto his feet, and had become active in men’s rights and welfare issues. He was also a keen Hendonite, at least partly because Beth Hendon was the only political figure who ever said a word about the ever-growing distress of men in the society. In fact Dave had been on duty at the Nation First booth outside the polling station when Tait went to vote. Tait asked him how Len Mullan was faring after the assault three days earlier. Dave replied that he was covered in bruises but nonetheless very chipper and swearing he’d been set upon by a bunch of schoolgirls, to judge from the sissy way they punched.

Jimmy rang Dave at the car-yard and said a friend was in a fix and being was mucked around by the bank. Dave chose a good late-model station wagon and drove it straight out to Francesca’s place, with one of his employees behind in another car to take him back. The wagon was hers to use, he declared. And if she wanted to buy it when her loan came through she could expect a whopping discount. But if she didn’t, that’d be no sweat. Any friend of Jimmy Sale’s, he said, was a friend of his.

Francesca was deeply touched and tried to thank him, but he waved it off.
“We all gotta stick together,” he said with deep feeling, “and not let the mongrels get over us!”

The mongrels of course ran the banks as well as the divorce courts.

Before they went, Dave and his employee helped to manhandle the damaged car away from the gatepost. Jesse helped too, and for once he seemed calm and focused. They managed to move it just enough to clear the entryway.

* * * *

Kelvin was roped in as prompt.

Tait had hardly seen him since he’d bought the plant-nursery up towards Melrose and was surprised that he’d agreed to step in. It turned out that Rory had urged him to do it lest he grow out of touch with his old friends. Rory was in one of his good phases and was being very sweet and supportive. He came to the final couple of rehearsals and sat watching everything with that beaming smile of his that nobody could resist. Saskia didn’t know at first about him and Kelvin and flashed her charms in his direction. Rory just kept smiling, but Kelvin looked such poisonous daggers at Saskia that she quickly got the picture.

He was sorry to hear about Francesca’s woes, and outraged that she’d been turned down for a part.

“The best actress the Players ever had, and they give her the flick!”

“Times have changed.”

“We didn’t appreciate how good it was when Auntie was in charge.”

“How is Megan? I’ve seen her once or twice in town lately, but not to talk to.”

“She’s narrowed her focus a lot. She’s desperate to leave the Council, but every time she gets ready to bail out some new fucking iniquity crops up and she feels duty-bound to stay a while longer.”

“She’s the tribune of the people. The only one they’ve got around here.”

“Well, she’s eased out of most of the other stuff, the Museum, etcetera. She’s become all home-loving, wanting cosy evenings with Brian. And Marigold. The three of them are there every night, playing cards and gradually working their way through Brian’s prize wine-collection.”

“Sounds nice.”
“It is, although there’s something slightly anguished about it too.”
“How about you? How are you going with your shrubs?”
“They don’t complain.”
“No?”
“No, they die without a peep.”
“I thought you had a green thumb, or a green appendage of some kind.”
“Leave my appendage out of this.”
“Or is it Rory’s appendage I’m thinking of?”
“Do you want a slap?”
“That’s a lovely offer, but not right now.”
They were sitting outside during the coffee break at the dress rehearsal. Or rather Kelvin was sitting in the narrow side doorway of the Court building, his bulk filling up the whole width of the step, and Tait was lounging on the grass.
“Actually,” Kelvin said, “he’s having second-thoughts about being a nurseryman. He’s a creature of wild enthusiasms that peter out. If I’d understood that earlier I wouldn’t have been so quick to sell the record shop.”
“Yes, it’s a bummer that you’re not at the Plaza. I’m forced to have long talks to myself now.”
“For some intelligent conversation?”
“Yes.”
“Same here.”
They saw Rory saunter to the open side door of the hall and look out. Neil the Wheel was just going in and was twirling his Nightfinder torch expertly into its holster. They heard Rory compliment him on it and Neil proudly saying that yes, he could do security good now that he had the proper quipment.
Rory gave Neil the full charming smile, but the divine Saskia was visible inside the hall and Neil had eyes for nothing else.
“So how’s the love-life?” Kelvin asked.
For a moment Tait half-thought he was referring to Neil’s love-life.
“Well?”
“Greta Garbo’s. Whose do you think?”
“Mine’s non-existent.”
“Don’t bullshit a bullshitter. There’s nothing to stop the two of you going at it like randy ferrets now. Everyone else is off the scene.”

“No, I’m just a family friend,” Tait said, a bit over-dramatically. “That’s all. That’s all I’ve been for years now. I help with firewood.”

“Oh fuck, where’s my lace hankie? I’m about to cry.”

“No, really. Too much water’s gone under the bridge — for all of us.”

Actually, Tait felt like talking about it. Kelvin was such a good sounding-board for one’s thoughts. Jimmy Sale was good for that too, of course, except that Jimmy’s natural sympathy sometimes got in the way. Kelvin kept a witty sardonic distance on things and freed you up. Tait wanted to tell him of the peculiar mixture of his feelings about Francesca. On the one hand there were those bolts of piercing happiness (if that was the word) that came when things were most difficult, when he felt his very existence was redeemed by being of some service to her. He had come to think of this as “the Marie Antoinette thing” because it reminded him of Burke’s great passage about the fallen Queen and how ten thousand swords should have leapt from their scabbards to defend her. On the other hand there were the feelings almost of revulsion — from her, from the kids, from the dank and dark and squalor of things, from the messiness of it all. That messiness was a danger to everybody involved because it gave the Anarcho-Tyranny so many possible openings.

He felt guilty about the revulsion but knew it came from some deep part of him and wasn’t to be denied. And yet even as he thought about how to phrase it to Kelvin, he knew the gist of the answer. Of course the dark feelings weren’t to be denied. That was the principle of Wholeness — that the light and the dark are always in it together. It was the puritan commissar who wanted to bring in the reign of Divisibility, that regime of unblinking sterile light gleaming off the white bones that stretch to the very horizon, the zillion skulls of the liquidated.

It was like the myth of trees and stars. At first you understand it in a facile way, as a total distinction between the dark down below and the light up above. But later you come to grasp that the trees and stars are in it together. The dark and the light get their meaning from each other, and we get the meaning of our lives from their combination.

“What’s wrong,” Kelvin asked.

“Sorry?” Tait asked, coming back out of his own thoughts.
“You keep clearing your throat.”

He hadn’t been aware he was doing it.

“I keep feeling there’s something stuck there.”

“Drink some water.”

“Yeah, I will.”

They heard Therese calling everyone together, and Kelvin was about to go back in anyway. He could see Rory sitting next to some guy inside the hall and didn’t like the way he was leaning towards the bloke as they talked. Kelvin had learned how the cycles went and he knew that Mr Hyde was due back any time now.

The dress rehearsal went very late and when Tait rode home after midnight he saw that the Garbage Gang had been along the street emptying the bins out on the ground. There was particular mess of rubbish in front of the pizza shop across the road.

* * * *

The bank loan finally came through and Francesca bought the station wagon from Dave at an excellent price. She had the old damaged car towed away by a wrecker. She also splurged on a ton of firewood cut and delivered.

Tait still had to chop a lot of the wood down into smaller chunks, but that was easier work than tramping the hillside. Jesse wanted to help. He liked using his tomahawk, so Tait got him to split kindling. Jesse seemed to want conversation and he talked about his vanished father with a touch of anguish. This was interesting to Tait because he was now working on a poem about the whole issue of the missing fathers of this day and age. He hadn’t known his own father and the poem was partly a disguised meditation on that fact.

But then Jesse said something else. He let slip a remark about Cobaldin, as though they might be moving there. Cobaldin was a big old country town, the gateway to the Western Plains. Cobaldin was flat, Jesse said, and so he’d be able to go everywhere on the roller-blades his mother had promised him.

Tait set the axe down, feeling as if ice-water had been injected into his veins. Jesse went on talking about other things. After a while Tait took the axe up again and went on with chopping methodically. He would not probe the matter. If Francesca was making major plans like that it was entirely her business. *He* had no right to be kept
informed. He was just the unpaid help, the poor stupid mug breaking his back to keep
the firewood up to them so they wouldn’t freeze to death!

He was glad she’d bought the ton of wood. It freed him from having to go there
every day. And now for the next two weeks he had the play to worry about, and that
would give him an excuse to keep his distance.

The crowds flocked in as they always did for a rollicking farce. Tait went through
his paces as the idiotic Sir Percy Pratt and got enough laughs to feel he was pulling
his weight.

He looked forward each night to the big moment in the broom-cupboard with Saskia,
to being the groping old fool with the frisky parlour-maid. There was even more to
look forward to after Saskia offered to do it topless. In fact she was adamant. Just
before the cue for the door to be flung open, she would slip her bra off. When the
doors opened to show them in full view she would squeal and cover her breasts with
her hands. The audience only got the merest flash of skin, but it gave the moment an
added frisson. Tait didn’t see much more than the audience did because it was dark in
the cupboard with the door shut and once it was opened there was too much else to
think about. But he got a lovely erotic sense of her bare chest. She conveyed
nakedness even when clothed, so when she was topless you really felt the electric
charge of it. It felt good because Saskia was so genuinely sensuous. She wouldn’t
have minded if he’d made the most of those few seconds in the dark, if he’d touched
her bare breasts, or any other part of her for that matter. That’s what a person does,
she’d have said, if they happen to be in a cupboard with someone they fancy — they
make the most of it. And the odd fondle never killed anyone.

It was delicious to think about, except that later, at the cabin, in the wee small hours,
he had to pay the price. He had to lie bereft, wishing Saskia was in his arms. How
sweet she would be in bed, he thought. As sweet as Narelle was. Maybe even as sweet
as Francesca was all those years ago when they had last made love. Then he would
realize again that it was Francesca he was aching for.

Although the play was doing great business, it wasn’t a very happy show. In her
typical way Mona was always in everybody’s face, wanting to be in charge of every
little thing, as if nobody would know how to blow their nose if she didn’t tell them.

Each evening Tait was inbued at the outset with a sense of her baleful influence. He
had to be elaborately made-up to look like the dissipated old twerp he was playing
and from where he sat for the make-up lady he was forced to look at the new Vision Statement with its load of drivel about the function of community theatre in “cementing harmony.” Mona had composed the little masterpiece herself and that phrase struck Tait as her signature. It made you think of gangsters setting people’s feet in cement before dropping them in the river. That was the only kind of cemented harmony that Commissar Mona understood. And now the statement was fixed in position so that he couldn’t even turn it to the wall.

Kelvin was also adding a certain tension backstage. He’d assumed Rory would be there each performance, watching or helping out, but Rory said he’d seen the show and didn’t want to be hit over the head with it too many times and would stay home. This worried Kelvin. When Rory insisted on having time to himself it meant he was likely to be out on the prowl somewhere. Kelvin was normally a superb prompt. He’d not only give you the word or line, he’d give you the voice, the tone, the inflection, the whole sense of the thing so as to put you instantly back into the rhythm of it. But now he was too worried about Rory’s whereabouts to focus properly. If he had to prompt he’d snarl it out in a tone of contempt. At once point Tait was waiting in the wings when someone needed to be prompted three times in a row. He heard Kelvin hiss: “Why don’t you try learning your fucking lines! See if that helps!” Tait thought it was very funny, but of course he wasn’t the poor wretch dying on stage. Actually, he wondered if Kelvin might just walk out and go home.

“I almost have a few times,” he said during one interval in the second week of the run. “But I don’t intend to give some little slut the satisfaction of knowing I’m upset.”

“Rory, you mean?”

“Yes, dear,” he snapped. “That’s who I mean. How many little sluts do you imagine I’m involved with?”

“Sorry, I’m not on the ball tonight.”

“Why, because your Great Obsession is here?”

“I didn’t know she was.”

He looked out through the peephole and saw Francesca chatting to Frank Baxter over a coffee.

He caught up with her in the Green Room after the final curtain. He was still half in costume, his forehead streaked with hair-whitener that had run in the sweaty heat from the stage-lights.
“I haven’t seen you for a week or so,” she said.
“Well, things have been pretty full-on. And you’re self-sufficient again now, in any
case, with new wheels and wood to burn.”
“Yes, things have looked up at last,” she said, peering closely at him as if to read his
face.
“And the floods didn’t eventuate this time.”
“Yes, what a mercy.”
“Though they’ll be back again soon enough.”
“They will.”
The Green Room was crowded and noisy.
“You still look hot and bothered,” she said. “Want to go in the fresh air?”
They went out and stood in the shadows.
“I enjoyed Sir Percy,” she said.
“Yeah, it was fun.”
“Tough, though, having to be squeezed in the broom-cupboard like that.”
“Someone had to shoulder the load.”
“You never flinched.”
A gust of night wind came and Tait turned his face into it, glad of the cold air on his
skin.
“Is there anything wrong?” she asked.
“No, why?”
“You seem a bit remote, that’s all.”
“Not that I’m aware of.”
“Good then.”
“I didn’t know you were coming tonight,” he said.
“I didn’t decide till late. Bambi happened to be available to mind the kids.”
“Ah.”
“Actually, it might be the last time she’ll be minding them. She and Jade and Bundle
are moving out of the Valley and into a new house and she’s giving up the babysitting
work.”
“How come?”
“Their good fortune continues. Jade’s been signed up to be one of the celebrity
judges on a new TV talent show. The deal is very lucrative, apparently.”
“Half their luck.”
“You predicted Jade would rise again. It was very shrewd of you.”
“So where are they moving to?”
“I’m not sure.”
“Cobaldin, perhaps?”
There was a pause.
“I knew there was something,” she sighed. “I suppose Jesse let it out of the bag.”
“Are you moving there?”
“Yes, I think so.”
“All the best then.”
“Please don’t feel hurt. I just didn’t want to mention it until I’d made a firm decision. I needed to quietly brood on all the angles. I talked to Jesse because he’s old enough now to have a right to know what plans are in the offing.”
“Certainly.”
“And so do you, of course,’ she added quickly. “It wasn’t my intention to keep you in the dark. Honestly.”
“Why Cobaldin?”
“My dad and I lived there once, for a year or so, and I quite liked it. And real-estate prices are much lower than around here. I can buy a perfectly good house in Cobaldin and still have some resources left over. And the campus of Western Plains University is there now, and I need to think about improving my prospects. But the main thing is that I have to leave where I am. It’s just too much to cope with — floods and rats and isolation and all the rest of it. No one knows better than you what the pressures are. Living in the Valley has had its better moments, but being there was Craig’s vision of happiness, not mine. The kids and I need to live in a town, a normal place where there are people around and it’s only a five-minute walk to all the facilities. I want to be someplace where my heart doesn’t sink at the sight of rain, and where it isn’t a major crisis if the car won’t start.”
“What time-frame are we talking about?”
“Craig has agreed for us to put the place on the market straight away, and the estate-agent reckons it’ll sell pretty easily — providing the buyer sees it on a fine sunny day.”
“As long as he doesn’t have to be taken there by boat, you mean?”
“And the rats have been bribed to keep quiet.”
“And the hillside isn’t looming like death.”
“And the wolves and goblins aren’t howling through the Valley of the Brothers Grimm.”
“It’ll have to be stage-managed with the utmost cunning,” he said.
“Lots of smoke and mirrors.”
“And ruthless mendacity.”
“We’re so much in tune, you and I.”
She touched his hand lightly.
“Do you forgive me?” she asked.
“For not mentioning it?”
“Yes, that. But also the actual fact of going.”
“Does my forgiveness matter?”
“You know it does. You could punish me by not being my friend anymore. The thing is, I’ll be needing your help to make the place presentable, and to pack up and everything. I can’t manage all that without you.”
“I wouldn’t stop being your friend,” he said, with a tremor of feeling. “Surely you know that.”
“Thank-you,” she murmured, lightly touching his hand again. “I thought I’d lost your friendship that other time, and it was pretty awful.”
“Which time?” he asked, although he knew which time she meant.
“After Craig left me, and then Brandon made off over the horizon. The clincher was when you didn’t come near me for all those weeks and weeks. I thought, bloody hell, if even you’ve given up on me I must be totally worthless. I can’t tell you how much it meant when you did turn up.”
A pain of remorse went through him as he pictured how gaunt and ill she’d looked after all those endless weeks at rock-bottom.
“I saw from your face how shocked you were at the state I was in. That’s what told me I had to climb out of it. But I couldn’t have climbed out without your faithfulness to lean on.”
He didn’t want to think about that whole episode any more, all those weeks of hell she’d gone through. It wasn’t what you’d call his finest hour. It wouldn’t exactly have
won him an approving nod from Burke. His sword hadn’t exactly leapt out of the scabbard to defend poor Marie Antoinette…

Francesca strained to see her watch in the dim light.

“I should go. I swore to Bambi I wouldn’t be too late home.”

They walked to her car and she got in and started the motor.

“I’ll pop out tomorrow afternoon,” he said, leaning down to the window, “and maybe mow some of that grass.”

“All these years,” she said, looking up at him, “and still pals. What does that tell us, d’you think?”

He started to reply but she put her finger across his lips.

“Don’t make some cynical crack, like ‘We’re both into Lost Causes’ or something. I’m not a lost cause, and neither are you. We may be on the wrong side of forty, but the best is still to come for both of us.”

He didn’t reply.

She took his chin in her hand and wobbled his head a little from side to side, as if to shake up his responses.

“Repeat after me,” she said. “Yes, Francesca, I totally agree.”

“Yes, Francesca,” he repeated. “I totally agree.”

“There, you see,” she said as he stood away from the car and she put it into motion.

“Great minds think alike.”

* * * *

Tait was glad when the play finished its run, even though it meant an end of being in the cupboard with Saskia.

He was going to Francesca’s almost every afternoon to mow and clean and tidy. There were major jobs to be done, like re-painting all the timber decking, and they watched the sky anxiously. The persistent rain hadn’t come back, but there were occasional showers and they worried that the drizzle would settle in. There was now a FOR SALE sign on the front fence.

Another reason to be pleased the play was over was that he had the Green Room pretty much to himself again. When a production was running he couldn’t be sure of peace and quiet there during the day. Somebody was always popping in to take care
of some detail of set or costume or lighting. And he didn’t want to make it too blatant that he was using the place as a sort of office and spare bedroom. When a production was running he tried to do some of his work at one of the tables in the Library, although the Library wasn’t a nice place to be. Every inch of spare wall was covered with the Anarcho-Tyranny’s agitprop. No matter where you looked you found yourself being hectored to feel either guilty or victimized. “Are you the Passive Victim of Family Members who Smoke?” asked the poster that loomed over the desk he normally sat at. If so, it yelled, “Don’t Keep It In the Family!” Underneath was the official phone number you could ring to have those family members “counseled” by experts. And soon, no doubt, there’d be a camp you could have them sent to. Of course there was no poster asking if you were being driven out of your home each day by a neighbour’s barking dog. That wasn’t the sort of problem the commissars wanted to help you with. The blighting of home and neighbourhood was part of their agenda and essential to their great project of atomization. If a neighbour is doing the job on you, more power to them. And some other neighbour will do the job on them, and so on. All that mattered was that the shelter of each other be smashed for all time, be deformed into the menace of each of other, into Orwell’s description of the future as “a boot stamping on a human face forever.” It was all there in Orwell’s writing, not to mention the blazing lucidity of Sam Foster’s The Wreck of the West. Yet how few people could see it. That too was just as Orwell said — to perceive what’s right in front of your eyes is the hardest thing of all. Actually, Tait had wanted to donate a copy of the Sam Foster book to the Library, but knew they’d never allow it on the shelves. With Marigold retired, the Library was an alien place and he found it hard to bear for more than an hour or two at a time. If the day was fine he’d walk down to the riverbank where there was a well-shaded bench and do some writing and snoozing there. Now and then he tried to stay at the cabin to work, ears stuffed with cotton wool and the earphones on over them and turned up loud, but the kelpie’s noise couldn’t be kept out and it permitted him no peace of mind. With the play over and done he had his sanctum back.

He had worked hard on the poem about the fathers, for Mike to use in the Nation First paper. Fathering was an issue the Hendon movement took to heart, even if nobody else gave a damn anymore. He also wanted to add support to Mike’s “mystic” view, the idea that it’s the victors of the spirit who ultimately save us. He had used a
rather odd metrical beat, a slightly broken little rhythm that somehow seemed appropriate.

THE FATHERS

A little boy bewildered,
    I made my way alone.
The world was full of fathers
    But none of them my own.

So it was no man’s duty
    To teach me what he knew,
To help me or protect me
    Or guide me as I grew.

But then I heard of figures
    Long gone into the grave,
The legends of the loyal,
    The sagas of the brave.

Through history they’d striven
    For me, the future’s waif,
To see that I’d be happy,
    To see that I’d be safe.

They battled for my birthright
    – The links of human love,
An intact world about me,
    A kindly star above.

And vagabonds and princes
    Alike were in that fray,
Allies of the common good
Against an evil day.

Alas for the hopeless odds
No effort could amend,
And yet the moral victors
Redeem us in the end:

For in a high example,
And in a brave renown,
The rightful patrimony
Is safely handed down.

And thus the future’s orphans
Come finally to know
Their true heroic fathers
Of centuries ago.

Mike’s acceptance came by return of post.
In his note he mentioned that everyone around Beth Hendon was pretty exhausted after the huge effort of the election campaign, but that was all he said. In a previous letter he had given notice that he would have to be much more circumspect in future, especially when it came to the Hendon movement’s affairs. All the Hendon people were having to tighten the rein on themselves. Tait understood why. There was no telling who might be reading one’s mail, or listening to one’s phone calls, or delving into whatever corner of one’s affairs. It wasn’t paranoia. There was a steady seep of poison in the media, and anything opening might be seized on. This was “the politics of personal destruction.”

The Regime had succeeded in undermining the Hendonite senator and it looked as if he might be kept out of his seat. His citizenship was being challenged in court and the aim was to entangle the case in endless hair-splitting rigmarole. The Regime had the whole national treasury and legions of lawyers to drag it out for a thousand years. The Hendon movement had empty coffers and the task of finding even one or two legal advocates willing to toss their careers down the drain.
On top of that the media was making the most of some real recriminations within the Nation First Party. There’d been bitter criticism of Beth’s decision to re-contest her lower house seat in the recent election. She’d have got into the Senate easily, if she had chosen that path, and would’ve retained all the practical advantages of being in parliament. Her judgement had been unsound, said the internal critics, mainly the people Mike described as the “operators” as distinct from the “mystics” like himself. The former didn’t like quixotic gestures whereas the latter took the view that the movement was quixotic or it was nothing. The Regime knew how to handle hard-boiled “operators” any day of the week, but it could be spooked by opponents who weren’t seeking power and perks as such but had a sacrificial agenda. Right now though the media’s aim was to make it look as though the Hendon movement was self-destructing from within.

In addition there were orchestrated calls to investigate the Nation First Party’s finances, with claims there could be “irregularities” there. It was the basic media ploy — you invent whatever dire headlines you like, then unctuously claim the right to pursue the matter to whatever lengths you choose because it’s in the headlines and therefore of urgent public interest and concern. This was the whole technique of power in the modern world. You invent the crisis which you then claim to be addressing. You manufacture the mayhem that justifies you exerting police powers over a crime-scene.

The Hendonites could with equal justice have asserted that the finances of the Regime’s parties were suspect, and that they too should be gone over with a fine-tooth comb, but of course there was a difference. The Hendonites didn’t have a non-stop media monopoly to ram their assertions into everyone’s daily consciousness.

Fiscal accusations being a bit dry, the Enemy varied them with juicier tidbits. A woman sacked from Beth Hendon’s office for laziness and backbiting had been paraded through the media with tales of the fascist hell she had endured. The Anti-Victimization Board screamed that it needed sweeping new powers to seize all the Hendon office records, and the Regime declared it would consider rushing the legislation through in the holy name of combating Workplace Abuse. The sacked woman had been several times asked to do her job more satisfactorily, and this of course meant she had been “subjected to a campaign of Bullying.” She had also been asked by a male colleague if she’d like to go for a drink, and this meant she’d been
“traumatized by Sexual Harassment.” And on another occasion she had not been asked to join colleagues at the pub, which meant she’d been “damaged in her self-esteem by Discrimination.”

This circus ran for a couple of weeks until, for once, the Hendon forces got a clear shot back. They had learned from a well-placed sympathizer that the woman had a history of defrauding health-insurance companies. Mike was able to run the story on his front page, to great effect.

And now the movement was having to think about gearing its ragged forces up all over again for the State election that wasn’t too far off. It was crucial not to lose the impetus of those one million federal votes. Electoral pressure had to be kept on the Regime, to keep the slither of dread alive in the clenched brains of the commissars, to keep them thinking about those lamp-posts they might yet dangle from.

* * * *

Tait found it a piercing irony that almost as soon as Francesca had made up her mind to flee the Valley it started to look lovelier than ever. The rain eased off and went away and the air of late winter began to change to that of a cool bright spring. The sky was blue and the drifting clouds were high and white, and you saw them reflected in the ponds of water that still lay in the lower corners of paddocks. There were increasing scatters of flowers along the roadside and trills of birdsong in the trees. Everywhere the grass grew longer and waved in the clean wind.

Astrid’s Meadow was especially lush and green and Tait stopped for a quiet sit most times on his way home from Francesca’s. Trailing his hand through the wavy grass one evening, he found the two tied sticks that he’d put there years ago and his thoughts went back to Black Elk’s vision of the Two Roads of human fate — the road of flourishing and the road of hardship. But now Tait felt he understood it better. The two roads might be symbolized by the two sticks neatly fastened at right angles, but that wasn’t so much how they were in real life. Symbols had to be neater than real life because you had to be able to read them for guidance, especially at times when you were baffled or heartsick. They were like myths, like those “redemptive myths” of Sorel’s. They weren’t there to give you all the answers, but to offer a clarifying insight which you then took and applied as best you could. They were something like
a “magic word” in a fairy-tale, something that might be given you at the start of a perilous quest, something that doesn’t make you invincible or infallible but yet might get you through many dangers. The symbol of the crossed sticks was to tell you that there are two separate roads, but you have to work out for yourself that it isn’t their separateness that matters but how connected they are.

And the more he thought of the Two Roads the more he thought of the Ghost Dance, of that season of delirious hope and faith when Black Elk went to Wounded Knee Creek and thought he saw the sacred hoop being renewed in that circle of men and women holding hands. In his mind’s ear Tait could hear the drums and the chanting in Astrid’s Meadow and it seemed to him that the sudden surge of nature’s beauty all around could be read as a sign of the power of the Ghost Dance that was happening now.

Then again, he knew that such mystical notions might just be a method of fending off the raw grief that would hit him like a truck sometime soon. He had not even begun to come to terms with the enormity of her leaving the Valley and moving so far away. A Shakespeare line kept coming into his mind: *If you have tears, prepare to shed them now.*

Tait tried to devote his mornings in the Green Room to working on the novel. Having got out of Carlisle before the surrender, Robert Connell and his handful of companions must decide what to do. They sit numbed with cold in a snowy hollow, discussing their options. They are all glad not to have been captured, but grieve for their comrades who’ve been led away in chains on the icy roads to be eventually executed or sent to the plantations. At first they think they should head north into Scotland to try to rejoin the Prince. But they would be foreigners there, out of their ken, without food or shelter, not knowing the lie of the land or the manners and ways of doing. They might not know friend from foe. They might be killed or captured very quickly. And the Regime’s forces would soon be marching in that direction and might simply overtake them. No, they had to survive and stay at large to be of continued use to the Cause, otherwise the escape from Carlisle would have been in vain. A number of them had been smugglers before the Rising and they urge the rest to return with them to their gangs. That was the best way to remain armed and defiant. Then if the Prince’s army came south again, they could rejoin it. Or if the English or Welsh
Jacobites gave any sign of mobilizing, they’d be close at hand. If not, they can keep on fighting the Regime in their own way, the old owler’s way of the moonless nights.

Like the Seven Men of Glenmoriston in their Highland cave a few months later, they make a solemn pact among themselves never to surrender.

They rise and go, starved and frozen and ragged, to be marked men for the rest of their lives, attainted rebels, outlaws to be taken or killed at the hazard of an unguarded word or a glance of recognition. But not wanting it any other way — not wanting to be anything other than men who had stood up in the year of 1745 and defied the whole monstrous juggernaut of the age, the whole despicable death-machine of the future.

* * * *

He was sitting on a bench outside the Plaza at mid-morning. He’d come up from the Green Room because he’d not been able to concentrate on his writing. The obstruction in his throat was worrying him a lot and trying to clear it didn’t help. It didn’t feel like a tiny fragment of peanut any more, but like an actual small lump that was starting to close off his throat passage. He didn’t know if it really was a lump. He didn’t want to think about it because he knew how easy it was to exaggerate things in the mind. He preferred to assume it was just a piece of something that had lodged there with particular tenacity. He felt he should eat some food and that might help dislodge it.

He had bought a pastie at the Plaza bread shop, counting the coins out ruefully in the palm of his hand. His finances were desperate and he was worried sick about the rego that was soon be due on the motorbike. The rego itself was bad enough, but if the bike needed repairs he had no idea how he’d find the money to cover them. If he lost the use of the motorbike…

Someone bumped into him as he dithered along with his pastie in a paper bag and his mind preoccupied. It was Narelle’s friend Cathy. She looked for a moment as though she would keep on going without a word, but she stopped and gave him a searching glance before she spoke.

“Narelle sends her regards,” she said.

“Oh, good,” he mumbled, still not quite on the ball.
“She particularly said to pass them on if I bumped into you.”
“Please give her mine in return,” he said. “How is she going?”
“She and her husband are having a baby.”
“Wonderful,” he said, just trying to sound halfway normal while he took the news in.
“They’re about to move down to manage her father’s newsagency in the country.”
“She’s giving up uni?”
“Well, she’s got her Masters now.”
“Yes, I thought she must’ve. She isn’t going after the Ph.D. then?”
“No, she says she’s had enough of academia to last a lifetime. She really hates it now. She’d had so many conflicts with the professors. Well, some of them, anyway.”
“A certain Sabina Sharpe would be one, I imagine.”
“Yes, Sabina. She calls her The Razorblade.”
“The Toxic Razorblade.”
“That’s it. Anyway, Narelle said to wish you well for the future, now that she’s taking up a new life herself.”
“She’s happy then?”
“Very. She’s over the moon about the baby, of course. They both are.”
Cathy seemed more at ease with him now. Perhaps it had just fully clicked in her mind that he hadn’t actually done Narelle’s life and happiness any permanent harm.
Tait was feeling deep relief about that himself.
Cathy said she had to hurry on.
Outside on the shaded bench he vaguely nibbled the pastie while he pictured Narelle with a husband and a child and a whole new life down south in that beautiful mountain town with the carpets of alpine flowers. And never having to set foot in academia ever again.
“Thank you,” he sighed to whatever powers might’ve been active in the matter.
“Nicely done.”
But then he felt a hiss of derision coming from another part of his mind. “You’ll be into Astrology next,” he told himself, “and Crystals and Oudja boards. But listen, if you’re so respectful of the great Mystical Powers, how come they always leave you broke and alone?”
He had to admit it was a valid question. Still, he replied to himself, it does no harm to attribute good things to benign powers. It was just a way of speaking about phenomena. It was just a mode of expression.

He closed his eyes to savour the feel of the breeze on his face and the sounds of the town and the aromas of spring coming from the hills. He drifted into a half doze and it all began to seem deliciously hazy. And he’d forgotten about the obstruction in his throat.

A child’s voice roused him. The voice was calling “Hey Jade! Hey Jade!” and he looked up just in time to see an amazing sight.

Jade’s old Plymouth was rolling majestically by in the street. But it was wonderfully renewed and transfigured. It gleamed with fresh duco and glinted with polished chrome. It looked as unblemished as if it were fresh out of the showroom. The top was down and Jade sat grandly at the wheel with his big white hat on and Bambi snuggled in the crook of his arm. Bundle sat in the back with his usual contemplative expression, watching the scene go by.

People were calling hello to Jade all along the street. He was a household name and face and everyone in the area was fond of him for being their local celebrity and yet seeming like such an ordinary person who wasn’t up himself. He was so laid-back, so wonderfully droll in his humour. He raised people’s morale.

“Eases the pain a bit, does it, Jadey?” some wag called out from the footpath.

“Too right, Squire,” Jade called laconically back. “Too right.”

Everyone within earshot smiled, feeling fortunate to have heard that little gem of dry wit from the very lips of the man himself.

And as he watched the amazing vision pass by in the street, Tait knew that this sign above all was not to be doubted. You can disenchant anything if you set your mind to it. You can mock and debunk until there’s nothing left but a dead planet drifting in empty space. All it takes is the will to disenchant, what Trilling called “the modern will that masks itself in virtue,” for the work of disenchantment is always done in the name of some high-sounding abstraction.

They make a desolation and call it Progress.

But to doubt this sign – the very chariot of Resurrection going by in triumph – would be to offend the good gods beyond all forgiveness. For redemption was a true thing and could happen against any odds.
And that was the sacred truth of the Ghost Dance.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Francesca had found a buyer and the deal was going through. It looked as though she had only a few more weeks left in the Valley. She had phoned a real estate agent in Cobaldin – a bloke who’d been pals with her father years ago – and arranged to rent a dwelling there for an initial period while she looked around the town for the right house to purchase.

The cool bright spring weather continued and the property looked lovelier than they’d ever seen it before. Tait had done all the outdoor tasks and now the rubbish was cleared, the grass mowed, the bushes trimmed, the gravel raked, the paths tidied. He had painted the decking a nice deep green, and the gateposts and letterbox the same. Francesca had worked equally hard making the inside presentable. Now there nothing much to do but wait for the final intense flurry of packing and leaving.

There was an odd air between the two of them now. It wasn’t so much strained as just delicate. They spent a lot of time sitting at the kitchen-table while she sorted through photo-albums and flicked through books and papers and examined items of clothing, deciding what was to be kept and what chucked-out. It was a poignant process for Tait. Every time she tossed something into the chucking-out box a twinge went through him, especially if it was anything that he recalled her touching or using or wearing. She was being ruthless, she declared, because she really needed to leave a lot of past associations behind. He asked if he could have some of the photos that she was discarding, and a few of the books, and one or two of the little trinkets. He wanted to ask for some pieces of clothing as well, but was embarrassed. He especially wanted a blue dress that he’d seen her in many times over the years. It shocked him that she was going to throw it away. How silly, he thought, that he couldn’t get up the nerve to ask her for it, after all there’d been between them. But there was this new fragile element, as if they were both aware of a need to be careful.
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It was this feeling that made Tait decide not to mention the dog. He had found the decomposed body of their lost dog Rocky up on the hillside and had covered it over with twigs and rocks.

After they’d finished at the kitchen table they’d adjourn to the deck outside and watch the sunset and then the first few stars beginning to twinkle as the sunlight died away. Tait would stay until around seven or seven-thirty, spinning out a certain ration of red wine so he wouldn’t be too affected for the ride home. He normally didn’t like drinking alcohol except at home by himself, but now it served as a sort of mild tranquilizer to make their time together feel more mellow. It also seemed to help his throat, to ease the obstructed feeling a little.

This evening he was in a tizzy but trying not to show anything. The blue dress was still lying in the chucking-out box where she’d casually tossed it a few days before. Each day he had been on the verge of asking for it but hadn’t. Now he was angry with himself for being so gormless. He was also angry with her for throwing it out, and for not knowing how much it meant to him, and for not offering it to him of her own accord. He was also irritated because the kids had turned the TV up loud. He wanted to go, to be alone on the bike with the wind in his face.

He stood up and said, more abruptly than he intended, that he was going.

She asked if anything was wrong.

He said there wasn’t.

She hovered near as he put the helmet on, then she lifted her arms to invite a parting hug, but he pretended not to notice.

“Bye,” he said over his shoulder and rode down the slope and out the gate.

For part of the way home he felt gratified that he’d punished her for the blue dress. But when the anger had gone he just wanted to cry.

* * * *

Mike and Caroline had just had their second child. Charlotte, they’d named her. This was partly after Charlotte Corday, the fine young woman who assassinated Marat, the French Revolutionary maniac, and partly after the Countess of Derby who’d held off the Roundheads at the siege of Lathom House and whom the Puritan fanatics had called “Babylon".
Tait was at the Green Room. He’d finished his stint of writing for the day and was re-reading Mike’s account of the new arrival.

“To have children is to give hostages to fate, is to give the commissars a leverage on you, and that can be an anguish when you’re lying awake in the wee small hours. But it’s also a show of trust in the ultimate scheme of things, and a pledge of commitment to the long-term fight. We need to re-stock the ranks for the battles of the future, need to breed our own replacements. As Sam Foster pointed out in The Wreck of the West, the loss of the will to reproduce is the direst of all signs, the most abject of all surrenders. Of course it helps to have a superb wife. When Caroline and I first talked about getting married, we sat down to discuss the whole topic of kids. I asked her in a rhetorical manner whether we ought to bring children into such a world of strife. I’ll never forget the matter-of-fact way she replied.

“Of course we should,” she said. “They’ll be Kieslowskis, won’t they? They’ll be built for strife. And if they aren’t born already knowing it, we’ll teach them the Number One rule.”

“Which is?”

“Always head to the sound of the guns.”

Tait agreed: Caroline was superb.

It was almost evening now and he was restless and unsure of what to do. He hadn’t felt like riding out to Francesca’s place that afternoon. Or rather, he’d felt the impulse but had repressed it. He was still feeling the peculiar pain and grievance over the blue dress and wanted to let it subside before he saw her again. Besides, the motorbike had developed a rattling noise in the engine and he was trying to spare it as much as possible. He half-thought to go to the Athena café and eat something, especially since it might help clear the obstruction in his throat, but he was trying to exist on two dollars a day. If it wasn’t for the dog he could just go home to the cabin to make himself cosy with a big bowl of thick noodle soup. That was his favourite food now and it was so cheap. Sometimes he would have a slice or two of crusty bread as well, to help clear his throat as it went down. Other times he just had the soup because anything more solid seemed to aggravate the obstruction. Or he could sit or stroll by the lake. But of course there was no peace of mind to be had at home any more. Nowadays he tried not to return until well after dark when the dog’s noise was winding down a little and its owners were inside for the night.
He locked the Green Room door behind him and went up the hill to the Plaza. The newsagency was still open for another few minutes, so he stood and glanced through a copy of the *Coast Chronicle*. The front page was taken up with a story headed *HATE-GANGS TRIGGER GAY FEAR*. It said that homophobic gangs were infesting the streets of Turrawong town. Tait knew the locality as well as anyone and was around the town a lot but had somehow missed this phenomenon. Nor had he heard a single word about it until now. It was utterly appalling news. Ordinary hate-gangs would’ve been a sufficient blight on the town, but to have the *invisible* ones operating was even worse. Even a callous Hendonite bastard like Tait was shaken to think of the possible extent of their depredations. Then he found an item on page 4 in which Commissar Mona was quoted in her capacity as the “Equity and Gender Affairs Community Co-Ordinator.” Her office had requested a quarter of a million dollars in state funds in order to “co-ordinate” a “Comprehensive Tolerance Plan” for the town. It was just so spooky that the phantom gangs had seized their moment to wreak unseen havoc, as if to show that nothing was more urgently needed than a “Tolerance Plan.” And how lucky that the local rag had blown the whistle on these invisible rampages, otherwise nobody would have known a thing about them.

He left the Plaza and headed back down the hill, and in the gathering dim of evening he saw Megan emerge from the Council building and start to cross the road to the car park. He began to walk faster. He would catch up with her before she drove away. Their paths hadn’t crossed for a longish while and it would be nice to say hello. And a few moments chatting with Megan would take his mind off make-believe hate-gangs and Tolerance rackets. As he quickened his pace he felt a piece of gravel flick into his shoe. He stopped and bent over to remove it. When he looked up again he could not see Megan. She must have got to her car very quickly. Maybe she was in a hurry. He crossed the road and went towards the car he knew was hers. But there was nobody in it. He glanced around at the other vehicles and saw Megan and Marigold sitting together in Marigold’s car. He took a step in their direction, just to say a quick hello, but then stopped. The two women were leaning together with their foreheads almost touching. They had not noticed him. They were too deeply engrossed in each other. He saw Megan put her arm tenderly around Marigold’s shoulder and kiss her gently on the cheek, then stroke her hair, as though to comfort her in some sorrow. He
wasn’t totally sure in the dimming light, but it looked as if Marigold was wracked with weeping.

Tait went into the Green Room and closed the door behind him and lay down on the sofa. He got up some time later and peeped out the door and saw that both their cars were gone. He opened the door wide and stood for a long time looking out at the night sky above the Court building, or at least at the part of it that wasn’t blocked by the dark mass of the Watchtower of the Regime.

When he thought it was late enough he headed home. He went slowly, nursing the bike, trying to keep the rattle in the engine from being too loud. The obstruction in his throat felt larger.

* * * *

He was at Francesca’s in the early evening of the next day. The load of wood she’d bought had diminished and he intended to make a foray along the hillside to replenish the stocks a little. He had begun to miss the wood-gathering, the stretch it imposed on the muscles, the primal nature of the task itself. And now with the cool dry spring weather the ground was firmer underfoot and there was less likelihood of twisting an ankle.

And soon he would not be out here any more. She would be gone and far away and this would be a stranger’s house. Everything now had the poignancy that comes when you are aware of the time running out.

Then again, not everything was poignant. Jesse was in his room playing records at full blast. He couldn’t get enough of a group called Black Death Vomit whose album covers showed pictures of atomic mushroom clouds and shrieking skulls and daggers dripping blood and tangles of diseased-looking flowers writhing in agony. The songs were like the hymns of Hell. But then again, Tait told himself as he tried to clench his ears, perhaps he was being hoist on the petard of his own theories here. Jesse might be showing a degree of psychic wisdom, reaching out for “wholeness” by getting in touch with the “shadow” side — getting himself in balance with a dose of Dionysus, plugging in to the force of the Furies, the howls of Hecate. How droll, Tait thought in a rush of self-mockery: he was quite willing to allow that horrors had a place, as long as they were ones he didn’t find too unattractive.
Emma and Clare were watching TV, apparently not too bothered by the din from Jesse’s room, but Cassie was sick of it and wanted to go out on the hill with Tait. He felt his stomach tighten with anxiety. He had no wish be out alone with a kid, any kid. Not in these times of The Great Child Terror. Not with the canting loonies running amok on all sides. Not with so many so many buckets of blood in the water.

“I won’t be a nuisance,” Cassie said, looking up at him with a forlorn expression.

“Truly.”

“It’ll be dark shortly,” he said, to put her off.

“I’m not scared,” she replied.

“Would the other girls like to come too, do you think?” he asked, the knot in his stomach getting tighter. He figured being with two or three of them was somewhat safer than being with one.

“No,” she said flatly.

He knew the kids had long been aware of his studied aloofness, his apparent dislike of them. That made Cassie’s request seem touching. She was risking a rebuff, and that made it hard to say no.

“Let’s be quick then,” he said.

They went along the track past Emmet the Melancholy Monster, then turned up the slope to where Tait knew there was a single dead branch on the ground, one he’d often meant to collect.

He felt intensely ill at ease. His skin prickled as though he was under surveillance. To break the silence he asked her about school and she started telling him about her interests and her friends.

But after a moment he was only half-listening.

He had just read Nadezhda Mandelstam’s _Hope Against Hope_, a great and terrible memoir of life under Stalinism. Nadezhda was the widow of the renowned Russian poet who’d been killed for writing a verse about “the peasant-slayer in the Kremlin” To Mike and Caroline the book was almost a kind of bible. In some ways it hit even harder than Solzhenitsyn’s work did, for the horrors were shown more in the context of common daily life.

“We learn to accept the unacceptable,” Mike had written, “as soon as it starts to become routine. This happens even when we think we’re being vigilant. We no longer see things clearly. One needs a focal point outside one’s own time and place, a way of
attaining the clarity of contrast. That’s why Caroline and I make a point of reading *Hope Against Hope* every couple of years. By recognizing more and more of Nedezhda’s experience in our own lives we keep track of how bad things really are.”

Mike was right. It read like an account of what was happening in the world right now, forty years after the peasant-slayer’s demise. It depicted every kind of suffering and evil, but above all it showed the drive to strip human society of the last elements of an honour-system, to degrade it into a colossal crime-scene. One particular quote said it all, and Tait had copied it out and pinned it at the top of the Blue Board: “A number of terms such as ‘honour’ and ‘conscience’ went out of use at this time — concepts like these were easily discredited, now the right formula had been found.”

And in place of that lost honour and conscience, Nedezhda went on, there was only

> the constant “unmasking” of people, the search for an ulterior motive behind every action. And in those conditions people lose their social instincts, the ties between them weaken, everybody retires to his corner and keeps his mouth shut — which is an invaluable boon to the authorities.

Yes, the right formula had to be found. That’s what the 500 year rampage of Modernity has always been about — the search for the formula, the method, the technique. And once found it would usher in the total crime-scene world, not merely a concentration camp, but Milosz’s concentration universe, the endless Orwellian prospect of a boot stamping on a human face forever. Tolkien was another who saw the whole thing clearly. The formula has been like Sauron’s lost Ring of Power. On one side there is a monstrous malice bent on finding that ring at any cost, and on the other are the desperate, scattered forces of the good, trying to thwart that malice.

And amazingly, even after 500 years of ruthless effort, the malice had not yet totally gained the upper hand.

Even the Great Killer in the Kremlin had not yet had the formula in its pure distillation, had not possessed the One Ring. There were still people who defied him in whatever ways they could. One of the Mandelstams wrote a verse that called him by his true name, and the other lived to tell the story of it all.
The good forces had held out just enough over the centuries to make a tiny but crucial difference in the overall equation. They might not have known it at the time, but we can see it in hindsight. We can see the vivid air signed with their honour.

And the forces of good, however depleted, were still in the field. People like Mike and Caroline were choosing to have children, giving hostages to fate because they knew there was always a higher priority than safety. They understood they had to breed their own replacements in the fight, had to raise up the reinforcements who would ride to the sound of the guns.

Tait felt ashamed. He’d been scared to take a walk with Cassie. How piss-weak was that. It just showed again what he’d always known about himself — that he was a quivering wimp who would obediently “retire to his corner and keep his mouth shut” and so please the commissars.

It was disgusting.

But he would try to be better than he was, would trust that an ounce of ancestral honour had somehow got through to him. He would have faith that he was indeed of Jacobite stock, and that there were brave ghosts who would wish him well on that account and would help him if they could.

But he had to invoke that help, had to join in the Ghost Dance with all his heart. Cassie had trailed off talking by the time they reached the spot high on the hill where the dead branch was half-hidden in the undergrowth.

Tait sat down on a stump for a breather.

“So,” he asked, “are you looking forward to moving to Cobaldin?”

“I’m not sure,” she answered.

“It’ll be a big adventure.”

“Have you been there?”

“A few times, long ago, when I was a teenager and working at jobs in the country. All the trains to the west went through Cobaldin. Still do, I guess.”

“Yes, Mum says that’s one of the good things about it, that you can always catch a train.”

“And there’s a university there now. That could be handy. Do you think you’d want to go to uni at some point?”

“I want to work in a chemist shop.”

“Why that?”
“I just like them. They’re clean and neat and you can help people with advice — like if they’ve got a cut or bruise, or if they’re not sure what cough-medicine to buy.”

It seemed a realistic aim. Francesca’s kids weren’t the coddled brats of the gentrified. None of them would be getting a free ride in life. They were the children of what Beth Hendon always referred to in her speeches as “Hard Street.”

“The Australia we’re battling for,” she would always say, “is the one that lives on Hard Street.”

“That’s a very good ambition,” Tait said. “It’s nice when there’s a helpful person in the chemist shop. Every bit of helpfulness makes the world a better place.”

“Yes,” Cassie agreed, nodding, as though she held that view strongly and was glad to hear it confirmed.

There was a pause, then she spoke again.

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure. What about?”

“My Dad.”

“Yes?”

“Do you think he might come and live with us at Coboldin?”

“I’m afraid I don’t know, Cassie,” Tait replied.

It was on the tip of his tongue to remind her that Craig now had a whole other family to look after, but caught himself in time. Instead he asked:

“Is that what you’d like?”

“I wouldn’t mind.”

“Well, your mum’s the person to ask about stuff like that.”

“I did ask her. She just got cross and said her usual thing about leaving baggage behind.”

“Baggage?”

“She says the whole idea of us moving away is to leave a lot of Bad Baggage behind. She says we have to dump all our Bad Baggage and never see it again.”

“Ah.”

“Is my Dad part of the Bad Baggage?” she asked softly.

“It’s just an expression. It doesn’t apply to people, just to things and situations.”

He realized that Cassie had wanted to ask him about her father all along, that that was why she’d come out on the hill, to get a private moment. He wished he had
something worthwhile to say. He remembered how it felt to be a kid and worried sick about matters you don’t understand and dying for a grown-up to say something helpful and clarifying.

They stayed resting where they were for another minute or two. The road was way down below them and they could just see the chimney smoke from the house drifting across, a blue spiral against the dim air. The bush was darkening around them and felt damp and chill.

Tait got a grip on the dead branch and began to drag it down the slope, with Cassie following behind.

When they got near the house they saw Francesca standing on the back veranda looking up at them. Her face was very serious. Tait dragged the branch the final distance and let it fall.

“Anything wrong?” he asked.

Francesca didn’t answer. She told Cassie to go inside and watch TV with the other kids, then beckoned Tait into the kitchen.

She looked at him for another moment. Then she spoke, softly but intensely.

“I just got a call from Bambi, after she got a call from someone else. The news is just going around.”

“What news?”

“Megan is dead. She killed herself this morning. She took a rifle into the bathroom and closed the door and shot herself.”

* * *

It was the cancer of course. Megan had seen the specialist, had learned it could only be a few months or perhaps a year.

Tait now thought he knew the meaning of that little private scene between Megan and Marigold in the car that evening. Marigold was being told the news. And how brave and poignant it was that Megan had been the one doing the comforting.

The cremation service was very small and private, but Bruce held a memorial occasion out at the farm a week later. It took place in a paddock at the back of the house so there’d be space for all the people. There were about three hundred of them and they came from all walks of life and from all the groups and clubs and societies.
that Megan had been part of, including of course a good many from the Players and from the Pioneer Museum. The local state and federal politicians were there, looking just as Evil and/or Stupid as you’d imagine. But Bruce did draw a line. The current Shire President had been one of Megan’s longtime enemies on the Council, and the years of dirty politics from him and his cronies had done a lot to wear her down.

When the man phoned and offered to lend his imposing presence to the occasion, Bruce was in no mood to trifle. Tait heard about it from Kelvin, who had been in the room. “If you come here,” Bruce had said with an icy calmness, “I’ll belt the smirk off your verminous face with a tyre-iron, and then kick you out the gate.”

The proceedings were held in the afternoon. It was a sunny day but pleasantly cool, and the paddock was full of the fresh scents of spring. Things were kept on a pretty informal basis. Various people got up and recounted fond anecdotes, and a few hymns were sung in between, good old hand-clapping ones like “Bringing In the Sheaves.”

At one point old Mrs Callander got up looking remarkably spry and said that she could remember tickling Megan under the chin in her basinet sixty-odd years ago.

Len Mullan was another who spoke. He told how Megan befriended him when he first drifted into the region at fifteen, an abandoned black kid whose only asset was a flair for football. She had kept a kindly eye on him through the Youth Sports Fund that she was chairing at the time, had made sure he had proper gear to play in, things like that. And it was through her influence that he’d been taken on as an apprentice in his trade, although he hadn’t found that out until years later. Because of Megan he’d been able to earn a living and have a decent life. How many others, he wondered aloud, had been helped along and weren’t even aware of it?

Kelvin spoke on behalf of the Players, and kept his composure pretty well, but seemed too dispirited to go on at any length.

Megan’s daughter Elly was there, having flown in from Malaysia. She was tall and strapping and looked like an Amazon in her Air Force officer’s uniform. She moved everyone very much when she said she’d be content to be half the woman her mother was.

Bruce and Marigold sat side by side, their faces drawn and pale, saying nothing but seeming to find some comfort in it all.
Now it was midnight and about thirty people were still there. Some were in the house and some on the verandah. Tait and a few others were still out in the paddock, sitting in plastic chairs around a fire being tended by Neil the Wheel. They were mostly people from the Players. Bambi was with them too.

Francesca had brought the four kids because there was nobody to mind them, but now she needed to get them home and was reluctantly making ready to leave.

The sky was full of stars and the night air was chilly, and it felt good to be there in the warm glow of the fire, and good to be in each other’s company, with so many shared memories of Megan and of other things.

Kelvin had been morose for most of the day but was more philosophical now that he’d had a few glasses of wine. Everyone had noticed Rory wasn’t with him.

They’d been talking about how well the proceedings had gone in the afternoon.

“We should’ve got you to read one of your poems or something,” Kelvin said to Tait. “Auntie would’ve liked that.”

“Yes, she would have,” said Elly, who had just come over from the house. “She’d read all your books, and quite often referred to them.”

“That’s lovely to know,” said Tait.

He had made a point of giving Megan signed copies of each of his books as they’d appeared but had never really talked about them with her. He never enjoyed talking about his work, even with people who liked it. There had been one occasion, though, when Megan told him she’d quoted a passage from *Ground Leave* during a bitter debate in Council. It was a paragraph about the persecution of the Fat Girl, she said, and it had helped her get an important point across. It seemed to Tait the finest compliment ever paid to his work.

A stanza of verse had in fact been going through his head all day, and especially when they’d been doing the tributes that afternoon. But they were not lines of his. They were Chesterton’s:

*I saw great Cobbett riding,*
*The horseman of the shires;*
*And his face was red with judgement*
*And a light of Luddite fires.*
It seemed to encapsulate a lot, like the whole idea of someone being a tribune of the people, a defender of the downtrodden, and the gallant shouldering of that burden over long years. And it had the tremor of rage one felt, anger at the cruel fraud of a world forever canting about Progress but only ever producing slums and prisons and dark satanic mills in one form or another. And it crackled with a flame of retribution, of a judgement-day coming for the exploiters with their hearts of flint and their tongues of serpents.

Elly was standing behind Kelvin’s chair, resting her hands on his shoulders. Marigold was coming across from the house. They saw her smile wanly in the flickering light, then warm her hands and stare into the fire for a minute.

“How are you, dear?” Elly asked gently.

Marigold looked at her and gave the wan smile again, then wandered back to the house.

“I wonder if she knew,” Francesca murmured, as though thinking aloud.

“How the ending would be, you mean?” asked Saskia.

“Yes.”

There was a silence, with everyone thinking this was the probably the wrong thing to bring up in front of the daughter and the nephew.

Then Elly spoke.

“I’m sure she did know.”

“And I’m sure Bruce knew,” Kelvin added.

“I think the three of them talked about it.”

“Yes,” said Kelvin. “I think so too. It might have been in a slightly roundabout way, but I’m sure they talked about it.”

“I’m glad they did,” Elly said softly, leaning down and putting her face against Kelvin’s cheek and hugging him round the neck. “I’m glad they had…I don’t know…”

“The shelter of each other,” Tait said.

“Sorry?” Elly asked, not quite catching it.

“It’s an Irish proverb. It says the only real shelter people have is the shelter of each other.”

“That’s beautiful,” Elly said, and hugged Kelvin more tightly.
Francesca got the kids into the car. And Bambi was leaving too. And Tait also felt it was time to go. Neil the Wheel had got a lift out with Frank Baxter but Frank had had to leave early, so Therese offered to drop Neil back into town along with Saskia.

Therese had been there that day partly to represent Commissar Mona at the solemnities, but they all knew Therese was a decent-enough person, so they didn’t hold it against her.

The farewells were said and they all left, with Tait the last out the gate on the motorbike. He looked back from the road and saw the daughter and the nephew holding each other in the red glow of the firelight.

* * * *

He was trying to press on with the ending of the novel.

He’d had an odd sense all along that he was working against a deadline, but without knowing what it was. Now he knew. The actual date was set for Francesca to leave the house and the new owner to take possession. Though it seemed to Tait that he was being philosophical about her coming departure, he suspected that underneath the surface he was more distraught than he knew. He wasn’t sure how it would be when she’d actually gone. He might be so very depressed that he wouldn’t be able to do any more writing for a long time, or maybe ever again. He might just want to lie down and die. So he had to get the novel over and done before she went. He would finish it and get it posted it off to Canopy Press for their opinion one way or the other. If they said it was no good, well, that’d be that. But if they should happen to like it he’d have something positive to focus on in the immediate future. He’d have a reason not to lie down and die.

Going on with the work wasn’t easy. The thought of her departure kept zooming in to shatter his concentration. He found he could regain a bit of focus by remembering the grievance of the blue dress, by getting angry with her again, by telling himself that he’d be well rid of the whole rotten entanglement. And when that didn’t work he’d fall back on the bitter conviction that in the end you must burn what you love and leave nothing but scorched earth.

The other problem was the obstruction in his throat. It was so constant now that it was hard to divert his mind from it. He could no longer eat anything solid. Even soft
bread would not go down properly and made him want to gag. He was living on wine and coffee and soup, but often didn’t feel like the soup.

He had decided what the final scene of the novel would be, that it would take place at Kennington Green in London on the 30th of July of 1746.

It is three and a half months after Culloden and the Prince is being hunted in the glens, a reward of thirty thousand pounds on his head, a truly staggering sum at that time. After the battle, the wounded Jacobites had been systematically murdered where they lay, and now the Regime means to tear out the very fabric of Highland society and destroy the Clan system forever. It intends to make a desolation and to call it peace and progress. The campaign is going on with full ferocity, a trial-run of the methods that will later be used against the Vendee and the Confederacy and the Sioux and Cheyenne and all the rest of them, and which will be part and parcel of all the totalitarian “final solutions” of the future. But despite all this, and despite the fact that numbers of people in the Highlands know the Prince’s whereabouts from day to day, he is never betrayed. The Regime keeps its filthy blood-money.

The Cause has been beaten in the World, but not in the Spirit.

Robert Connell has been with the smugglers, has learnt how to live a secret life on the shadow side of normal society, has learnt how to be a kind of guerilla, how to hit at the Regime in certain ways and then blend out of sight. He has learnt signs and signals, winks and nods, the secret language of the owlers’ network. And now he will begin his life of wandering.

But first he has a duty to do at Kennington Green on this cold and rainy day. The crowd has been gathering since the previous night and there are scuffles as people vie for good vantage points. Robert Connell stands in the midst of the throng, his hat pulled low, his long coat drawn tight around him, the rain dripping down. He tries to feel nothing but a stony dedication to this duty of witness. He has to see and remember this. By some whim of fate he might live to be a very old man. He might live to be the only one left who can report this day truly for the good name of the Cause.

And there’s another reason to be here, one harder to put exactly into words. He believes that he must look into the very heart of his allegiance, into the very terror and abyss of what it means. If the allegiance is not utterly true it will not endure beyond
today. It will not survive the ordeal that nine men must undergo in full sight of the crowd, will not pass the test that he himself must take in his private heart and soul.

Francis Townley and eight others are to be executed. The charge is Treason and the full penalty has been spelt out by the judge:

_They must be severally hanged by the neck, but not till they be dead, for they must be cut down alive; then their bowels must be taken out and burned before their faces; then their heads must be severed from their bodies, and their bodies severally divided into four quarters…_

At eleven o’clock in the morning they are dragged to the site on sledges to which they have been tied upside-down. As well as Colonel Townley there are seven other officers of the Manchester Regiment as well as a Welsh civilian:

George Fletcher, twenty-five, is a linen-draper from Salford who had declared to the court: “I would do it all again!”

Thomas Syddall is a middle-aged barber with a wife and five children. His father, a blacksmith, had been hanged for taking part in the rising of 1715.

Thomas Deacon is one of the three sons of a bishop who had refused to take the oath of allegiance to the new order. All three sons joined the Prince. One is already dead, one is to die today, and the youngest, only 17, is under sentence of death but will in the end be spared for transportation.

James Berwick is another young linen-draper.

Thomas Chadwick is a Staffordshire man and a tallow-chandler by trade.

James Dawson, known as “Jemmy” to his friends, is a former student at Cambridge.

Andrew Blood is an estate manager from Yorkshire.

The Welsh Jacobite is David Morgan, a lawyer and a poet.

When they have been untied and brought up on to the scaffold, they are permitted to say their final words. All speak firmly and with composure. And all the while the ropes are dangling at their backs and in front of them is the butcher’s block with the knives and the cleavers, and, spluttering in the rain, the fire in which their organs are to be burnt.

There is a unity of defiance in one form or another.
Francis Townley, for example, keeps his words brief and his manner disdainful, as if loath to dignify or drag out the occasion.

Thomas Syddall declares his forgiveness of his enemies, including King George and the Duke of Cumberland, while reminding the crowd that neither have a valid right to those titles.

“I think myself happy,” says Thomas Deacon, “in having the opportunity to die in so just and so glorious a cause.”

And then, when all has been said, the hoods are put over the faces and the executioner begins the business.

Robert Connell stands in the hushed crowd until it is all finished and the nine have triumphed, have passed beyond their trouble and have left the vivid air signed with their honour.

And he too has passed the test, has left his last fear behind. He knows that he too can endure this if he must. However long or short his time may be, he knows now that his allegiance will not waver.

And when the crowd begins to depart, Robert Connell drifts away with them and along the road as they gradually disperse into smaller groups and then into mere handfuls and then dwindle away. At some point he is finally alone in the gathering dusk many miles from Kennington Green.

He stops and looks up at the sky, and then looks forward and back along the empty road. He tightens his coat over the sword and pistol he carries. Then he strides on into the night and is never heard of again, except in a half-mythical way by some who will not be born until much later.

And all they will really know is that their ancestor stepped forward one cold December day in Preston when the Cause was out in arms, and badly outnumbered, and in dire need of its friends.

* * * *

The date of the State election had been set. Tait learned of it the next evening when he was over at the pizza place buying a carton of milk and saw a copy of the evening paper. Tony and Joe were talking and Tait picked up that they’d had a run-in with the young hoons of the Garbage Gang the previous night. They’d heard them coming
along the street, doing their usual thing, emptying the bins on the footpath and chanting in unison, and had run out to intercept them. There’d been a scuffle and Tony had given one of the louts a clip in the ear after Joe had been hit in the knee-cap by a thrown bottle.

Tait paid for the milk and left, wondering if Tony would find himself in trouble. This was just what the Anarcho-Tyranny relished — a chance to punish a decent citizen for infringing the rights of barbaric little scum. Of course the Regime would move heaven and earth to combat phantom gangs, but actual gangs were a different matter. They were not to be interfered with, were not to be harassed by Violent White Male Vigilantes like Tony and Joe who should be made an example of.

Ernie was outside when Tait went back over the road and they talked for a minute. Ernie said he’d seen the scuffle through his window and if he’d been twenty years younger he’d have run out to give the louts a whack in the ear himself.

“But what’s the use?” he sighed, with a shrug, leaning against the bird-stand. “This isn’t the world I used to know. And I tell you what, I won’t be all that sorry to be leavin it, the way things are goin.”

Ernie had been very sad to hear of Megan’s death, and angry about it too. He reckoned she’d had her stamina worn down by the Council.

“Hope she comes back and haunts the bastards!” he’d said.

He was looking ever more frail himself and his doctor sometimes popped in to see him. It was Doctor Pascoe who came to most of the Players’ productions and whom Tait had consulted a few times over the years about minor ailments.

He wondered whether if he should go and see Doctor Pascoe about the lump in his throat. That hadn’t quite occurred to him before. But he thought he should wait. It might go away.

He was at the Green Room a few days later. He’d been there since early morning with his portable typewriter, trying to get the manuscript of the novel into presentable shape to send off to Canopy Press. He was retyping particular pages here and there, ones that were smudged or messy, or where he saw a need for last-minute revisions. That was true of almost every page and he had to restrain himself from trying to rewrite the whole book. He was going through the usual anguish that happens when you’re about to post a new work to a publisher. It seems so hopelessly inept and weak that you can’t imagine anyone liking it.
It was five o’clock and he put his things away and locked the door behind him to head up to the Plaza. He had to buy some cheap packets of soup mix, the kind that comes as a dry powder in a sachet, that you put into a mug or bowl and just pour boiling water on. He mostly got the tomato flavoured ones because they always had a smooth consistency with no tiny fragments of pea or carrot or anything like that. Those soups were almost the only food he ate now – except for the cheap wine and the coffee of course, which didn’t really count as food. The sachets were so convenient and the mixture slid down without him having to swallow too hard. It distressed him to have to do a proper swallowing action. It wasn’t that it hurt, exactly, it was just that when his throat clenched for the instant he seemed to feel the lump more precisely. But he figured the soup was okay to live on. And when he wanted to thicken it into a broth he would put in chunks of soft bread and stir till they were nearly dissolved.

He paused beside the motorbike. Seeing it had reminded him of the re-registration problem. The renewal notice had just come in the mail and he didn’t know how he’d manage. Apart from the loud rattle in the engine, it needed new tyres and the headlight was playing up, and there were sure to be other faults that would come to light when the mechanic did the full examination. He told himself not to think about that and just nurse the bike along for now. The rego wasn’t due until the week after Francesca was to leave. After she was gone he could survive without the bike if it came to that. He could survive without access to the Valley. He’d be cut off from Astrid’s Meadow of course, and that would be pretty bad, but he could worry about it when the time came.

Looking up, he saw Peggy Dean heading towards him in her Salvation Army uniform. She had been on duty at the Court building and was just knocking off. She had a serious look on her face. Hardly surprising, Tait thought, after another day of struggling to help a procession of poor wretches in the grip of the Law — which in the end is always the law of the Regime. The King expressed it all in 1649 when he faced that kangaroo court of the commissars, well knowing that if they could do the job on him they would do it routinely and forever on ordinary people. And like so much else that he said, it was beautiful in its eloquent simplicity: “Think what justice others will have.”

“Isn’t it just awful?” Peggy said as she came near.
“Yes,” Tait answered. “I was just thinking about it all. The gross imbalance of forces.”
“How do you mean?”
“All the power of the state against one wretched individual who might not have a friend in the world or a penny to his name.”
“And is illiterate and semi-retarded.”
“That must be the famous “level playing field” we hear so much about nowadays.”
“So you’ll be here for the meeting?” she asked.
“What meeting?”
“The one about Neil.”
“Sorry?” Tait asked, shaking his head. “I must be missing something.”
“Weren’t we talking about Neil?”
“What about him?”
“He’s in the police lockup at Castleton. He was arrested last night for supposedly stalking Saskia.”
“Ah, shit,” Tait groaned.
“Saskia’s father caught him creeping around the side of the house in his camouflage gear and beat him nearly senseless with that big heavy torch.”
“Neil’s own torch?”
“So I gather.”
“Bloody hell,” Tait sighed.
“He staggered away and the police picked him up an hour later. So Mona has called an emergency meeting for six-thirty to discuss our response to it all.”
“Oh, that’ll be illuminating,” Tait declared.
“I’m going home now to change and freshen-up, and then I’ll come back.”
“Good.”
“I hope you’ll be there as well. There need to be at least one or two people who’ll try to understand it from Neil’s side a little bit. I gather Mona is adopting a very stern line.”
“I’ll be there. Is anyone looking out for Neil’s interests right now? Does he have a lawyer?”
“I presume he’ll have a public defender.”
“Is his father doing anything?”
“I spoke to the father this afternoon. He’s very upset, of course, but as an invalid-pensioner he’s fairly restricted, and of course they haven’t a penny to their name.”

“And how is Saskia? Was she directly involved?”

“Well, she saw the beating, and I gather she’s as upset as one would expect.”

“What a rotten thing to happen.”

“Ah well,” Peggy sighed, unlocking her car. “Let’s have some faith in the process.”

“The legal process?”

“Well, that too. But I was thinking of something more comprehensive.”

“The process of the Spirit?”

“Yes.”

“Do you find much of that around the Court building?”

“Not as much as I’d like, but then it isn’t necessarily visible to us.”

“I have my own version of that idea. The universe as an Honour-System as opposed to a Crime-Scene. As a Sacrament rather than a Snare.”

*Fear and a snare is come upon us, desolation and destruction.*

“What a good quote.”

“It’s in Lamentations.”

“I’ll look it up.”

Peggy drove off home and Tait strode to the Athena café, his thoughts whirling. He sat in the back booth with a pot of tea and tried to organize his mind. He could imagine all too well the broad thrust of Commissar Mona’s “stern line” towards Neil and he needed to reflect on how to counter it. He took his notebook out of the satchel and jotted down a few points.

He went back to the Green Room at six-fifteen and found Mona and Therese unlocking the door to go in. Therese said hello but Mona ignored him. She had on a sort of severe black tunic with a row of metal buttons and black high-heeled boots and looked a lot like an actual commissar.

“Why is the urn already boiling?” she demanded.

“Because I was here earlier and switched it on,” Tait said.

Mona gave him a clenched look.

Then she noticed that her Vision Statement had a towel over it. Tait always covered it up when he was there during the day and this time he had forgotten to remove the towel before he left.
“Who put that there?” Mona snapped.
“The pixies would be my guess,” Tait said.
She gave him the look again.
He went outside and stood looking up at the Watchtower, thinking of Neil in a cell at
Castleton. Various others then arrived, all with grim expressions, and the meeting was
declared open.
Mona ranted at great length, getting up out of her chair and pacing in front of the
committee-table, stabbing the air with her finger to drive home the points. What they
were dealing with here, she said, was a microcosm of the entire system of Patriarchal
Sexual Violence Against All Women and they must make it absolutely clear that this
Would Not Be Tolerated. She insisted on an immediate range of measures. The
Players must:

A. Send the Victim a formal letter of Sympathy and Solidarity.
B. Subject the Culprit to Non-Negotiable Expulsion for Life.
C. Seek an “Apprehended Violence Order” banning him from the vicinity.
D. Introduce a Sexual Assault and Harrassment policy, with Complaint Procedures.
E. Make regular donations to the local Women’s Refuge.

Mona was wielding what Tait had come to call “the Puritan Hammer,” a method
passed down from the zealots of old. The ploy is to go so over the top in
sanctimonious outrage that all sense of proportion is quickly undermined and you can
then manipulate people any way you like. This was the technique of TabloidWorld
and of all commissarial politics.

When the tirade finally stopped, Mona appeared to have beaten all the others into
line. Had the vote had been taken then, all her measures would have gone through.
But Tait and Peggy Dean then began to counter-attack. They made a good team. Tait
could drip with sarcasm because Peggy supplied the balancing tone of sincere
goodwill towards all. Tait addressed one or two of Mona’s particular points, like the
fact that Neil had been wearing camouflage clothes, and how this proved, according
to her, that the stalking had been a wickedly calculated act. Tait patiently reminded
everyone that Neil almost always wore his camouflage gear, that it was his normal
mode of dress and therefore didn’t prove a damn thing about calculation. You could
see it dawning on the faces of the others. Of course they’d known it perfectly well, but hadn’t been able to retain it under the barrage.

Then Tait and Peggy together set out to restore some proportion in the key matters of the act and of the person. First they pointed out that only unrestrained act had been the beating of Neil himself by a spooked father. Then they pointed out that there was no such person as the hideous Perpetrator that Mona had conjured up. There was just a human being they all knew and who’d been their faithful watchman for umpteen years without ever putting a foot wrong.

“Let’s try to have some compassion for all concerned,” Tait urged at the end. “For Saskia, who has been badly upset. For her father, who has been triggered into bashing someone. And for Neil himself, who has been beaten-up and locked-up and still faces god-knows-what consequences from the law.”

Mona had begun to look sullen. She knew she’d overdone it, that her tirade had put people off, even some of her allies like Therese.

In the end, only two of her recommended measures were voted on. The first was adopted as it stood, and the second was agreed to in a modified form. So they would write a letter of sympathy to Saskia, and Neil would be expelled from the Players for the time being at least.

Tait and Peggy Dean conferred for a minute afterwards, outside, and agreed it wasn’t too bad an outcome.

“Not that its any consolation to Neil at this moment,” Tait muttered.

“All we can do…” Peggy started to say.


“That too, of course,” she said, patting him on the arm, “But I was going to say, keep our powder dry. Mona isn’t finished by any means.”

“No, she isn’t.”

“Thanks for your help tonight.”

“And for yours too.”

The bike’s engine cut out on the ride home and would not restart. It happened as he was riding along beside the river, so he went and sat on the bank and looked at the dark flow and the squirls of light playing on it from the street-lamps on the other side. The salty tang of the lake breeze came strongly. He wondered if Neil was awake in that cell and what he might be thinking about. And what Saskia and her father were
That was what Francis Townley and his eight comrades must’ve known at Kennington Green, and what Robert Connell would have understood as he stood in the crowd in the dripping rain with his head bowed. Better to be in the worst of messes than to miss the glimmer that guides you home to the meaning and the story. At a profound level, Tait saw, it was better for Neil to be locked in that cell, having known the ache of love, than free as a bird and never knowing it. Better for Saskia and her father to be distressed now than that she not be generous and he not be protective.

These ideas had brought a surge of exhilaration that blew around him like the salt wind from the lake. He looked at his watch and found he’d been sitting there for three hours. Suddenly he felt exhausted and his thoughts began to fragment into meaningless wisps and he knew how quickly depression could follow.

He began to walk the bike along the edge of the road. He had about four kilometers to do. His limbs felt stiff and when he breathed heavily from the exertion it seemed to aggravate the lump in his throat.

He had completely forgotten about his throat, but now the lump felt enormous. For the first time he acknowledged fully to his conscious mind that this could be his death sentence.

Chapter Thirty

Neil was formally charged with a stalking offence that carried a minimum three-year stretch. Because of his clean record he was released into his father’s custody for the time being. He had to report to Turrawong police station every afternoon and was under certain restrictions — the main one being of course that he wasn’t to go near Saskia’s house or approach her in any manner.

The Castleton paper had an item headed TERROR STRUGGLE WITH SEX PROWLER. It said Neil had been armed with a hunting-knife and that the girl’s father had suffered severe lacerations “in the frenzied struggle to keep the assailant
from storming the house and cornering the terrified girl in her bedroom.” It said the shattered teenage victim was “undergoing intensive counselling from local experts.”

Tait and Peggy Dean went to see Neil when at home. He answered the door and they were both shocked at how black-and-blue his face still was from the beating. One eye was half-closed and his mouth was cut and swollen and he could not speak properly. Not that he wanted to speak. He stood dumbly in the doorway with his eyes lowered. Peggy gently explained that they had come to see if he was okay and he stood back to let them enter. As they went down the narrow passage they saw his father hunched in a chair on the back porch with a sort of shawl around him like an invalid. They sat in the bare musty lounge room, hardly knowing what to say. Neil had to be told that he’d been expelled from the Players and wasn’t welcome around the Green Room any more. They tried to convey it with the right blend of gravity and casualness. They didn’t want to seem to be rubbing it in. No doubt he had already been warned away from the Players by the cops. The Perpetrator was barred from any place frequented by his victim.

Peggy went out to the back porch to confer with Neil’s father and ask what they could do to be supportive. While she was out there, Tait told Neil about his own period of being on the wrong side of the law, thinking it might help to know that others had been through it and that it wasn’t necessarily the end of the world.

When they left, Peggy recounted what she had put together from talking to the father. There had been a ludicrous comedy of errors with Neil’s release from the Castleton lock-up. The father was to be notified, so that he could go up on the train and collect his son. He’d not been able to stay close at hand because he couldn’t afford the accommodation. In fact he could barely cover the train fares. But the police had just shoved Neil out on the street. Dazed and penniless, he had started walking the ninety-odd kilometers home. When the father phoned the cops later in the day he heard that Neil was gone. He got the next train to Castleton and scoured the streets. Or at least he made as good a search as he could, being a semi-invalid who sagged in exhaustion every two minutes. He thought of asking the police to help, but was afraid that might somehow get Neil into more trouble. It was starting to get dark when he had an idea. His next-door neighbour had a son and daughter-in-law living in Castleton. Maybe they could drive him around the streets in their car. He phoned the
The neighbour to ask about this and was told that Neil had just then arrived home. After about seven hours of walking he had been given a lift for the final part of the way.

“The father seems a sad man,” Peggy said reflectively. “Even apart from his health problems, you can tell he’s painfully self-enclosed and intimidated by life. All this is testing him to the limit.”

They remained silent for a moment as they walked back towards the Green Room, to where they’d left her car and his motorbike.

Then Peggy said something memorable.

“Isn’t it poignant,” she reflected, “that Neil chose to be the watchman? To come from such a background and yet to put himself out there like that. To have no security himself, and yet be the security of others for years on end. It shows a lot of … I don’t know… what would you call it?”

“Character?”

“That’s the word.”

“Character dredged from god-knows-where.”

“Yes, I’m sure God does know. But is it poignancy or irony we’re talking about?”

“Both. Neil comes undone through being a prowler, an illicit intruder, exactly the kind of figure he’d set himself on watch against. Suddenly one can see it in a whole new light. One can see Neil as a person whose predicament would interest Thomas Hardy or George Eliot.”

“I love George Eliot,” Peggy said. “Dorothea Brooke in Middlemarch is my favourite person in literature.”

“There’s a line in Middlemarch that relates to all this,” Tait said, straining to see the words on the page in his mind’s eye. “It refers to those who have ‘a certain spiritual grandeur ill-matched with a meanness of opportunity.’”

“Poor Neil. I wonder what will happen in the end.”

“Well, as another great mind said the other day, we have to maintain have some trust in the process.”

When Peggy drove away Tait went into the Green Room and lay on the sofa in the dark and thought about Neil the Wheel and that comedy of errors and about having trust in the process. There’s the evil Perpetrator, grimly locked in a police dungeon, with the system cranking up all its terrible cogs to have him dealt with… and next minute he’s flung out to trudge the roads, the world oblivious to where he is or what
he might be doing, he who only that morning had required so many tons of stone and iron to secure him.

Yes, George Eliot could write it, and there was no doubt it was Hardyesque. Talk about satires of circumstance!

* * * *

The battle of the posters had resumed around the town, now that the State election was on. The red and black SNARL posters were everywhere, but Len Mullan’s people were fighting back with their green and gold ones. Tait was just passing a patch of brick wall where the green and gold had gained an edge for the moment. But in general it was still an unfair contest. With the university campus nearby at Ridwell, SNARL had all the willing hands it needed.

He had just left the Green Room and was coaxing the motorbike up the hill to the Plaza. The engine had a habit of cutting out unless you kept the revs up, and the blinkers didn’t work properly at all times, so Tait was always nervous of being pulled up by the police. Between worrying about the revs and watching out for the cops, he had his attention fully occupied.

He was heading to the post office on the corner opposite the Plaza. He had the typescript of the novel to post to Canopy Press. It wasn’t quite as neat and presentable as he’d have liked. He had rushed the job of typing it up over the past few weeks because of the sense he had of working against a deadline. But it was good enough for Canopy to read and decide about. The book was four years of work, off and on, and he was as satisfied with it as one could be at this stage. He had only just decided on the final title. He would really have preferred to have kept the working title, *Paths of Glory*, but he was afraid it would inevitably conjure up the second part of the well-known line it came from: “The paths of glory lead but to the grave.” He wanted to be able to use it without irony, without any cynical or debunking connotation. But that wasn’t possible in an age like this, and the whole point of the work was to illustrate a different set of values. So he was calling it *The Fable of All Our Lives*. That phrase came from something Mike said in a letter years ago: “If Henry VIII is the villain-king in this fable of all our lives, Charles I is the hero-king.” It was the letter Tait had read in the old graveyard that day out in the Valley, that rainy evening that was so
profound because it was the evening he remembered what Auntie Annie had said to him. And that of course was what had drawn him into the fable in a way that he could understand and make proper use of. As epigraph to the novel he had chosen a line from *The Lord of the Rings*, a statement in which grief and consolation come together in a beautiful balance: “You will learn that your trouble is but part of the trouble of all the western world.” Between the title and the epigraph, he hoped it would be clear what the book was all about — our relation to each other, and to the meaning of the story we belong to.

He left the bike in the car-park of the Plaza and went over to the post office. As always there was a very long queue. It was so long today that it stretched in a big circle, so that the last person in the queue was standing, ridiculously, right beside the person being served at the counter. Everyone was in the usual state of fuming resignation, feeling that if they had any gumption they’d protest, yet having no sense that it would do any good.

The long fret in the queue made Tait painfully aware of his throat. The obstruction felt as big as golf-ball and at times he feared he might even keel over from the sheer horrible awareness of it. He held himself stiffly upright and stared at a fixed point on the wall. His whole body felt riddled and undermined. He had been losing a lot of weight because of his exclusive diet of soup and coffee and cheap wine.

By the time he got to the counter and paid the postage on his parcel, the sick and distressed feelings had turned into rage. He shoved the parcel down the chute and walked out into the street.

He was in a state to brood again on the Anarcho-Tyranny and what he’d lately come to think of as its “hierarchy of harms.” He had been thinking about Neil coming to grief at Saskia’s house. In that case the commissariat had been content to lay all the blame on Neil and to forget the fact of Saskia’s father bashing him up. But they might just as easily have chosen to punish the man who had defended his home and family. They did that all the time now. Poor wretches found themselves being hauled-up for having dared to resist muggers and burglars. If Neil had gone there that night as a *burgler* the Anarcho-Tyranny would now be making every excuse for him and throwing the book at Saskia’s dad. But because he was a so-called *stalker* there was a different focus.
You could understand the method, Tait figured, when you saw how that hierarchy of harms was formed. The Anarcho-Tyranny always had a single and unwavering aim — to promote maximum damage to the fundamentals of human society, to hasten the day of the “concentration universe” and then finally the dead planet whirling through empty space. In any given situation it would promote the harm that had the most corrosive effects.

The worst part was knowing that this wasn’t a crackpot Conspiracy Theory. It wasn’t like blaming everything on Aliens from Outer Space. It would in fact be a deep relief to find it was nothing more than one’s own craziness. But one wasn’t seeing a conspiracy so much as a syndrome — the inherent drift and tendency of the age. Of course, though, the conspiracy was there also, the vast deliberate push of the Death Forces. It was as real as the Puritan maniacs going to smash every church window in England. It was as real as Butcher Cumberland setting out to mutilate the culture of the Highlands. It was as real as Sherman’s march to the sea, with its aim of leaving the Confederate civilians “nothing but their eyes to weep with.” It was as real as Sheridan’s plan to make all the Indians good by making them dead. It was as real as Auschwitz and the Gulag and the Killing-Fields. It was as real as the knock on the door when they come to take you. But most people simply can’t grasp it until their door has been knocked on, and by then of course the knowledge can’t help them.

In every case there was a “hierarchy of harms” operating, a calculated scale of mayhem to be inflicted, a technique of maximum undermining. It was like Orwell’s “Room 101” where they do precisely the thing that will break you most completely, like confronting Winston Smith with rats.

Tait knew he had to keep brooding on this, had to follow the whole idea through. Seeing it clearly would illuminate so much.

Right now, though, he had to go to the supermarket and buy milk and a light-bulb for Francesca. He had phoned her earlier to say he was heading out to the Valley – assuming the bike was up to it – and to ask if she needed anything.

He went in past the newsagency and noted the screaming headlines about yet more “extremist violence” at a Hendon meeting. As always, they were spinning the idea that the Hendon people were the culprits, that they were storm-troopers who couldn’t go for five minutes without stomping on somebody’s head. This was part of the strategy of demonizing the Hendonites in the media and getting the police to close
down their meetings on the grounds that they were a danger to public safety. In her role as the media mouthpiece for SNARL, Sabina Sharpe had been urging that strategy quite openly on TV. Of course this was a democratic country, she declared, but democracy must never allow “a platform for racist terror.” A number of meetings had already been called off and the commissars wanted to jack it up to the point where Beth wouldn’t be able to show her face in public.

Actually, there was a Hendon meeting scheduled for Castleton and Tait intended to go. It was to be Beth’s last rally before election day and was likely to be a pretty fiery affair. For all its recent gentrification, Castleton was still a working-class city and the Hendon movement had strong support there. Many of the battlers had a clear sense of what was being done to them, with the steel-works and the shipyards being closed down and the jobs going overseas in the name of “globalism,” and with their own union leaderships colluding in the process. And that was only the half of it. They knew they were being redefined as evil rednecks, as bigoted white trash, as primitives whose feelings were of no account. If they had any knowledge of the whole grim record of Western modernity they would know that they were merely the latest batch of the uncounted millions who’d gone under the grinders. If they were up on Scottish history they’d have an appropriate word for it: they were being “cleared” in the name of the Puritan-Whig ideology with its endless rhetoric of freedom and progress and its actual practice of social and economic murder. That’s when it wasn’t doing outright murder. Yes, the battlers knew they were being done like dogs. But the fact that there was strong Hendonite sympathy in Castleton just meant the commissars would do anything to prevent the meeting going ahead. Castleton, after all, was the lair of the Toxic Razorblade herself.

The very thought of Sabina Sharpe made the lump in his throat feel bigger and more lethally constricting, and Tait felt a sudden stab of awareness that he might not be in any condition to go the Castleton meeting anyway. He didn’t know how soon the throat thing would become critical. It was as though the Death Forces were operating within his body as well as in the world.

He forced himself to push all that out of mind.

He went to the supermarket and bought the light-globe and two litres of milk, counting the coins carefully at the checkout, then went down to the car-park and got the bike and started riding towards the edge of town.
Paused at a zebra crossing, he heard someone call hello but didn’t realize it was
directed at him. He was too busy worrying whether the bike would stall halfway down
the Valley, and whether the cops might catch him at any moment with faulty blinkers.
The voice said hello again from right beside him. It was Saskia, still in her high
school uniform.

“Hi,” Tait said, surprised. “How are you?”
“Not bad,’ she said. “Where are you heading?”
“The Valley,” he told her. “If the bike doesn’t play up on me.”
They were having to speak firmly to be heard over the clattering noise of the engine.
“It seems very loud,” she said.
“It has to be kept revving or it stalls,” he explained, then added, “Like life itself, I
guess.”
“And are you keeping your revs up in life?”
“Me? No, I’m mostly conked-out at the side of the road.”
“I’m sure you’ve still got some revs left,” she replied.
At that moment the bike stalled and went silent.
“Great timing,” Tait said wryly. “But how about you? Are you okay after recent
events?”
“Yeah, I’m alright.”
“That’s good to hear.”
Listen,” she said, earnestly. “I heard you stuck up for Neil at that meeting.”
“Well, sort of,” he replied awkwardly, wondering if she had taken it amiss. “Just
tried to maintain some balance, that was all.”
He let the bike roll closer to the kerb and took his helmet off and then continued.
“I hope you don’t think it showed a lack of sympathy for your situation.”
“No, I don’t think that,” she said. “I’m glad someone put a word in for him. The
whole thing’s been such a stupid mix-up. If my sister hadn’t started carrying-on when
she saw him looking through the window, it wouldn’t have blown up like it did. If I’d
seen him first I would’ve just gone out and quietly said hello and explained to him
that it isn’t nice to creep around at windows. I’d have promised not to be angry with
him if he promised not to do it any more. I’m sure that was all it needed.”
“That’s a very decent attitude.”
“Well,” she said with a shrug. “The guy hasn’t got all that much going for him in life, has he?”

“I guess not. How is your Dad feeling about it all?”

“He’s just sorry it happened. He got stuck into Neil more by mistake than anything. My sister came yelling a whole lot of stuff, and my Dad thought she’d actually been attacked, so he ran outside and banged headlong into this bloke in the dark and then thought he was being attacked as well. So he went straight into frantic action mode.”

“Oh dear,” Tait sighed, picturing the horrible scuffle of it all.

“I think Neil was just trying to push past in the narrow space to get away,” she went on, “but Dad thought it was aggression. And he thought the bloke had a weapon in his hand – it was that big torch Neil carries – so he wrenched it away from him and used it to whack into the guy a few times, to fend him off. He stopped as soon as he heard me shouting out that it was Neil from the Players. Dad and I would rather have forgotten the whole thing, but the police insisted on pressing the charges.”

“They probably have a quota to fill. X number of ‘stalkers’ per week.”

“My mother and sister are still quite upset, although mostly because of Mona. She came barging into our house, ranting at the top of her voice about how traumatized we must all be, and how we’d all have to have intensive counselling, and what a nightmare the trial was going to be because the defence lawyers would try to crucify us. Then she started on about how the court would just give the Perpetrator a slap on the wrist and send him back to terrorize us again. It was really off, as if she was grooving on it. In the end I told her to stop upsetting my family and mind her own business.”

‘Well, I gather Neil is pleading ‘Guilty,’ so there won’t be a trial in that sense. It’ll just be the sentencing.”

“What do you think they’ll do to him.”

“I don’t know. He could go to gaol, I suppose. Or maybe they’ll put him on a good behaviour bond, because of his previous clean record.”

“And all his good service to the Players.”

“Yes, if someone could present that to the court.”

For a moment he was lost in the poignancy of Megan not being there any more. She’d have taken all this in hand.

“Listen,” Saskia said in an earnest tone, “would you do me a favour?”
“Of course.”
“Would you give Neil my best wishes?”
“Certainly.”
“At first I thought I’d call in to see him. I don’t mean alone, but maybe with my Dad, and we could all sort of shake hands. But I’m told I could get him into more trouble if I go anywhere near him, or even phone him.”
“That could be so.”
“But I do want to send a message that there are no hard feelings.”
“I promise I’ll pass it on.”
“Thanks.”
“Will you be at the auditions next week?” he asked.
“I doubt it,” she said, wrinkling her nose. “I’ve gone off the Players. Or off Madam, I should say. I’ll be getting a car soon and I thought I might see what the Melrose group is like. They aren’t all that far away.”
“And they do have the greatest of all assets.”
“Which is?”
“A president who isn’t Mona.”
“That’s my kind of outfit.”
They looked at each for a few moments.
“Ah well,” he said, finally. “It’s life’s rich tapestry, isn’t it?”
“Yes, that must be what it is.”
“I suppose I’d better see if this worn-out heap will start,” he said, fitting his helmet back on. “And then see whether I can get the bike going.”
She grinned.
“Fingers crossed,” he said.
She held up two pairs of crossed fingers.
He set himself carefully for the kick-start and put his whole body in to the short, sharp action of it. The engine clattered into life.
“I’ll deliver the message,” he said and eased away from the kerb and waved as he picked up speed.
He saw her wave back in the rear-view mirror.
The bike seemed to run better now and Tait realized that he felt lighter of heart. He had forgotten the lump in his throat and his various other worries. Whirling along the
Valley road he thought how wonderful it was that human decency could still survive against the odds. Saskia was a child of the times. She had never known anything but the prevailing rottenness, the agitprop of the Imperium, the conquering march of the Pathologies. She had dwelt all of her seventeen years in the midst of what Burke called “the antagonist world.” The girl should be deeply warped, a living bag of spite and grievance, another little toxic razorblade. She ought to be in the palm of Commissar Mona’s hand.

Instead she was generous and humane and sensible.

Where did the System go wrong?

* * * *

News had come that Fergus Gunn had been felled by a stroke at sixty-eight and was not likely to recover. It was awfully sad for Fergus and a severe setback for the good side. It meant, among other things, that Compact magazine would now drift into compliance with the zeitgeist. It had been heading that way and it was only Fergus’s combative flair as literary editor that restrained the process. Tait and Mike of course felt the blow keenly. Fergus had always backed their work, had stood by them both, had especially stood by Mike all those times he was liable to be tarred-and-feathered for what he’d written in the magazine. Above all things Fergus had loved taking the mickey out of people according to the bees they had in their bonnet. So with Mike, and with Tait also to a lesser extent, he had never tired of avowing his attachment to Protestantism and to Whig principles, his devotion to King Billy and the Glorious Revolution that secured our rights as Free-Born Englishmen, etc, etc. But when Tait heard what had happened he knew at once the proper thing to do. He played his record of “The White Cockade,” that rolling thunder of pipes and drums, that deep beat of defiance. Maybe the spirit of it could reach Fergus and be a resource to him.

Now he was out in the Valley.

Francesca had asked a few people to come for Sunday afternoon. It was meant to be a low-key farewell occasion. Having totally written-off the Players, there were now only a handful of people she still considered friends. Aside from Tait, Jimmy and Lauren and the kids were there, and Bambi and Bundle. She’d especially wanted Kelvin to come but he had a prior engagement.
Food had been put out on a table on the deck and they were sitting around in chairs, eating frankfurts and salad and sipping drinks. It was a superb spring day, cool but sunny, and the air was clean and fragrant and tasted like an elixir.

Tait was half-listening to the talk. They had discussed Neil the Wheel and the trouble he was in, and now they were talking about the Pioneer Museum being vandalized a few nights earlier. Every window had been smashed and the inside of the building turned into a shambles. Nobody was at all surprised. The place had always been a sitting target and it was amazing that this hadn’t occurred earlier. Francesca was saying that when they’d first opened the Museum the security angle hadn’t been the main thing on their minds at all, whereas now it’d be the first thing you’d consider. So much had gone to the dogs in the intervening years. And that was a factor, too, she said, in her choosing to leave the Valley and move to the centre of a country town. Being isolated had become dangerous. That led to a debate about the pros and cons of being right in the midst of other people as against having a margin of distance from them. Living right amongst them had its perils too, Lauren said. Bambi thought it all came down to the basic assumption we make as to whether people are more likely to help or harm us. It was her view that we encourage good or ill by the attitude we adopt, for life is mostly a state of mind. Jimmy agreed and said he’d seen too much of the harm done by the power of negative attitudes, the self-fulfilling effect of only seeing the worst. There are those who are committed to seeing the worst, who are trained to see it and rewarded for seeing it — and who therefore quickly begin to manufacture it for their own filthy purposes. Francesca asked if he meant the Hounds of Halifax in particular and Jimmy replied yes. Bambi asked what the Hounds of Halifax were and Jimmy briefly explained. Of course he didn’t mention that he and Roger had kept those hounds and hyenas off Bambi’s own family when it was under stress following the car-crash. But that was the thankless nature of the work. If it was successful the people who’ve been saved have little inkling of what has been done for them.

“Is this world a Snare or a Sacrament?” Tait asked, half absent-mindedly. “That’s the question you’re all circling around. Is it Vanity Fair or Ludlow Fair?”

They turned their heads and looked at him and waited for him to elaborate, but he was not really part the conversation and didn’t care to be caught up in it right now. The others resumed and he stopped listening.
He was sitting a little back from the circle of chairs. He stared out at the clear blue sky and breathed the delicious air. He wasn’t eating. He knew he’d gag if he tried to get even the tiniest piece of food down, and then the others would want to know what was wrong. Of course they’d noticed how thin and hollow-cheeked he was and had asked if he was okay. He said he was, but they did not look too convinced. Right now he was thinking about his impending death and realizing that he wouldn’t mind too much if he could go in surroundings like this. Keats had written of a desire to “cease upon the midnight with no pain.” But Tait preferred the idea of cool clear daylight, a blue sky with a few white wisps of trailing cloud, the fresh green of nature all around, the air full of flowers and birdsong.

He’d recently acquired a shorthand term for that kind of idyllic scene. He thought of it as “shropshire” from the title of Housman’s famous book of poems, *A Shropshire Lad*. The term could mean an actual location, like some particular patch of landscape in the Valley, but it equally meant a mood, an atmosphere, a quality of emotional balance. He preferred the word with the lower-case “s” because it meant something as perennial as “grass” or “sky” or “sunlight” and it didn’t need upper-case heightening.

The Housman poems were all deeply tragic of course, but the tragedy happens against the backdrop of that county on the Welsh border that always seems to be burgeoning with beauty no matter what manner of grief the poet is dwelling on. Even when he speaks of the snow on the hedges it doesn’t seem frozen and sterile but full of richness, as though you can see through the cold white surface to the blossoms that are coming into readiness underneath.

At that minute Tait had in mind a stanza of one of those poems, one called “Spring Morning.” The people have been drawn out of their cramped cottages by the beauty of the fields and lanes and hedges:

*Easily the gentle air*
*Wafts the turning season on;*
*Things to comfort them are there,*
*Though ’tis true the best are gone.*

There was the blend of beauty and fatality, comfort and sorrow. It was like in another of the poems where someone is returning to the lovely town of Ludlow where the Fair
is held each year. He remembers the two good friends who came to Ludlow with him in former times. Now he comes there alone, for Ned lies low in the churchyard and Dick lies long in gaol.

Yes, Tait thought, 'tis true the best are gone, and the world is sorely diminished. And yet that very sense of diminishment enhances the value of whatever good still remains. The pain of the loss has lent it a poignant force, a defiant edge that it might otherwise lack. The shadow gives it strength to live. The gaiety is all the more entrancing for that shadow, and the banners of Ludlow Fair lift more bravely in the wind.

It is April in the poem and April is everlastingly the month of Culloden, and though there was rain and wind that day on the moor, yet still the earth was quickening with spring.

And the best are gone.

And Kennington Green is far away, and departed are those like George Fletcher, the young linen-draper who declared, "I would do it all again!"

And far away now is Tower Hill where Lord Balmerino went to the block with superb calm defiance, still wearing his blue and red Jacobite uniform and asking the Almighty to bless all the Cause’s faithful adherents. "God reward them!" he had cried. "Make them happy here and in the world to come!"

And far, far away are all those whose precise endings are unknown to us, those like the Maid of Dunblane who had but one fleeting moment in which to be valiant and did not shirk.

And the best are gone.

It would not be too hard to die on a day like this, Tait thought, in a place like this, in the fresh bright air — that vivid air that is everlastingly signed with their honour. One would be following where the best have gone, and on the easiest of terms. And although one could not claim even a fraction of their fidelity or their courage, it would stand to one’s credit that one had very often remembered their story in the course of an otherwise foolish life.

Yes, if he knew the end was near he would go to Astrid’s Meadow and recline in the grass under the lush little tree. He would die in “shropshire” — in that state of equalibrium where death and beauty match.
He came out of a doze to find himself alone and nobody in sight. He went into the house but no-one was there. He stood in the dimness of the kitchen for a minute, recalling all the times he and Francesca had sat at the kitchen table. Then he went out on to the back verandah. Several of the big cardboard chucking-out boxes were there and he saw a corner of the blue dress sticking out from amongst the odds and ends. He knew he should grab it now and shove it in his satchel and that would be that. He’d have the keepsake he wanted and a yearning ache would be assuaged. But something held him back. He wasn’t afraid of being seen. He knew the others had gone up the hillside track towards Emmet the Melancholy Monster. He could hear the voices faintly. And even if he was seen, so what? Who cared if he took an old blue dress? He knew he hesitated out of that sense of grievance against her that she hadn’t offered it to him that day, that she hadn’t soothed him a little, that she hadn’t acknowledged the situation. He knew how silly the grievance was, but still couldn’t put it aside.

Then he remembered that he was dying and that none of it mattered anyway.

He went slowly up the track, finding the slope exhausting, and saw them sitting about on the ground in Emmet’s little gully.

“Ah, there you are,” Francesca called. “We left you to snooze because we thought you needed it.”

They stayed sitting up there for a couple of hours, idly chatting and enjoying the feel of the bush around them. The shafts of sunlight through the branches grew more golden as the sun got lower and they looked like bright marble pillars in a cathedral. Just before the sun went over the top of the hill there came a slow surge of wind. The long reeds around Emmet’s pool bent and whispered together and all along the hillside there were huge sighs of rustling leaves and branches, and the golden pillars of sunlight seemed to shimmer from the movement of the trees.

*Take heart,* it seemed to say, *take heart.* And Tait thought of that line of William Morris’s: “And they changed their lives and departed, and returned as the leaves of the trees.”

And then he remembered about Saskia being generous and humane and sensible and how that meant the Regime was not all-powerful after all and could not twist everyone to its will.
The sun disappeared over the hilltop and the bush was suddenly quite dim and chilly and they began to get up to go. Lauren asked Francesca if she would miss moments like the ones they’d just had, and Francesca nodded sadly.

Bambi and Bundle had to leave soon after. Francesca gave Bambi the address of the house she had rented in Cobaldin and they promised to keep in touch with one another. They gave each other an emotional hug, and Bundle and Jesse shook hands awkwardly, and then the car was out the gate and it was all over.

Jimmy and Lauren were in no hurry, and Tait had got a lift out with them, to spare the motorbike, and would leave when they did. They stayed till late in the evening and had a meal and played Monopoly. They got a cheery fire going and used up the last of the big load of wood Francesca had bought. She was in a quandary about buying another load, with only a few days left to be there, so Tait said he’d come out the next afternoon and get some more wood down from the hill.

Lauren asked Francesca about the actual process of moving out. She explained that it was all organized, and that Tait would be there to help. The removalists would come on the Thursday to take everything in their big van, and the real-estate man at Cobaldin – her father’s old pal – would see to the stuff’s arrival at the other end. They would just keep their blankets and pillows and toothbrushes for the final makeshift night in the house. The new owners were due to take possession at one o’clock the following day, so at noon precisely she and the kids would put themselves and their last few belongings in the station-wagon and drive away to their new life.

“And with barely a backward glance,” she added in a flippant tone.

Tait felt how uncalled for that was, and the grievance of the blue dress came back to mind.

Jimmy and Lauren did the whole hugging procedure with Francesca and said farewell to the kids, and then they were driving back through the dark of the Valley.

“So, are you okay,” Lauren asked Tait, who was scrunched in the back seat with Toby and Josie.

“About her going?”

“Well, that too, but I meant health-wise. We’re all a bit concerned at how run-down you seem.”

“Is it that obvious?”

“You look as if you can hardly drag yourself along.”
“That’s my normal condition.”

“Well, that’s true, but we’re still a bit worried. I’m not sure you ought to be doing the big lumberjack routine for Francesca when you aren’t a hundred per cent?”

“She hasn’t any wood.”

“She has other ways of getting some than working you to a frazzle.”

“I don’t care. It won’t be for much longer.”

“You don’t stick up for yourself enough.”

“She used to say the same thing. She used to tell me I’ve got a Broken Safety Valve.”

“Has she told you that lately?”

“No, not lately. I doubt if she cares enough, any more, to mention it.”

He hadn’t intended to say that. It had slipped out.

“Doom and gloom,” Jimmy intoned in a funereal voice. “There’s naught to be done and we’ll all be rooned, for it’s a bleak old bugger of a world and no mistake!”

“What became of Robin Rainbow?” Tait asked. “I liked his upbeat style better.”

“Beadle Brimstone converted him.”

“It serves me right then,” Tait groaned.

The kelpie started barking as soon they pulled into the driveway of the cabin. Tait got out and went up to the front door to unlock it in the headlights. When he reached in and flicked the kitchen light on, Jimmy started reversing the car. Tait waved, then turned his head and saw something on the ground a few metres away in the shadow thrown by the porch. He wondered what a pile of old clothes was doing there, but then realized it was a person. A stab of dismay went through him. He stared at the shape for a few moments to see if there was any movement, but it was lying very still. Jimmy had backed out the gate now and swung around onto the road. He tooted briefly and began to move forward. Tait shouted “Hey!” with all the strength he could get into his voice and felt a searing pain in his throat. He was afraid he had done a dreadful harm to himself. Jimmy drove back up the driveway and got out and asked what the matter was.

Jimmy had handled a lot of dead people in his nursing life and wasn’t fazed by it. He checked for a pulse and found there was none. He and Tait and Toby waited with the body while Lauren drove up to the phone box to ring the police. The kelpie kept barking the whole time.
Ernie had either had the heart attack while he was outside, or had stumbled outside in distress, looking for help. If he’d been groaning or calling out it would have set the dog off, and the dog’s noise would have prevented anyone hearing his cries. And that mad, pointless din would have been the last thing he ever heard.

* * * *

Having to fetch wood from the hillside was a godsend, really. It meant he was fully occupied for the next four days. He wasn’t in a frame of mind to do any writing and only went to the Green Room first thing in the morning to try to catch up on some sleep. At about ten o’clock he set out for the Valley, carefully nursing the bike along, keeping the revs up so it wouldn’t conk out, and then spent the rest of the day on the wood-gathering. He worked very slowly because he felt so weak and ill, and because he had nothing else to do and needed to spin it out. The lump in his throat was painful all the time. He knew he had done something to it when he’d shouted down the driveway to Jimmy at the top of his voice. He knew he had made it more malignant. At times he was sure he could feel the tentacles extending. He wore a scarf round his neck now because it seemed a tiny bit better if he kept his whole throat warm. And it felt sort of like a bandage, like he was doing something about the problem.

He and Francesca spoke very little. She was methodically packing, room by room, and he was either out on the hill or on the back veranda sawing a branch, sawing it very slowly with many pauses to rest. They stayed in the separate realms of their own thoughts.

He was glad they weren’t talking much. Talking above a whisper felt horrible. The vibration seemed to intensify the growth.

He hid the fact that he couldn’t eat anything solid. He brought a sachet of the instant tomato soup for lunch each day and told her he had developed a craze for it and didn’t fancy anything else. She’d ask if he was staying for a meal in the evening but he’d say he needed to get back to town. He would have a long rest on the Green Room sofa until it was late enough to go home to a session with the cheap wine and the records and the earphones, although he felt so bone-weary that before long he would nod off in the arm-chair.
Sometimes he saw Neil walking along the street in the evening, heading home before dark. He was only allowed in certain streets of the town and was never to be out at night. He was a different person without the boots and the camouflage gear and the long barrel of the Nightfinder slung from the belt. Those things had made him Neil the Wheel, the sturdy guardian — or rather they were the things he had used to make something better of himself against all the odds. Now the brats of the town made a sport of him. They’d come cavorting round him on the footpath and then pretend to run away in fright. Of course by doing that they were putting Neil in further peril. It only needed some grandstanding parent to claim that this Perpetrator had menaced their kid in some way and the shit would hit the fan all over again.

He had a public defender to help with his case and the lawyer reckoned it would be touch and go as to whether Neil went down for a three-year stretch. On the facts of the case he ought to get a good-behaviour bond, but there was such a clamour nowadays to crack down on “sexual predators” that it might go hard.

Tait had passed on Saskia’s good wishes, and Neil’s face had stayed completely blank, which meant he was full of emotion. It occurred to Tait that the cops would have got an impression of total unfeelingness when they grilled Neil that night. He would’ve seemed like a psychopath, creepily unmoved about it all. You could just see it written down in the police documents: “Showed no sign of remorse during questioning.”

Now it was the morning of the Thursday and Tait was at the Green Room. He had tried to have a solid sleep on the sofa but could only manage a fitful doze. His throat was giving him hell.

There’d been a long letter from Mike in the box the previous night and Tait was reading it through again. He had mentioned in a recent note that he wanted to be at the Hendon rally in Castleton, assuming it went ahead. Mike declared how pleased he was to hear it.

“I’ll be there too,” he wrote, “so we’ll meet after all these years. How odd that our paths have never crossed before, or that we’ve never made them cross. Fate must have willed it that way. But perhaps, and sadly, we’d have come together soon in any case, to pay our respects to Fergus. I’ve heard that he’s going steadily downhill.”

Tait had heard the same, and had pictured some kind of memorial occasion being held.
“I’ve been going to a few of the recent rallies with Beth,” Mike continued. “It does one a power of good to get out of the office and into the front-line, to sniff the gunpowder and see the Enemy in full array. And in fact I’ll be giving one of the warm-up speeches in Castleton, before Beth comes on. And Len Mullan, that dynamic local chap of yours, will be giving the other.

“As to it going ahead, we have an advantage for once. The venue is owned by a keen supporter, so they’ll find it harder to foil us from that angle. It’s always difficult for us when a venue belongs to local government or to some public or community body that the commissars either control or can easily lean on. Our supporter who owns the Castleton venue is a tough cookie. He’s a Vietnam vet who can’t be stood over, although he knows he’ll be harrassed for years to come with endless fire and safety inspections and what-not. Our opponents will also try their other standard ploy, panic-mongering about potential violence – the violence they intend to cause – but that isn’t playing quite as well with the punters now. People aren’t that stupid. They can see on their TV screens who the violent ones are. And we have a pretty strong support base in Castleton, so the commissars will be aware of the risk of creating a backlash there. That’s if one gives them credit for being relatively sane, which I know is an awfully big leap.

“I’m just drafting my speech now, and the prompting idea is that quote of Woody Guthrie’s you mentioned one time, about how some villains will do you down with a gun and others with a fountain-pen. That captures the whole truth of modernity’s regime, a criminality so vast that even Hitler and Stalin and Mao and Pol Pot have only been its minions, its mere operatives. All modern political orders are in the ultimate business of murder. That’s what modernity is, the urge to kill ever-larger categories of people in the name of progress. But some orders will kill you quick with bullets or gas-chambers, or relatively quickly with methods like planned starvation, as was done to the Ukrainians in the 1930s. Others – the vaunted democratic orders of the West – will render you just as dead but more slowly and with a touch more finesse. One method gets a lot of blood on the floor, the other gets ink on the paper. As Dylan Thomas wrote: “The hand that signed the paper felled a city.” That’s a fitting line for Castleton, which is being gutted by the fountain-pens as truly as if the Regime was pounding it with artillery.
“We have to expose the lethal nature of the forces at work. They are the same forces everywhere, but just wearing different hats and having differing notions of how much blood to put on the floor. It’s always about eliminating one or another set of people from this world, and the only question is whether to cram them into cattle-trucks or not. The Anglo-American mindset isn’t keen on cattle-trucks, and so we falsely assume that the mindset is worlds away from the principle of elimination. That’s the essential problem. We look for the familiar outward signs of evil and if those signs aren’t there we assume the evil isn’t there either. That’s of course why no politician of today wears jackboots and a little black moustache.

“If hoodlums burst into your home one night and mangle you and your family, you at least comprehend the criminal enormity of it. But the Regime commits that same atrocity every day of the week. It shatters homes and families all the time, all over the place, but it does it with fountain-pens. It has an arsenal of sawn-off weapons and blunt instruments, but these are acts of parliament and bureaucratic procedures and judicial rulings and economic policies.

“Or take another scenario. A man who has been reduced to a shell of despair commits suicide. If this occurs in a camp and the poor wretch is a Jew who’s undergone a Gestapo interrogation, we hold the death to be a crime against humanity and we put the culprits on trial at Nuremburg. But if it happens in a cheap rented room, and the man is a vilified husband and father who’s been dragged through the torture-mill of the Family Court, we shrug and say tough luck. Why are there no demands for those culprits to be put on trial? The process over which they preside is as just fundamentally Hitleroid and Stalinoid and the victim is just as dead.

“As Czeslaw Miloz noted in his Nobel Prize address in 1980, the spirits of Hitler and Stalin may have won a more durable victory than any they ever gained with their armies. And of course the same sort of thing can be said of a Calvin or a Cromwell.

“The Woody Guthrie quote is so apt because the Western political orders – the fountain-pen tyrannies – operate on the most basic con-trick of all, that of the villain who claims to be helping you against the villains. The ploy has worked a treat for centuries. First it’s the Pope or the King you need to watch out for, that you need to be protected from. Then time goes by and the list of the sinister has grown to include pretty well everyone on the planet, with your own friends and family at the top of the danger-list. The only one you are supposed to trust is the one who put you on your
guard in the first place, he of the suit and tie and the fountain-pen. Nobody is genuine except the one who smartened you up and set you straight and gave you some sophistication that you can preen yourself over, the one who first warned you, out of sheer goodness of heart, against trusting in anyone’s good heart.

“The punters have to grasp all this while there’s still a faint hope of resistance. And the battlers of Castleton most of all, for they are now on schedule to get the full treatment. In their plight we can see how the common people of the West are always used as grist and fodder, are always expendable in the name of the latest Big Idea the commissars have got clenched in their vicious reptile brains. It’s Reformation, or Enclosure, or Industrialism, or Consumerism, or Liberation or whatever the hell else. Now it happens to be Globalism and the jobs must be sent to where the wretched of the earth will do them for ten cents a week — though of course those lucky ones will soon be hurled aside in their turn, for there are queues of even more desperate applicants over the horizon.

“Meanwhile the battlers of Castleton have had their lives demolished by those who then trawl through the wreckage for excuses to persecute them even more. The maggots will hurry to the corpse. There won’t be jobs there for normal human beings who want to keep actual homes and families together, but there’ll be plenty of openings for the parasitic trendoids. There’ll be a whole growth-industry in policing the crime-scene and servicing the dissolution. Castleton is about to join the great Empire of Dysfunction and there’ll be room for any number of dole inspectors and sensitivity-trainers and child-protection gurus and domestic-violence crusaders and sexual-harrassment co-ordinators, not to mention legions of the zealous personnel of the Tolerance Tribunal and the Intimacy Inspectorate, the Suspicion Commission and the Bullying Bureau. There’ll be stacks of new work for the show-trial courts of so-called Family Law, that black jewel in the crown of the Anarcho-Tyranny. There’ll be lush new pastures for all the unctuous creeps of the counselling racket. There’ll be high times for all the filthy frauds of academia — its kaput for a thousand steel-workers and their families but the Sabina Sharpes will always have a pay-packet. And of course there’ll be open slather for every kind of snoop and snitch and copper’s nark and dirty lickspittle who cares to crawl out of the woodwork.

“In The Wreck of the West, Sam Foster made the remark that ‘political correctness is the placement of life under an alien jurisdiction.’ In that sense ‘political correctness’
is just another name for modernity, and modernity is itself the ‘alien jurisdiction.’ And under its grinders, as the King so eloquently said to that jurisdiction’s great kangaroo-court of 1649, ‘I do not know what one he is in England that can call his life his own, or anything that belongs to him.’

“The King was speaking for the yet unborn ex-workers of Castleton, who are now to be eliminated from this world as creatures of any value. But at least there won’t be cattle-trucks involved, and there won’t be too much blood on the floor, for our little patch of the Great Commissariat is after all a Democracy…

“But oh dear, how intemperate I’m being in my remarks! How very naughty of me! I should know by now what is required by the great Double Standard, the great sacred law of “Who Whom?” It’s only the Commissariat and its dirty bootlicks who have the right to toss invective around. They are free to vilify most of the population as racist and sexist and homophobic and xenophobic and whatever the hell else they like, but we mustn’t hurt their feelings, poor tender little lambs! We mustn’t say a word that hasn’t been carefully qualified from nineteen different angles and vetted by the Speech Police! But I’m of the old school of Fergus Gunn, and the school of Sam Foster, and the Enemy can like it or fucking lump it!

“I wish I could distribute copies of The Wreck of the West to everyone in the audience. And copies of Hope Against Hope as well. The Mandelstam would open some eyes a bit, would show them how much of the atmosphere of our society now parallels the Stalinist horror she writes about. We too have now come to the point of having to look askance at our friends and neighbours, and at our own children, and wonder if they will denounce us.

“What are our chances of success in the fight? The short answer is that it doesn’t matter. Our duty is clear regardless of the odds. And one the best statements of that outlook is in a letter the King wrote in the darkest days of the Civil War when even his great cavalry leader Prince Rupert had urged him to seek terms with the enemy. Acknowledging that he and his cause were in dire straits, and that his foes held the upper hand, Charles went on:

*a composition with them at this time is nothing else but a submission, which, by the grace of God, I am resolved against, whatever it cost me, for I know my*
“We have to hope that courage is contagious. The Hendon movement won’t always be around. Very likely it will only be a brief shining moment, for the Great Commissariat is bending all its power and malice against us. But even if we are cut down, we might have sown a few seeds that will germinate later.”

It was time for Tait to head out to the Valley. The removal van was due around lunchtime and it was nearly eleven now.

He locked the Green Room door behind him and tried to start the motorbike, but it just gave a splutter and then subsided. He tried again and again to no avail, kicking down on it with what little strength he could muster. The effort hurt his throat and sent spasms of distress right through him. He gave up and sat down with his back to the brick wall and tried to recover his strength. When he tried the bike again after nearly half an hour it clattered into action.

When he got to Francesca’s place the removalists were trying to back their huge van up the slope of the driveway, but it wouldn’t go. The van had too long an overhang from the back wheels. The removalist was a bad-tempered old bloke and his offsider was surly and they didn’t appreciate having to carry everything down from the house to where the van was parked in the gateway. Tait helped as well as he could, but felt weak and ill and had to take a breather every couple of minutes. Any sudden strain of lifting made him want to groan with anguish from the pain in his throat. At times the lump felt so big he thought it would choke him. The removalist took it amiss that Tait wasn’t pulling his weight and gave him dirty looks.

They finally got everything loaded and the van drove away.

Tait desperately needed to go back to the Green Room to lie down in the dim quietness. He told Francesca he had to get back to town and would see her the next morning before she left, although that would depend, he said, on whether the bike would start. He said it in a low quick mutter, to spare his throat. Francesca looked at him and said, “Oh, okay.”

He got the bike going after only five attempts and gave Francesca a brief wave as he pulled away. She stood and watched him go. She had a grave expression on her face and he wondered if anything was wrong. It only struck him when he was past
Honeysuckle Hill that he might’ve sounded a bit brusque or even hostile when he’d muttered about seeing her next morning and how it all depended on the bike.

Chapter Thirty-One

Ernie’s dwelling had stood forlorn since his death. The police had checked inside it that night and had locked the door after them when they left and no one had been there since. Tait vaguely wondered what would happen now. He had been eight weeks behind with the rent when Ernie died and was worried that someone might come demanding those arrears. He had four hundred and twelve dollars in his account, all that remained of the last of the film-option money from Mayhem Productions. When that was gone he would not have a penny in the world.

The pain and worry of his throat kept him from getting any sound sleep and he was only fitfully dozing when the kelpie began its first barrage of barks at around five-fifteen that Friday morning. He dragged himself to the sink and filled the electric jug for coffee and then looked out the window and saw a vehicle parked at the door of Ernie’s place. It was a panel-van with fancy silver wheels and red flames painted down the side. Tait felt his stomach go watery with dismay and the dog kept up a high-pitched manic yelp that he couldn’t bear.

He switched the jug off and got his satchel and crept out of the cabin. He walked the motorbike along the driveway and then freewheeled it down the hill. It rolled to a stop next to the yard where another hostile dog lived. The animal came out at him and he had to fend it off as best he could while trying to kick the engine into life. The dog managed to nip him once on the ankle. When he got to the Green Room and lay down on the sofa and closed his eyes and made an intense effort to control the tearing pain in his throat. He told himself he would go to Doctor Pascoe as soon as the surgery opened and ask for a pain-killing injection. Doctor Pascoe was a decent chap and would surely help him out. The thought was calming and he gradually regained a bit of composure. He realized how bone-tired he was.

It was after ten-thirty when he woke, and it was another minute before he remembered that Francesca was leaving at noon. The bike started after about twenty
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attempts and Tait was slumped on the seat in exhaustion as he rode through the Valley.
Francesca was standing in the empty kitchen when he entered and the kids had gone up the hill to say goodbye to Emmet.
“Sorry I’m so late,” he said, keeping his voice low to spare his throat.
“It’s okay,” she replied.
It was ten to twelve.
“It’s a strange feeling,” she said, looking around at the empty space. “You want to say good riddance to it all, but you start remembering every nice moment you’ve ever had in the house, and you feel like a traitor for leaving it.”
“Yes.”
“The same with friends,” she said. “You remember all the sweet times you’ve had with them.”
“And block out the all times you wanted to strangle them?”
“No, those become poignant as well.”
“Yes, they do.”
“It’s been fourteen years for you and I.”
“Yes.”
“What does one say?”
“I don’t know.”
They heard the kids coming back down the hill.
Francesca took an envelope from her bag and handed it to him.
“Should I open it now?”
“Well.”
“I’ll open it later then.”
They walked on to the deck and Francesca locked the door behind her and they stood looking out.
“What are you thinking?” she asked.
“That you’ve got a long drive ahead.”
“About seven hours.”
“Best not tarry then.”
Tait shook hands with Jesse and kissed each of the girls on the cheek and they took their places in the car.
“My new address and phone number are in the envelope,” Francesca said. “Make sure you ring me very soon. I can’t ring you of course, since you still don’t have a phone. You’re just incorrigible.”

“But cute with it?”

“Cute as a button.”

She put her arms around him and they hugged. She brushed her lips against his and then stepped down off the deck and got in the car and drove away. The car tooted once before it went out of sight.

It was right on noon and he had an hour before the new owners were due.

He wandered vaguely around the place for the next forty minutes with that peculiar pit-of-the-stomach feeling you get. He opened the envelope and found a five-page letter and five brand-new fifty-dollar notes, as well as the new address and phone number. He was not in a frame of mind to read the letter just then, but he saw at a glance that it was about how precious their friendship had been to her, and how that friendship was now entering a new phase. That kind of thing. The fifty-dollar bills were to cover the accumulated little sums he’d spent on her behalf.

He thought of the blue dress and felt bitter regret that he hadn’t secured it when he had the chance. He supposed it was now on a rubbish-pile somewhere. But then he started to think in a more elevated way and the tune of a song came to him. It was Robbie Burns’s “Ae Fond Kiss” and one stanza of the words came with particular force:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Had we never lov’d sae kindly,} \\
\text{Had we never lov’d sae blindly,} \\
\text{Never met – or never parted,} \\
\text{We had ne’er been broken-hearted.}
\end{align*}
\]

He realized he wasn’t thinking of Francesca at all, or at least not on a conscious level. He was picturing the scene at Ruthven where the remnants of the Prince’s army had re-assembled after Culloden.

There were about three thousand of them and they were willing to fight on, but the Cause was just in too much disarray. As well as the lost battle, there was no money and no provisions, and their supply-lines from France were cut. The next campaign
would have to be prepared all over again from scratch, and so the Prince told them to disperse. The worn and scarred and weary Jacobites had to part and go their many ways. Some would be captured and killed while others would escape to exile, some would never be seen again and others would settle back into almost their old lives, to suffer along with their clans the great doom of the Clearances. It gripped the heart to think what sorrow there must’ve been in that dispersal, in the parting of so many who had been through so much together, who had so many dead friends and vanished hopes in common, so many shared memories of horror and heroism to carry till their dying day. As one of them later wrote, putting it into the third-person as though to gain some emotional distance on it: “There were eternal adieus when they took leave of one another, no one being able to foresee his fate…”

The words of the song were true. If they’d never met and never parted they never would have been broken-hearted. But that was only one aspect of it. The far greater aspect was that time had transfigured the anguish into something beautiful, had turned it into a song, a poem, a myth, an inspiration, a fable — the fable of all our lives. And that had enabled those heroes of the past to live on. It was as Richard Weaver said: “they live on as forces, helping to shape our dream of the world.” And their story remained, as the Welsh poet R.S. Thomas put it, referring to the ancestral song of blackbirds, “fresh always with new tears.”

Tait looked at his watch and saw it was nearly one o’clock. He had to get out of there.

He got the bike to start and coasted down the slope for the last time and out the gate and headed for Astrid’s Meadow. He wanted to go on with his thoughts.

He stayed there for a longish while, dwelling on the whole notion of “the fable of all our lives” and on how the griefs of the Jacobites had been changed into forms of loveliness. The gist of the “fable” itself was plain in whatever form one might happen to encounter it. It related to the great struggle for and against Modernity. Hans Christian Anderson, for example, presents it as a parable at the opening of his story of “The Snow Queen.” But how did the transfiguration thing come into it, the magical process that over time turns tears of anguish and defeat into tears of comfort and redemption? It seemed to Tait that it was precisely in fable or fairy-tale terms that you could see the answer. It was like when the good fairy cannot undo the spell of the bad fairy but can modify it somehow. And so instead of the princess dying, she will sleep
for a hundred years. It was like that in the fable of all our lives. The kindly fates could not avert our side’s defeat in the world, but they could make it beautiful.

After much effort the bike started again and he set off towards town. The engine cut out along the way and he could not kick it back into life for any amount of trying. After he’d recovered a little from the exertion, he started to walk the bike along the side of the road, but found the effort too tiring. He wheeled it down a bank and stood it out of sight behind some thick bushes. It had only a few days of registration left on it.

He continued walking and felt lighter without the burden of the bike. He realized that by and large he didn’t feel too bad. He had not been conscious of his throat for a couple of hours, although the fact of becoming aware of it now began to bring back the constricted feeling and a certain amount of pain. Still, the road felt firm under his feet and there was a cooling breeze on his face and he could hear the sigh and rustle of it through the long grass at the road’s edge.

He got into a steady rhythm.

This could be the landscape near Ruthven, he thought, and he could be one of those dispersing Jacobites in that sad April of 1746 — broken-hearted, yes, but still going resolutely to whatever fate was in store.

* * * *

The silver panel-van was gone from in front of Ernie’s place when he got back to the cabin that night, and it wasn’t there the next morning when he left for the Green Room.

He caught the very early bus from the stop down the road. It felt odd not to have the motorbike, but he was trying to put that out of his mind, along with everything else. He was trying to see the gist of a new poem, and as long as he was focused on that he didn’t have to think about Francesca being gone.

The line of thought had been sparked by the idea of the politics of modernity being the politics of murder, and that modernity was the battering-ram of Revolution, forever being resisted by the ad hoc scattered forces of Counter-Revolution. Camus had summarized it brilliantly in words that were now pinned up on the Blue Board:

“Then, when revolution in the name of power and history becomes that immoderate
and mechanical murderer, a new rebellion is consecrated in the name of moderation and of life.” It was yet another way of referring to the paradigm wars — the Party of Murder versus the Party of Life.

Tait saw that modern politics was the constant process of softening-up this or that set of people in order to eliminate them. The big trial-run was in the 1530s when the monks were the target. They were said to be “cruel,” an accusation that now sounded almost quaint. But every period has its own terms of attack and nowadays the potent words were “abusive” and “violent.” Once you’ve pasted those labels on them you can act against the target groups with any amount of righteous ferocity, for no-one can object to crackdowns on violent abusers, not even the very people who are being collectively framed and set up, such as white heterosexual males. Indeed many of those will applaud the process, unable to understand that the grave is being dug for them along with the others. It had been like that from the start, when the job was done on the monks. When the crunch came they didn’t show solidarity with each other and were picked-off separately. It was that way too in the Forty-Five when all but a poignant handful of the English Jacobites failed to rise. But even some of the supposedly loyal clans had stayed at home in the Highlands, had not lined-up for the great fight “in the name of moderation and of life.” Chesterton said that in the fall of good things there is almost always a touch of betrayal from within. And it was the same now. A million voters had come out for the Hendon movement in the federal election, but of course a far greater number had not. They couldn’t see the grave being dug for them. Most people never can, not until they’re kneeling at the edge of it with their hands tied and the executioner’s pistol at the back of their head. Then the endless fog of stupidity lifts and for the split-second they have left they see that this was what had been coming towards them all the time. This was what those ratbags had been talking about, those ridiculous panic-mongers with bees in their bonnets. In one of his many fruitless warnings to the West, Solzhenitsyn had quoted a Russian proverb: “You’ll know its true when it happens to you.”

It was this peculiar blindness that Tait wanted to focus on. He worked on the poem till his head swam and the words were a meaningless jumble. But he had nailed it down.
THE ARREARS OF ANGUISH

We’d seen the images in black and white
Of giant heaps of spectacles and teeth.
It might have given us a proper fright,
But we were too complacent underneath.

Orwell had written. Aldous Huxley too.
It wasn’t so very hard to glimpse ahead.
We could’ve used our brains a time or two,
And listened to what Solzhenitsyn said.

But wickedness wore foreign uniforms
And sparked more curiosity than fear.
We had this wholly other set of norms
And always knew it couldn’t happen here.

No worries, it just wasn’t in the hunt.
We’d pick that looming evil in a flash
— A fur cap with a red star on the front,
Or jackboots and a little black moustache.

Surely it looked identical each time.
Surely the Devil comes in crimson tights.
Such futile ignorance was not a crime,
Merely the most cherished of our rights.

We simply didn’t fathom how it grew,
Could never visualize it on the loose.
We never understood what it could do
In the name of a war against Abuse.

All this will be a torment on the day
It seizes each of us and lets us know
The reckoning is due and we must pay
The full amount of anguish that we owe.

He called at the Plaza just before six and saw screaming headlines about more bloody violence at a Hendon meeting the previous night. This time a sixty-two year old man had been carted off with a fractured skull. It was only when you read right down in the text that you learned the man had actually been a Hendon sympathizer trying to get in the door and that the assailants were in fact the tender young humanitarians outside, the ones howling “DEATH TO BETH!” and gobbing spit on people who could be their grandparents.

He bought some sachets of instant soup at the supermarket and then caught his bus home. His throat was giving him hell again. The pain had come back when he’d finished the poem and no longer had that intense focus to occupy his mind. And it had surged up again when was reading the report in the paper.

At home he put cotton wool in his ears to drown out the dog’s noise, then put his earphones on and played music as he sat at his work-table staring out at the darkening trees and the lake. He thought about Francesca at Cobaldin and wondered what she was doing at that moment, then about the place in the Valley and how peculiar that it was now out of bounds and that he wouldn’t ever be fetching firewood from the hill again, would never again see old Emmet the Melancholy Monster.

A large face appeared at the window in front of him and gave him a fright, but then he registered the purple hair and the pierced eye-brows and the lurching bulk of the frame underneath.

“I did knock,” Kelvin said when Tait opened the door.
“I’m fussy who I let in.”
“I know it’s a select list and I’m very thrilled to be on it.”
“You’re not on it. I’m just being extremely gracious. Like a coffee or something?”
“Have you got a beer?”
“I have cheap wine that will make you puke.”
“You shouldn’t have gone to the trouble just for me.”
They sat in the work-room and Kelvin sipped the wine.

“So, our girl is finally up and gone,” he said. “How are you coping with that?”

“Okay, I think,” Tait replied, keeping his voice low because of his throat.

“She was a bit concerned about you.”

“When was this?”

“Yesterday morning when I called in to say goodbye.”

“She didn’t mention that you’d been there. I got there very late.”

“Yes, she was wondering where you were. She thought you might be bitterly pissed-off and weren’t going to show.”

“I fell asleep in the Green Room, that was all.”

“Maybe you fell asleep out of subconscious hostility.”

“You’re right. It was savage doze. I snored through gritted teeth. I stopped at nothing to get even.”

“We had a longish talk about you.”

“Oh dear, anything you can bear to relate?”

“Actually, she said she hoped you were pissed-off, as pissed-off as a hornet. If you got angry enough you might start putting your life in order and getting your proper needs met. This is Francesca speaking, remember, not me. I’m the last one to judge the deals anybody makes with life — although, since the subject has come up, why the hell don’t you pull your finger out?”

“I need to work up to it slowly.”

“Anyway, for whatever its worth, she worries about your well-being.”

“I know. It’s the Broken Safety Valve issue.”

“What’s the matter with your voice? Why are you speaking in a whisper?”

“I have a sore throat.”

“You look like shit, actually. And you’ve lost weight since I saw you last.”

“A bit, yes.”

“Wish I could say the same.”

“How is it with Rory?”

“Non-existent.”

“Has he moved to Cobaldin?”

“He might as well have.”

“I’m sorry.”
“It’s been totally over for almost a month.”
“Totally?”
“The whole box and dice.”
“So where is he?”
“Installed with a new partner.”
“Anyone I know?”
“I hope not or your reputation is in tatters.”
“Where does that leave you?”
“I’m selling the nursery.”
“Going back into a record shop?”
“No, I’ve decided to move away. Live in the city for a while. This area’s been getting stale for me for a long time. It was Auntie dying that brought the feeling to a head.”
“It’s a season of departures.”
“And of ghosts.”
“The time of the Ghost Dance is how I think of it.”
“Why?”
Tait briefly outlined what he knew about it from reading Black Elk.
“I feel I’ve been with the dead these last several days,” Kelvin said. “I’ve been reading Megan’s diaries, the record she kept of her time on Council and of being the person everybody came to with their troubles.”
“I saw great Cobbett riding, the horseman of the shires…”
“I’ve no idea what you’re muttering about.”
“Sorry.”
“She recorded all the routine injustice, the way people are put through the ringer by the Council, the police, the dole-office, the social workers, you name it. And by their own stinking neighbours, as often as not. And there’s nobody they can turn to, except a rare figure like her.”
“And getting rarer.”
“Yes.”
“The best are gone,” Tait sighed.
“And the fucking dregs remain.”
“Too true.”
They stayed silent for a couple of minutes and Kelvin methodically finished the glass of wine. He looked more severe than Tait had ever seen him.

“Does that dog still never shut its fucking trap?” Kelvin asked after another barrage of yelps.

“Not very often.”
“How long has it been going on now?”
“Feels like a lifetime.”
“Do you want it killed?”
“Pardon?”
“I’d be glad to kill it for you.”
“Whoa, what was in that wine?”
“I’ll do it as a parting gift before I leave the area.”
“Are you serious?”
“Am I wearing a clown-suit?”
“How would you kill it?”
“An arrow through its heart.”
“Go on,” said Tait, after a pause.
“I’d come one night and shoot it over the fence. I’m a very good shot with a bow and arrow. Or at least I used to be. I did archery for years. But in any case I couldn’t miss from nearly point-blank range.”
“Here’s yet another facet of the wonder that is Kelvin.”
“Give me some more of that wine.”
“Would you leave the arrow in the dog?” Tait asked as he filled the glass again.
“It depends.”
“If you did, could the police trace it?”
“I’d use one that couldn’t be traced.”
“A ‘cold’ arrow?”
“The arrow still in the body might make the message a bit clearer to the owners.”
“What’s the message? That the Commanches have broken off the reservation?”
“That evil will be met with evil.”
“How about a package deal? You whack the mutt and the whole family.”
“Haven’t you thought of doing the dog in?”
“Endlessly. I once bought some snail-baits and mince-meat. I meant to put the baits inside little balls of mince and throw them into the yard.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“I was afraid there’d be a stuff-up, that other creatures might get poisoned. Or kids, even.”

“There’s the whole pile of shit right there. Others can make your life hell for years on end and not give two hoots. But you’re too scrupulous to strike back. That’s what I kept seeing in Auntie’s diaries, and what she herself noted repeatedly — the conscientious get screwed because they don’t get down and dirty. They’re too civilized. They imagine there are proper channels to go through.”

“Whereas in fact the channels are all owned by the Regime,” Tait said. “It’s part of the great inversion process of the Anarcho-Tyranny. The brutal now get the protection, and the gentle get the shaft.”

“What about it then?”

“The hit on the hound, you mean?”

“Do you want it rubbed out or not?”

“The package deal is off the table?”

“Stop joking. Answer yea or nay.”

“I appreciate the thought. Nobody’s ever cared enough to offer to shoot a dog for me with a bow and arrow. It doesn’t mean we’re engaged or anything, does it, in your culture?”

“Stop joking. Yea or nay?”

“I guess it has to be nay, then,” Tait sighed, his voice turning gravelly. His throat was hurting very much from the strain of speaking.

“So the bastards win again, and their whole system gets reinforced.”

“I know,” Tait said, with no heart to joke anymore. “But we have to cling to a hope that there’s a larger process, as Peggy Dean keeps reminding me. ‘The mills of God grind slow, but they grind exceeding small.’”

His voice was getting more gravelly with every word.

“Take some cough medicine,” Kelvin said, draining his glass. “You sound like shit. In the meantime, you wait while the mills grind,’ he said. ‘I’m into smiting mine enemies now, and I was willing to give yours a quick smite as well. But it’s your call.”
He looked at his watch, then ran his hand through his purple hair and heaved his bulk up from the chair with an effort.

“I’d better make tracks,” he said, turning to peer at various items on the Blue Board.

“So when are you leaving the area?” Tait asked.

“Not for a few weeks. I’ll see you before then.”

“Good.”

Kelvin leant close to the board and peered at the Trotsky quote: “You might not be interested in war, but war is interested in you.”

“Good point, that,” he said, tapping it with his knuckle. “Apposite, as they say.”

“Very.”

When Tait opened the door he saw the panel-van was drawing up in front of Ernie’s place. The light streamed from the cabin doorway and they saw a young man get out of the van and stare across at them. It wasn’t a polite look. There was something abrupt about it. But maybe the young man had just been startled at the sight of Kelvin.

The dog was still barking at the panel-van’s arrival and kept barking as Kelvin got into his car and started the engine.

“That wine was everything you promised,” he called.

“Will you be at the Players meeting this week?”

“No, I’ll be having my stomach pumped.”

“Good plan.”

He backed down the driveway and drove off with a toot. The young man had let himself into the dwelling and turned the light on. Tait went back inside the cabin and shut the door, hoping the dog would settle when the activity ceased.

He felt horribly depressed now. His throat throbbed and he just wanted to settle in with the remainder of the cheap wine and the earphones and *The Storm on the Heather*. He needed to lose himself in emotion so he wouldn’t think too much.

Kelvin was perfectly right of course. If you didn’t strike back you got the boot stamping on a human face forever, as Orwell said. It was Solzhenitsyn’s point about slugging them hard because that’s the only thing they ever respect. And there was something else he said. If every person had resisted to the utmost when the KGB came, it could’ve have made a difference. If the goons knew, each time they went out to make an arrest, that one or two of them might not come back alive, or might return
with an eye gouged out or a kitchen-knife in the stomach, it might have changed the equation a little. Vast numbers of good people would have been killed defending themselves, but the model of resistance would have been established, the point made that people aren’t mere sheep to the wolves. And besides, all those people mostly ended up being killed anyway. They might as well have saved some of their honour, and that of the human race. But of course you couldn’t ask it of ordinary people who’d been so undermined within themselves. That’s what the Commissariat did to human beings over hundreds of years. It leeched away their fighting spirit, their natural fury, that proper frenzy that ought to boil over at a certain point of being insulted and kicked and spat on. It turned them into wimps.

That was why the Highlanders had been the sword-arm of the Cause. They were pre-modern people who hadn’t yet been wimpified. And that was why the Regime knew it had to destroy them by any means available. It could never be safe while the clans were still out on the heather.

Tait knew he should long ago have made the kelpie’s owners rue that they ever allowed that animal to breathe, let alone bark. He might now be in gaol for it, but the point would have been made, and the making of such points is what determines the fate of the world. That’s what Solzhenitsyn was talking about. That’s what everything is always about. It was like the Spartans at Thermopylae, or like the Seven Samurai, or like Shane on the individual level. At a certain stage of events they unleash terrifying blood and slaughter, but the carnage isn’t important in itself, only insofar as it goes to the making of the point.

* * * *

Tait was walking along the Valley road just after midday. He had a screwdriver in his satchel and was going to remove the number plate from the motorbike. The rego had now expired and he was required to hand the plate back in at the motor registry. He had no thought of trying to salvage the bike, of wheeling it back into town and then all the way to the cabin. He didn’t have the energy for that, and anyway it would serve no purpose. He would just leave the old steed where it was, at the bottom of that bank, behind the shrubs. Let that be its resting place. Let it gradually disappear in the undergrowth and be at peace.
He had a similar thought about himself. He wouldn’t mind sinking into a deep sleep in the long sweet grass of Astrid’s Meadow and have the green tendrils weave over him and draw him down into the earth.

He’d seen Doctor Pascoe that morning.

He had been at the Green Room, trying to work on a new poem, a piece about himself and Francesca bumping in to each other years in the future. But his throat had given him such hell that he couldn’t concentrate. The pain had recently spread to the back of his neck and his shoulders and he could no longer support his head properly when he bent his neck to write. He’d had to go outside and pace up and down in the car-park, keeping his head carefully balanced over his body to ease the neck muscles. Then he had headed off along the street, trying to focus all his attention on the rhythm of putting one foot in front of another. To reinforce the rhythm he began counting his steps. He’d count a hundred paces and then tap the keys in his pocket three times to make them jingle. That meant a sequence had been completed and he could start on the next.

He found himself passing the surgery. He stopped and peered through the glass, telling himself that if there were less than three people waiting he would go in and consult the doctor. He did not think there would be less than three people. He had never seen less than three people in there. But there were only two. He swore at himself for making such a rash commitment, but knew he had to abide by it. He took a deep breath and went in.

Doctor Pascoe wanted to talk about the Players. He had been coming to the shows for years and enjoyed seeing Tait in comedy roles. He’d been a fan of Francesca’s dramatic acting too, and said how much she’d be missed now that she had moved away. He kept prattling on while he felt Tait’s throat with his fingers. Yes, there seemed to be some swelling there, he said, but it would need a proper examination by a specialist. He would set up an appointment.

Tait came out and stood shaking with dismay on the footpath, and yet amused at the way you can have your doom confirmed in the course of a breezy chat about pantomime and farce. But of course imparting the bad news to people was no big deal for a doctor. Pascoe must have to do it every day. But now the air in the street felt chilly and more quivering to the touch, as if all the nerve-ends of his skin were suddenly more alert. And the street itself looked slightly strange, as if he hadn’t quite
seen it before. But he realized he felt calmer than he would’ve expected. There was even a kind of relief. A line came to him — “And that has made all the difference.” It was from the Robert Frost poem, “The Road Not Taken.” Yes, it was like that. There might be a load of regret about the road you haven’t taken, and now won’t ever be taking, but at least you know which road you are going down. At least you have done with the endless dithering uncertainty of it all.

That must be what Robert Connell felt, marching out of Preston with the Prince’s army. Neither Robert Frost nor Black Elk would be born for another century or so, but the idea of the Two Roads could have been floating about in his mind somehow. Even if he wasn’t thinking in exactly those terms and images, he would have understood that he was now on the Black Road, the north-south road of trouble and war and death, but that it was good to be finished with uncertainty, to be able to say at last: “And that has made all the difference.”

When he reached the spot he went down the bank and unscrewed the number plate and put it in his satchel. There was a nice little paddock, and the creek was just on the other side of it and you could faintly hear water trickling. He took the bike from its leaning position against the tall shrubs and laid it down on its side in the long grass. He pushed the grass across it with his foot and laid some twigs on top. It was still shielded from the road by the shrubs and it would gradually settle and when the grass grew longer in summer it would hardly show at all.

He stood for a minute, hoping no car would come along to break the quiet. Apart from near the end when it was worn-out and began to falter in the general break-up, the bike had done him faithful service. He felt he should find some proper words to say. He knew he wasn’t just being twee. The bike was only an object, a thing of metal, and yet like so many other items in the world it was a sacramental object. The eternal had reposed in it, even if only for fleeting moments. The sacred had made use of it, had passed through it, had dwelt in our mundane realm by means of it. We perceive this readily with certain kinds of objects — we comprehend that a wedding-ring is a sacrament of love, a sword a sacrament of valour, a framed photograph of someone a sacrament of remembrance, a church window a sacrament of faith. Tait knew the motorbike had been a sacrament of something too, though it wasn’t for him to say exactly what, for he was too close to the matter and in any case wasn’t wise enough.
But then you weren’t required to be a paragon of wisdom. You were just required to have a bit of respect for things as you find them. It wasn’t really all that complicated. It just meant, to take one example, that you leave the church window intact instead of going out of your way to smash it.

“May this machine rest in peace,” he murmured, “with the Rose and the Blackbird’s Tune around it always.”

Perhaps because of that, he felt settled and calm as walked back to town. On reaching the Green Room he found he had new poem fairly when organized in his mind. He only had to do a few hours of work and then tidy it up and polish it a little more the next day. As nearly always, the poem had expanded from a personal into a more general statement. The very fact that Tait wasn’t going to be around much longer gave added poignancy to the imagined scene years in the future. “There will be meetings like this,” he whispered, half-addressing Francesca, “but it will not be we two who meet.”

FORMER LOVERS

Bumping into each other after years.
And after everything that they’ve been through,
The sight unclouds and the perspective clears
And they can start to see each other true.

“Have you time for a coffee?” They exchange
The stories of the separate ways they went.
At first, of course, they feel a trifle strange,
A little awkward with embarrassment.

For each of them is poignantly aware
Of things about each other that they know,
Of all that private history they share.
The sweet and bitter of that time ago.

But from the pain and wreckage of before
They know that something permanent survives,
The fact that they’ll be linked for ever more,
A special chapter in each other’s lives.

There seems so little yet so much to say
Between glances at the clock on the wall.
In a few minutes each must go their way,
For other lives and other people call.

So with the passion safely in the past,
And bitterness no longer poised to strike,
Each gazes on a human being at last
And sees what he or she was really like.

* * * *

The next night it was well after dark when he went home on the bus. It was the night the rubbish bins were put out and Tait could tell the Garbage Gang were at work, for the bins had been kicked over and rubbish flung about as usual. He wondered nervously how far along the road the punks were. When he got off at his stop near the cabin he heard jeers and obscenities and the kelpie barking its head off. Five or six of the Garbage Gang were standing on the road in front of the pizza shop and Tony and Joe were looking out at them from the doorway. A yobbo tried to frisbee a rubbish-bin lid at them and it dipped at the last moment and crashed into the doorstep. Tony and Joe must have feared for their plate-glass windows. They withdrew inside and closed the door. Maybe they were phoning the cops. That’d be the price of a phone-call down the drain, thought Tait bitterly, with the police force already at full stretch persecuting the innocent. The punks jeered in triumph and carried on up the street, emptying bins and trying to break letterboxes.

Tait had halted back where he hoped he wouldn’t be seen. When the punks had moved a good distance off he walked up to his gateway, his stomach still churning. There was no rubbish spilled at his place because Tait didn’t put his bin out until just before he went to bed, which was usually not until one or two in the morning. He
always crept down the driveway, clutching the bin, watching for signs of trouble and nearly frantic with hatred for the kelpie barking at him the whole time. Now he checked his letterbox and found one letter. As he went up the driveway he could still hear the shouted obscenities of the punks in between the barks.

As he fished for his door key, the panel-van veered into Ernie’s gate and surged up to the driveway and slammed to a halt only inches from the dwelling. Tait slipped inside and closed his door. He went into the work room and flicked the desk-lamp on. He made sure the curtains were all fully drawn across. He wanted to be quiet and unobtrusive.

The letter was from Mayhem Films and it said they would not be renewing their options on *Ground Leave*. They were weary of trying to raise the millions of dollars that a movie would cost. And it appeared that all the “tax windows” were now closed. The Mayhem cheques were really all that had kept him going these last few years. They’d made the difference between surviving and going under. He had no idea how he’d manage without them.

He sat vacantly for a while, smoothing the letter on the table and aligning its corners with the base of the lamp, as if that might correct what it said. Then he put it aside.

He poured out a big glass of the cheap wine and got *The Storm on the Heather* from the shelf. It was nearly worn out from all the years of being played through the night. He set it on the turntable and leant back in the armchair and tried to rest his head in a way that didn’t aggravate his throat or the back of his neck. He put on the ear-phones and waited for the old charge of the songs to put some gumption back into him.

At first he wasn’t aware of the knocking. He just registered that the kelpie was barking again. Then he heard the thumping on his door.

When he opened it the young man of the panel-van was standing there with his hands on his hips. He was powerfully built, with acne or pockmarks on his face, and his eyes were hard and glittery.

“Didn’t ya hear me knockin’?” he asked brusquely.

“Sorry,” Tait replied, “I had ear-phones on.”

“I’m Darryl,” the young man said in a kind of challenging tone, “Ernie’s son.”

“Ah, I see. Well, I was very sorry about your Dad passing away.”

“Yeah,” Darryl said, abruptly brushing past him and into the kitchen. “I’m handlin’ things now.”
“Of course.”

Darryl went over to the sink and turned the tap on and off, then went and looked in at the bedroom door. He had his hands on his hips again, like someone in complete charge. Tait was about to suggest that this wasn’t quite the right time for an inspection of the premises, but Darryl came across and stood closer than was comfortable and fixed the glittery eyes on him.

“I come to see what ya doing about the rent, sport.”

Tait had known he would have to have this conversation with someone at some stage, and he wished he’d thought it through in advance, but he’d had so much on his mind lately. He tried to gather himself now.

“Yes, the rent,” he began awkwardly. “Well, there’s a situation in relation to that, and the fact is…”

“Yer a fuckin long way behind behind, aren’t ya?” Darryl cut in.

“You’re right. I’m not as current as I should be, I’m afraid…”

“Ya can say that again. It’s eleven weeks, accordin ter the receipt book.”

“That sounds correct, but it isn’t all that unusual a situation, actually. Your Dad was always fairly relaxed about that side of things…”

“Fuckin relaxed, was he?” Darryl said with a kind of snort.

He was standing so close that Tait could feel his breath.

“I’ve been here a long time and I always seem to catch up in the end.”

“How ‘bout catchin up right now, sport.”

Tait was about to apologise that he had no cash at hand, but he remembered with relief he had most of Francesca’s money still in the envelope.

“I could give you, um, two hundred dollars right now,” he said helpfully.

“That’s not even one month. And there’s nearly three months win. Ya gonna need ter do better than that, sport.”

Tait’s throat and neck were killing him and he couldn’t go on standing there with the glittery eyes and the breath so close.

“Look,” he said with an effort. “I’m actually not feeling too well at this minute. How about I give you the two hundred now and we discuss the rest of it at a more convenient time?”

The tone appeared to provoke Darryl.
“Hey!” he yelled. “Who the fuck d’you think you are? I’ll decide when we discuss it, sport, not you! I’ll fuckin decide!”

He was poking his finger an inch away from Tait’s chest to emphasis each word, but one or two of the pokes made contact, and there were drops of spit flying.

Tait stepped away from him and got the four fifty dollar bills from Francesca’s envelope and showed them, trying not to let his hand quiver.

“Here’s the situation, sport,” he said, hoping his voice sounded steady. “If you’d like to give me a proper receipt, I’ll give you the two hundred now and we can talk again another time. The other option is that I give you nothing and you piss off out the door.”

“You’re outa here, ya fuckin cunt! Yer out on ya fuckin ear!”

“Leave,” Tait said, pointing to the door.

Darryl stabbed his finger savagely in the air.

“You fuckin looney!” he shouted. “You’re a fucken head-case! I know all about you, ya fuckin cunt!”

The glittery stare had grown wilder and Tait was afraid Darryl was about to get physical. He felt watery in the stomach. The satchel was lying on the kitchen table. He turned and opened it and drew out “Angus Stewart” and looped the cord around his right wrist.

“There’s the door,” he said again, pointing with his free hand and putting his back to the sink in came Darryl rushed at him.

He was telling himself to remember to use a jabbing motion rather than a swinging one. A hard jab at the adam’s apple. He realized he felt quite steady now.

Darryl stood and shouted some more stuff and the dog had started up of course and Tait was reflecting on how Darryl and the dog were sort of interchangeable in terms of their mindless noise.

Then Darryl abruptly turned and walked out the door. He stopped on the porch and turned back with his hands on his hips again.

“You’re out on the fuckin street, cunt! That’s a promise! You’re fuckin history!”

Tait went across and swung the door shut and Darryl gave it a savage kick as the latch clicked into place. Thirty seconds later came the sound of the door of Ernie’s place being slammed.
He went into the work room and unwound the cord from his wrist and laid “Angus Stewart” down on the table with a slight clunk. He saw his hands were now shaking quite badly and he stood there and waited to become calmer while the dog’s noise gradually subsided.

When the dog had stopped there were only two sounds to be heard in the night. One was the whoosh of wind off the lake, and the other was the muted sound of the song in the head-phones dangling over the back of the armchair. He did not need to hear the song clearly, for he knew every lilt of that record and every word of the lyrics.

Dundee is about to ride out of hostile Edinburgh and into the final sequence of events that will culminate on the Braes of Killiecrankie, and in his own death at the pinnacle of that famous victory. He is surveying the balance of forces. He has only a handful of men and the odds are appalling. And yet the Cause is not wholly bereft:

There are hills beyond Pentland, there are lands beyond Forth –
Be there Lords in the south, there are Chiefs in the north!

God, I hope so, Tait thought, appealing with all his heart to the powers of the QO: “Let it be that the best are not all gone. Let there still be Chiefs in the north!”

* * * *

It was five-thirty in the morning when Tait crept outside. The cold air felt horribly sharp in his throat. He fastened the scarf a bit closer, the one he wore nowadays as a kind of bandage. He made sure it wasn’t tight though, because the least feeling of pressure on the lump was unendurable.

The panel-van was parked there, the silver duco starting to gleam in the first light, the painted flames leaping along the side. He half-feared Darryl might be watching for him and would come bursting out.

He caught the early bus and looked out the window at the endless litter of rubbish along the road from the previous night of the Garbage Gang. When he got to the Green Room he hurried to boil the urn and fortify himself with strong coffee.

He set up his little work-space with table and desk-lamp and began to fiddle with some odds and ends of verse. He actually had a good idea for a short story about
Emmet the Melancholy Monster, but did not seem to have the span of concentration for it. Verse was easier to go on with because you could tinker with very small bits. You could focus on a single line or phrase, and on the single idea in it, until it felt totally right. Or at least you could try to.

He desperately wanted to lose himself in some work so he wouldn’t have to brood on being evicted. But his mind kept returning to it. He hadn’t the faintest idea of what would happen now. If he didn’t leave within a certain time, would Darryl try to throw him out physically? Or would he take him to court or something? And what about all the rent he owed? The thoughts went round and round, getting nowhere.

He also brooded over his appointment with the throat specialist, and in fact the thought of that came as a kind of harsh relief from the eviction worries. Soon he’d have no further need of accommodation in this world. That fatalism began to loom larger in his mind, the fact that he needn’t let Darryl get under his skin too much, for the ultimate solution was on its way.

The work wasn’t going anywhere, so he lay down on the sofa and tried to relax into a light sleep. He looked up and realized that he had forgotten to cover the Vision Statement on the wall. There it was in all its sinister fatuousness. He debated with himself whether it was worth the effort of getting up, then decided it was a matter of principle. He dragged himself up and hung a cloth over the rotten thing and lay back down and drifted into a doze.

He dozed on and off for most of the day and in between dozes he stood at the open door and looked out at the Court building and up at the Watchtower. There were wisps of high white cloud drifting across it and the connection seemed incongruous. He saw the prison-van lumber in through the big roller-doors. It was depressing.

He was vaguely watching for Peggy Dean, thinking she might be on duty at the Court. He could ask for her advice about how he stood legally at the cabin. She knew that kind of stuff from her work, from having to help the unfortunate. Or there was Jimmy Sale. Jimmy knew about that kind of thing too, from his community-nursing days. He could ask Jimmy. But just then he thought he saw Peggy Dean and he stepped back out of sight. He didn’t want to have to talk to anyone about how he stood. It didn’t matter anyhow, with the ultimate solution approaching. He closed the door and lay back down on the sofa.
Around five o’clock he realized he hadn’t eaten that day, so he trudged up to the Plaza to buy a sachet of soup. He saw Neil standing in a kind of trance in an aisle of the super-market, his eyes fixed on the floor, his shoulders hunched, his lips moving. Tait did not approach him, for he knew there was nothing to say. He went through the checkout and past the newsagency. The posters were all about the election campaign and the violent Hendonite brutes and how all the other parties agreed there should be new laws to stop them existing.

He decided to go to the Athena café. He wanted to be cosy in the back booth and see the figure of the goddess on the wall with her piercing eyes and her owl of wisdom on her shoulder.

He remembered that it was the monthly meeting night at the Players. He would stay cosy at the Athena café for a couple of hours and then wander back to the Green Room for the meeting. He did not feel like going to the meeting but there was nothing else. He could not return to the cabin till late, so late that there wouldn’t be too much chance of another confrontation.

Settling into the back booth, he remembered that he had Francesca’s money in the envelope in his shirt pocket. He decided to splurge on a big bowl of chicken soup. It was tasty and didn’t hurt his throat very much so he ordered another bowl, then sat gazing out over the street and the roofs of the railway station. The far-off clouds were vivid red with reflected sunset, the way they’d been that other time when they’d made him think so vividly of the magic red paint of the Ghost Dance.

How ironic, he thought, that Black Elk had gone to that particular dance at Wounded Knee Creek, how cruel that the site of that yearning hope of redemption would so soon be the site of the final massacre. “Bury my Heart at Wounded Knee” was the famous line of the poem by Stephen Vincent Benet, but one could just as easily write, “Bury my Heart at Culloden.” Or there were a hundred other place-names you could insert, all testifying to what happens to pre-modern people who will not repudiate their own existence and must therefore be wiped out. Those place-names might all seem unbearably sad, but when you think about it they actually ring out like high salutes to all those who chose paths of glory rather than lick the boot.

As he walked down past the Council chambers he saw the Green Room door was open and the light on.
Mona and one of her lickspittles were putting a poster up on the wall. They did not notice him entering and he stood and read the hectoring message over their shoulders. The poster was stark black and yellow and had been laminated so it was like a firm sheet of plastic and they were securing it to the brick wall by tapping small nails into the mortar. They meant it to be a permanent fixture.

The printed words were in strident yellow on the black background. WE DON’T TOLERATE HARRASSMENT, STALKING, BULLYING OR INTIMIDATION! IF IT’S HAPPENING TO YOU, OR TO ANYONE YOU KNOW, CALL THIS NUMBER! The number it gave was that of a government bureau.

He went outside and stood in the shadows. He felt like wandering off along the street and never coming back. But he had a duty to say something. And surely some of the others would feel as he did. Peggy Dean at least would be of the same mind, and if Kelvin should happen to turn up he’d be another. Those were the only two he could think of. The cars began arriving and the Green Room filled up with people and chatter. Tait went inside and took a seat at the back and waited.

The people near him were talking about old Mrs Callander having died the night before last.

It had been on the local radio, apparently, and the disc-jockeys had it mentioned it a few times that day because of her being over a hundred and the last link with the pioneers of the region. It was the kind of thing they would make use of before it floated out of their attention span, that day’s tidbit of “community interest” to help conceal the rootless alien vacuity of all that came over the airwaves now. He could just hear the gibbering trendoid voices, half-trying to sound as if anyone actually gave two hoots about the death of some ancient old duck. They were what Errol would call “haircuts,” and could barely conceive of the reality of last week, let alone what a hundred years of a human life meant. But the old lady couldn’t have lasted much longer and was probably fairly content to be out of it now.

Her dauntless old spirit had gone to join the Chiefs in the North.

He hoped so.

The meeting began and the minutes were read. When it was open for general business, Mona turned in her chair and pointed at the poster and invited everyone to take careful note of it. Something of the sort had been long overdue, she declared, and a horrifying recent case involving the Players had underlined the urgent need to Raise
Awareness and force Attitudinal Change and put Victim Support Procedures in place. She didn’t need to specify the matter she referred to, she said. The trauma was still so acute for all of them, especially with the Perpetrator still shockingly allowed to roam at large in a vulnerable community. At least the poster was a start in the right direction, she said.

She was about to go briskly on to other business when Tait stood up. Neither Peggy Dean nor Kelvin were there and he knew he was on his own. His throat had begun to throb and he had to hold his head very erect to offset the pain in his neck and shoulders. But then he thought of the example of Mrs Callander having battled it out for a hundred years, and that fortified him.

“I want to move a motion,” he said through the gravel of his voice. “That the poster be taken down and never be put up again, nor anything like it.”

There was silence.

“I see,” said Mona smoothly. “Does that mean you aren’t concerned about predatory behaviours, and the safety of those who are vulnerable?”

“That’s precisely what I am concerned with,” Tait said, knowing he should press on while he still had a voice. “It’s your predatory behaviors that are the issue here, Mona. And its our vulnerability that we need to worry about. You putting that poster up is an act of hatred and contempt towards every one of us. It tells us we’re either potential abusers who can’t be trusted in normal human dealings, or inadequate little twits who can’t cope with normal human dealings. Either way, we need the firm hand of righteous commissars like you — either to control our viciousness or to wipe our poor little victim noses for us. How dare you bring something as vile as that poster into this room and into this group, to poison the atmosphere and ruin the trust and make our every word and gesture seem suspect.”

The room was silent and Mona was staring straight ahead with tightly pursed lips, as if calculating how much of this to tolerate. Tait kept going with the last bit of voice he had left.

“That poster is the equivalent of Nazi or Communist propaganda. Its aim is to turn this theatre group into another site to be policed. It’s there to colonize us. It’s there to bring us under the heel of the boot. It’s the illness posing as the cure, the madness posing as the sanity. And the only one who gains from it, Mona, is you. It suits totalitarians like you right down to the ground. Your proper role as president is to
preside, but you wouldn’t know what presiding is if you fell over it. All you know is the toxic little mentality of policing, and that this group must be turned into a pack of rabble that can be policed. That’s the agenda of the poster.”

There was silence.

“Is that all?” Mona asked.

“Not quite,” Tait replied. He still had a tiny bit of voice coming through the gravel. He looked around at the other faces.

“Is anyone prepared to support a motion to have the poster taken down?” he asked.

No one responded.

He knew he had been too “ideological.” He had appeared to blow it out of proportion. Posters like these were part of daily life now. Why get so hot and bothered about this one?

“No-one supports me on this?” Tait asked again, still looking around at the faces.

“Shall we go on to other business now?” Mona asked in a silky tone.

“Just one last thing,” Tait said holding up his hand.

“Yes?”

“I resign from the Players as of this moment.”

“That’s your prerogative.” Mona said without missing a beat.

“Yes, it is,” Tait agreed. “And it’s getting to be the only prerogative we have left — that of determining our own attitude towards what is happening. If anyone here is interested in grasping the point, they can read Victor Frankl’s book, Man’s Search for Meaning. It’s all about how to cope with being in Auschwitz, a topic of increasing relevance for us. But I daresay nobody wants to go that far. It might involve having to think.”

He knew he was spoiling the dignity of his exit by talking like that, but he couldn’t help it.

He went forward to the table and took his Green Room key off his key ring and laid it down, then went to the door. People were telling him not to be silly and to come back and take it easy.

He closed the door behind him and began to walk briskly away. Someone come out and called to him to come back, but he kept walking until he was out of sight past the corner of the Court building.
He wouldn’t miss the Players all that much, not now that the old gang from the Megan days was mostly gone. And now Kelvin too was heading elsewhere. The only part that hurt was having given up the Green Room, his sole refuge, his one and only sanctum. On the scale of self-inflicted wounds, that was a rather big one.

But then he remembered that in two days he’d be seeing the throat-specialist. The ultimate solution was approaching and he wouldn’t need the Green Room anyway.

It was a season of departures, and that didn’t seem a bad thing.

* * * *

The train to Castleton was half an hour behind schedule, and Tait was wondering if he might miss the start of the Hendon meeting, miss Mike Kieslowski’s warm-up speech. He didn’t feel terribly much like going to Castleton right now, and he couldn’t really spare the money for the fare, but he’d told Mike he’d be there so they could meet at long last. He didn’t know whether Mike or Len Mullan was due to speak first but he supposed it would be a pity to miss either of them.

He should’ve got an earlier train to give himself a margin. He’d meant to but had been accosted by Darryl as he was walking down the driveway. It was a tense and hostile conversation, but they had come to an arrangement. Darryl wanted him out of the cabin in a week and was willing to forget the arrears of rent if he would go just quietly. It was obvious Darryl meant to sell both blocks of land as soon as he could. And two double waterfront blocks would bring enough keep a hoon in silver panel-vans for a long time. Compared to that, a bit of rent was nothing — and extracting it from a nut-case armed with an iron pipe might not be worth the aggravation anyway.

At least he wouldn’t be on the street. He could stay in the old caravan in Jimmy Sale’s backyard until he sorted himself out. It was back to where he had started fourteen years ago. But he had no idea how he would ever sort himself out or put his life on any proper basis. He had just under two hundred dollars in the world and no prospect of getting any more. He wasn’t qualified to earn a living and hadn’t the faintest idea how to begin. The only skills he had were literary ones that they wouldn’t pay you a regular living wage for. It seemed to him he made a fatal error fourteen years ago when he set himself to live by writing, or to exist rather. It was only by the sheerest luck that he had survived as long as he had. It had only been
because of things like having Ernie for a landlord and a weird outfit like Mayhem Films deciding to give him sums of money for strange reasons of their own. He had been enticed down the wrong road by receiving that first literary grant from the Arts Council when he was fresh out of the institution. Not that he was trying to shift the blame. He made his own decisions. But maybe that first grant that had seemed so marvellous at the time had really been a kind of poisoned chalice.

The only glint of hope he could think of was The Fable of All Our Lives. He’d written that novel out of his heart’s blood, and if it was no good then he might as well give up the game. Canopy Press was assessing it now. The sudden thought of all the faults they must be finding made him want to cringe. But then again, miracles have been known to happen and they might actually like it. The sun was now sinking down to the line of hills on the far horizon and for a while the flaming grandeur of the western sky took his mind off his worries.

It had been easier, in a chilling sort of way, when he still thought he was dying. All the mundane things had been receding from him and ceasing to matter. He’d been reconciled to it, sitting in that chair in the specialist’s office, the tiny camera down his throat on the end of a tube. He’d been prepared to hear the worst, had already heard it a hundred times in his mind’s ear, and was dumbfounded when the doctor said there was nothing wrong. The camera had shown a completely normal throat. He had paid the hundred and ninety dollar fee and walked out and sat on a park bench. He began to feel kind of relieved, but it wasn’t a shout-for-joy feeling or the sense of a new lease-of-life. He was mostly just conscious of the mundane worries clumping back to surround him again. The specialist had given him a brochure about the condition he’d had. It was a type of fantasy-illness known as Globus. You get it from being depressed and lonely and anxious. It makes you feel a lump in your throat, and the longer it goes on the more real it seems and the more pain and anguish it gives you.

So the ultimate solution wasn’t on its way after all, and that left one pretty much at a loss. It was like in that great poem of Cavafy’s about the played-out Byzantines waiting for the barbarians to come and resolve everything for them, but it turns out they aren’t coming at all. What shall we do without the barbarians? the played-out people ask each other.

Alighting at the main station in Castleton, he began to trudge towards the city centre. He saw a copy of that day’s Castleton paper on a bus-stop seat. He took it up and
looked at the headline: HENDON FURY: WILL THE LID COME OFF? It was all about the rally, and how the whole nation was watching to see if there would be blood in the streets. As always it was made to seem as if there were thousands of strutting jackbooted Hendonite goons just looking for a chance to run amok.

A car full of teenagers came past and blared their horn right next to him and he quaked at the sudden assault of the noise and then felt a rush of anger. They were hanging out of the windows yelling the slogan “DEATH TO BETH!” and waving black and red SNARL flags. Then another car came with more tooting and yelling. Tait grew more determined and quickened his pace. A phrase had come to him, the injunction to “head to the sound of the guns.” He knew where the venue was. It was a nice old-fashioned stone building with an auditorium. It was in a narrow street not far from the park. It had been the venue for the local drama festival in the past and Tait had gone there with the Players.

There was noise in the distance. He could hear a deep undertone of crowd-sounds, and a woman’s voice echoing through an amplifier, and a siren wailing, and then some angry chanting. He began to see the flash of blue and red police-car lights. More cars came past waving and tooting and there were now many more people around him in the street.

He turned a corner and the noise and the lights were directly ahead. He began to have to press and weave his way through knots of people on the footpath. Some were drinking beer and laughing and lurching with their arms round each other, as if it was a festival. Others were angry and argumentative. There were parked vehicles with the logos of TV networks on them.

The crowd was very dense and loud in the narrow street right in front of the venue, and there were many anti-Hendon placards and red and black SNARL banners being waved. The lights of several parked police-cars flashed relentlessly, creating a horrible garish effect with flickering weird shadows, and a great many edgy-looking cops were standing in groups of three and four. Just beyond the police cars was a big television van with a camera crew standing on top of it, looking down on the crowd. People at the edges of the crowd were waving and making faces for the camera.

Rows of steel barriers had been placed to make a walkway from the middle of the street to the doorway of the building, and a wire security fence had been put across so that the whole front of the venue was blocked off except via that corridor. Half a
dozen athletic-looking young fellows in blue pants and blue T-shirts stood on the front steps surveying the crowd. The T-shirts had the Nation First logo on them. They were the stewards, Beth Hendon’s own security people.

It was obvious the meeting hadn’t begun. People were still trying to get inside. They came along the street in twos and threes and the protesters closed around them screaming “NAZI! NAZI!” right in their faces. If they were lucky they were shepherded through by the cops and directed into the walkway, which was another gauntlet to be run, for there was a great deal of spitting and things were being thrown. They looked like brown paper bags. Tait heard a teenage girl say excitedly that the “racists” were copping bags of shit. The people being pelted and spat at were mostly middle-aged. Some were angry and tried to remonstrate with their tormentors, others appeared grimly composed and a few looked scared.

Tait caught a snatch of shouted discussion. Two young men were deciding whether to go and join in the trashing of the cars. Apparently there was an organized program to strike at the “fascists” by smashing their car windows and puncturing their tyres while they were at the meeting.

Tait’s heart was thumping from the noise and garishness and menace of the scene. But he felt highly energized now and wanted to take it all in, wanted to get a store of vivid impressions in case he ever came to write about this.

The female voice kept blaring through the amplifier and he knew it was Sabina Sharpe. He pushed through the edges of the crowd and went along a hundred metres and saw her standing in the back of a parked utility festooned with SNARL posters. She had a micro-phone in one hand and was waving and stabbing the air histrionically with the other. She conjured a dark picture in Tait’s mind. It was a picture of short black hair, black leather, a slight build, a sharp face and a wicked intelligence. She was Dr Goebbels, rabble-rousing in some Berlin street of about 1930.

He headed back through the crowd, meaning to make his way into the building, but there was a sudden change in the mass mentality. A grey-haired man running the gauntlet of the walkway was grabbed and flung to the ground. Another grey-haired man shoved the assailant back and a flurry of punches were thrown. A bellow went through the whole crowd. The barriers began to be pushed over as the mob pressed in.
Cops moved to hold it back but the pressure was too great. “NAZI, NAZI!” the crowd began to chant, then “DEATH TO BETH, DEATH TO BETH!”

Sabina Sharpe took up the chant through her microphone and it began to be horribly deep and rhythmic as the whole crowd got into the beat of it.

The corridor was completely collapsed and the metal barriers were being passed back over the heads of the crowd so they couldn’t be set up again. The Nation First stewards had set themselves more firmly in the doorway of the building in case the crowd’s next move was to storm the place. Their faces were grim and uncanny, like everyone else’s in the garish light. The narrow canyon of the street was crackling with collective rage and excitement, pulsing with delirium.

Tait realized he was wildly happy, that he was surging with exhilaration. Here was the Enemy in full array and here was the battle. This wasn’t the Blakean “mental fight” that you wage in an endless solitude, that you wage by the corrosion of your own spirit alone in a room with a cold sheet of paper. It wasn’t that old war of inner attrition that leaves you a hollowed shell. He’d had his fill of that kind of fight, had had years and years of it and it had nearly destroyed him. He wanted the other kind now, wanted it with all his heart.

The best were gone, and yet they were not absent from us. They were still there, those moral victors who save us in the end. They were still there in our shelter of each other, and still there in the fable of all our lives. And lesser men and damaged men could even now take heed of them and thus rise above their own paltriness and redeem their time a little. There were still Chiefs in the North, but they existed in a different way now and you had to find them within yourself. It struck him that this was the true meaning of the Ghost Dance.

He hurled himself into the crowd.

“DEATH TO BETH” was the booming chant.

“Long live Beth!” Tait shouted as he was pressed and shoved on all sides.

He was trying to force himself towards the building, to get to his own side, his own people. Faces and bodies were jammed against him. The faces looked inhuman in the garish light, like zombies.

“DEATH TO BETH!”

“Long live Beth!”
There were snarls and obscenities as people up close realized what he was saying. He was punched in the face but didn’t feel anything. He punched back as hard as he could. Somebody was being trampled on the ground and Tait looked down near his feet and thought he saw a head of grey hair before the surge of the crowd took him away.

“DEATH TO BETH!”

“Long live Beth!”

Someone had him around the neck from behind and was trying to knee him in the back. He wriggled out of the hold and turned to punch the bastard in the face but tripped over and clung to someone’s coat as he tried to prevent himself going down and getting trampled. He felt his satchel being ripped away.

“DEATH TO BETH”

“Long live Beth!”

He lost his grip on the coat and sank to the ground. Someone tried to stamp on his legs and he kicked them hard in the shins. He saw the base of the wire fence and crawled to it and pulled himself up into a standing position against the mesh. The fence was under a lot of pressure and was bending inward. Tait looked towards the doorway and saw Len Mullan standing there with the stewards. Then came another heavy surge of the crowd and Tait’s face was banged hard against a steel upright of the fence. When he looked at the doorway again Mike Kieslowski was there. He looked just like his photos and there was no mistaking him. Mike and Len both had their ties off and their shirt collars undone and their sleeves rolled up. You could tell they were ready for anything, almost wanting the mob to come on. They were looking out over the heads of the line of cops who were blocking the front steps but being jostled back up them one step at a time.

Tait yelled out to Mike as loud as he could but there was too much other noise. Then one of the stewards came closer to the fence and Tait was able to get his attention. The steward went and told Mike that someone wanted him. Mike came across.

There was barbed-wire at the top of the fence, otherwise Tait would’ve shinned over it — and so of course would the crowd.

“Edge along that way,” Mike shouted, pointing to his left.
It wasn’t easy to push along through the crowd but when he got near the far end of the fence he saw there was a little narrow gate in it. Mike was there with one of the stewards.

“You’ll have to move quick,” the steward shouted through the wire into Tait’s ear. “Be ready!”

Tait nodded.

The steward produced a key and unlocked the gate with a single quick motion and drew it open just a body’s width. Tait slipped through and it was slammed and locked again in a mere moment. It had taken people in the crowd a second or two to register that a gate was being opened, and by then it was too late, although one or two had made a grab for it.

The steward went back to his duties.

The people on the other side of the fence howled abuse as they kicked and pounded the gate and the wire mesh. “NAZI! NAZI!” they screamed. Then gobs of spit came through the wire. Tait and Mike stepped further back and looked at each other.

“Well, my friend,” Mike shouted above the din, “we meet at last, and in the thick of it.”

“And about time too,” Tait shouted back.

They shook hands.

“You’re bleeding,” Mike said, indicating Tait’s face.

“Good!” he replied. He knew his nose was bleeding. He could taste the blood running down.

“The Enemy appears to be out in force,” Mike said.

“And appears to want to annihilate us.”

“Yes, but would we have it any other way?”

“Not at all,” Tait replied. “It’s been like that for hundreds of years. Who are we to have it any different?”

“And as far as I’m aware,” Mike said with a smile, “the Cause never promised anyone a walk in the park.”
“No,” said Tait, smiling back, “it never did.”

And then the crowd built to another huge booming wave of noise and the bellow of its hatred reverberated in the canyon of the street and rolled across the city, and it almost seemed as if it could fill the whole world.

THE END
“CULT OF HONOUR”
Reflections of a Born-Again Jacobite

An Essay

Peter Kocan

The critical component of a
Doctor of Creative Arts thesis
under the general title The Shelter of Honour
submitted in January 2008
by P.R. Kocan BA (Hons) MCA

The University of Western Sydney
I hereby certify that the work embodied in this thesis is the result of original research and has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other University of Institution.

(Signed)____________________________
SYNOPSIS

This essay seeks to elucidate certain historical, intellectual, moral and aesthetic perspectives presented in the novel *The Fable of All Our Lives*. It offers a critique of Western Modernity, arguing that this 500 year period, despite some beneficial features, has overall been one of escalating falsehood, destruction, alienation and despair, to the point where the survival of Western society and its heritage – perhaps of *any* worthwhile society or heritage – appears uncertain. The critique is framed around a view of what it calls the “paradigm wars” of the modern age, the ongoing physical, social, cultural and psychological conflicts through which a single profound contest has been carried on. It holds that the two sides are best understood as having been thrown up by the great divide of the Reformation, and as having their clearest archetypal figures in the Cavalier and Roundhead of the English Civil Wars. It contends that the warring paradigms are two incompatible views of the world and of human nature and human destiny, and that these can be characterized as the “Cavalier” conception of the world as a “sacrament” and an “honour-system” and the “Roundhead” conception of it as a “snare” and a “crime-scene.” In that context, the essay has its main emphasis on the post-1688 movement we know as Jacobitism, arguing for it as a source of inspiration to those in the present day who would adhere to the “Party of the Sacrament” as against the “Party of the Snare.” The merits of the Jacobite example are urged on two main grounds. Firstly, that Jacobitism was a rich and varied *cultural* movement as well as an armed cause. And secondly, that the sheer adversity of the Jacobite experience brings into clear focus the qualities of the Jacobite character, and above all the notion of *honour*, the general recovery of which, it is argued, is the first requisite if the world of our own time is to have any chance of being rescued from the brink.
INTRODUCTION

In 1895 was published a rather beautiful poem by Lionel Johnson. It was called “By the Statue of King Charles at Charing Cross.” It is a night-meditation on an equestrian statue of Charles I, and just three of its thirteen stanzas will convey the spirit of the whole:

Comely and calm, he rides
Hard by his own Whitehall:
Only the night wind glides:
No crowds, nor rebels, brawl…

King, tried in fires of woe!
Men hunger for thy grace;
And through the night I go,
Loving thy mournful face.

Yet, when the city sleeps;
When all the cries are still:
The stars and heavenly deeps
Work out a perfect will. (1)

As an English Catholic, Johnson was on the losing side of history and knew what it was to yearn for the consolation of that “perfect will” of heaven which comprehends defeat and victory in terms quite other than those of the everyday world. In the view of most of the poet’s contemporaries, however, King Charles was a figure against whom the Divine Will – or the God of History at any rate – had decisively witnessed. Great Britain was then at the height of its power and majesty and bestrode the world, and this was manifestly due to the triumph of Charles’s enemies over everything that he and the house of Stuart had stood for. To the more thoughtful or decent-minded, King Charles and his cause might still merit an occasional salute, but only as one acknowledges a gallant past that is gone, and – all things considered and despite the odd twinge of nostalgia – rightly gone.
That glib picture was always largely fraudulent, and the Victorian age was riddled with a deepening despair, but the great public façade was at least kept up. Something has happened since then, and it was called the Twentieth Century, “that murderous and unrepentant century,” as Hilton Kramer has put it, at the end of which we find “we are left confronting a moral void.” (2) The British can now reflect that, as Kipling warned, “all our pomp of yesterday/Is one with Nineveh and Tyre.” Allen Bloom asserted in a book of 1993 that we faced “either despair or extremisms beyond the imaginations of all previous ages.” (3) The West has proved his point ever more amply since then and now exhibits extremes of squalor and vacancy even beyond our own imaginations. Australian commentator Shelley Gare conveyed something of the vacancy in her 2006 book, *The Triumph of the Airheads*:

Airheadism means believing that 2,500 years of wise maxims designed to ward off greed, stupidity, selfishness, unhappiness and calamity no longer hold true. It’s as if Aesop had never told his fables. (4)

And this airheadism goes hand in hand with a kind of dead-eyed robotic righteousness and a rampant control-freakery.

Intelligent people now write about the death of the West, aware that on every issue from the cretinization of culture to the implosion of birthrates, the prospects are dire. Referring to what he sees as “the collapse of the will to live,” philosopher Thomas Molnar writes: “Such a collapse seems to have spread over much of Western mankind, and the modern ideology finds innumerable pretexts to justify it, even to regard it as a positive sign.” (5)

This impairment of the very will to live has come over us for various reasons, and chief among them is the fact that, as Saul Bellow put it in a 1995 collection of his essays: “Everything worth living for has melted away.” (6) He reflected at length on “the abysses created by the modern cognitive habit” (7), and equally on the “malign forces of modern magic” (8), habits and forces which have jointly led to what he calls “the apocalypse of our times.” (9) The abasement of the human now appears to be so complete that “We have to go back to the Bible, to Plato, to Shakespeare, to see what man once was.” (10) And as though to sum it up on behalf of those who have not yet quite succumbed to full-blown “airheadism,” he wrote: “We have learned from history
that enlightenment, liberation and doom may go together. For every avenue liberation opens, two are closed.” (11: unless otherwise noted, all italics in this essay have been added.)

Bellow’s only glimmer of hope was the possibility that, “The force of the crisis is so great that it might summon us back.” (12) As John Ralston Saul puts it, however:

After four and a half centuries of turning in circles around the same solutions, we have eliminated all practical memory of what came before. We are now as alone with our age as any civilization can be.” (13)

And without a practical memory of the former genuine life to regroup ourselves around, we are left with only that barren and tawdry thing we have learned to call lifestyle. But even as empty as it is, it is solid enough to give some form to our cruelty and to our suffering. Zygmunt Bauman characterizes our present situation in terms which neatly encapsulate this essay’s view of modernity itself. He writes of the bitter contest between “the pain-inflicting forces” and “the desperate struggle to mitigate the pain.” (14)

Lionel Johnson’s poem is the same text now as it was in 1895, but it does not have the same meaning, for we have lived to experience what King Charles’s enemies have truly made of our world, and thus to re-assess the balance of good and evil. In a 2006 book those enemies, those “pain-inflicting forces,” are collectively personified as “Modman,” that radical new type who brought modernity into being and enforced it without mercy. “Modman” is described as nothing less than “the worst criminal in history.” (15) It is now possible to look afresh at the “fair and fatal king,” as he is called in the poem, and see the central symbolic hero of the past 500 years. Despite a full share of human faults, he was the inspirational figure who saw the grim necessity of fighting Modman in a great civil war which was in fact a contest for the soul of the West and ultimately of the whole human race. Then, confronting Modman’s kangaroo court that meant to kill him no matter what, he uttered perhaps the most eloquent and prophetic words of the modern age: “It is not my case alone.”

This essay begins with its focus on the Jacobite movement, which was the final stage of what can be usefully thought of as the hundred-year saga of the “Stuart Wars” from the 1640s to the 1740s, from the Battle of Edgehill to the Battle of Culloden. And the
Stuart Wars were crucial in that overall struggle for and against Modernity which has continued for half a millennium. Although in factual terms Jacobitism began with the exile of King James in 1688 — the movement took its name from the Latin for James: *Jacobus* — one can think of it as having begun in spirit forty years earlier, when King Charles went to the scaffold. Its white rose grew out of the terrible beauty of that event. The figure in Lionel Johnson’s poem, riding without motion under the stars in a vast quietness “where only the night-wind glides,” and near the site of his own execution, is the presiding presence here.

The essay is meant to expand on matters which are central to my novel *The Fable of All Our Lives* but which could not be fully elucidated there because of the need to avoid overloading the work with exposition. The novel is essentially focused in Australia within the past twenty-five years or so, but throughout the work the protagonist has an ever more vital concern with the story of an English ancestor who took part in the Jacobite rising of 1745. By the end he has come to regard this ancestral link to the Jacobite cause as a spiritual salvation and as the means of his redemption as a human being in his own time. And that focus in the novel reflects the extent to which I had personally come to identify with Jacobitism as a value-system and a world-view. The process of that identification was a long one, but the essentials of it can be told fairly briefly, and in the light of Edmund Burke’s observation that: “Times and occasions, and provocations, will teach their own lessons.” (16)

The first factor was in the early 1980s when I used the proceeds of a literary prize to make my brief and only visit to Britain. On April sixteenth, being at Inverness, I went out to see the nearby battlefield of Culloden. I then knew so little of the historical detail that I’d had no idea of the actual date of the battle. Against odds of 364 to 1, I found had come there on the anniversary. That morning, ten generations after the event, there were wreaths of remembrance on the ground, thin beams of sunshine playing across them. By afternoon the day had grown bleak and windy with bouts of driving rain and no other person was in sight. I had the whole moor to myself and stood wet and chilled to the bone, but feeling that my visit had been “meant” in some way. Nearby was a cairn inscribed with a reminder that this was a burial site: *The graves of the gallant Highlanders who fought for Scotland and Prince Charlie are marked by the names of their Clans.* A day or two later I went to see the Jacobite Monument at Glenfinnan, erected about eighty years afterwards on the spot where the Forty Five began with the raising of the Stuart banner beside the
waters of Loch Shiel. Again I found myself alone in a brooding landscape. I read and re-read the inscription at the base of the monument, rolling the cadences in my mind:

_This column is erected by Alexander MacDonald, Esq., of Glenaladale, to commemorate the generous zeal, the undaunted bravery, and the inviolable fidelity of his forefathers, and the rest of those who fought and bled in that arduous and unfortunate enterprise…_

The words had been carved in Gaelic, English and Latin. These two occasions left me haunted by the way a thing can be abstractly mythic and symbolic, and yet at the same time utterly tactile and vivid in the fresh particulars of the moment. Like the way a rose can be a living flower, a bloom of this particular season of the world and no other, and at the same time an heraldic symbol, a timeless emblem. As the recent Scottish poet Iain Crichton Smith put it: “There is fresh dew on the ballads.” A battle occurs whole centuries ago, yet wreaths of tender blooms are laid in place this very morning. A monument is raised in a remote glen for the sake of local attachment and tribal loyalty, and yet the gesture is so universally human that it is told in three languages so that it can belong to the whole world and to any passer-by. I thought of Virgil’s _Aeneid_, the part where Aeneas finds himself in a strange land which he fears may be the realm of savages. But then he sees some carvings and is reassured, reflecting that “These men know the pathos of life, and mortal things touch their hearts.” (17) After that the Jacobite story was never far from my mind and surfaced now and then in my verse. But though my experience at the two sites in Scotland had been so deeply felt, I was still far from having an adequate intellectual grasp of the matters.

The second factor came one evening twenty years later when I tuned into the middle of a TV program called “A History of Britain,” written and presented by the eminent historian Simon Schama. Having just traced the course of the Forty Five and its defeat at Culloden, Schama then made what I believe was a most graceless and provocative comment about the Jacobite survivors of those events. He depicted them as the “unrepentant” fetishists of what he made to sound like a foolish and unwholesome “cult of honour.” That led me to reflect on the actual value and purpose of honour in human affairs. (18) And a reference by Schama to himself as a “born-again Whig” prompted me to perceive my own identity in sharp contrast as that of a “born-again Jacobite.” (19)
Later I came upon an observation by Erik Erikson which made explicit the psychology of this:

By accepting some definition of who he is…the adult is able to selectively reconstruct his past…In this sense, psychologically we do choose our parents, our family history, and the history of our kings, heroes, and gods. (20)

Nothing was clearer to me than that Schama and I adhered to quite different “kings, heroes and gods.”

The third factor was that in pondering the nature and meaning of Jacobitism I saw in it a principle which struck me as an entire code of life. It was the distinction between Power and Authority, and one’s duty to adhere to the latter if they come into a crisis of conflict. The distinction had been articulated on starkly opposite sides of the moral and ideological spectrum. King Charles, bidden to accept the kangaroo court of his enemies as a rightful authority, replied: “I find I am before a power.” And no less a technician of power than Lenin made the point by referring to the great difference between “the truncheon” and “voluntary respect.” (21)

On the work of the late Christopher Lasch, an American scholar commented: “To say that Lasch feared we had lost our moral bearings is to understate. I wish he had spent more time rummaging about in the underpinnings of his conclusion.” (22) That formulation will serve to describe the aim and intention of this essay. It is to rummage about in the underpinnings of the novel’s conclusions regarding Jacobitism and the notion of honour. It will attempt to indicate how and why a person of the present day – someone like my protagonist – might come to regard those seemingly moribund things as being in fact of the utmost relevance. A quote from the sociologist Peter Berger goes to the point:

The contemporary denial of the reality of honour and of offences against honour is so much a part of a taken-for-granted world that a deliberate effort is required even to see it as a problem. The effort is worthwhile, for it can result in some, perhaps unexpected, insights into the structure of modern consciousness. (23)
My essay aims also to make what contribution it can to the critique of modernity (which I take to include the so-called “post-modernity” of today), and to urge that an appreciation of the Jacobite world-view and value-system is vital to that critique. Peter Berger, writing in 1977, is again apposite:

I believe that the critique of modernity will be one of the great intellectual tasks of the future, be it as a comprehensive exercise or in separate parts. The task is also of human and moral urgency. For what it is finally about is the question of how we, and our children, can live in a humanly tolerable way in the world created by modernization. (24)

And in this context, David Daiches has identified a key point. In his 1973 biography of that “strangely fated man” he observes that many people saw in Bonnie Prince Charlie a symbol of something they felt deeply but were unable to describe… His appeal, in a sense, was to the conscience. Many who would not have wanted him to win felt that nevertheless he stood for something they ought to have valued. (25)

Understanding the true nature of that “appeal to the conscience” might tell us a good deal about modernity and the difficulties of living “in a humanly tolerable way” under its regime.

I intend here to follow what I have come to call “the Allen Tate Principle.” The American poet Allen Tate contributed an essay to I’ll Take My Stand, the manifesto of the Southern Agrarian writers, published in 1930. His piece was entitled “Remarks on the Southern Religion” and he set down the following: “So I begin an essay on “religion” with almost no humility at all… and without apology to those who know better, for there seem to be none, as a class, who have that high qualification. (26) If that view can be taken of “religion” in recent times, it can likewise be taken of “honour,” and the two things are in various ways linked. As one commentator asked in 2007: “When is the last time you heard of a public action attributable to honour – once a defining characteristic of Christendom?” (27) And so my essay also begins “without apology to those who know better,” for there seem to be few who fit that description.
In his 2002 book, *The Death of the West*, Pat Buchanan observed: “Western man may be living out the final act of a tragedy that began five centuries ago.” (28) That tragedy can be seen as bound up with religion in at least three crucial ways. First, the religious divide of the Reformation set the whole thing in violent motion and created the conditions for what followed. Second, the mindset of the Enlightenment was based to a large extent on intense hostility to religious belief and practice as previously understood. And third, most modern political movements can be comprehended as “secular religions.” (29)

Given the presence of this religious factor in one form or another, and given that much of what I want to say in this essay will seem to accord with a broadly “Catholic” perspective, it seems only right to clarify my own position. I have never been a Catholic or a practicing Christian of any denomination, and neither have I adhered to any non-Christian faith. But nor would I profess to be an atheist. I could characterize myself not as a religious believer but as a believer in the “religious impulse” as defined by the contemporary philosopher Anthony O’Hear:

> The religious impulse might be seen as stemming from our urge to understand the world as it is in itself; then from our sense that we have certain absolute duties, which we have neither chosen nor can abrogate; and finally from our experience of a natural object or work of art as beautiful, which suggests that the perfection we long for in some other world may on occasion actually be realized in this one.” (30)

As to Catholicism, insofar as I am aware, the only explicitly Catholic influence on my viewpoint has been that of the poems and essays of G.K. Chesterton, of which I am fond. “Mysticism keeps men sane,” Chesterton declared (31), and perhaps I can do no better than to borrow a formulation from Camille Paglia and describe my own outlook as “secular but semi-mystical.” (32)

Religious and other identities, however, can be complex and contradictory, especially under modern conditions, and we should heed the words of R.H. Tawney:

> In every soul there is a socialist and an individualist, an authoritarian and a fanatic for liberty, as in each there is a Catholic and a Protestant. The same is true of the mass movements in which men marshal themselves for common action. (33)
And in that kind of light, George Orwell, writing about Dickens and quoting Chesterton, makes a large point in general, and one which partly sums up the project of this essay: “What he is out against is not this or that institution, but, as Chesterton put it, ‘An expression on the human face.’” (34)

Even so, this essay does in broad terms line up on the “Catholic” side of the wars and the culture-wars of the modern age, simply because the Catholic cause has generally been the anti-modern and counter-revolutionary cause. Most especially in the context of Britain and the English-speaking world, this has been the losing side and therefore the side whose battle-honours have been gained against the odds. It was defeated in England, the very cockpit of modernity, by what a recent historian sums up as, “that official view of the past, created by the Henrician government in the 1530s and elaborated later by the Whig interpretation.” (35) All the same, it was only a hundred years ago, in Pope Pius X’s encyclical *Pascendi*, that it reaffirmed its defiance of the juggernaut of the modern world. It is really only since the “reforms” of the Second Vatican Council that it can be said to have suffered a catastrophic collapse of will. (Allen Tate, interestingly, argued that the South would have been stronger if its religious basis had been more like that of Irish Catholicism.) (36)

Even as the Church flounders, however, the broadly “Catholic” perspective on modern history has become one which many different kinds of people can choose to adopt without necessarily having any connection to Catholicism as such. In a brief poem Czeslaw Milosz has conveyed the gist of my point—that lack of faith in an entity or an institution does not mean abandoning an ethic, that indeed it may make the ethic even more crucial.

If there is no God,
Not everything is permitted to man.
He is still his brother’s keeper
And he is not permitted to sadden his brother
By saying that there is no God. (37)

Or as C.S. Lewis has one of his Narnia characters say: “I’m on Aslan’s side, even if there isn’t any Aslan to lead it.” (38)
One doesn’t have to be Catholic to view Thomas More as a martyr and a hero, and one doesn’t need to be a monarchist to revere King Charles I. A person or a cause can become what the literary critic Kenneth Burke referred to as a “ramified symbol” — a symbol whose meanings have expanded from the particular to the general. And Northrop Frye referred to “resonances” to convey much the same idea.

An excellent illustration can be given. In a 2006 article Pat Buchanan wrote: “As for Left and Right, they retain much of the meaning they have had since the French Revolution. And we are of the Vendee.” (39) The Vendee is the name by which we know that heroic Catholic, Royalist, and regionalist resistance movement in western France in the 1790s, a movement eventually crushed with unspeakable cruelty. Buchanan himself happens to be Catholic, but the symbolic meaning of the Vendee is now so “ramified” and so full of “resonances” that the person called upon to unveil the Vendee Memorial at Les Lucs in 1993 was not Catholic, not Royalist, not from the region, and not even French. The person was Alexander Solzhenitsyn.

In an article, “Remembering the Vendee,” Sophie Masson, an Australian novelist of French background, noted that the ceremony “was attended by thousands of people, but was sniffily ignored by the mainstream media.” (40) In that brief comment she encapsulates the entire 500-year struggle in the West. On one hand there are the cultures of resistance, rooted in memory, and on the other hand there are what she simply calls the “intruders” – the agents of what Lionel Trilling referred to as “the modern will which masks itself in virtue.” (41) They wield today’s “mainstream media” as one of their weapons, just as they once enforced the French Revolution’s “despotism of liberty” with fire and massacre, and before that blighted all decent life in England with their Puritan ferocities. And Masson writes in terms which convey that contest between “the pain-inflicting forces” and those who must find ways to “mitigate the pain”:

It was the people themselves who remembered. For that is what the intruders did not take into account: memory. The people still tell the tale, vividly, with pain. But their pain is not that only of victims. It is a glowing, rich thing, a thing that paradoxically enabled them to survive.
And as a child she herself felt that rich glow: “I was brought up with it, because one side of my father’s family came from Vendee… we were taught the stories, the songs of resistance…”

And as for those “intruders” who have held the whip hand for so long, they might best be understood as the Adversary Culture, to use the famous phrase coined by Trilling. They stand in a relentlessly “adversarial” relation to everything on which common human life and happiness is based, and they “intrude” into human affairs with their alienation and hate and despair. Irving Kristol expressed it well:

Has there ever been, in all of recorded history, a civilization whose culture was at odds with the values and ideals of that civilization itself? It is not uncommon that a culture will be critical of the civilization that sustains it – and always critical of the failure of this civilization to realize perfectly the ideals that it claims as inspiration. Such criticism is implicit or explicit in Aristophanes and Euripides, Dante and Shakespeare. But to take an adversarial posture toward the ideals themselves? That is unprecedented. (42)

It is because of the deadly dominance of this Adversary Culture that I follow Allen Tate’s example in picking my own way through the woods, finding insights where I can. Like Tate and his Southern Agrarian colleagues of 1930, I write consciously in the shadow of old wars and lost causes, acutely aware that, as Czeslaw Milosz put it: “Truth is a refugee from the camp of the victors.” (43)

In the introduction to my copy of I’ll Take My Stand there is a sentence describing the essence of that book. Given here in italics, it is pretty much the same essence that I seek to catch and get clear in this essay, although in the nature of things I will undoubtedly fall short: “It was the vision of poets, and carried with it certain convictions about living and dying.” (44)
Underpinning # 1: Enacting Further Stages

The moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre writes: “To be the adherent of a tradition is always to enact some further stage in the development of one’s tradition.” (45) The authentic traditionalist does not remain fixed at a static point but “enacts a further stage.” In *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, T.S. Eliot states the matter in the context of literature:

> the difference between the present and the past is that the conscious present is an awareness of the past in a way and to an extent which the past’s awareness of itself cannot show. Someone said: “The dead writer are remote from us because we know so much more than they did.” Precisely, and they are that which we know. (46)

We are never better or wiser than our forebears, we just have the benefit of knowing what they couldn’t know — how all their lives and endeavours turned out in the long run. (But of course it works the other way too. People in the past understood their time in ways we can’t hope to match by hindsight. They could hear what Trilling calls that constant “hum and buzz of implication” which a living society gives off but which is mostly silent to the ears of posterity.)

On the face of it, nothing could appear more defunct than Jacobitism. As an active cause under that name, predicated on “a common theme of loyalty to the exiled Stuarts and opposition to those who wielded power in Britain” (47), and on a wish to defend “the beliefs and affections they saw being discarded around them” (48), it can be placed within the span of a single lifetime two and a half centuries ago. That period ran from the overthrow of King James in 1688 (the so-called Glorious Revolution) until the defeat of his grandson at Culloden in 1746. Over that span the Jacobite forces came out in arms at least six times in Scotland, Ireland and England and fought a string of major battles. In addition there were the many Jacobites in foreign service, like those of the Irish Brigade of the French Army who in 1745 won the battle of Fontenoy against the forces of the Hanoverian regime under the Duke of Cumberland. In that period Jacobitism always had the potential to instigate what it did finally create in the Forty Five — “the most serious crisis to affect the eighteenth-century British
The Jacobites were therefore heavy contenders in war and politics, but their moment was relatively brief and long ago.

Yet that’s only half the picture. Jacobitism was a counter-revolutionary movement of both the sword and the harp, and the harp of the Spirit may prevail, or at least endure, where the sword of the World cannot. Carlyle made the point, apropos of Burns, that creating the *songs* of a people is more vital than creating their laws. Jacobitism is the clearest and perhaps the most poignant example of a movement which, to use a stock phrase, lived on in song.

In 2002 was published a new edition of James Hogg’s anthology, *The Jacobite Relics of Scotland: Being the Songs, Airs, and Legends of the Adherents of the House of Stuart*. This work had first appeared in 1819 and had served as the basis for nearly all later collections of such material.

In his original Introduction, included in the 2002 edition, Hogg broached two matters of special interest here. The first was to do with the quality and profusion of Jacobite song and the fact that there was no equivalent on the Whig side. “I have searched in vain for the songs of the other party,” he noted, “in order to contrast them with those of the Cavaliers.” He reports he could find but few, adding flatly that, “it is impossible to preserve that which is not.” (50) And Burns agreed, declaring that: “the Scottish Muses were all Jacobites.” (51) The second matter raised by Hogg was even more politically provocative and it was stated in what appear to be surprisingly bold terms. Of those who had stood up for the exiled and “suffering” Stuarts at so much deadly cost to themselves, he declared:

> The generosity displayed by these unfortunate men will always be remembered to the honour of their country, and it even powerfully interested those who were adverse to their cause. The national feeling was strongly roused, and its bards partook of the common sympathy. It would therefore have been doing injustice to our country, to its heroes as well as to its poets, to have suffered these effusions to have perished.

And he went on:

> The question of *right* has been submitted to the arbitration of the sword, and
is now invariably decided. But neither that decision, not any other motive, should deter the historian from doing justice to the character of those men who fell in a cause which they at least judged to be right, and which others, perhaps, only thought wrong as it proved unsuccessful. (52)

In 1819 Hogg was articulating the broad argument of this essay— that the Jacobites had been the moral victors, that the “arbitration of the sword” was far from being the whole of the matter, and that the realm of “bards” and “historians” is one in which justice can and should be done.

Hogg was able to get away with all this because his anthology stood in relation to particular factors of the time. One of these factors was that, as Murray Pittock puts it, “a transmuted Jacobite rhetoric… developed rapidly in these years” (53), that is, in the wake of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars. British society had felt so deeply menaced by Jacobins that the Jacobites of the past began to appear admirable by contrast. Of course they had adhered to the wrong monarchs, but their devotion to monarchical principles had never been in doubt. And since then the many Highland regiments had proved exemplary cannon-fodder in titanic struggles on behalf of the Hanoverian regime. The sentimental “myth” of a bygone Jacobitism could now be allowed for the sake of those who “had done penance for its reality from Quebec to Waterloo.” (54) Sir Walter Scott’s Waverley novels had just begun to appear, and in 1822 George IV’s visit to Scotland would put the seal on the process of transmutation. After that, Jacobitism appeared to be totally de-fanged and sunk to the level at which most people know of it today, if they know of it at all—that of a quaint picture of a Prince on a tin of shortbread.

Another and related factor was the Romantic movement (with Scott again a key figure). By 1819 this had been brought to a pitch by the advent of the dark Satanic mills of industrialization, by the colossal fallout of the French misbehaviour, and by the whole malaise of what Schiller was the first to call the “disenchantment of the world.” Defining Romanticism is a notoriously difficult task, but the view taken here accords with that of Roger Scruton:

The course of romantic art is one of ever deeper mourning for the life of “natural piety” which the Enlightenment destroyed. And from this mourning
springs the romantic hope — the hope of recreating in imagination the community that will never again exist in fact. Hence the importance of folk poetry, folk traditions, and “ancestral voices”. (55)

The view in this essay differs only in laying the blame for the destruction, or for the onset of it at least, at the door of the Reformation. In a longer essay one would also take account of the malign influence of the Gnostic elements in Western thought. (56) As to romanticism, though, the essay leans a good deal on the insights of Donald Davidson and others in *I’ll Take My Stand*. In modern conditions, Davidson argued: “Romanticism is the artistic anti-toxin and will appear inevitably if the artist retains enough courage and sincerity to function at all.” (57)

The Hogg anthology was a move in the “culture wars” of its time, and Scruton writes:

The concept of culture leapt fully-formed from the head of Johann Gottfried Herder in the mid-eighteenth century, and has been embroiled in battles ever since. *Kultur*, for Herder, is the life-blood of a people, the flow of moral energy that holds society intact. *Zivilization*, by contrast is the veneer of manners, law and technical know-how.

And he goes on to explain that this idea developed in two directions:

The German romantics … construed culture in Herder’s way… Culture, they held, shapes language, art, religion and history, and leaves its stamp on the smallest event. No member of society, however ill-educated, is deprived of culture, since culture and social membership are the same idea. Others, more classical than romantic, interpreted the word in its Latin meaning… culture meant not natural growth but *cultivation*. Not everyone possesses it, since not everyone has the leisure, the inclination or the ability to learn what is needed. (58)

Hogg can be seen as operating on the Herder-style conception that the Jacobite songs, with the history and lore and emotion they represented, were part of “the life-
blood of a people” and the “flow of moral energy,” and that “culture and social membership are the same idea” because, as he himself had put it, “the bards partook of the common sympathy.” And even the fact that he had written or revised some of the material himself was typical of that kind of project. As Scruton notes:

all such collections were put together as much from bourgeois dreams and parlour games as from real folk traditions. But that only testifies to the power of the longing which inspired them… (59)

Scruton is saying that the alternative idea of culture as “cultivation” is always present as well. The very act of reflecting on one’s own culture — as Hogg had to do in order to produce his anthology, and indeed as Herder had to do — involves the recognition that one has become separate from it and therefore able to make judgements about it, that it cannot be regarded as a given any more, and that indeed, as Scruton says, *it will never again exist in fact.* It is the loss of what Jung calls “participation mystique,” or that “submersion in a common unconsciousness.” It is the loss of the old unproblematic sense of belonging. (60)

Hogg’s anthology stands as our key cultural link to the Jacobites. Imbued with the inner tensions and conflicts of late modernity, it looks towards *us*, even as it looks back from its own poignant moment in time. Hogg was born in 1770 and in his youth must have heard many first-hand accounts of the Forty Five. As Murray Pittock observes:

Hogg’s encounter with the tradition was one which enabled him (as he indeed states in his notes) to be of the last generation who were both inside and outside the Jacobite tradition.” (61)

A reviewer ended his notice of the 2002 edition of Hogg’s anthology with these words: “Jacobitism still lives, its old songs not ended, and so does the aversion to it.” (62) That assertion points up among other things the recent strong revival of pro-Jacobite scholarship, one that has come as though in long overdue response to Hogg’s call to historians to “do justice to the character of those men.” The assertion also conveys the deep hostility with which that revival has been met.
In his comprehensive and sympathetic new account of the Forty Five, published in 2003, Christopher Duffy declared:

Latter-day supporters of the Hanoverian regime and the Jacobite cause are sunk deeply into entrenched positions, and their exchanges take the form of the academic equivalent of hand grenades and mortar bombs. (63)

And in 2004, in a new study of the Jacobite period in England, Evelyn Lord surveyed the entrenchments from the Whig position. From her we ascertain that Jacobitism “has once more entered the mainstream of eighteenth-century political history,” having for a long while been nothing more than “the province of the antiquarian, or of the Scottish nationalist or sentimentalist.” (64)

She explains about the break-up into warring groups:

As Youngson points out in The Prince and the Pretender, “All perception is selective…” Perception and selection has led historians writing about the Jacobites to fall into a number of different camps. David Szechi suggests that this has made Jacobitism into the “bane of early eighteenth-century British historical writing.” From this “stems the near-mystical view of much of the Jacobite world view…” Szechi calls the group of historians who have this mystical view of Jacobitism, “the optimists.” Amongst their number he includes Sir Charles Petrie who wrote that “Jacobitism was a genuine political movement with a mass following.” Szechi adds that Petrie’s enthusiasm overcame his scholarship. Also among this group he places Frank McLynn and Eveline Cruickshanks.

Opposing these pro-Jacobite “optimists,” we are told, are the camps of at least two varieties of Whiggism:

Szechi suggests that the Whig/Protestant writers on Jacobitism are “the pessimists,” who see Jacobitism as being “a self-delusory movement with little prospect of success…” Another group Szechi identifies are “the rejectionists.” They are the pro-establishment Whig historians who take Fielding’s Squire
Western as symbolizing the typical Jacobite Tory squire, “a bigoted, ignorant, drunken philistine.” (65)

That reference to Eveline Cruickshanks is important, for she is the scholar credited with having set off the revival in Jacobite studies back in 1970. It was she, as Lord acknowledges, who “recovered the role of English Jacobites from the mists of time.” But she is used here more as a stick with which to beat others on her own side of the scholarly divide: “Although she promotes the Jacobites in a reasoned interpretation of the sources,” Lord pronounces, “other pro-Stuart historians have been less subtle.” (66) But as we have seen above, Cruickshanks has already been cited via Szeci as one of the same group as that Sir Charles Petrie whose “enthusiasm overcame his scholarship,” which seems rather to moderate the praise of her powers of “reasoned interpretation.” Lord is clearly attempting a demolition job on pro-Jacobite scholars per se.

She says of these “unsuitable” historians: “it is useful to ask when they were writing, and why they might have espoused the Stuart cause.” She does not feel it necessary to ask why their opponents have signed-on to the Hanoverian side. Only the pro-Stuart viewpoint is thought peculiar enough to need explaining. To do so Lord reaches back to 1933, nearly forty years before Cruickshanks reinvigorated the field, to the instance of one L.S. Eardley-Simpson, author of a local history, Derby in the ’45:

Eardley-Simpson admits he is pro-Jacobite, and his bile against the Hanoverians leaps off the page. The king is always referred to as the Elector of Hanover, showing that Eardley-Simpson did not recognize the legitimacy of the Hanoverians’ claim to the throne. (67)

One notes the police-court flavour of this “admission” of Jacobite sympathies, and the way that non-recognition of Hanoverian claims is of itself held up to show the “bile” of the man. And on top of that we learn that the wretch had served in the First World War and that, “The ‘Huns,’ who by implication included the Hanoverians, were still his enemy.” (68) The chap was a head-case, you see, stuck in a time-warp of hysterical Hun-bashing and twitchy with shell-shock. How else to explain the lunacy of pro-Stuartism?
Whatever Eardley-Simpson’s faults or virtues might have been, his book appeared almost at the same time as Herbert Butterfield’s *The Whig Interpretation of History*, the famous critique of a dogma so pervasive as to be “a magnet forever pulling at our minds, unless we have found the way to counteract it.”

It is astonishing to what an extent the historian has been Protestant, progressive, and whig… Long after he became a determinist he retained his godly role as the dispenser of moral judgements, and like the disciples of Calvin he gave up none of his right to moral indignation. (69)

An Eardley-Simpson had the odds against him, back then, with little chance of a fair hearing for his views. And it seems clear that Lord trots him out for ridicule in order to damage Cruickshanks and others by association.

One can see the whole dark picture. The Whig historians had shut down Jacobite studies at the cutting-edge of scholarship, had consigned them to “the province of the antiquarian.” The field could only be rescued by the advent of a wave of scholars with the talent, tenacity and credentials to push a pro-Stuart perspective back into serious contention. But by the tenets of “the Whig interpretation of history” that perspective was profoundly misguided, if not utterly wicked, and the sounder the scholarship the more unwelcome it would be. Those revisionists would have to be debunked by any means available. They would be accused of having made a “bane” of the whole topic by injecting “bile” into it and causing it to split into different camps. And what did these camps represent? Aside from the ludicrous outpost of the pro-Stuart crackpots, there were two Whig camps. The first held that Jacobitism was “self-delusory” and the other held that the true picture of the Jacobite was of “a bigoted, ignorant, drunken philistine.”

There we have Whiggery in a nutshell — forever accusing others of delusion and bigotry. And as the great Australian poet Les Murray has noted: “Whiggery did not seem to have changed its essence merely because it had adopted the intellectualizing fake-airiness and fanatical chic of Transatlantic culture.” (70)

The Whig historians are quite right to be alarmed, for the pro-Stuart revival goes to fundamentals. Jeremy Black is one of its leading proponents and has summarized the matter in a tone that remains urbane and yet has a glint of cold steel in it:
Those who work on Jacobitism have been accused of “revisionist obscurantism” and nostalgia. Having published extensively on Walpole and British foreign policy, I hope I will not be charged with only seeing one side of the hill. I personally feel that study of both Jacobitism and the ’45 is salutary. The former reminds the reader that many were not comprehended within the Whig consensus and that both the Revolution settlement and the Hanoverian regime were only established by force. Consideration of the ’45 is a useful corrective to deterministic approaches to eighteenth-century Britain and challenges those who find it easiest to see the past in terms of patterns. One wonders whether they would like to be explained and dismissed in a similar fashion. (71)

This is a long way from the Prince on the shortbread box, and also from the harmless researches of the antiquarian. Like Eardley-Simpson, but in a rather different climate, Black is returning to the very issues that drew the swords from their scabbards long ago — inescapable questions about legitimacy and about inevitability.

The Whig interpreters of history have every reason not to want those cans of worms re-opened.
Underpinning # 2: The Widening View

Perhaps the handiest account of the transformation of the scholarly scene is given by Murray Pittock in his 1998 book *Jacobitism*. Having traced earlier developments, he then describes the “major challenge” mounted by Cruickshanks in 1970. A key feature of the new thrust was its widening of the view to take in aspects which had long been either overlooked or actively disregarded. What Cruickshanks did was to indicate the actual extent of Jacobite commitment within the Tory Party during the period of its political exclusion in the first half of the eighteenth century. And the effect of this was:

for the first time to provide the basis for a revisionist evaluation of English Jacobitism. This was of major importance, since if Jacobitism was strong in England, it became far more of a pervasive threat to the British state than if it was merely the reaction of a Celtic fringe hostile to centralism. Studies on English Jacobitism, which had long lagged behind their Scottish counterparts, now outstripped them. Since English Jacobitism could hardly claim a massive military presence in the major Jacobite risings, arguments for its importance had to be drawn from other sources… while the techniques of “history from below” began to uncover a wide range of plebeian Jacobite activity. (72)

This new awareness of “plebeian” Jacobitism was of course profoundly unwelcome to historians on the other side, for it challenged the whole claim of Whiggery – and of modernity itself – to be the undisputed friend and benefactor of the common man against age-old forces of ignorance and oppression. They sought to explain away this level of Jacobite activity as a product of aristocratic manipulation, in much the same way, Pittock suggests,

as evidence of political or industrial discontent was explained away as the manipulation of left-wing agitators in the 1980s tabloid press. Historians who make such excuses confer an unlovely and implausible passivity on popular Jacobitism which one may doubt they would suffer themselves to believe in, were Thomas Paine rather than James Stuart the catalyst for the
demonstrations they wish to discredit. (73)

Christopher Duffy, drawing on Eardley-Simpson, relates that in the Derby election of 1742: “Tory voters, but not a single Whig, were to be found among the frame-work knitters, wool-combers, butchers, tailors, brick-makers, blacksmiths and tanners.” (74) Evelyn Lord confirms the point in the course of seeking to impress on us how few recruits the Prince was able to muster in England, and the doom he brought on those he did attract. “Only four men joined the army at Derby,” she reports, relating that two of them were afterwards executed as rebels by the government. But the interest here is in the occupations given for three out of the four. They were a blacksmith, a butcher, and a framework knitter. (75) That they volunteered for a cause that could get them hanged has a significance other than the one Lord seeks to underline. Pittock makes the point in general terms:

enlistment in Jacobite armies was, as is surely always the case in politics, the role of a minority of activists within a mass of sympathizers: the tip of an iceberg. It is the detail, beliefs and iconography of these sympathizers which provided the warp and woof of networking and communication for those who stood in danger of the gallows, should they be explicit. (76)

Duffy summarizes the matter in words italicized here to indicate their importance for our whole conception of the Jacobite cause: “before Radicalism emerged in the 1760s Jacobitism was seen as the creed of the distressed craftsman and small trader,” as well as other types and categories of people “who had in one way or another been marginalized in Hanoverian Britain, which seemed to be run by rich and influential men for their private advantage.” (77)

Or in the words of Jeremy Black noted earlier: “Many were not comprehended within the Whig consensus.”

Duffy adds an observation that strikes oddly to anyone whose mental picture of the movement has mostly been of tartanry and bagpipes: “The purest form of Jacobitism in the ideological sense was probably to be found in Manchester…” (78) And indeed Manchester was the Prince’s main source of English recruits.
Though just one segment of the overall movement, the Highlanders were crucial to it because they were the one segment that could quickly gather a powerful armed force. The end of the Forty Five brought the inevitable final consequences of this when the government set itself to eliminate the source of any future threat by destroying the Highland clan-system and way of life altogether.

Both Duffy and Pittock argue that the key role of the Highlanders has been a major factor in obscuring the real breadth and depth of Jacobite support across Britain as a whole. Writes Duffy:

Perceptions are even now shaped by the propaganda of King George’s supporters in 1745 and 1746. The neo-Hanoverians have always been happy to take its assertions at face value, while the neo-Jacobites have played into their hands by giving the commemoration of the ’45 an overwhelmingly Highland character. To test this claim I have made a point of asking professional historians at random about their impressions of the Jacobite forces. With slight variations in wording, the answer has invariably been: “thieving Catholic Highland bastards.” (79)

Pittock concurs in seeing the problem as one perpetuated by those well-meaning pro-Jacobite “sentimentalists” who did little to dissuade serious historians from their view that the subject did not deserve serious treatment. The sentimentalists endorsed the image of doomed marginality which more dismissive historians had attached to Jacobitism, using it to intensify their celebration of the heroic Celt who always fought but always fell…” (80)

And Evelyn Lord illustrates that kind of dismissive attitude in her assertion, for example, that: “The Stuarts and their feudal army were too late… they were defeated by modernity.” (81)

Pittock laments that even now “it appears that there is little dialogue” between the predominantly Scottish and Highland “sentimentalists” and the English revisionist writers. This communication-gap is a great pity, but one can feel behind it a painful awareness on both sides that when the supreme test came in the Forty Five, the Scots
adherents gave their utmost while the English ones – with a relative handful of brave exceptions – kept out of harm’s way.

This chiding of the Scottish “sentimentalists” took me back in memory to my visits to Culloden and Glenfinnan. I could not help bristling at the thought that these latter-day English revisionists could seem to denigrate what those sites represented. What were most of their forebears doing, I wanted to ask, when those of the “sentimentalists” were marching to Derby, outnumbered six to one?

To refer to “sentimentalists” was heavy-handed of Pittock, but despite my initial reaction I understood the point he was trying to make. All the same, I saw that one’s emotional response was not a mere distraction from the real issues, but central to the issues. The belief that the emotions have a truth and dignity of their own was the very point of departure from Whiggery. As Pascal famously put it: “The heart has reasons that reason cannot know.”

Scruton refers to “the knowledge of what to feel which comes from the invocation of one’s true community.” And this knowledge can remain valid over time because, as he puts it, “The community may vanish in fact but live on in imagination.” (82) It was growing clear to me that the genuine Jacobite outlook related not to a reductive clash of argument in which one idea seeks to vanquish and replace another, but rather a rich coherence of meaning in which many different things may co-exist and from which little is ever totally discarded. Kenneth Minogue has touched on the idea, referring to a type of allegedly outmoded person as: “one who understood his life in terms of the coherence of his commitments.” (83) And this coherence can be seen as something like the imaginative unity that Richard Weaver refers to: “When a culture is unified on the imaginative level, the unity effects an abridgement of egotism among the members.” (84)

As though to redeem himself for his lapse of proper feeling, Pittock does a fine job of illustrating what he calls “the richness of Jacobite code and culture” in the period of its full flowering. He conveys the coherence of it all, and a key to that coherence is the fact that although the movement was a counter-revolutionary crusade to overturn the prevailing political order, it was never driven only by an ethic of worldly attainment. Pittock observes:

One of the gains of recent Jacobite scholarship has been the realization that
a merely teleological account of success or failure is insufficient to explain
the importance of dynastic, political, national or religious loyalty to the Stuarts
in the eighteenth century, still less to account for the phenomenon of popular
or plebeian Jacobitism. (85)

(Chesterton made the same point back in 1929: “the Jacobite theory is not in any way
disproved by the fact that Cumberland could outflank the clans at Drummosie.”) (86)
So widespread was the pro-Stuart feeling that:

had the secret ballot been open to Jacobites, it has been the opinion of
scholars as politically opposed as Samuel Johnson in the eighteenth century
and Christopher Hill in the twentieth that the Stuarts would have regained
their three kingdoms. (87)

In a relatively short book, Pittock looks at everything from the movement’s
finances (if the Scots and Irish did most of the actual fighting, the English had to do
the bulk of the fundraising), to its well-known appeal to women, to its religious and
philosophical milieu, to its ruralist and “folk” sympathies, to its elaborate codes of
symbolism. This passage taken almost at random conveys something of the breadth
and texture of the scene:

Jacobite literature shared major themes in common throughout the British
Isles. First, there was the portrayal of the absent monarch as a messianic
deliverer whose return would awaken the land to newness of life: such a
vision can be found from Scottish popular and folk song through Munster
aislings to high cultural writing such as Alexander Pope’s “Messiah: an
Eclogue.” Second, the absent monarch could be presented as a social bandit,
a criminal hero, a lord of misrule who would reverse the cultural categories
of the Whig state and restore customary rights: deliverence and renewal
were the common themes, but the manner of their achievement crossed
every register in the heroic, from the heavenly to the criminal. (88)
Duffy, too, describes a Jacobite culture that burgeoned with lovely images of fruition and was filled with “all the excitement of renewal”:

a walk through the countryside in springtime and early summer revealed on every side the emblems which the Jacobites had appropriated for themselves—butterflies, daffodils, wild white roses, honeysuckle, and acorns embowered in sprigs of oak leaves. (89)

And he too notes that the symbolism was understood right across the social spectrum, from those “genteel young ladies” who “worked the motifs into their embroidered cushions,” to the likes of “the highwayman, the smuggler and the adventurer.” This seems almost the epitome of Weaver’s idea of “a culture unified on the imaginative level” and which “effects an abridgement of egotism.”

One begins to understand a little better the irritation felt by the English revisionist writers. The old image of “doomed marginality” had left so much out of account, and especially undercut the movement’s focus on the great renewing process of life itself, a focus that links Jacobites to the most perennial concerns and leads to the conviction that it was their Whig opponents who were “marginal” in the truer sense of the word. The revisionist picture is deeply attractive, and even as moving in its own way as the old picture of a doomed order of Celts refusing to go gentle into that good night. No aspect of the new view is more appealing than the sense it gives of the sheer human inclusiveness of the Jacobite movement, although that inclusiveness could also create problems. As Pittock notes, the various pro-Stuart elements had many different hopes and agendas:

Some of such aims were in conflict, and many would no doubt not have been realized in the event of any restoration: but people risked their lives believing in them, and it is important for the modern reader to understand that Jacobitism was thus far more than a dynastic squabble: it was regarded by its contemporaries as a major military, political and religious threat to the existence of the state itself… (90)
And that “state” was the brutal new entity known as “Great Britain” which had been given its ideological warrant by the Whig Revolution which deposed James Stuart in 1688. In this new state: “Power was centralized, and an economic and commercial powerhouse, built on the metropolis, provided the credit for massive military spending which secured an Empire.” (91) And the worldly success of that effort set the seal on its moral rightness, at least in some eyes: “In the nineteenth century, the British state reached the apogee of its imperial triumph, a triumph too easily confused with destiny through natural pride…” (92) It had also of course by then accomplished the Industrial Revolution, with incalculable consequences for the rest of the world.

The advent of “Great Britain” did more than any other factor to create the conditions of late modernity, that catalogue of horrors (as well as some benefits). Pittock takes it to be no coincidence that politicians and historians who have “sought and celebrated the coalescence of that state have also been responsible for the misrepresentations of Jacobitism which have endured to our own day.” (93) And those misrepresentations were found necessary to combat the plain fact that “the Stuarts continued to offer, or to appear to offer, something different”:

The Jacobite critique of a centralized and centralizing state and its thirst for war and Empire has its echoes both in its own time and today… Jacobitism was the first fruit and for a long time the sole means of opposition to the British state as it developed in its modern guise after 1688. (94)

Evelyn Lord’s Whiggish viewpoint once again provides an illustrative contrast. The Jacobite movement, she declares, was focused on mere “dynastic wars,” on outworn conflicts which only got in the way of the genuine matters at hand:

As far as England was concerned dynastic wars interfered with the process of modernization, industrialism and the accumulation of capital. The rebels came out of the mists into a modern country, and disappeared back into the past. The Stuarts’ day was over.” (95)

Her line is that those dim archaic “rebels” could not comprehend what a brave new world they were briefly obstructing by their foolishness. Yet once or twice in passing
Lord does acknowledge that they were well aware of what they were ranged against. She refers to “the clash of the two cultures.” On the Jacobite side was the one that revolved around “kinship and social networks” and was based on “obligation and allegiance.” And on the other side was the juggernaut of “the new industrial society.” She notes that this whole clash, and its eventual outcome, “can be summed up by James Clegg’s entry in his diary when the Jacobites left Manchester for the last time. ‘Blessed be God the silk mill is safe.’” (96)

The victory had gone to the crude but relentlessly massing forces of what the art historian Kenneth Clark sardonically called “Heroic Materialism.” (97)

Here is one likely key to the present renewed interest in the Jacobites and the fresh impetus in scholarship. The shine has worn off the “British” model of modernity and the zest has gone out of its triumphalism. But the social and economic brutality of it continues unabated and has arguably become even more savage with globalization—“another turn in the history of servitude.” (98) The outward Empire has been replaced by an even more vicious *internal* imperialism which intends to leave individuals no escape or sanctuary in their own lives. To ward off potential revolt, Whiggery has imposed a new inquisition of “political correctness.” The aim is to demonize and thereby marginalize any challenge by defining it as “hate” and “intolerance,” as socially primitive and as evincing the bigotry of “rednecks” rather than the valid concerns of normal human beings. The tactic is to treat such concerns as matters not for legitimate politics but for the police. It is equivalent to the labeling of the Jacobite forces of 1745 as “thieving Catholic Highland bastards.”

A growing number of people today can see in the Jacobite story an analogue of their own situation. And this applies both to the bitter hardships of the movement and to the hope of renewal expressed in its beautiful symbolism. Straight to the point is Pittock’s encapsulation: “It is the essence of the Jacobite challenge to the Britain we inherit that it should still be controversial.” (99)

Two final clarifying comments come from Christopher Lasch in his book of 1991, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics*, a long and sober re-evaluation of the progressivist program in the modern world. The first comment relates to the widespread loss of faith in that program, and the need to retrace our steps, at least intellectually:
The same developments that make it impossible for those who believe in progress to speak with confidence and moral authority now compel us to give a more attentive hearing to those who rejected it all along. (100)

And although the second passage is not specifically about the Jacobite cause, it can be read as deeply applicable to it:

It may teach us something; and even if its history of defeat does not strike us as wildly encouraging at first, it may help us, in the long run, to come to grips with our contemporary situation and our darkening prospects. (101)
Underpinning # 3: Stories We Live By

C.S. Lewis observed: “It is astonishing how little attention critics have paid to Story considered in itself.” He cited what he took to be the three notable exceptions to this: Aristotle in the *Poetics*, Boccaccio and others in the Middle Ages, and Jung and his followers producing “their doctrine of Archetypes.” (102)

In 2004, Christopher Booker published *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories*, a work based on decades of reflection. Not so much a whole new theory as a fresh elaboration of Jungian ideas, it begins by equating the 1970s movie *Jaws* with the eighth-century poem *Beowulf*, arguing that in archetypal terms they are the same basic story— the one that can be defined as “Overcoming the Monster.” In setting out to fathom the nature of Story, Booker writes:

> what we are looking at here is really one mystery built upon another, because our passion for story-telling begins from another faculty which is itself so much part of our lives that we fail to see just how strange it is: our ability to “imagine,” to bring up to our conscious perception the images of things which are not actually in front of our eyes. (103)

That peculiar faculty enables us to focus on “those mental patterns we call stories,” and the making of those patterns, “serves a far deeper and more significant purpose in our lives than we have realized.” (104) Booker then goes on to say that his investigations made two things above all clearer to him. The first is that, “there are indeed a small number of plots which are so fundamental to the way we tell stories that it is virtually impossible for any storyteller ever entirely to break away from them.” The second is that in learning how stories operate we find that, “We are uncovering nothing less than a kind of hidden, universal language: a nucleus of situations and figures which are the very stuff from which stories are made.” And when we have become acquainted with that “symbolic language,” we approach “the heart of what stories are about and why we tell them.” (105)

Though these ideas are not new in themselves, Booker claims his work breaks new ground in “the extent to which it looks at all kinds of story-telling on the same level,” its view that the archetypal rules apply to stories “however serious or however
trivial.” (106) Of real interest to us here is his view that, “a particular element of disintegration has crept into modern storytelling which distinguishes it from anything seen in history before.” But, he says, since the archetypal rules remain unchanged, the very manner in which these “aberrant” modern stories have “lost the plot” can show us “just how and why in the collective psyche of our culture this element of disintegration should have arisen.” (107)

I had not read Booker’s work at the time of writing the novel, but some of his Jungian ideas, the kinds of ideas to which I had long felt intuitively drawn, connect very much to the novel’s outlook. I began writing the novel with two intellectual starting-points in mind. One was Schama’s notion – clarified by Erikson – of being “born-again” into certain allegiances and self-identifications, and the other was an insight gleaned from R.H. Tawney. In Religion and the Rise of Capitalism, his study of seventeenth-century England, this beautiful passage appears:

Where Catholic and Anglican had caught a glimpse of the invisible, hovering like a consecration over the gross world of sense, and touching its muddy vesture with the unearthly gleam of a divine, yet familiar, beauty, the Puritan mourned for a lost Paradise and a creation sunk in sin. Where they had seen society as a mystical body, compact of members varying in order and degree, but dignified by participation in the common life of Christendom, he saw a bleak antithesis between the spirit which quickeneth and an alien, indifferent or hostile world. Where they had reverenced the decent order whereby past was knit to present, and man to man, and man to God, through fellowship in works of charity, in festival and fast, in the prayers and ceremonies of the Church, he turned with horror from the filthy rags of human righteousness. Where they, in short, had found comfort in a sacrament, he started back from a snare set to entrap his soul. (108)

For me that quote shone a vivid light on what the “modernity wars” were all about. I immediately thought of the opposing outlooks as those of the Party of the Sacrament and the Party of the Snare. And when I combined this with the notion of being “born again” on one or other side of that contest I began to feel that I knew where I stood. Needless to say, Tawney’s words go to realms beyond their own immediate context.
Not everyone who adhered to the House of Stuart in its many troubles was a Catholic or an Anglican, much less all those who have opposed the march of modernity in other ways and other contexts. Yet it came to me as a great truth that every one of them had been fighting, whether consciously or not – and perhaps as much within themselves as outwardly – for some vision of the Sacrament and against the mentality of the Snare.

The issue of Story can be tied into all this by means of a couple of key comments from Booker.

The more we look at stories, he writes, “the more clearly we see the consistency with which they portray one great fundamental struggle” –

On one hand there are the forces making for disintegration, confusion, darkness and ultimately death. These are all centred on the ego. On the other are all those forces which are urging both central figure and story towards wholeness and light…

These latter forces, he goes on,

are not centred on the ego but on something far deeper in the human personality something all-connecting, something universal. This ultimate state of wholeness and the forces which work to bring it about comprise the archetype of totality which Jung and others have called the Self. (109)

And as he stresses in a footnote, this Jungian “archetype of the Self,” means quite the opposite of what we might understand by “self” in the sense of selfishness. The Self is in fact “both the core of our individual identity and that which connects us with everyone and everything outside us.” (110) It is the personal point of intersection between the particular and the universal. And Tawney indicates in striking terms the extent to which the Puritan type – he or she of the Party of the Snare – seems to lack this kind of Self. Outside the guarded boundaries of the Puritan self there is only “an alien, indifferent or hostile world,” a world full of reprobates to be shunned. It is important to convey the full weight of Tawney’s assessment:
Those who seek God in isolation from their fellow men, unless trebly armed for the perils of the quest, are apt to find, not God, but a devil, whose countenance bears an embarrassing resemblance to their own. The moral self-sufficiency of the Puritan nerved his will, but it corroded his sense of social solidarity.

And the consequences of this were vast:

A spiritual aristocrat, who sacrificed fraternity for liberty, he drew from his idealization of personal responsibility a theory of individual rights, which, secularized and generalized, was to be among the most potent explosives that the world has known.

A “spiritual aristocrat” he may be, but unlike other types of aristocrat the Puritan is devoid of noblesse oblige:

Convinced that character is all and circumstances nothing, he sees in the poverty of those who fall by the way, not a misfortune to be pitied and relieved, but a moral failing to be condemned… (111)

Booker’s second key comment for us here, indeed his final summarizing comment after 700 pages, concerns what he sees as the link between the words “hero” and “heroine” and the word “heir”:

I am convinced that, lost in the mists of history, they must be related in some way… In other words, the hero or the heroine is he or she who is born to inherit; who is worthy to succeed; who must grow up as fit to take on the torch of life from those who went before. Such is the essence of the task laid on each of us as we come into this world. That is what stories are trying to tell us. (112)

All of the above makes it possible to offer a fairly clear idea of the concept of Story that underpins my novel. Stories, in Booker’s words, “portray one great fundamental struggle,” and that struggle can be seen in Tawney’s terms as being between those for
whom the world is a Sacrament and those for whom it is a Snare. And since Stories, like dreams, are sequences of pictures in our heads, they require their costumes and scenery. The costumes and scenery in my novel are those of the Jacobites and their opponents. And “Jacobitism” in the deepest sense means both the particular historical movement and also the Jungian archetypal “Self” in its battle against the forces of the ego. And Schama’s notion of being “born again” as a Whig or Jacobite helps us to be aware that the same drama is being played out in our lives whether the time is 1745 or 2008. Richard Weaver put the whole thing precisely:

Are those who died heroes’ and martyrs’ deaths really dead? It is not an idle question. In a way, they live on as forces, helping to shape our dream of the world. The spirit of modern impiety would inter their memory with their bones… (113)

Weaver articulates two points that Booker also makes — first about us being the “heirs” who must be “fit to take on the torch of life from those who went before,” and second about that “element of disintegration” which has “crept into modern storytelling” and which is unlike “anything seen in history before.”

Modernity is the period in human history when for the first time — or at any rate for the first time on such a scale — people rejected the idea of being “heirs” to the past and to the “sacrament” of the world. They began to despise and disparage that heritage as a “snare,” as something to be either shunned or brutally cleansed and refashioned to the dictates of what, as we have noted, Trilling refers to as “the modern will which masks itself in virtue.” One could say that the modern age became a scene of struggle between two archetypes — those of the “Grateful Heir” and the “Ungrateful Heir.” The latter of course does not reject the benefits of the inheritance, only the duties and the decencies that should accompany them. He or she is that nasty piece of work who is only too keen to inherit the family assets while despising those who created and preserved them and neglecting even the proper upkeep of their graves.

In the light of all this the realm of Story can be understood in terms of three different categories: Story, Anti-Story, and Pseudo-Story.

The first is story proper, story in its perennial form, teaching us the great truths of existence, and, as Booker says, drawing us towards the goal of being worthy to take
up "the torch of life" from those who went before. The deep message of Story is that the world is by and large a good place and a Sacrament.

The second is story that has been blighted by Booker’s "element of disintegration" and by Weaver’s "spirit of modern impiety." It is story twisted to modernity’s purposes and made to serve the agendas of the "Ungrateful Heir." The deep message of Anti-Story is that the world is by and large a bad place and a Snare.

The third is story which is not in the actual service of evil but is simply too bland or shallow to do good. Much contemporary public culture and discourse is of this kind. But Pseudo-Story can help to facilitate evil by its "dumbing down" effect which the forces of Anti-Story know how to exploit.

Much of the contest of Story and Anti-Story revolves around the idea of Enchantment — as in Max Weber’s famous phrase (adopted from Schiller) in which he characterized modernity as "the disenchantment of the world." In his 1997 book The Re-Enchantment of Everyday Life, Thomas Moore observes that, “A culture dedicated to enchantment recognizes our need to live in a world of both facts and holy imagination.” (114) That phrase “holy imagination” catches the underlying gravitas and pietas in the very idea of Story, the sense of it having a sacred purpose, however deep down. Roger Scruton has expressed it beautifully: "Many who never take communion in fact, take communion in imagination. Such is the fate of almost every intelligent person who is brought into the ambit of Western art." (115) The more disenchanted the world becomes, however, and the more Story is pushed aside by Anti-Story, the less of that "communion" is available to people, and at the end of the process there can only be what Scruton calls “the final ruination of the sacred in its last imagined form.” (116)

“It isn’t easy to discuss enchantment in a disenchanted society,” Moore writes in his introduction to the book already referred to, but in a previous work, Care of the Soul, he had made the essential point that Booker would come to make: “The important thing is to realize that although life seems to be a matter of literal causes and effects, in fact we are living out deep stories, often unconsciously …” (117)

Without employing the terms, Neil Postman laments the dreadful over-supply of Anti-Story and Pseudo-Story, and the lack of that genuine Story that humans need as much as they need air to breathe:
I refer to the confusion that accompanies the absence of a narrative to give organization and meaning to our world — a story of transcendence and mythic power. Nothing can be clearer than that we require a story to explain to ourselves why we are here and what our future is to be, and many other things, including where authority resides. (118)

The trap for human beings, especially in the modern age when our links to nature and to commonsense have been frayed or cut altogether, is that what appears to be a great shining Story can prove to have been an Anti-Story all along.

In his book on myth, The Hero With a Thousand Faces, Joseph Campbell refers to:

the hero-cycle of the modern age, the wonder-story of mankind’s coming to maturity. The spell of the past, the bondage of tradition, was shattered with sure and mighty strokes… modern man emerged from ancient ignorance, like a butterfly from its cocoon…

It sounds inspirational, but then Campbell goes on to mention the little matter of the outcome:

there is no such society any more as the gods once supported… And within the progressive societies themselves, every last vestige of the ancient human heritage of ritual, morality, and art is in full decay. (119)

Deeply pertinent to all this is David Gordon’s assertion that Sir Walter Scott was not only the inventor of the historical novel, but “the father of the political novel” as well. This was because of his profound concern with what Gordon calls “the passional and psychological consequences of our group identifications as they are affected by the processes of history.” And those large “identifications” can be framed in the terms we have outlined here – either as attachment to the perennial world as a Sacrament, or as the rejection of it as a Snare. And if we take the word “strange” to mean something like “not yet fatally disenchanted,” Gordon beautifully characterizes one side of that great divide. He writes of “the strange world of Jacobite minstrelcy, where legitimist sentiment adopts the language of the love-lyric.” (120)
Les Murray has referred to the dominating influence of what we mean here by Story and Anti-Story, although he prefers to speak of “poems”:

I think poetry is the principle which controls reality, and I doubt there is any more final truth. But when I say that I use the term poetry in its widest sense. We are ruled, and sometimes martyred, by successive large loose “poems” which become the governing paradigms of our lives. (121)

He has, for example, described the Enlightenment as “a Luciferian poem.” (122) And this way of seeing things has now migrated from literary theory — from the realms of insight we might associate with Northrop Frye, — explicitly into the field of historical studies. In a lucid although hostile overview of the trend, Keith Windschuttle writes of the work of Hayden White in the 1970s: “In his book _Metahistory_, White became the first to offer a comprehensive argument that history was ultimately a literary or poetic construct.” (123)

In 2001 the sociologist John Carroll published _The Western Dreaming_, with the subtitle _The West Is Dying for the Want of a Story_. The concept of the “Dreaming” and of the “Dreamtime” comes from the Australian Aboriginals and refers to their entire heritage and world-view. It isn’t an easy concept to summarize, but Scruton seems to come close to what it means in his explanation of what Herder had meant by the term _Kultur_: “a shared spiritual force which is manifest in all the customs, beliefs and practices of a people… and leaves its stamp on the smallest event.” (124) That “shared spiritual force” is precisely what is rejected by the Party of the Snare and its Anti-Story. (125)

One of the best illustrations of Story as a life-giving and life-preserving force can be found in Conrad’s _Heart Of Darkness_. Marlow is a sea captain who by a process of gradual moral slippage has become involved in a dubious venture in Africa. Gnawed by a nameless dread as he steams up the river, he feels, in the vastness of the jungle, “the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention.” (126) He is journeying into the heart of this to meet the mysterious and charismatic and deeply deranged Mr Kurtz, a figure who, he will learn, “had taken a high seat amongst the devils of the land” and who surrounds himself with severed human heads on poles:
Everything belonged to him—but that was a trifle. The thing was to know what he belonged to, how many powers of darkness claimed him for their own. That was the reflection that made you creepy all over. (127)

For all his deepening dismay, Marlow cannot break the spell that draws him on. What saves him is coming oddly upon an old tattered seamanship manual, full of mundane matters to do with tackle and gear:

Not a very enthralling book; but at first glance you could see there a singleness of intention, an honest concern for the right way of going to work, which made these humble pages, thought out so many years ago, luminous with other than a professional light. (128)

Marlow feels “a delicious sensation of having come across something unmistakably real.” He feels a link to the manual’s long-dead author, the sense of having come into “the shelter of an old and valued friendship.” (129) But above all he has been freshly re-armed with a great Story, one that he knew but had let slip. It is the profound Story of practicality and probity handed on through time from one conscientious person to another, and which, as an ideal of well-doing, becomes “luminous” and amounts to a whole code of honour. And if it should seem to us that probity is rather too stolid a thing to be inspirational, we might reflect on what Chesterton called, in reference to another seafarer, Robinson Crusoe, “the poetry of limits” and even “the wild romance of prudence.” (130)

Marlow may still not know what powers Mr Kurtz “belongs to,” but he now knows and remembers what powers he belongs to, what deep Story he himself is required to live out. To put it in Booker’s terms, he has regained awareness of what he is “heir” to, and he has the decency to be grateful for it. Or in Scruton’s terms, Marlow has regained “the knowledge of what to feel which comes from the evocation of one’s true community.” He has taken “communion” again by means of that tattered old manual, the human solidarity it represents and the Story it conveys. And because of this he will survive the encounter that lies ahead, whereas Mr Kurtz will end his life crying out aghast: “The horror! The horror!”
Underpinning # 4: The Fury of Evil Forces

In his speech on receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1980, the Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz confessed that he and other poets of his era had failed to perceive in time the real nature of totalitarianism, of what he called “the heart of darkness” of the twentieth century.” (131) He spoke of “events which by their death-bearing scope surpassed all natural disasters known to us.” He then continued in a sentence that could have come from Marlow, steaming up-river before the tattered old seamanship manual came to his moral rescue: “Like blind men we groped our way and were exposed to all the temptations with which the mind deluded itself in our time.”

When insight did finally come, he went on, the most precious part of it was “respect and gratitude for certain things which protect people from internal disintegration and from yielding to tyranny.” But, he declared:

Precisely for that reason some ways of life and some institutions become a target for the fury of evil forces, above all the bonds between people which exist organically, sustained by family, religion, neighbourhood and common heritage. In other words, all that disorderly, illogical humanity, so often branded as ridiculous because of its parochial attachments and loyalties. In many countries traditional bonds of civitas have been subjected to a gradual erosion and their inhabitants have become disinherit ed without realizing it. It is not the same, however, in those areas where suddenly, in a situation of utter peril, the protective, life-giving value of such bonds reveals itself.

He noted that one place where such life-giving bonds retained their hold was his own native land. Although his mother-tongue was Polish, he grew up in Lithuania, which he described, significantly, as “a country of myths and poetry.” To translate this into terms already discussed, he was saying that Lithuania was a stronghold of Story, and that this gave its people the means of resistance to the various brands of Anti-Story that ran amok across Europe.

Milosz was making a point about a specific period of twentieth-century history, but the same point writ larger applies to the entire 500-year struggle of the modern age.
Two passages, the first from a sociologist and the second from a poet-scholar, will convey the essential nature of that struggle with great clarity.

In his essay “On the Obsolescence of the Concept of Honour,” Peter Berger refers to what he calls the “transformations” that modernity has wrought:

What to one will appear as a profound loss will be seen by another as the prelude to liberation. Among intellectuals today, of course, it is the latter viewpoint that prevails and forms the implicit anthropological foundation for the generally “left” mood of the time. The threat of chaos, both social and psychic, which ever lurks behind the disintegration of institutions, will then be seen as a necessary stage that must precede the great “leap into freedom” that is to come. It is also possible, in the conservative perspective, to view the same process as precisely the root pathology of the modern era, as a disastrous loss of the very structures that enable men to be free and to be themselves. (132)

The key point for us is the part about the “root pathology of the modern era,” which brings about that “disastrous loss of the very structures that allow men to be free and to be themselves.” Or as Roger Kimball has put the matter: “The socio-cultural fabric that gives body to freedom is redefined as the enemy of freedom.” (133)

What Milosz calls “the fury of evil forces” can be defined for our purposes as the raging of certain malignant socio/psychological energies – what we might call the “atomizing energies” – and across 500 years these have worked to bring the “root pathology” to an ever more destructive pitch. And against that we have what Milosz calls “all the bonds between people which exist organically,” and which we could call the “cohering energies.” The cohering energies can be seen to correspond to Story, the atomizing energies to Anti-Story, and a lack of any real energy at all to Pseudo-Story. The whole dynamic of the “root pathology” and of the “atomizing energies” is caught by the marriage and family therapist William Doherty when he writes of, “the social forces and cultural currents that pull us apart faster than our love and good intentions can pull us back together again.” (134)

In an essay, “A Visit to Bunhill,” from The Grammar of the Real, James McAuley reflects on a visit paid by Dryden to Milton in 1674. It was a symbolic meeting, given
that the two poets can be viewed as representing the two sides in the 500-year war, although at the time of the visit Milton was in the final year of his life and Dryden’s best work was yet to come. Milton was the fervent champion of that “revolutionism” which McAuley calls “a psycho-social disease particularly characteristic of modern Western civilization.” Dryden’s political outlook, on the other hand, “is very close to that of Shakespeare as shown in the histories. Is both principled and pragmatic. It tries to make the best of an imperfect state of things,” but in a way which “never loses the sense that there are human norms and constants which are real and sacred…” (135)

“Revolutionism” is in fact another name for the “root pathology” which seeks to wreck “the very structures which allow men to be free and to be themselves,” and also another name for what we have termed here the “atomizing energies.” McAuley’s analysis needs to be quoted in full, for he goes to the essence of the matter.

Revolutionism has taken various forms over the past few centuries, but in essence it consists of four propositions:

1. A perfect society is possible.
2. The present system is the sole barrier to attaining the perfect society and is therefore essentially evil and must be destroyed, not reformed.
3. The enlightened elite (who define themselves by believing propositions 1 and 2) have a right or mandate to override the majority and impose their will.
4. After the revolution power must be confined to the loyal true believers, while all backward elements are converted or rendered historically inoperative.

The seventeenth-century Puritan form of these propositions clothes them in messianic-millenarian terms:

1. The Kingdom of God is at hand as a political event.
2. The monarchy and established church are the Antichrist which must be destroyed.
3. The Saints (i.e. Puritan zealots) have a mandate from Heaven to overthrow the Government and bring in the new order by force.
4. The new order will be “the rule of the Saints” in which “dominion is founded in grace,” i.e. power is confined to the Puritan politburo and its cadres. It is a matter of taste whether one prefers the clotted but colourful religious terminology of the Puritan version or the grey sociological sludge of later secularized versions. (136)

On McAuley’s view, which provides the conceptual backbone of my novel, we are dealing with a single 500-year phenomenon which presents different faces or facets over time and in any given period is guided by whatever is the current version of that “Puritan Politburo and its cadres.” These are the Commissars of Modernity, these are the mavens of the entire “root pathology” of “revolutionism.” These are the ones who, like Mr Kurtz, “have taken a high seat amongst the devils of the land.” Their manias both drive and are driven by those “atomizing energies.” Mr Kurtz, for instance, is not identical to the type pictured in Dostoyevsky’s *The Devils*, but the important thing is not the local and particular differences but the overall continuity of the Commissariat and its “cadres.” Their legacy has been, to use an absolutely key quote from Edmund Burke: “that long roll of grim and bloody maxims which form the political code of all power not standing on its own honour and the honour of those who are to obey it.” (137)

And “revolutionism” cannot stand on any basis of honour (although it can pretend to in a passing way for tactical purposes) for the concept of honour derives from that immemorial fabric of human society to which the commissars are pathologically hostile. The novelist V.S. Naipaul wrote that: “The politics of a country can only be an extension of its idea of human relationships.” (138) And the commissariat’s idea of human relationships is literally murderous. In the words of the former 1960’s radical David Horowitz, with original italics:

it is an idea whose true consciousness is this: *Everything human is alien.*

Because everything that is flesh-and-blood humanity is only the disposable past. This is the consciousness that makes mass-murderers of well-intentioned humanists and earnest progressives. (139)
And it also makes what Saul Bellow has referred to as the “killer mob” of the liberal-minded. (140)

Burke is a central figure, not only for the fierce insight and eloquence he brought to bear, but also because he stands near to the halfway point of the 500-year contest, and because his complex relation to “revolutionism” may help us to understand our own position better.

Robert Nisbet reminds us that, “The Jacobins believed that their work was in a direct line from that of the Puritans earlier in England, at the time of the Civil War.” (141) The meaning of the French Revolution thus goes back through the Puritans to the Reformation, while at the same time it runs forward through Marxism to the present day. In From Dawn to Decadence, Jacques Barzun points up this continuity of forces by referring to “Calvin—a sort of Lenin to Luther’s Marx.” (142) Leopold Damrosch has reflected on it also with regard to Puritan doctrine:

Like other closed systems (those of Marxism and psycho-analysis, for instance) it was self-justifying and magnificently defended, since it could not be criticized except through principles which it ruled inadmissible. (143)

Nisbet relates that in one of Burke’s last letters he “referred somewhat enigmatically to ‘The System.’ He meant the spirit of Jacobinism, in England as well as Europe, but he meant a good deal more.” (144) Again and again in Burke’s writings we can see the comprehensiveness of his view of the enemy and the enemy’s whole infernal System. For example, and with original italics: “We are at war with a principle, and with an example, which there is no shutting out with fortresses, or excluding by territorial limits.” (145) And in the following passage he could be writing at any point in the 500-year war, and in defence of any target of the enemy’s malice, from medieval Christendom to heterosexual marriage:

Now all its excellencies are forgot, its faults are forcibly dragged into the day, exaggerated by every artifice of representation. It is despised and rejected of men, and every device and invention of ingenuity or idleness is set up in opposition or in preference to it. It is to this humour, and to the measures growing out of it, that I set myself (I hope not alone) in the most determined
opposition. (146)

To a “born-again Jacobite” such words are deeply moving, and one has to pause to remember that Burke spent his public political career as a Whig, albeit in a minority faction of the Whig party. His detractors like to assert that there was a contradiction between Burke’s sympathy for the American revolutionaries in the 1770s and his detestation of the French ones in the 1790s. The real disjunction, however, is that between his abhorrence of the French Revolution and his defence of the so-called Glorious Revolution of 1688 which drove the Stuarts into exile. Yeats handled the problem in his poem “The Seven Sages” by simply declaring that Burke was not a Whig in the realm that really mattered, that of the soul or spirit or deeper sensibility. Burke, he wrote, was unmarred by the key characteristic of Whiggery:

A levelling, rancorous, rational sort of mind
That never looked out of a drunkard’s eye
Or out of the eye of a saint. (147)

Conor Cruise O’Brien has addressed the issue in scholarly terms. In an Introduction to Reflections on the Revolution in France, he refers to what he perceives in Burke as “the friction between outer Whig and inner Jacobite.” (148) He points out that Burke has three different “manners” of feeling and expression. The first one is the “Whig,” rationalistic and business-like, the second is the “Jacobite,” exemplified by the famous lament for the fallen Queen of France, and the third is what he describes as “a peculiar kind of furious irony,” generated by the inner conflict of the first two. The “Jacobite” manner is not often made explicit, O’Brien notes, but once one has become aware of “this reserve of underlying emotion, even the more prosaic parts of the argument take on a more formidable sonority.” (149)

The Jacobite part of Burke was in his Irishness. His mother was Catholic, as were other of his connections, and if Catholicism was a handicap in England, in Ireland it was “socially and economically disadvantageous to the point of ruin.” (150) And so “between the ruined Irish Catholics and the owners of the wealth of England there was a chasm for Burke’s affections to bridge.” (151) This bridging operation was problematical because:
if Burke as a Whig cherished, at least in theory, the Glorious Revolution, Burke as an Irishman, with close emotional bonds to the conquered, detested the Protestant ascendancy which that Revolution had riveted on the people of his country. (152)

In the *Reflections*, Burke had with patient sarcasm to point out to the Whig grandees that the example of the confiscation of Church property in France was a potential peril to themselves: “Revolutions are favourable to confiscations; and it is impossible to know under what obnoxious names the next confiscations will be authorized.” (153) The next Revolution, Burke was pointing out, might well be against them. Many of these magnates were inclined to approve of the idea of the seizure of Church property because their own family fortunes had been based on the plundering of the English monasteries under Henry VIII, and because they were generally imbued with what O’Brien calls “varying combinations of ‘Reformation’ and ‘Enlightenment’ principles.” (154)

*Letter to A Noble Lord*, written near the end of his life, while tumults in France were still raging, indicates what degrees of contempt Burke grew willing to express toward such people. O’Brien argues the probability that:

Burke had never fully realized – until the events in France provided the critical test – how profoundly he was at odds which much that was fundamental in the philosophy of the Englishmen with whom he had allied himself.” (155)

But it is from “a remarkable unfinished letter” of 1792 that O’Brien quotes most tellingly. Members of the Whig ascendancy in Ireland, Burke wrote, should in their own interest be loath to call up the ghosts of the dispossessed,

to tell by what English acts of parliament, forced upon two reluctant kings, the lands of their country were put up to a mean and scandalous auction… to pay the mercenary soldiery of a regicide usurper.

And he expatiates on the murderous hypocrisy of that same Cromwell who,
if he avenged an Irish rebellion against the sovereign authority of the parliament of England, had himself rebelled against the very parliament whose sovereignty he asserted full as much as the Irish nation, which he was sent to subdue and confiscate, could rebel against that parliament, or could rebel against the king, against whom both he and the parliament, which he served, and which he betrayed, had both of them rebelled. (156)

O’Brien’s summary of Burke’s genius must be quoted here, for it helps to underline the grave and disturbing point to be made.

No other orator or political writer either before or after him has his combination of qualities: his wide range of articulate emotion, his intuitive grasp of social forces, his capacity for analytical argument, his pathos, fantasy and wit and his power to marshal all these, through a superb command over the resources of the language, towards ends clearly discerned and passionately desired. (157)

Here was one of the very greatest opponents of the “root pathology” – his famous definition of society as a partnership between the dead, the living and the unborn is the essential and beautiful rebuttal of it – and one of the most brilliant and energetic foes of the “atomizing energies” of the Commissariat and its cadres. And yet even he was undermined by bitter contradictions and divided within himself. A man whose deepest instincts were those of a Jacobite, he found himself having to rouse in defence of their ill-gotten gains the very oppressors of his own native land and of England too—the bloated villains of that Puritan-Whig “revolutionism” whose evil had gone on festering unabated ever since it had destroyed a comparable figure of greatness in Thomas More.

It isn’t surprising, then, that for 500 years much less gifted men and women have been baffled by the complex forces around them and been stymied by contradictions in their own outlook. The point we are leading up to here is the issue of what Eamon Duffy in The Stripping of the Altars calls “the compliance conundrum.” (158) If the forces of “revolutionism” are as wicked and destructive as they are painted, how are they able to prevail? How do they gain the seeming compliance of so many ordinary
human beings who will suffer the harm of them? In one of the recent books which attempt an overall rebuttal of the Whig interpretation of history, Edwin Jones prompts a useful line of thought. Referring to the medieval poem, the *Vision of Piers Plowman*, he writes:

> It tells us of a truth, an “essential commonplace” of the medieval world, which historians often fail to discern – that before the Reformation, Christianity in the West meant a unified body or community of people rather than a body of differing “isms.” (159)

It is surely the endless clamour and confusion of these “isms” which has made it so hard for people to grasp the 500-year contest of modernity in the simple (though not simplistic) way set out by McAuley. Even a partial list of the “isms” is enough to blight the human soul. There is Rationalism, Progressivism, Capitalism, Industrialism, Utilitarianism, Darwinism, Marxism, Freudianism, Individualism, Consumerism, Managerialism, Liberationism, Multiculturalism, Environmentalism and Globalism… And though intertwined like adders in a pit, each one has had its own distinctive righteous fervours, its glib idiocies, its vicious cunning, its particular spites and cruelties, and each leaves its own poisonous legacy when the vision turns sour and adds to the grievance and disillusion for which the next “ism” will of course be the touted snake-oil cure. As McAuley himself observes: “The modern world breeds ideologies like dreams and nightmares. But the sort of belief which is attached to them… is perpetually shadowed by doubt.” (160) And Orwell makes the same point about totalitarian doctrines which “are not only unchallengeable but also unstable. They have to be accepted on pain of damnation, but on the other hand the are always liable to be changed at a moment’s notice.” (161)

At any given moment of modernity the Commissariat’s cadres are operating through several of these “isms” at once, often in seeming contradiction, and so more sand is thrown into people’s eyes, another degree of distortion is added to the hall of mirrors. The cumulative effect is what McAuley calls, “successive lowerings of the point of view from which reality is measured and experienced.” (162) And this brings us ever nearer to what Richard Weaver describes as: “a condition in which we shall be
amoral without the capacity to perceive it and degraded without means to measure our descent.” (163)

In his *Life of Thomas More*, Peter Ackroyd observes that in More’s time, “few seemed to be aware of the threat to their practices and beliefs,” and he movingly describes More’s “exhausting and almost single-handed fight” against what he called the “bretherne,” the Puritan fanatics who are the eternal aggressors:

The horror of their enterprise is conveyed by More in his image of a procession at Corpus Christi bearing the blessed sacrament, being attacked by a gang of villains who “cache them all by the heddys, and throw them in the myre, surplices, copys, sensers, crosses, relyques, sacrament and all.” (164)

These “bretherne” (now a gender-neutral term if ever there was one) remain just the same after 500 years. The following words were written in 2001 by a professor of history at the University of South Carolina, a defender of the Confederate flag and related symbols which are now under savage attack in the American culture wars. He is addressing his fellow Southerners, too many of whom “have not understood the nature of the battle.”

When was the last time you thought about telling people in New York or Seattle what to do? Never, because it is not part of our national character as Southerners. But hundreds of thousands of Northerners are thinking about you and about their right to suppress your evil ways. In their fantasy world, which is the only culture of any significance they have, you are the evil obstacle to making the world perfect. They have always been that way… It has nothing to do with the South except that the South lies convenient for their aggressions. They cover up their own emptiness, hatred, hypocrisy, and insignificance by identifying you as the Enemy. This is the way Puritans behave when they lose their religion. (165)

It is equally how they behave in the full possession of their religion. In *Civilization*, Kenneth Clark quotes More’s friend and colleague Erasmus on the early Protestants: “I have seen them return from hearing a sermon as if inspired by an evil spirit. The
faces of all showed a curious wrath and ferocity.” (166) Early or late, the fanaticism is the constant factor. The Commissariat and its cadres are always out to seize those things that are most sacred and sustaining to normal human beings in order to, as More put it, “throw them in the myre.”
Underpinning # 5: The Doom of Choice

In Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, the most important recent work of “Jacobitism by analogy,” there occurs the following exchange:

“What doom do you bring out of the North?”

“The doom of choice,” said Aragorn. (167)

Those words could be carved on the portals of Western Modernity. The geographical reference is accurate: though the stirrings of modernity were there in the Renaissance, it was the Reformation that really set the whole dynamic going, and the Reformation came out of the North. And this notion of “the doom of choice” has at least two major meanings: each person is doomed to make a choice, in one form or another, and every choice that is made carries its own kind of doom.

A quote equally applicable comes from Shakespeare. When Antony urges Cleopatra to “seek your honour, with your safety,” she replies: “They do not go together.” (168) There is the cleft stick of the modern age and the quandary at the heart of my novel, that of the English Jacobites in 1745, which in turn provides the analogy for the main story set in our own time. When the Prince’s army marched down from the North that December it brought to the English Jacobites the starkest of choices. They could keep their honour or their safety, but not both.

Peter Berger asserts it is “a matter of choice” how one estimates the transformations of the modern age— as the great “leap into freedom” or as the “root pathology” that can only bring ruin. That assertion is of course somewhat politically loaded and could itself be understood as symptomatic of the “root pathology,” but let that pass. It is true enough that we must make choices which involve entire paradigms of reality. That is to say, “paradigm choices.”

Northrop Frye made an observation which enables us to neatly join Les Murray’s idea of “poems” as “governing paradigms” with McAuley’s view of “revolutionism” and its foes. Frye wrote that, “the ideologies of revolution and counter-revolution are ultimately poetic creations.” (169) And this enables us to view the ultimate “doom of choice” as a choice between these two “poems,” these two great warring paradigms of
the age. The clash can be seen in religious and/or secular terms, but regardless of the terms the contest is that of the “paradigm wars” of modernity.

One fears one is stating the obvious, but in fact it isn’t as obvious as it ought to be, as a single example will prove. In his very absorbing book about the first epic disaster of the twentieth century, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell examines the adversarial mindset. He writes: “What we can call gross dichotomizing is a persisting imaginative habit of modern times, traceable, it would seem, to the actualities of the Great War.” (170) This is surely a case of not seeing the forest for the trees. Far more plausible to suggest that the monstrosity of the Great War came about because 400 years of “gross dichotomizing” had *preceded* it.

In his 2003 book, *Reformation: Europe’s House Divided*, Diarmaid MacCulloch observes:

> During the sixteenth century this western society… was torn apart by deep disagreements about how human beings should exercise the power of God in the world, arguments even about what it was to be human. It was a process of extreme physical and mental violence. (171)

Of course history showed plenty of “extreme violence” before the Reformation came along, but we are focusing here on the concept of the “adversary culture” — that internal attack against a civilization’s own basic ideals and values which seems so characteristic of Western modernity. We have noted Irving Kristol’s view of it as “unprecedented,” although ancient Athens might be seen as an early example of the same process. Chesterton approaches the matter from a characteristically ingenious angle, that of the medieval conception of the patron saint, which carried with it the idea of what he calls “variation without antagonism”:

the very idea that they were all saints excluded the possibility of ultimate rivalry in the fact that they were all patrons. The Guild of Shoemakers and the Guild of Skinners, carrying the badges of St Crispin and St Bartholomew, might fight each other in the streets; but they did not believe that St Crispin and St Bartholomew were fighting each other in the skies. Similarly the English could cry in battle on St George and the French on St Denis; but they did not
seriously believe that St George hated St Denis, or even those who cried upon St Denis… With the religious schism, it cannot be denied, a deeper and more inhuman division appeared. It was no longer a scrap between the followers of saints who were themselves at peace, but a war between the followers of gods who were themselves at war. (172)

In his *Conflict and The Web of Group-Affiliations*, Georg Simmel offers the useful insight that, “there is a relation between the structure of every social group and the measure of hostility it can afford among its members.” (173)

There are thus two methods: organic solidarity, where the whole makes up for damages from partial conflicts; and isolation, where the whole preserves itself against such damages. The right choice between these two methods, or their right combination, is of course a vital question for every group, from the family to the state, from the economic to the spiritual union. (174)

One can suggest that the overall “doom of choice” in Western modernity is bound up with the distinction between these two methods of dealing with conflict. Max Weber clarifies it further with his distinction between a “church” and a “sect,” declaring that “the difference in principle between the basic ideas of each type stands out again and again.”

The “universalism” of the “churches” lets their light shine on the just and the unjust: only open rebellion against authority, expressed in notorious and obstinate hardening of the heart, leads to excommunication.

Or in Simmel’s terms, the organic solidarity of the “church” makes up for the partial conflicts within it.

For the genuine “sect,” however, the “purity” of its membership is vital… the driving force was always a profound horror of sharing Holy Communion with a “reprobate,” let alone receiving it from the hand of a reprobate… The “sect” claims to be a religious “elite,” and sees itself, the “invisible church,”
visibly portrayed in the community of the “proven” members.

Or in Simmel’s terms, the “sect” preserves itself by isolation, by excluding or casting out the offending or “reprobate” elements. Weber then makes what is a crucial point for our purposes: “To judge a man solely according to the religious qualities which he demonstrates in his conduct inevitably cuts off any feudal and dynastic romanticism at the roots.” (175) And the loss of that “feudal and dynastic romanticism” must lower the status of those who have gone before and thus open the way to their belittlement and denigration. As Roger Scruton puts it: “from the sacrilegious treatment of the dead all other impieties stem…” (176)

All of this is filled-out and confirmed by Eamon Duffy in *The Stripping of the Altars*, his 1992 study of English religion before and during the Reformation. In a preface to the second edition he describes what had long been the “axiomatic” viewpoint that Butterfield called “a magnet forever pulling at our minds”:

Believers and unbelievers were agreed that whatever the claims of Christianity, the Reformation was a vital stage along the road to modernity, the cleansing of the English psyche from priestcraft, ignorance and superstition. (177)

But the critical responses to the book’s first edition were instructive:

Even the least enthusiastic reviews then agreed that the late medieval church was “a flourishing and popular institution” and that the shift to Protestantism “was at first the work of a small minority.” In an England rapidly shedding, and indeed sometimes sadly embarrassed by, its own patriotic Protestant foundation-myth, the book’s main contentions have been quietly absorbed into public perception.” (178)

The Commissariat and its cadres had marched on to newer ideological encampments, like “multiculturalism” and “globalism.”

So then, the picture Duffy provides is that of a “flourishing and popular institution” attacked and destroyed by “a small minority” which felt itself entitled and qualified to “cleanse the English psyche.” Thus in Weber’s terms, the “church” was attacked and
overthrown by the “sect,” the process aided by the political requirements of Henry VIII.

Duffy also dwells powerfully on the repudiation of the dead:

the removal of the images and petitions of the dead was an act of oblivion, a casting out of the dead from the community of the living into a collective anonymity… It is worlds away from More’s evocation of the dead, a generation before, as “your late acquaintance, kindred, spouses, companions, play felowes, and frendes…. The dead became as shadowy as the blanks in the stripped matrices of their gravestones… (179)

By these acts and policies against the dead, the world became one in which, as Duffy puts it, “the boundaries of human community have been redrawn.” (180) That is to say, horribly narrowed.

This conceptual framework of “church” and “sect” can be applied in the most comprehensive way. In his 1967 book, The Idea of Happiness, V.J. McGill dwells on what he calls “the far-reaching, unavoidable issue”:

whether the best possible world is one in which happiness is maximized, or one in which heroes and villains receive their exact due of happiness and misery. The implications for political policy, legislation, and the theory of punishment are fundamental and obtrude tenaciously on the levels of both theory and practice. (181)

In the language of Simmel and of Weber, the view that people should get their strict deserts is that of the “sect” which defines itself by “isolation” and by shunning or casting out the “reprobate.” The other view is that of the “church” which depends on “organic solidarity” to work its effect, and which shines its light on the just and unjust alike. One is a working principle of rejection, exclusion and severity, while the other is a working principle of acceptance, inclusion and charity. So much is modernity a product of the harsher and more arrogant principle that we can begin to recognize the Great Lie at its very core—the claim that it came into the world to rescue people from narrowness and to broaden human fellowship. Far truer to say that it came for the
opposite reason, and that it came from the start with whips and chains and Lenin’s “truncheon.” In a striking phrase, Weber refers to “this doctrine, with all the pathos of its inhumanity.” (182)

The extreme Protestant doctrine of “predestination” consigned the great majority of human beings to what we can call the garbage-bin of Eternity. The secular version of the same mindset merely changed it to the garbage-bin of History. The lethal nature of the mindset comes out of the interaction of two constant factors. The first is that the Commissariat feels entitled to interfere in every detail of the world and of human life. We might call this “Gelber’s Law” after the Australian political scientist who wrote: “What intellectuals typically cannot stand is ‘benign neglect,’ or leaving things well alone.” (183) The second factor is that the interference typically comes in the form of condemnation, in terms of the “sect” denouncing the wicked “reprobate.” This is what Christopher Lasch identifies as “the habit of criticism, which, unleavened by a sense of its own limits, soon reduces the world to ashes.” (184) Put the two constant factors together and you have the full-blown Adversary Culture, which could as fittingly be called the Culture of Hostile Definitions, since its most essential feature is to define everything – except of course itself – in hostile terms.

The whole matter of the “doom of choice” and of the “paradigm wars” can be shown in the kinds of definition people choose to apply, and to whether they apply them in the spirit of the “church” or of the “sect.” The “paradigm wars” could thus equally be called the “definition wars.” Take, for example, the celebrated assertion by John Stuart Mill that the only justification for interfering with a person’s liberty is to prevent them from harming others. This is routinely cited as a charter for human freedom, and so it might be, as long as “harm” is defined narrowly. It means that the great majority of people ought not to be interfered with. But if “harm” is defined broadly then Mill’s assertion becomes a gross charter for tyranny. It means that vast numbers of people, indeed the bulk of the population, should be interfered with. And this is precisely the case in today’s West. All adult males are now held to be actual or latent abusers of women and children. All white people are held to be the oppressors of the non-white. All heterosexuals are seen as complicit in victimizing gays. The hale are seen to be exacerbating the plight of the disabled by the “attitudes” they harbour towards them. And in certain environmentalist circles, the very presence of human beings is now seen as an outrageous harm to the planet. The obsession with “abuse”
of every kind has gone from an extended moral panic to become an actual ideology. “Abusism,” it could be called, and like any ideology it rests on a basic proposition about society. This proposition could be rendered as: A human community is, above all, a site of Abuse.

Definitions determine how we live and how we see things, and in my novel I dwell on the contrast between definitions of the world as a Crime-Scene or an Honour-System. The first is about Policing an environment of constant crisis and outrage. The second is about Participation in what are mostly the good and perennial rounds of life. Such views can never meet on any basis at all. They are wholly different poems and paradigms. As Richard Weaver asks: “How can men who disagree about what the world is for agree about any of the minutiae of daily conduct?” (185) There can only be a choosing of sides for the war.

It needs to be noted that Burke referred to the Jacobins of the French Revolution as a “sect,” as for example in this characterization of the overall struggle:

It is a war between the partisans of the ancient civil, moral, and political order of Europe against a sect of fanatical and ambitious atheists which means to change them all. It is not France extending a foreign empire over other nations: it is a sect aiming at universal empire, and beginning with the conquest of France. (186)

To grasp how little has changed we need only peruse the following passage, written and published in the twenty-first century by one Michael Ledeen, a leading American “neoconservative.” Here is “revolutionism” in as pristine a form as we have seen it in these past 500 years. Here is another vindication of Burke’s warning that, “with this republic nothing can co-exist.” And here is another confirmation of More’s message that the “bretherne” are out to desecrate all things sacred to other human beings and “throw them in the myre.” Here is the proof that the “doom of choice” hangs over us still, for here is the fury of evil forces, in the face of which there can only be either abject surrender or a fight to the end.

Creative destruction is our middle name, both within our own society and abroad. We tear down the old order every day, from business to science, literature, art,
architecture and cinema, to politics and the law. Our enemies have always hated this whirlwind of energy and creativity, which menaces their traditions (whatever they may be) and shames them for their inability to keep pace. Seeing America undo traditional societies, they fear us, for they do not wish to be undone. They cannot feel secure so long as we are here, for our very existence – our existence, not our politics – threatens their legitimacy. They must attack us in order to survive just as we must destroy them to advance our historic mission. (187)
Underpinning # 6: Paradigms of Personhood

We have already noted a statement by Diarmaid MacCulloch that the Reformation involved “arguments about how human beings should exercise the power of God in the world, arguments even about what it was to be human.” And in examining our predicament at the opposite end of the 500 year span, Pat Buchanan uses the same terms: the adversary is “another way of seeing God and man.” (188) The sociologist Frank Furedi writes in a 2005 book, with original italics: “conflicting ideas about the paradigm of personhood are today the equivalent of past clashes of ideologies and political alternatives.” (189) Across the whole span of modernity, then, the conflict has gone on between “paradigms of personhood” or differing views of what it means to be human. As Max Weber summarized it:

“Cavaliers” and “Roundheads” felt themselves to be radically different kinds of people, not simply two different parties, and anyone who studies the subject closely would be compelled to agree with them. (190)

And Irving Babbitt’s view of the long-term effect of the struggle between Cavaliers and Roundheads is basically the view taken in this essay. He first offers a quote from Joubert: “It is from England that have issued forth, like fogs, the metaphysical and political ideas which have darkened everything.” And he then elaborates:

the upshot of the civil commotions of seventeenth-century England was to diminish imaginative allegiance to the past. The main achievement of Cromwell was, as his admirer Marvell allowed, to “ruin the great work of Time.” As loyalty to the great traditions declined, England concentrated on the utilitarian effort of which Francis Bacon is the prophet [and so came to] carry through the Industrial Revolution, compared to which the French Revolution is only a melodramatic incident. (191)

In other words, Western Modernity came out of a clash between two different types of human being. But we have not learned this only from books. We have felt the truth of it in our own lives. We have lived through the recent decades of “Culture War” and
“Identity Politics,” through assaults of hatred and cruelty by beings more malignant than we can ever quite fathom, some breed akin to Shakespeare’s character Iago. And in saying this one isn’t forgetting Solzhenitsyn’s dictum that the line between good and evil runs through every human heart. That profound observation only takes the question one step back. Why do some people operate so totally on the wrong side of that inner line? As with Marlow pondering on Mr Kurtz, we can only wonder what “powers” they “belong to.” Pat Buchanan has described what has been done to human society in these few decades as “the moral equivalent of vandalizing the graves and desecrating the corpses of its ancestors.” (192)

In their 2001 book, *Spreading Misandry: The Teaching of Contempt for Men in Popular Culture*, Nathanson and Young give an equally bleak account of how things stand:

There is nothing new about hatred and revenge. What is new is that many people no longer feel any need to legitimate them, but on the contrary now place the burden of proof on those who give moral and legal primacy to love and forgiveness. Clearly, we can no longer take for granted even the most fundamental ideals of our society, or of any society. Everything will now have to be argued all over again from scratch. In short, we will have to re-invent the moral wheel. (193)

Again Iago as paradigm. At the end of *Othello* he evinces no need to “legitimate” his actions. The onus is left on the normal decent people to try to “re-invent the moral wheel” amidst the sociopathic horror he has wreaked.

Australian clinical psychologist Ronald Conway has looked at these kinds of issues in terms of “obsessive-compulsive” disorder, though in our context here the interest is more in a ruling mentality than a clinical illness. Our concern is therefore in the vein of John Gray’s comment: “Whatever else they become, tyrannies begin as festivals of the depressed.” (194)

In his 1992 book, *The Rage for Utopia*, Conway writes:

Obsession is usually the disease of the person of sceptical intelligence, even as its mirror image, compulsion, is the malady of meaningless action. Both these
linked dimensions of behaviour are cut off from the promptings of almost every strong emotion except a driving anxiety. (195)

In that mindset is neither balance nor amplitude, as we may judge from a statement of Calvin’s: “There is no middle way between these two things: either the earth must be worth nothing to us, or keep us fettered by an intemperate love of it.” (196) For that great obsessive-compulsive – described by Barzun as “the pre-eminent ideologist of the sixteenth century” (197) – there is clearly neither a happy medium between two extremes, nor a vision of coherence big enough to contain the extremes.

Conway traces the obsessive-compulsive mindset as far back as an inscription from the reign of the heretical Egyptian pharaoh Akhnaton which he cites as, “One of the first known official obsessive statements.” Against this he contrasts a passage from the ancient Chinese sage Lao Tzu on the principles of the Tao, principles articulated in recent times by Jung, for example, and by C.S. Lewis. For Lewis, the Tao is that set of perennial moral values and proverbial wisdoms which can be broadly recognized in virtually all times and across all cultures. What the Tao requires is not so much that we submit to this or that particular rule or value, but that we accept the broad package of rules and values, with its overall coherence and intrinsic balances. The entirety of the package is the point. It is what permits a humanly tolerable blend of security and freedom, for within that entirety there is always some room to move. Rejection of the Tao takes the form of, as Lewis puts it, “arbitrarily selecting one maxim of traditional morality, isolating it from the rest, and erecting it into an unum necessarium.” (198) And this allows little or no room to move, for that “one necessity” has to be made totalistic and relentless, precisely because it stands in isolation. And so we are back with Lenin’s distinction between “voluntary respect” and “the truncheon.”

In the narrow focus by which one rule or value is given sole priority, and in the tirelessness of its enforcement, can be seen the essence of this obsessive-compulsive mentality. A powerful statement about it can be found in Pasternak’s novel Doctor Zhivago. A frozen and starving Zhivago is standing before a noticeboard of Bolshevik proclamations, each more shrill and crazy than the one before:

Have they no memory? Don’t they remember their own plans and measures?
Have they forgotten that by these measures they have left no stone standing upon stone? What kind of people must they be to go on raving with this never-cooling, feverish ardour, year in and year out, of things which are non-existent, of themes which have long vanished, and to know nothing, to see nothing, of the reality which surrounds them? (199)

As Conway makes clear, the two outlooks had existed for a long time and in many places before they clashed in the persons of certain Englishmen called Roundheads and Cavaliers. Even so, Conway emphasises “the curiously obsessionslant” of the Western world in particular, a slant he argues grew much more dangerous when the Reformation “left so little inner psychic ground to which the over-sermonized and busy populations of evangelical Protestantism could retreat.” (200) Quoting Jung’s remark that “The gods have become diseases,” he then goes on to discuss:

the benefits and forfeits borne by a Western civilization which has banished the caprices of the gods and the demonic terrors dreaded by ancient peoples, only to have them re-enter as morbid crazes through the back door of the modern psyche. (201)

And these “morbid crazes” have been examined by, among others, Erik Erikson in his book *Young Man Luther: A Study of Psychoanalysis and History*. Although willing to give Luther's better qualities their due, Erikson is frank about his dark side:

According to the characterology established in psychoanalysis, suspiciousness, obsessive scrupulosity, moral sadism, and a preoccupation with dirting and infectious thoughts and substances go together. Luther had them all. One of Martin’s earliest reported remarks (from his student days) was a classical obsessive statement: “the more you cleanse yourself, the dirtier you get.” (202)

In those concluding words we see the entire modern pathology of the morbid craze, or what we now call the “moral panic” of whole populations cut off from the rituals and traditions which aided emotional stability. As we see in our own days with regard to
the ever-lurking demon-figure of the “paedophile” and the unchanging logic of lunacy that goes with it, the more ferociously and frantically you target the evil, the more monstrous it grows.

Erikson posits a pair of concepts which fit beautifully with those of the Tao and the *unum necessarium*, with the “church” and the “sect,” with the Honour-System and the Crime-Scene.

On one hand there is what he calls “basic trust.” This is gained through having one’s elemental needs provided for in infancy. Here, Erikson declares,

> is something which most individuals who survive and remain sane can take for granted most of the time… it is the first psychosocial trait and the fundament of all others. Basic trust in mutuality is that original “optimism,” that assumption that “somebody is there,” without which we cannot live.” (203)

And on the opposite hand there is what he calls “radical suspiciousness,” an especial trait of Luther’s, a mentality that can take “strange noises made by wind and water” as evidence of demons.

> The belief in demons permitted a persistent externalization of one’s own unconscious thoughts and preconscious impulses of avarice and malice, as well as thoughts which one suspected one’s neighbour of having.

In all such “magic thinking” Erikson says:

> the unknown and the unconscious meet at a common frontier: murderous, adulterous, or avaricious wishes, or sudden moods of melancholy or friskiness, are all forced upon me by evil-wishing neighbours.

And such modes of thought, he goes on, provide “a form of collective mastery of the unknown,” for they allow the individual to say to his fears and conflicts, “I see you! I recognize you!” He can even tell others what he saw and recognized while remaining reasonably free, by a
contract between the like-minded, of the aspersion that he imagined things out of depravity or despair, or that he was the only one to be haunted. (204)

The whole modern age of mass-murder and social atomization was inherent in these ideas. Here was a formula as deadly to human life and society as bubonic plague. It consisted of (a) the conviction that evil is all around, and (b) the conviction that the culprit is one’s literal or figurative neighbour. And that reference to the “contract between the like-minded” has a horrid applicability to the “Puritan politburo and its cadres.”

The same mentality can be seen in today’s feminism. As Christina Hoff Sommers notes, with original italics:

The devout tend to confess their sins. By contrast, the feminist ideologue testifies relentlessly to how she has been sinned against. Moreover, she sees revelations of monstrosity in the most familiar and seemingly innocuous phenomena. (205)

And Richard Sennett has a comment equally illuminating when viewed in the light of Erikson’s idea of Basic Trust and the original source from which it comes. Referring to “those who have invoked the shame of dependency” – by which he means all those hostile to normal human inter-dependence – Sennett writes, “it could justly be said that they have a horror of the primal maternal scene: the infant sucking at the mother’s breast.” (206)

That psycho-social atmosphere suits the Commissariat to perfection, as indicated by many of Philip K. Howard’s observations in The Death of Common Sense. He refers to “regulation by episodic panic.” (207) He points out that, “Zealots, we learn time and time again, always push their ‘right’ to its absolute limit and beyond.” (208) He describes the present-day insistence on “stringing people up for an impure heart,” the pervasive assumption of “the right to challenge someone’s motives,” and to declare: “You are an evil bigot.” (209)

At the present time the “revelation of monstrosity” is very likely to take the form of denouncing a family member as an “abuser.” We are now in the throes of what Mark Bryan has called “family noir” when even the way we pass the butter to each other at
the breakfast table may be subject to dire interpretations. (210) Burke, as usual, went to the heart of the matter:

The very names of affection and kindred, which were the bond of charity whilst we agreed, become new incentives to hatred and rage when the communion of our country is dissolved. (211)

To sum up, Erikson’s notion of Basic Trust is that of the “optimistic” assumption that “someone is there” and that they mean us well. Radical Suspicion is the opposite “pessimistic” assumption that “someone is there” but that they mean us ill. The first is about having some faith in what we can call “the shelter of each other” and the second is about inciting “the menace of each other.” The ultimate crime and vileness of the forces of Radical Suspicion is that by their fear-mongering and accusation, and by the whole relentless working of “Gelber’s Law,” they bring their own psychopathologies true in the real world.

We must beware, however, of assuming that the mindset of Radical Suspicion occurs only in the classic form of puritanical rigidity. In The Age of Insanity: Modernity and Mental Health, which appeared in 2001, the clinical psychologist John F. Schumaker shows how modern pathologies also come in the forms of fluidity and fragmentation. He states at the beginning: “all viable cultures throughout history have succeeded by organizing themselves around the actual nature of the human being.” (212) He then goes on to argue that the culture of modernity does not accord with this rule. Instead of the culture serving as “the first line of psychological defence” in the lives of the people, “Modernity has seen the arrival of an almost opposite relationship.” (213) Citing “modernity’s destruction of shared understandings” he surveys the mounting evidence that it “no longer acts in the service of existential needs” (214), but instead forces people into “a contest with discontent” (215) which they can never win and which must in the end destroy them. This overall contemporary condition he calls “culture failure.” (216) The following passage appears as a striking reiteration – in more clinical language – of the picture we got from Erikson.

The social alienation that lies at the heart of the modern psychic defence also
helps to explain the current rise of externalization disorders, which tend to revolve around flawed social communication, attachment deficiencies, and gross underdevelopment of social facilitation skills. (217)

“Externalization disorder” seems just the right name for the need to explain what ails or disturbs you in terms of the malice of demonic neighbours. But where the Puritan might have striven to keep a tight clamp on his inner confusion, the person of today is more prone to let it all hang out. Schumaker uses terms like “the pastiche personality” and “the California self” to indicate the traits of narcissism, egocentrism and the lack of a “stable core.” He makes explicit link to the Puritans when noting the distinction between individualism of the “reciprocal” or of the “alienating” kind. The former is now only found in the remnants of certain non-Western societies, he says, but the latter is “rooted in Calvinistic theology” and is “regarded as the type that exists in contemporary Western culture. (218)

This “alienating” individualism is the kind that must remain ever alert for the “revelation of monstrosity,” ever prepared for the righteous unmasking of the demonic neighbour, the cutting-out of the “reprobate” even from one’s most intimate circle. As Barzun observes: “Calvinism, it has been said, makes every man the enemy of every other.” (219) The same can be said of the “pastiche personality” or the “California self,” except that in their case it is puerile submission to the zeitgeist and/or an amoral careerism which makes them incapable of loyalty and thus of honour.

Many commentators have written of the deep disloyalty of the current Western elites, that “new class” formed by the huge post-war growth and corruption of the universities. (220) It is a caste both new and old. Newly refashioned in the style of the “California self,” it is nonetheless the continuation of the old “cadres” of “the Puritan politburo.”

In a powerful book of 2006, the expansion of that “new class” is seen as the final factor that overwhelmed the remnants of the old forces. The book is Alexander Boot’s *How the West Was Lost*, and no work does more to argue that modernity has been a clash between “paradigms of personhood.” For Boot the stark paradigms are those of “Westman” and “Modman,” by which he means Western man and Modern man, and of course the terms are not gender-specific.
The former carried the whole Western heritage but was at his most characteristic in medieval Christendom. The key feature of the latter is that despite being nurtured in the West he harbours an “intuitive animus” towards its whole heritage of spirit. Of course, as the Ungrateful Heir, he is nonetheless keen to have “the material gains which were incidental to that heritage.” (221) Writes Boot:

they are mutually exclusive opposites, with the Modman sociocultural type born out a widespread urge to do away with Westman and everything he stood for. In that task Modman has succeeded so thoroughly that Westman is now dead as a social and cultural force. (222)

Only a few Westman “holdouts” remain, he says, mostly “fighting a rearguard action” in those Catholic countries which have not had all of their defences “stripped away by Protestantism.” (223).

Born in the Soviet Union, Boot got away to the US in 1973 and this first-hand experience of the two basic styles of recent modernity prompts one of his most useful insights. He divides Modman into two sub-types, the nihilist and the philistine. The first is the outright totalitarian of the kind who ran amok in twentieth century Europe. The second is the figure we know so well in the English-speaking world, the “radical” who is ever vehement for “change” but appears to accept at least some of the broader constraints of civilized behaviour. Boot asserts that although this distinction can assist our understanding, the difference between the two sub-types is more situational than intrinsic. Sir Edward Hyde observed of his friend Lord Falkland, who was killed in the English Civil War, that he had died “as much of the time as of the bullet.” (224) That notion is illustrative here. The nihilist Modman will put a bullet into you, while the philistine version will find ways to make you die “of the time.” Roger Kimball sums it up:

When tumbrels and firing-squads are unavailable, the upheaval tends to be primarily cultural or moral. But the element of fanaticism remains: a despotic subtext beneath the progressive rhetoric. (225)
And this is confirmed even in one’s personal experience. For example, one has often heard or read feminists (of either gender) expressing “Final Solution”-type thoughts of a better world without men. They can’t set up death-camps in the Nazi manner, but they could and would promote Nazi-style elimination programs by means of genetic engineering and so forth. (226) John Ralston Saul makes the essential point. Referring to Nazism, he notes grimly: “What our civilization has retained from that experience is not what it pretends to have retained.” (227) And Simone Weil, in London with the Free French during World War Two, saw clearly the extent to which the whole age had been imbued with the anti-values of Modman, whether in a nihilist or philistine form:

Our conception of greatness is the very one which has inspired Hitler’s whole life. When we denounce it without the slightest recognition of its application to ourselves, the angels must either cry or laugh… (228)

And that “conception of greatness” is of course the 500-year mindset that always has a compelling reason to fling people — entire categories and populations of them — into the rubbish-bin of Hell or of History. Boot says that Modman is “programmed to negate every other culture and human type.” (229)

How a man acquires so much bile as to let it dominate all other humours is not easy for us to say. One thing is clear: he has to be evil to let that happen to him, someone driven by a destructive force. The same force enables him to spot and exploit similar qualities in the mob. (230)

Modernity imposes cruel paradoxes. One of them is that if we want to be free of the pathology of seeing demons and perpetrators everywhere, we have to remain almost pathologically alert to the real demon and perpetrator: Modman. To show the menace of the new sociopath may well have been Shakespeare’s purpose in creating Iago. In his 2004 book, The Wreck of Western Culture, John Carroll argues strongly that the existential horrors of modernity were pressing on people even as early as 1533 and that the sense is evident in Holbein’s great painting of that year, The Ambassadors. (231) If Iago was meant as a warning, one can see why Othello would be depicted as
so little on his guard. But in our own time Iago/Modman bestrides the world. *Our* lack of clarity is more likely to be a way of sparing ourselves the “doom of choice” and the harsh fate of having to resist. As Boot writes: “Few of us are brave enough to fight a losing battle. In the absence of such courage, Modman is unstoppable.” (232)

The fact is that a losing battle may serve the cause as much as a battle that is won, a truth understood at least since the time of Thermopylae. As T.S. Eliot expressed it: “We fight for lost causes because we know that our defeat and dismay may be the preface to our successors’ victory…” In an age of death we have to fight, as he went on to say, “*to keep something alive*…” (233)
Underpinning # 7: The Common Dish of Honour

One of the best-known modern statements about honour is a paragraph from *A Farewell to Arms*, Ernest Hemingway’s 1929 novel based on his experience in the First World War. The key section reads:

> There were many words that you could not stand to hear… Abstract words such as glory, honour, courage, or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates. (234)

This has been widely misread as a rejection of the concept of honour. In fact it is perfectly clear that Hemingway is seeking to restore the concept, to rescue it from the regime of modernity that by now had run totally amok. He wants to separate the genuine thing from the official drivel and tabloid verbiage spewed by what D.H. Lawrence calls “the unspeakable baseness of the press and the public voice.” (235)

Alain De Botton approaches the point when he cites Jane Austen and George Eliot as artists whose work helps to “correct our conceptions of what there is to esteem and honour in the world.” (236) The Hemingway quote – and indeed *A Farewell To Arms* in its entirety – is just such a “correction.” And the world to which it would restore honour is undoubtedly something like that of Herder’s *Kultur*, a realm in which every person in some sense has the essence of the matter in them, not just those equipped with a special cultivated sensibility. Roger Kimball seems to catch the drift when he refers to “the common world that culture defines.” He writes: “When we ask about the survival of culture and the fortunes of permanence, we are asking about the fate of that common world.” (237) F.R. Leavis puts it in terms of the literary culture, and his observation applies both to my novel and to this essay: “A real literary interest is an interest in man, society and civilization, and its boundaries cannot be drawn.” (238) And another comment he sets the matter against the background of the whole modern age:

> There would have been no Shakespeare and no Bunyan if in their time… there had not been, living in the daily life of the people, a positive culture
which has disappeared and for which modern revolutionaries, social reformers and Utopists do not commonly project any serious equivalent. (239)

All of this serves to bring us back, in cultural terms, to Weber’s contrast between the “church” and the “sect,” and the following comment of Chesterton’s applies as much to that lower-case “church” as it does to the upper-case Church that he refers to:

In nine cases out of ten the Church simply stood for sanity and social balance against heretics who were sometimes very like lunatics. Yet at each separate moment the pressure of the prevalent error was very strong; the exaggerated error of a whole generation… (240)

This illuminates Hemingway’s point. The name of honour has been made obscene by those heretics and lunatics of the modern world. Hemingway understands that honour can be only be saved by returning it to the “church,” to whatever context of common life and authenticity can still be found—even if that context has to be conveyed in shorthand as mere place-names and numbers and dates. Leavis wrote, with original italics: “works of art enact their moral valuations.” (241) They manifest them by the very act of being, rather than by the modes of rhetoric and polemic that are now so tainted by “unspeakable baseness.” And the same may be said of all that is authentic in life and in the world—like those villages and roads and rivers.

Another gleam is cast on all this by John Ralston Saul’s insight that much of what is wrong with modernity can be comprehended in terms of the rise of the “staff officer” as against the “field officer.” (242) The field officer shares the overall condition of those he leads. He is part of the common reality of what is happening, and part of the collective identity of those it is happening to. The staff officer is removed from that reality, but attempts to control it by means of abstract ideas and theoretical plans and on the basis of second-hand or twentieth-hand information. The First World War showed the full murderousness of that approach, but it was only the culmination of the whole tendency of the modern world, for the commissars of modernity are staff officers to the nth degree. Even if they are at the actual scene of events, they are sealed-off in their “sect” mentality from the real human experience around them. Although not necessarily of the left, they are George Orwell’s “left-
wing intellectuals who are so ‘enlightened’ that they cannot understand the most ordinary emotions.” (243)

Orwell provides a perfect illustration of the sense of common humanity when he describes an incident when he was fighting on the Republican side in Spain and had his rifle trained on an enemy soldier in the trenches opposite. But the man was returning from the latrine, awkwardly holding up his trousers, and Orwell did not pull the trigger:

I had come here to shoot at “Fascists,” but a man who is holding up his trousers isn’t a “Fascist,” he is visibly a fellow creature, similar to yourself, and you don’t feel like shooting at him. (244)

In all of this we have ideas of universality, of the common lot and the shared verities, and at the same time a focus on particularity, like the names and numbers of things, or the specific situation of an individual in the opposite trench. As Goethe expressed it: “I am a citizen of the world, a citizen of Weimar.” (245) The modernity wars are very much about this relation between the universal and the particular. The “root pathology” of the commissars drives them to attack particularity in the name of some abstract universalism. The opposing side believes like Goethe that the universal is to be comprehended in and through the particular, and that to undermine particularity (what Burke called “the little platoons”) wrecks our relation to everything. It is in this light that we understand Hemingway’s statement about the roads and rivers and villages.

If Hemingway provides one part of the conceptual picture being offered here, another is provided by Les Murray. One of Murray’s best-known ideas and images is that of what he calls “the Common Dish”:

that vessel of common human sufferings, joys, disappointments, tragedies and bare sufficiencies from which most people have to eat in this world, and from which some choose to eat in order to keep faith with them… To refuse the common ration, or to fail to recognize and respect it, earns one the contempt and rejection of battlers and all who live under the laws of necessity… Much of the art of living in Australia consists in judging, continually and if possible
gracefully, just what distance we may wander from the common table and how often to come back. (246)

To be noted is the reference to “the laws of necessity.” Necessity can be both material and moral, and morally it means doing that which needs to be done to meet at least the basic guidelines of the “church” and of the “honour system” and of “basic trust.” In terms of our dealings with each other, the ideal of it is expressed by Jung:

It is… a kind of deep respect for facts and events and for the person who suffers from them — a respect for the secret of such a human life. The truly religious person has this attitude. He knows that God has brought all kinds of strange and inconceivable things to pass, and seeks in the most curious ways to enter a man’s heart. (247)

One need hardly point out the incompatibility of this with the mentality of the “sect” forever hastening to cast out the “reprobate.”

In *The Force of Character*, James Hillman tells of one of the ways in which Jung departed from the example of Freud:

He moved the analyst’s chair from behind the reclining patient to a position across from the seated patient… two armchairs, face to face. Concealment and disclosure shifted to the present reciprocal gaze. (248)

And in that reciprocity, we could say, the “staff officer” of the Freudian mode became the “field officer” of the Jungian mode. Hillman explains the importance of the face to face arrangement. First citing a definition of the face as “where the coherent mind becomes an image,” he then asks:

What enters into that coherence? A coalition of flickering displays: the ancestral forces of genetics, the history of personal passions, the ravages of fate, geographies and climates, daimonic intentions and societal compliances.” (249)
For humankind this is the most basic site of that whole interplay of the universal and the particular. The “flickering displays” of the human face occur universally, and yet in each face the precise “coalition” of those forces and factors is particular to itself. Hillman catches the true dimension of all this in terms which remind us of Sennett’s “primal maternal scene” where a mother and child look at each other, and this in turn reminds us of the original source of Erikson’s “basic trust.” Writes Hillman: “Just here, with the face, ethics begins…” (250)

Kenneth Clark makes the point that the mutualities of human interaction are part of the mutuality in the whole fabric of nature. He quotes John Ruskin:

The power which causes the several portions of a plant to help each other we call life. Intensity of life is also intensity of helpfulness. The ceasing of this help is what we call corruption. (251)

That idea, but with the spiritual dimension included, is caught by a commentator on Marcus Aurelius. He refers to the Stoic view that “the whole universe is an organized society… in which the divine and the human dwell together in common citizenship.” (252) And this is like the sense we get of medieval Christendom before the onslaught of the “bretherne.” In his Life of Thomas More, Peter Ackroyd writes:

There are intimations here of Christian society making up one physical body, but we must see it more properly as a symbolic and imaginative order in which Christ, the eucharist and the Church partake of the flesh and the blood and are incarnated in the heart of the city… London is not only a physical community but also a host of angels singing “Holy, holy, holy!” (253)

It is clear that the idea of the Common Dish of Honour is not only about levelling down to a degree of mutual moderation in the material sphere, but is equally about levelling up to a shared richness of the spirit. In this and in other ways it connects to ideas put forward in a book called The Broad Stone of Honour by one Kenelm Henry Digby, a work which first appeared in 1822 and which influenced a number of notable writers, from Wordsworth to Carlyle to William Morris. (254) And it also connects to the views of William Cobbett on “the self-respect of the poor.” Chesterton describes how Cobbett spent much of his life in “an agony of rage” because of the way in which
“this popular sense of honour was being broken down by a cruel and ignoble industrialism.” (255)

Nothing could better illustrate that cruel demise than Liberalism With Honour, a book published in 2002. Sharon Krause is a Harvard academic and what she means by “liberalism” and by “honour” is soon made clear. “Honour,” she informs us, “does not require altruism and consequently has a natural (if partial) affinity with the liberal way of life.” And for good measure:

it is not the special attribute of a single class, but neither is it commonly held.
It marks out a natural aristocracy consisting of the few individuals who, when pressed, will rise to defend their principles and their liberties, despite the risks. (256)

Krause continually stresses the exclusive quality of this particular mode of honour, which could be marketed as “Honour-Lite” (guaranteed altruism-free!). She even provides a good upmarket advertising slogan based on a shrewd appeal to both self-indulgence and moral vanity: this concoction offers to the lucky few “the promise of pleasures that stand above the appetites.” (257)

It appears that honour is “limited in the sense of being episodic and relatively rare, rather than continuous and societywide.” In addition: “Honour is too limited and too plural to provide a comprehensive unitary standard for moral and political life. (258)

But then comes the quote that tells us exactly where we are in the realms of ideology and double-standards: “The political structure matters with respect to the substantive content of honour.” (259) This is in fact just a much less catchy rendering of Lenin’s great homicidal question: “Who Whom?” This becomes clear when Krause turns to consider those beyond the political pale, such as unreconstructed Southerners. Then honour suddenly takes on all the attributes it was said to lack. No longer “episodic and relatively rare,” it is now the pervasive force that drives an entire culture, an evil one. Southern honour, she declares flatly, “was abhorrent” (260), and she devotes a whole chapter to its dreadfulness. She conveys little sign of humane sympathy for the great sufferings of the South in the Civil War, such as those of the civilian populations who were “Shermanized” with the approval of a Lincoln whose “moderation” she touts at length.
Krouse is worlds away from the integrity shown by one William Hepworth Dixon, a Northern patriot who nonetheless wrote of the Confederates that, “Their sin was not more striking than their valour. Loyal to their false gods, to their obsolete creed, they proved their personal honour by their deeds.” (261)

In his 2001 book, *The Culture of Defeat*, Wolfgang Shivelbusch notes the extent to which the Confederates saw their experience as a continuation of the English civil wars, “with the South as the reincarnated Cavaliers and the North as the Roundheads.” (262) And along with that went the influence of what he calls “the Scottish model” of gallant resistance, the kind that gleams with moral victory even in defeat, and which fed into the South’s own *mythos* of the Lost Cause. (263) And in *How The West Was Lost*, Alexander Boot also notes the continuity of the American Civil War with earlier stages of the epic struggle of the Cavalier and Roundhead paradigms:

Both sides displayed an all-out commitment… sensing that no conflict between Westman and Modman could ever end without a decisive victory for one side. Hence the unrestrained savagery displayed by the victorious Yankees in the closing months of the war; and hence, the gallant effort of the Confederates who stood to the last man. (264)

The notion of the Common Dish necessarily involves the idea that normal people can recognize the commonality when they see it, as Orwell did with the “Fascist” he chose not to take a shot at. The commonality is that of the Tao, the overall package of moral precepts, each of which is relative to all the others in its weight and applicability in a particular situation. This can also be approached in terms of what an Aquinas scholar calls “the Thomist concept of a perennial philosophy”:

the claim that there is an abiding metaphysical pattern in the changing and developing universe, which is capable of being understood and stated. But it does not follow that any given man had or has a completely adequate understanding of it. (265)
Or as another scholar puts it: “man is equipped with a special cognitive disposition called ‘synderesis’ which enables him to grasp as evident the fundamental principles of morality.” (266) On the simplest level one might speak of ordinary common sense, or of common decency, or even just of *sanity*.

This matter of “synderesis” is important because honour requires one to know when to fight and when to forbear. A person who can only ever do one or the other is surely more a creature of conditioned reflex than of honour. On another day and in the light of other factors, Orwell would have felt obliged to shoot at that “Fascist” and although on the revolutionary side in Spain, Orwell can be counted as a Westman.

While Modman also makes choices about when to fight and when to desist, there is a difference in his decision-making which goes to the very heart of what honour really is. Modman’s choices about fighting or desisting are made on the basis that he doesn’t have to care about the damage, whereas Westman’s choices are always constrained by the need to limit the damage as much as possible. This is true for the stark reason that the scene of their conflict is a world *which one side values and the other does not*. In this sense we can say that the 500-year war of modernity has never been a fair fight on a level field. It can be likened it to a confrontation in a china shop. One party despises the stock of china and wants to see it all smashed and swept away and the shop itself radically restructured. The other party has a deep attachment to the shop and cherishes the beauty and delicacy of the china. An all-out brawl is much more problematical for the party of love and attachment, for the place will be turned into a shambles. Even if that side wins the brawl, it will be the loser. And even if the other side loses the brawl, it will have gained much of its aim.

For those kinds of reasons, ruthless attack is not in Westman’s true nature, and in the stress of modern conditions the values he tries to perceive by “synderesis” present themselves in ever more desperate disarray. How then can the Westman of today orientate himself?

Solzhenitsyn suggested an answer when he wrote that Communism was as crude an approach to human affairs “as if a surgeon were to perform his delicate operations with a meat axe.” (267) Modernity could be defined as the very principle of doing surgery with a meat-axe. Holderlin wrote that “Danger itself/Fosters the rescuing power” (268), and in like manner this Meat-Axe Modernity must surely generate the reaction to itself, reviving our sense of urgency and proportion, our sense of when to
fight and what to fight. The very monstrousness of what we face can help us to see that many things – things we might have wasted our energies against – are not so bad and can be put up with. It can generate a clear-eyed scheme of both resistance and forbearance, so that we can say, as is said in The Lord of the Rings: “let all who fight the Enemy in their fashion be as one.” (269) It can provide a perspective on resistance like the one M.H. Abrams postulates for art:

   a frame of reference simple enough to be readily manageable, yet flexible enough so that, without undue violence to any one set of statements about art, it will translate as many sets as possible onto a single plane of discourse. (270)

And for our purposes, that “single plane of discourse” is that of the Common Dish of Honour.

Two quotes from The Rebel go to the heart of it. Camus is contrasting “revolution” with “rebellion,” but we can equate these terms with our notion of the “poems” of Revolution and Counter-Revolution. First he addresses the scourge of what he calls “revolution without honour”:

   calculated revolution which, in preferring an abstract concept of man to a man of flesh and blood, denies existence as many times as is necessary, and puts resentment in the place of love.

Then he asserts:

   when revolution in the name of power and history becomes that immoderate and mechanical murderer, a new rebellion is consecrated in the name of moderation and of life. (271)

We began this section with Hemingway, and the above quotes can help us to grasp A Farewell to Arms as a work of “Jacobitism by analogy.” The protagonist, Frederick Henry, comes to see that the First World War is a rampage of rogue power, a vile usurper regime, an “immoderate and mechanical murderer” devoid of any moral authority. He repudiates it and gives his allegiance to what does have moral authority
at both the particular and the universal level, the relationship with Catherine. Their commitment to each other is a “rebellion consecrated in the name of moderation and life.” Catherine’s death at the end of the novel leaves Frederick Henry in much the same situation as those “unrepentant” Jacobites after the Forty Five. He knows that what they did was good and true and brave, and all the more poignant for having come to grief. The narrative ends with the numbness of shock and loss, but we know the survivor will soon take up the duty of remembrance, of keeping Catherine alive in spirit for the sake of what they had and what they did. We know that he will maintain – albeit, no doubt, in the understated Hemingway mode – what some would mock and denigrate as a “cult of honour.”
Underpinning # 8: Symbolic Institutions

In that captivity which he knew would only be ended on the scaffold, King Charles wrote to his eldest son that, “this may be the last time we may speak to you.” And then he went on:

We are sensible into what hands we are fallen; and yet (we bless God) we have those inward refreshments the malice of our enemies cannot perturb. We have learned to busy ourself by retiring into ourself and, therefore, can the better digest what befalls… (272)

The key thing is that he is not describing a withdrawal into passive resignation but a mode of resistance, a method of sustaining oneself amid the triumph of malicious enemies. And since we know that he defied his foes to the end, this notion of “inward refreshments” ought to be of profound interest to us.

“In my fall and ruin,” Charles had said to some people a day or two earlier, “you see your own.” (273) It is only now that the full truth of that can be seen, for today in all the Western societies they are coming for many of us precisely because they were first able to come for the King. The fact that the worst tyrannies ever known have been set up in recent times and in the name of dogmas of social equality has enabled at least some people to see past the Egalitarian Fallacy. We can see that kings have at times been better champions of the common man and woman than many of those who have claimed to be more of the demos than the demos itself.

At the very minute of his death in 1649, King Charles declared that the people’s liberty consisted of “having of government, those laws by which their lives and their goods may be most their own.” (274) We can now see the prophetic greatness of those words, for we’ve had another few centuries to observe how modernity strips human beings of everything that belongs to them, right down to their human identity itself. Like Thomas More, the King had seen the commissars and had surely perceived the future they would make, had deduced the truth that Camus would one day express: “The majority of revolutions are shaped by, and derive their originality from, murder. All, or almost all, have been homicidal.” (275) Or even more pithily from John Gray, Professor of European Thought at the London School of Economics: “Progress and
mass murder run in tandem.” (276) And if we should retort that the forces of Progress don’t always conduct an actual slaughter-house, Camus has also conveyed their more moderate line of approach: “The heart, that ‘weak spot of the intellect,’ must be exterminated: the locked room and the system will take its place.” (277)

Another comment of Gray’s goes to the essence: “The good life is not found in dreams of progress, but in coping with tragic contingencies.” (278) The pressure of those tragic contingencies is what enables us to see the beauty and meaning of things. It is rather like the force of gravity which can make our activities heavy and tiring and difficult, but which happens to be the very thing that enables us to live and function on the face of the earth and so find our measure of fulfillment. To deny or to seek to eliminate those forces and pressures only leaves us more bereft, and the world more absurd. As Louis Bredvold puts it: “No philosophe ever meditated on the needs of our naked and shivering human nature. There was to be no chill in the moral weather of Utopia.” (279)

Richard Sennett notes the outcome of denuding people of their various outer guises and trappings, even by so allegedly benign a scheme as what he calls “Liberalism of the Lockean sort.”

It meant stripping away the fictions of honour – titles, privileges, rituals of rank. Montesquieu perhaps understood the consequences better than Locke. Defining who is then a virtuous, self-sufficing citizen means assessing a person’s inner state of being. (280)

And sooner or later this requires that everyone’s “inner state of being” be under the surveillance of some version of Orwell’s “Thought Police.”

Boot observes: “Traditional institutions may have been paternalistic, but they were not cannibalistic.” (281) The cannibalistic nature of modern institutions has been noted by Kimball, with reference to the insights of Joseph Schumpeter, who was “uncannily right about the dangers bourgeois capitalist societies harbour within themselves.” And he quotes Schumpeter directly, with the key words italicised here:

capitalism creates a critical frame of mind which, after having destroyed the moral authority of so many other institutions, in the end turns against its own:
the bourgeois finds to his amazement that the rationalist attitude does not stop at the credentials of kings and popes but goes on to attack private property and the whole scheme of bourgeois values. (282)

Kimball then notes a deeply “Jacobite” point, with original italics: “what Schumpeter calls the ‘emotional attachment to the social order’ begins to disintegrate.” (283) And without that attachment, “authority” is easily shredded by “power” of the kind that is impelled by the rage of the “root pathology” and which attacks everything that links human beings to each other, to the natural world, and to a divine Creation.

The Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski refers to what he calls “the farcical aspect of human bondage.” (284) Although the essence of human folly is no doubt perennial, the modern age has promoted one form of fatuousness above all others—the weird inability of people ever to grasp that “What goes around comes around,” or, to put it in more resonant terms, “Those who sow the wind will reap the whirlwind.” Given that the modern age was forged out of the Puritan style of rabid denunciation and canting sanctimony, it isn’t surprising that this form of moral blindness not only continues but has vastly intensified with the advent of media capable of keeping the whole society totally saturated with it.

In the English-speaking world, this inability to grasp the principle of reaping what we sow springs at least in part from the fact that we simply don’t comprehend the real weight and meaning of events, a failure for which we might blame the joint influence of the Whig interpretation of history and the more recent phenomenon of “dumbing down.” (285) Les Murray’s observation is horribly apt: “as Australian-born people resist knowing, the ultimate deployments of ideology and fashion leave you not chic and sated but lying in a mass grave.” (286)

One of the characters in my novel re-reads Nadezhda Mandelstam’s great memoir Hope Against Hope every couple of years. He does this not just to re-envision the horrors of existence under Stalin, but in order to have some gauge by which he can recognize features of the current plight of his own society. But only a few people are acute or strong-nerved enough to use such a work for such a purpose. John Gray has put his finger on it: “It is not our ignorance of the future which is incurable. It is our failure to understand the present.” (287)
In an address to the West in 1975, Solzhenitsyn posed the question: “Can one part of humanity learn from the bitter experience of another or can it not? Is it possible or impossible to warn someone of danger?” (288) It must be said with a heavy heart that in broad terms the answer appears to be in the negative. For this reason we in the English-speaking world need to recover what we might call our own authentic “heritage of harm.” A single illustration may suffice.

In 2005 the historian John Hirst published a hard-hitting essay called “Kangaroo Court”: *Family Law in Australia*. His attention had been drawn to that realm by the plight of one of his students, a man accused by his estranged wife of being a danger to their children. Hirst saw at first-hand the plight of a father undergoing “the common experience in divorce of being brought under suspicion and having to prove himself innocent.” (289)

Having quoted a typically unjust ruling by a Family Court judge, Hirst reflects on the urgent need to find ways to avoid “labelling innocent men as child abusers.” But, he goes on:

> Such thoughts do not appear to cross the judges’ minds. They have supreme confidence in what they are doing; the confidence of their own virtue. They are pleased rather than distressed at what they are doing, for it shows how far they will go to defend children.

Then he follows with a comment which takes us back to C.S. Lewis’s absolutely crucial point about the evil of extracting one value from the Tao and making it the sole yardstick.

> There is a great danger in elevating one purpose as the only purpose to be pursued. This is the totalitarian impulse. We see its evils clearly in the extreme cases when the purpose was the racial purity of the German people or the defence of the proletarian revolution in Russia. (290)

Despite the deep truth of what he is saying, Hirst illustrates our whole concept here in the way he has strayed off the direct line of that “heritage of harm.” In the context of a Family Court in the English-speaking world, the primary line of that bitter heritage
runs not through Nazi camps and Soviet gulags but directly from King Charles and the “kangaroo court” he faced and defied in 1649.

Recall Schumpeter’s observation about the amazement of those who find that the attack “does not stop at the credentials of kings and popes.” The Family Court’s attack on present-day husbands and fathers is the same attack, but by now broadened and replicated and made routine. And today’s attackers, just like their Puritan/Roundhead predecessors, have, in Hirst’s words, “supreme confidence in what they are doing; the confidence of their own virtue.” They are the “sect” that never doubts its own fitness to judge and punish the “reprobate”—that is, anyone disapproved of on theological and/or ideological grounds. In this psychopathology, a husband and father is by very definition an oppressor and a tyrant, is indeed a type of little “king” or “pope” who must be denounced and destroyed by the Virtuous.

Here is the essence of that “Jacobite” distinction between “power” and “authority.” A Court claims above all to have the authority of eternal moral imperatives of justice, but the man who is being destroyed by it knows, just as King Charles did, that he is before a power, and one of more unbridled criminality than any defendant who stands before it. As Hirst flatly declares of the Family Court: “This court of law has become a gross abuser of human rights.” (291) But the upside of all this is equally apparent. If a man in front of the Family Court can trace his lineage of woe back to the martyred King, he can also take an example of courage and dignity and honour from the same source. He can know that he is living out a deep Story, and one that is fit for heroes, for real heroes have lived it before him. And so he may discover that he has inward refreshments the malice of his enemies cannot perturb. One of the most memorable statements from The Lord of the Rings can be applied most aptly here: “But you do not stand alone. You will learn that your trouble is but part of the trouble of all the western world.” (292)

The Family Court example leads to the key issue of the relation between institutions and honour—or rather, nowadays, the total lack of honour. We earlier cited Peter Berger’s essay on the “obsolescence” of the very concept, an essay beginning with this statement:

Honour occupies about the same place in contemporary usage as chastity. An individual asserting it hardly invites admiration, and one who claims to have
Honour and chastity are perceived as “ideological leftovers in the consciousness of obsolete classes, such as military officers or ethnic grandmothers.” Berger notes that the obsolescence “is revealed very sharply in the inability of most contemporaries to understand insult, which is in essence an assault on honour.” And tellingly he points out: “In this there is a close parallel between modern consciousness and modern law.” An agency like the Family Court cannot fathom that in branding the innocent as wife-bashers and child-abusers, by subjecting them to insult in that way, it is treading those men’s honour in the dirt. We are back with More’s “bretherne” and their hurling of sacred things “in the myre.”

Citing a study of rural society and culture in Greece at the beginning of the 1960s, Berger outlines the role and function of honour in a context where traditional norms could still be seen operating, He stresses that it would be an error “to understand honour only in terms of hierarchy and its delineations.”

Those who have high status in the community have particular obligations of honour, but even the lowly are differentiated in terms of honour and dishonour. For all, the qualities enjoined by honour provide the link, not only between self and community, but between self and the idealized norms of the community. “Honour considered as the possession by men and women of these qualities is the attempt to relate existence to certain archetypal patterns of behaviour.” Conversely, dishonour is… loss of face in the community, but also loss of self and separation from the basic norms that govern human life.

This presents a striking parallel to the concept of the Common Dish put forward by Les Murray, who grew up in the Australian version of that kind of rural culture, the culture that began to be dissolved everywhere in the West by about the 1960s, under the impact of things like television. After centuries of being engaged elsewhere, the Commissariat got around to mopping-up in the boondocks. Berger conveys the entire process which began with “the rise of the bourgeoisie,” for it was then that:

not only the honour of the ancien regime and its hierarchical prototypes was
debunked, but that an understanding of man and society emerged that would eventually liquidate any conception of honour. (296)

Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* is a key text, he suggests, “the tragi-comedy of a particular obsolescence, that of the knight-errant in an age when chivalry has become an empty rhetoric.” And a comment of Quixote’s to Sancho Panza is italicized here for deep emphasis:

*in our midst there is a host of enchanters, forever changing, disguising and transforming our affairs as they please, according to whether they wish to favour or destroy us.* (297)

There could be no better description of the Commissariat, or of its use of something like television as a social solvent. These “enchanters” are in fact, as Berger notes, the agents of the “disenchantment of the world.” They are what we now recognize as the peddlers and proponents of the “root pathology” and the “atomizing energies” and the endless march of the “isms” that keep us bamboozled. In their work of “transforming our affairs as they please” they show us the very essence of Revolutionism/Creative Destruction, and in those concluding few words, “according to whether they wish to favour or destroy us,” we can hear Lenin’s ever-murderous question: “Who Whom?”

In Berger’s view, “Modern man is Don Quixote on his deathbed.” He’s been stripped of his “multicoloured banners” and he is “bereft of the consolation of prototypes.” He is, Berger states, with original italics, “man alone.” (298)

Central to Berger’s view is the link between honour and institutions. He writes that: “an individual discovers his true identity in his roles, and to turn away from the roles is to turn away from himself.” (299) Or again: “identity is firmly linked to the past through the reiterated performance of proto-typical acts. And such acts need a “social location” in “a world of relatively intact, stable, institutions.” (300) He concludes therefore that man’s “fundamental constitution” will in time drive him to construct new institutions in order “to provide an ordered reality for himself.” And he boldly asserts: “A return to institutions will ipso facto be a return to honour.” (301)

At least one problem with that assertion is that it fails to register the full complexity and malignancy of the present situation. It is true that much of our predicament is
caused by the loss of those institutional structures which once provided a “social location” and an “ordered reality.” It is also true that we are alienated from those remains of authentic structure which still have a beleaguered existence, such as the family. As Frank Furedi states: “disengagement of people from the institutions of society is the defining feature of contemporary life” (302). And Zygmunt Bauman warns in his 2002 book *Community* that this atomizing process is “self-perpetuating; once it takes off, there are fewer and fewer stimuli to stem the disintegration of human bonds…” (303) The immediately desperate problem, however, is not just the loss of genuine institutions but the fact that we are so tightly in the grip of *false* institutions. We are in the classic “Jacobite” predicament of seeing “authority” being overthrown by “power.” As Roger Kimball has summarized it:

Wherever we look – at our schools and colleges, at our churches, museums, courts and legislatures – we see underway… a process whereby institutions created to protect certain values have been “deconstructed” and turned against the very things they were meant to preserve. (304)

The full meaning of this process has been spelled out by Samuel Francis in terms of what he named “Anarcho-Tyranny,” which is to say “a kind of Hegelian synthesis of two opposites — anarchy and tyranny.” (305) This is the mode of power now installed in every part of the West and its essential feature is that certain laws are not enforced at all while certain other laws are applied with oppressive harshness. The system has a great deal in common with the old Soviet practice of making allowance for ordinary criminals – those “socially friendly” elements who only prey on the rank-and-file of society and have no quarrel with the regime as such – while treating with automatic severity anyone disapproved of on political grounds. Our example of the Family Court illustrates Anarcho-Tyranny to perfection. When it comes to the right to make accusations *against* a husband or a father, it’s an anarchic free-for-all. But when it comes to *his* right to be accorded at least the rudiments of natural justice, there’s tyrannical repression and he is delivered in chains to his tormentors. As Francis comments:

What really drives the system is the revolution of our time, the internal
onslaught against traditional identities and values that is usually termed the “culture war.” When we think about which laws are enforced and which are not, this becomes clear.

The husband and the father are foremost amongst those “traditional identities” which are to be wiped out by the “internal onslaught.” Many other categories are also lined up for liquidation, but because of that “farcical” aspect of human bondage mentioned by Kolakowski, that sheer inability of people to see the rod being fashioned for their own backs, they won’t know it until too late.

All this has implications for the Berger scenario in which honour is to be recovered by a rebuilding of institutions in the future. The task would need to be a double one, for we can’t restore true institutions of “authority” without first overthrowing the false institutions of “power” which are now being deeply entrenched in the service of the Anarcho-Tyranny. Our difficulty is that only people of a traditionalist bent would see the need of such an overthrow, and those are the people least prone to the overturning of what they assume to be lawfully constituted. Francis has sought to address this by contrasting the “legal” pretensions of the system with its actual moral and historical status: “it is not the authentic continuation of traditional American or Western identity, but rather its revolutionary antithesis and betrayal…” (306) And John Gray provides a useful definition, one which parallels King Charles’s assertion that what government owes to the people is “those laws by which their lives and their goods may be most their own”:

Today, as in all previous times, regimes are legitimate to the extent that they meet vital human needs —needs such as security from violence, economic subsistence and the protection of cherished ways of life. There is nothing to say that regimes that meet these needs must be democratic. (307)

This is partly a way of saying that legitimacy adheres not in a bogus equality but in a genuine fraternity. Some medieval monarch, “touching” the peasants to cure them of the scrofula, was being more fraternal than any glad-handing politician of democracy could dream of. By Gray’s definition, or by that of King Charles, no current Western regime is legitimate. None is anything other than a Family Court writ large.
The “traditionalist” mindset, insofar as it has any form of political expression, tends to attach itself to what are referred to as the “conservative” parties of the West. And as Francis perceives, that is another part of the dilemma:

While we find much in the conservative tradition to teach us about the nature of what to conserve and why we should want to conserve it, we will find little in conservative theory to instruct us in the strategy and tactics of challenging dominant authorities. (308)

Aside from the use of the word “authorities” instead of the more appropriate word “powers,” this is well said, and it brings us to the point where the Jacobite spirit might come to the aid of the merely conservative one. And in the light of matters we looked at in an earlier section, one might express this by saying that conservatism needs to take up a newer and truer and more applicable version of Burkean inspiration: that of the Jacobite Burke.

If the great sin of political radicalism is irresponsibility, not caring about the wicked harm it does to people, the great sin of political conservatism is obtuseness, not seeing the real point and meaning of what is going on. Francis himself has characterized the two groupings as the Evil Party and the Stupid Party, and we might sum them up by saying that the Evil Party knows but doesn’t care, while the Stupid Party would care but is too dumb to know. The latter submits to current power because it doesn’t grasp the inherent degree of modern power’s illegitimacy. The Jacobite spirit, on the other hand, is all about seeing modern power as the regicide usurper and about resisting it with both the harp and the sword – like the Minstrel Boy in the old song – and with no quarter asked. But whether that spirit happens to be using the sword or the harp at any given moment, it understands that the Poem of Revolution can only be opposed by the Poem of Counter-Revolution. As Pat Buchanan says: “To defeat a faith you must have a faith.” (309) And James McAuley paints it precisely in terms of stark confrontation: “Tradition and Anti-Tradition confront one another, each recognizing its supreme antagonist.” (310)

Anarcho-Tyranny is an evil synthesis and opposing it will require other types of synthesis. In that regard, Peter Berger’s insight about honour relating to institutions
may be combined with certain insights of the great literary theorist and critic Kenneth Burke, born in 1897.

Burke’s main importance for us here is in the emphasis he places on symbols and symbolism in human life. In his book *Language as Symbolic Action* he examines “the symbol-systems by which men build up their ideas, concepts, and images of identity and community,” and he offers, with original italics, a definition of the human being: “*Man is the symbol-using animal*” (311).

It is crucial to grasp, however, that Burke is not peddling an early version of those mind-games of “French theory” that came to plague academia in the 1980s and which we associate with the likes of Derrida and Foucault. Kenneth Burke’s concern with language and symbols is a concern with the realities of life, with the Common Dish, as we might say. This is clear from his essay “Literature as Equipment for Living” in which he offers a view of the nature and purpose of proverbs. Examine any collection of proverbs and you will find:

> there is no “pure” literature here. Everything is “medicine.” Proverbs are designed for consolation or vengeance, for admonition or exhortation, for foretelling. Or they name typical, recurrent situations. That is, people find a certain social relationship recurring so frequently that they must “have a word for it.” (312)

Because proverbs relate to the conditions of life they can help us determine a course to follow in relation to particular states of affairs. Burke refers to this process as that of “strategic naming.” A proverb “names” this or that situation and thus indicates a “strategy” that might apply. But it isn’t just a one-to-one equation between a given proverb and a stock item of advice. Only certain proverbs will appear to bear on the matter, and these may conflict in the advice they offer, and so the guidance taken will depend a lot on one’s own attitude and character— on whether, for example, one is inclined to resist a given circumstance, or adapt to it, or flee from it.

Burke then goes to the second stage of his proposition:

> Why not extend such analysis of proverbs to encompass the whole field of literature? Could the most complex and sophisticated works of art legitimately
be considered somewhat as “proverbs writ large”? (313)

The illustration he puts forward is the novel *Madam Bovary*. It is “the strategic naming of a situation,” for it reveals “a pattern of experience that is sufficiently representative” for us to “adopt an attitude to it.” (314) The “type” situation in this case is that of a person deeply dissatisfied with the social niche they occupy and who comes to grief as a result. *Jude the Obscure* and *Great Expectations* would seem to belong in the same category. The important thing is common agreement that the work shows a “type” situation. The lesson or strategy to be taken from it in a particular case is up to the individual.

For Kenneth Burke, then, a novel or a poem can be viewed as a “proverb writ large” (or as a “ramified symbol,” as he also calls it) from which we may deduce a “strategy” for our own practical purposes. But that’s barely the half of it, for as human beings we function in two realms, that of immanence and that of transcendence. The “symbol-using animal” is indeed an animal, a material creature, but the symbols he conjures up, and conjures with, are things of the spirit, of the heart and soul and imagination, the intuitive and aesthetic faculties. They are qualities moral and ethical. Unless we are extreme determinists, we accept that much of human conduct takes its colour and meaning, its rightness or wrongness, its good or ill intention, from a moral and ethical blueprint that we carry in spirit. To engage with symbols, which are the language of the spirit, is to engage in a form of action, “symbolic action.”

William H. Rueckert explains:

> Burke defines poetry as symbolic action, which means it is symbols in action, verbal action that is symbolic of something, and verbal action that performs a vital psychological and physical function for poet and reader alike. (315)

And further:

> Because poems are the poet’s solutions to problems faced in the search for the self and the better life, they may be considered as “charts” or “maps” which one may consult when lost in the wilderness of the world; or they may be used to study the various “routes” which the ideal self takes in its quest, and from
such a study one may locate oneself and derive some solace from the knowledge
that others have travelled the same hard route. (316).

In this way, “Burke asserts that the general purpose of all poetry is salvation, that the
general function is purgative-redemptive.” (317) And Burke is quoted directly, with
original italics: “if you look for a man’s burden, you will find the principle that
reveals the structure of his unburdening…” (318)

And thus we come to the synthesis of Kenneth Burke’s ideas with those of Peter
Berger. On one hand is the potent nature of symbols, and on the other the relation
between honour and institutions. If there can be such a thing as symbolic action which
can offer “salvation” and “redemption” for those who are “lost in the wilderness of
the world,” then there can be symbolic institutions. And these might be our best or
only hope of resistance and renewal.

Harold Bloom declares: “Our despair requires the medicine of a profound
narration.” (319) And Neil Postman, as we have noted, asserts our desperate need of
“a story of transcendence and mythic power.” We had such a Story once. In its
broadest form it was what John Carroll refers to as our Western Dreaming, but it has
been attacked and shredded by Modman. But though that Story can no longer be
heard in the framework of institutions that have been destroyed or usurped, we can
find it and listen to it in the framework of symbolic institutions. And the authority of
these is of the truest kind. Having no temporal power to compel the unwilling, it
stands, to reiterate Edmund Burke’s lovely words, “on its own honour and the honour
of those who are to obey it.”

Symbolic action can indeed lead you out of the wilderness, as Kenneth Burke
asserts, because, provided you have a symbolic institution to locate yourself in, you
are never quite as lost as it might seem. There could be no better illustration than
Marlow finding the old seamanship manual and thus locating himself back in the
symbolic institution of probity from which he had strayed. Many other examples
could be offered, but no one has put it more succinctly than C.S. Lewis: “I think St
George, or any bright champion in armour, is a better comfort than the idea of the
police”. (320)
The “police” are of the actual world that has been captured and turned against us, while “St George” is of the symbolic world in which we might still find solace and courage.

Like Don Quixote, we see best when we are “imagining things.” (321)
Underpinning # 9: The Jacobite Option

To fill out the concept of symbolic institutions we need to broaden the Peter Berger/Kenneth Burke synthesis to include the ideas of at least a couple of other people.

The first is Georges Sorel. His importance for us here is shown in a recent article by Peter Coleman, who characterizes him as “one of the last of the great nineteenth-century sages and moralists” (322), Coleman cites the various disasters of French life and society at the time, including military defeat at the hands of Prussia in 1870, and the hideous Dreyfus case, and suggests these “may be compared with the combined effect on American life of Vietnam and Watergate.” Sorel, he continues, reached the conviction that:

the intellectuals – journalists, academics, clerics, lawyers, freethinkers, party apparatchiks – were responsible for the erosion of French morality, honour and justice. For Sorel, la trahison des clercs went deeper than anything Julien Benda could imagine.

Dismayed by this perception of what we have here called “Gelber’s Law,” Sorel was left with an outlook “little different from that of many moral conservatives hankering for a return of the ancien regime and the old values.” It was at that point, Coleman declares, with original italics, that “the Sorel of legend begins to emerge”:

he turned away from parliament and the political parties in his search for sources of renewal. What was needed, he came to believe, were not careerist reformers or the conservative loudmouths but moral secessionists—that is, a movement contemptuous of…all the moral squalor of contemporary France. Such heroic secessionist movements occur rarely, but he had some examples in mind. You find them, if you find them at all, at moments of moral and political collapse, precisely like the period in which Sorel was living.

But that was only part of it:

His preoccupation with moral secession led him to his doctrine of heroic
myths. We will never understand the transformations of history, he said, by concentrating on the reason or argument of the professors or sociologists or politicians. The key to these movements is the apocalyptic myths drawn from the Bergsonian depths of the soul that sustained them.

Interestingly, from the perspective of this essay, Sorel saw Catholicism as a “striking example” of the kind of heroic and redemptive myth he had in mind. In a letter of 1907 he wrote:

Catholics have never been discouraged even in the hardest trials, because they have always pictured the history of the Church as a series of battles between Satan and the hierarchy supported by Christ…” (323)

And although he dismissed Marx’s economic doctrines, he felt that, as Coleman puts it, “Marx’s theory or vision of the coming transforming revolution was fruitful – not as social science but as ‘social poetry’ or morale-building mythology.” Or in Sorel’s own formulation: “The myths are not descriptions of things, but expressions of a determination to act.” (324)

Another who can assist us here is Morris Berman. He describes his book of 2001, *The Twilight of American Culture*, as being “for men and women who experience themselves as expatriates within their own country.” It is, he says, “a guidebook of sorts,” one aimed at helping people “to find meaning in a disintegrating culture, and perhaps to contribute in some way to the eventual reconstruction of that culture on a very different basis.” (325) And though the focus is on American life, the message applies to any Western society.

He is especially conscious of what he calls “the decline that shows up as pseudo-renewal,” the fact that the times are crackling with electronic and other energies, “all of which are pulsing with life, but which are actually harbingers of death.” (326) And attempts to address the prevailing situation, especially if they have potential public appeal, are likely to become part of the problem:

in the din of cultural noise, one has to gloss up an idea, package it in a sound bite or flashy formula, in order for it to get a hearing at all. This is true even if one is
attacking the sound-bite culture itself. (327)

The answer put forward by Berman is moral secession, although he doesn’t mention Sorel and the strategy is referred to as the “monastic option.” Reflecting on the way monasticism kept civilized thought alive between the fall of Rome and the flowering of medieval Europe, Berman writes: “You can choose a way of life that becomes its own ‘monastery,’ which preserves the treasure of our heritage for yourself, and hopefully, for future generations.” (328) The monastery is his metaphor for one or another process of cultural preservation. Among various illustrations given is Ray Bradbury’s novel *Fahrenheit 451*, about a society in which books are banned and there are people who “hide in the woods, memorize the classics, and then teach them to their children.” (329)

Berman’s case for the “monastic option” is interesting because of the extent of his discussion of it, because he appears to be in certain respects a person of the political left, and because of his sober tone:

> the “monk” of the twenty-first century will not be pursuing his or her activity for grand, heroic outcomes, but for the sense of worth and meaning that the activity itself contains. The work may lead somewhere, or it may not. Our job is only to give it our best shot. (330)

The idea of something like the “monastic option” was already floating about when Berman’s book appeared. Two years earlier there’d been a furor in some US political circles when conservative activist Paul Weyrich circulated an 1800 word open letter entitled “A Moral Minority?” Roger Kimball provides a useful if slightly impatient account of it all, describing the letter as “the product of profound disillusionment bordering on despair.” (331) Weyrich had once helped to popularize the phrase “moral majority” – a reference to the essential moral soundness that was presumed to exist in the great majority of the American people – but had now reached the conclusion that there was no such majority and that conservative political victories were therefore hollow, having no flow-through into the fabric of the society. He wrote that: “what Americans would have found absolutely intolerable just a few years ago, a
majority now not only tolerates but celebrates.” He saw the issue very much in Schumaker’s terms of “culture failure”:

> politics has failed because of the collapse of the culture. The culture we are living in becomes an ever-wider sewer. In truth, I think we are caught up in a cultural collapse of historic proportions, a collapse so great that it simply overwhelms politics.

But he went on to posit a response to all this:

> What seems to me a legitimate strategy is to look at ways to separate ourselves from the institutions that have been captured by the ideology of Political Correctness, or by other enemies of our traditional culture.

Weyrich advocated such things as an increased focus on homeschooling of children and even the setting up of “private courts” where people could find justice instead of “ideology and greed.” He urged that what he was arguing for was very like “what the early Christians did within the Roman Empire: creating a new society within the ruins of the old.” (332)

Kimball calls the Weyrich letter a “counsel of retreat,” but he acknowledges the “pathos” of it. Its author may be wrong, he states, but at least he isn’t “supercilious.” Kimball’s frank contempt is directed at “conservatives who have adopted the strategy of denial,” the kind who will collude with any kind of evil “so long as there is a game going and they are allowed to play.” (333)

Berman pictures the symbolic institution in terms of the “monastic option,” while Weyrich sees it in terms of the “early Christian option.” Each is visualizing a “social location” where “symbolic action” can be grounded and given authority, and which is a source of “medicine,” a word we should understand as a Sioux or a Cheyenne might understand it, as the spiritual efficacy of being in the right relation to what matters most.

In clarifying what we mean by “symbolic institutions,” we need to recall Milosz’s Nobel speech. As we noted, he refers to “some ways of life, some institutions” which “protect people from internal disintegration and from yielding to tyranny.” And the
example he mentioned was that of his native land, Lithuania, “a country of myths and poetry” and a people not yet “disinherited” by the forces of the modern world. Since Lithuania was raked and gouged and trampled over by the juggernauts of both Hitler and Stalin, by the modern age at its most berserk, Milosz is offering no fair-weather philosophy. His message can be seen to accord with that of Victor Frankl who as a young psychiatrist was a prisoner in Auschwitz and other camps. In his book *Man’s Search for Meaning*, Frankl tells of his experience and how it taught him that human beings can endure any horror, and even win a moral victory over it, as long as they have a sufficient sense of their plight as meaningful.

Frankl came to the view that there are three main avenues to meaning in a human life. The first is “creating a work or doing a deed.” The second is “experiencing something or encountering someone.” The third and most important is what he calls “the final freedom,” which is to determine one’s own attitude to a fate one cannot alter. (334) And it seems to me that much of the argument of this essay, and of my novel too, clicks into place as soon as we perceive that all three of these avenues are especially and powerfully available in the context of a “Lost Cause,” a cause like that the Jacobites.

From Milosz and Frankl we can turn to Roger Scruton and the dire condition of the English-speaking world. What he writes of “myths” is also true of “symbolic institutions”:

a myth is not just a fiction, and our engagement with it is never just a game. The myth sets before us in allegorical form a truth about our condition… Through the myth we understand both the thing to which we aspire, and the forces which prevent us from attaining it. And we understand these things not just theoretically, but by living through them in imagination and sympathy… (335)

The great essential factor is that, as Scruton observes elsewhere: “consolation from imaginary things is not an imaginary consolation.” (336) This is beautifully illustrated by a quote from Patrick Curry’s *Defending Middle-Earth*:

Someone wrote to me of a sixth-grade pupil who, after reading *The Lord of the Rings*, had cried for two days. I think it must have been a cry for life and meaning
and joy from the wasteland which had somehow already managed to capture this boy. (337)

Many of us today are like that boy. Captured by the wasteland, our most desperate need is for something that will set us weeping for two days in sheer joy and relief at having found a redemptive “myth” commensurate with our plight. Tolkien himself writes of the potency of certain kinds of stories and how they provide a three-fold benefit of Escape, Consolation and Recovery. (338) Which is exactly what symbolic institutions provide. For that boy, finding The Lord of the Rings was an initial Escape from the wasteland; what he experienced in it was Consolation for his miseries; and the effect of that balm on the wounds was to set him towards Recovery of his overall courage and morale.

Camus wrote that Sorel wanted to create “new cadres for which a world without honour was calling and still calls.” (339) And one thinks of that boy, and of how only “symbolic institutions” of one kind or another could prepare such cadres for the restoration of the world’s honour.

To be viable, an “option” must have certain necessary features. It must encompass the Harp and the Sword, for without a tradition of culture we cannot remember, and without a tradition of valour we cannot resist. These are clearly there in the “monastic option,” which evokes both the priceless work of cultural preservation and the heroics of the crusading military orders. On the debit side, however, the “monastic option” is rather short on such elements as a tradition of marriage and family life. Of course the “monasticism” advocated by Berman and others is metaphorical rather than literal, but metaphors too have their understood limits.

The “Jacobite option” gives entry into a complete human world, both symbolically and literally. There we find princes and peasants, warriors and minstrels, sages and martyrs. There are clergymen and smugglers, tavern-wenches and high-born ladies. There are lonely exiles and loving families, genteel spinsters and “savage” clansmen. There are drunkards and wits and simpletons, and poachers and seafarers and secret agents. There are brides and babies and ribald uncles and wise grandmothers. We are in the mortal world of our own forebears, our own flesh and blood, and at the same time in a storybook of archetypes. In this assemblage anyone who broadly adheres to the Party of the Sacrament can find the “social location” they require and can identify
with. Thus in my novel, the “symbolic institution” is the Jacobite cause, and the “social location” is that of Robert Connell, a common Lancashire working-man. And that “social location” defines his role and duties in relation to honour, and marks out the kinds of action and “symbolic action” that may be open to him. A hundred authors could write novels about the Forty-Five and each find a different “social location” to work from within the one symbolic institution.

And since they are coherent in themselves, symbolic institutions fit easily into larger coherences. An illustration of this will serve to tie together the closing threads of this essay.

In 2007, a Texan named Jeff Adams posted an article on an Internet site devoted to the Southern heritage. The piece was entitled “Southern Wild Geese.” (340) Adams began by explaining that the term “Wild Geese” had denoted those Irish who went abroad to serve in various foreign armies in the 17th and 18th centuries — beginning with those who chose to go into exile in France with King James II, and who formed the Irish Brigade of the French Army. Part of their motivation was always the hope of getting an opportunity to fight the oppressors of their native land. Adams noted that Southerners have similarly provided “a disproportionate number of warriors to go abroad and fight.” But unlike those Irish, these Wild Geese of the South have not enlisted with other nations. They have “offered their services to the very entity that crushed their independence… the United States Government.”

These people, “flung to the far corners of the earth,” are “not just the literal Celtic descendents of Erin, but they are also black, Hispanic, Asian and American Indian,” and they have in common “the fact they are from the South.” (341) But whereas the Irish were respected by the foreigners whose battles they fought, “we Southerners still face ridicule by those we serve.” While noting pro forma that he “does not advocate the support of modern enemies of America,” he goes on to question behaviours which support “a Yankee culture” and which can only benefit, “those that spend their time banning symbols of your home, denigrating your history, and attacking and rewriting your heritage.”

Why lend a hand in our own destruction? It would be better if these Southern Wild Geese were to re-evaluate what they are serving and consider other options, lest they end up emulating what the poet Emily Lawless said about the original
Wild Geese: “Fighters in every clime — Every cause but our own.”

In that Internet item, and in the feeling and motivation behind it, we can perceive almost everything this essay has dwelt on, from the distinction between power and authority to the impulse towards *gemeinschaft* and the idea of the Common Dish of Honour. There is the stance of “moral secession” and the adherence to a “symbolic institution” in place of actual institutions which are now seen to be malignant. There is the Harp of cultural memory alongside the Sword of the will to resist, and there is the awareness of centuries of struggle between paradigms of personhood—those of the Yankee-Roundhead-Whig and the Confederate-Cavalier-Jacobite. Jeff Adams is “enacting a further stage” of his tradition, making the best fight he can in the current conditions.

Things have gone so far that we must look at worst-case scenarios, and Boot could be correct in stating that Modman, “the worst criminal in history,” has won the contest hands down and that “Westman is now dead as a social and cultural force.” And yet one finds oneself asking: What does “dead” mean in such a context? The Spartans, to take an example, have been extinct for two thousand years. The grass was growing over their city within a few generations of the stand at Thermopylae. And yet even now one can read the account of that stand in Herodotus, can read of one Dieneces. When told the enemy arrows would fly so thick they would blot out the very sun, he replied that this was excellent news: “If the Medes darken the sun, we shall have our fight in the shade.” (342) And reading that, and feeling the fresh tears welling up, and mindful of that “final freedom” to determine one’s own attitude, we might experience the Spartans as rather more vital even now than most of those we see walking about in the flesh. And if we happen to know it, we might call to mind a verse by Oliver St John Gogarty:

**TO DEATH**

But for your Terror  
Where would be Valour?  
What is Love for  
But to stand in your way?
Taker and Giver,
For all your endeavour
You leave us with more
Than you touch with decay! (343)

In *Albion: The Origins of the English Imagination*, Peter Ackroyd’s final words are about the relation between “the landscape and the dreamscape” (344), terms useful to us here. As in the case of the Spartans, the plight might be terminal in the “landscape” without being quite so dire a calamity in the “dreamscape.” In the long run the latter realm appears to be beyond the Enemy’s power to fully conquer or close down. David Gress makes the broad point: “Religion, myth, and the deep structures of the psyche are far more serious, interesting and dangerous preoccupations than politics.” (345) As we noted from T.S. Eliot, we can never gain enough distance on our own situation to know how things really are. And D.H. Lawrence spoke a great truth when he said that we should trust the tale, not the teller. If we are of the Party of the Sacrament we know – at least in our better moments – that what counts is not the poor fumbling tale we are always trying to tell, but the great overarching Story we belong to and by definition can never know the whole of.

A grave and poignant inspiration is conveyed by the Australian anthropologist A.P. Elkin, writing about the Aboriginal elders whose task is to impart the sacred lore of the tribe to the young men. But they must not impart it lightly, or to any who are not respectful of the old ways. They must judge the matter with care. Alas, only too often, after contact with the white man, the time is never propitious… so the secrets pass away with the old men; and though the latter die in sorrow knowing that the old rites and myths will pass into oblivion, that the sacred places will no longer be cared for, and that the tribe is doomed to extinction, yet they die triumphantly, having been loyal to their trust. (346)

And there is the essence of the “cult of honour.” It is the notion – fully compatible with the deepest heartbreak – that if people are “loyal to their trust” it will continue to matter in some scheme of things that lies beyond the appearance of doom. It is the
tiny glow of belief that the cosmos itself is *moral* and that winning a “moral victory”
is therefore never wholly in vain.

Across the ages there must have been very many attempts to express this faith, but
we can settle here for that of the 1890s poet who stood by the statue of King Charles
and gazed at the night sky above Charing Cross:

*The stars and heavenly deeps*

*Work out a perfect will.*
NOTES


4 Gare, *Triumph of the Airheads*, p. 22.


6 Bellow, *It All Adds Up*, p. 112.

7 Ibid. p. 163.

8 Ibid. p. 154.

9 Ibid. p. 155.

10 Ibid. p. 151.

11 Ibid. p. 11.

12 Ibid. p. 94.

13 Saul, *Voltaire’s Bastards*, p. 582.

14 Bauman, *Community*, p. 43.


17 I knew these lines not from their direct source but as quoted in Clark, *Civilization*, p. 35.

18 Schama, *A History of Britain 2: 1603-1776 The British Wars*, p. 312. I had switched on the TV in the middle of Schama’s program. Having apparently just traced the course of the Forty Five and its defeat at Culloden, Schama declared in the key part of the key sentence, here italicized: “*Henceforth, unrepentant Jacobites, survivors of the cult of honour, had to live an occult life of relics and fetishes*…” The term “cult” is not necessarily a disparaging one, but the tone and context made the hostility quite clear. Here was a glib dismissal of people – the survivors of terrifying risk and hardship, men and
women who had seen their friends and kinsmen slaughtered and their society smashed forever – as nothing more than “unrepentant” cultic fetishists. This seemed to me not fair comment but character-assassination. I found myself thinking: “Well, let’s hope Professor Schama is never trapped in a burning building, or held hostage, or placed in any situation where police or firefighters or soldiers might need to adhere to a cult of honour in order to save him.” It seemed a case of someone sawing off the branch on which he sits, and indeed the branch on which all of us are sitting. It made me think of Simone Weil’s assertion that, “Honour is a vital need of the human soul” (Weil, The Need for Roots, p. 19), and also of her words about the decline of humane sympathy, about “the toxins generated by society in general having even corrupted the sense of misfortune.” (Weil, p. 54) Later, obtaining the book version of Schama’s TV program, I confirmed that my impression of a deep-seated hostility had been correct, and I knew at least vaguely that this open contempt of Jacobites and their cause was not the peccadillo of an individual but a reflex built into the whole intellectual culture. I then flipped back to the book’s preface and read the following:

It was these battles for allegiance – the British Wars, between and within the nations of our archipelago, and then beyond in the wider world, between different and fiercely argued ideas about our historical and political inheritance – that made us what we became. The creation of our identity was a baptism of blood. (Schama, p. 11)

I tried to imagine the bloodshed at Culloden, although not so much that which occurred in the delirium of the battle itself and for which, in the way of the fate or chance of war, no one can quite be held to blame. I pictured rather the systematic killing of the wounded and captured Jacobites after the battle, and the subsequent terrorization of the whole Highland society, the calculated crushing of an entire people and culture. Then Schama continued in the words italicized here, words crucial to my epiphany: “But the slaughters were not always mindless. Crucially, for our future, they were often, even excessively, mindful.”

There it was, the idea of mindful slaughters set down in terms of broad approval. I was anxious not to mistake the meaning and turned the words over in my mind. The gist seemed unmistakably clear. It was to be held to the credit of the slaughterers that at least some of the time they had acted consciously and rationally, even indeed to a fault. The key to the meaning was in an earlier sentence: “The creation of our identity was a baptism of blood.” The carnage, it seemed, had been “creative,” for it had fashioned an “identity” sufficiently approved of by people like Simon Schama for him to call it “ours.” That the mayhem had also destroyed identities was clearly of very much less importance. It was doubtless a case of needing to break eggs to make an omelette. In the final analysis, Schama was stating his approval of the bloodier forms of what ideologues of a certain stripe now like to call “creative destruction.” And coupled in my thoughts with the idea of mindful slaughters came the opening words of Albert Camus in The Rebel:
There are crimes of passion and crimes of logic. The line that divides them is not clear. But the Penal Code distinguishes between them by the useful concept of premeditation. We are living in the era of premeditation and perfect crimes. (Camus, p. 11)

I felt shaken by all this precisely because I knew that Schama was a decent and sincere individual according to his lights, which were broadly those of the zeitgeist. I felt I had come up against the very spirit of the age, the outlook that could denigrate the most profound human plights of love and death and honour while congratulating itself on the enlightened largeness of its own outlook. I had not led a sheltered life. I had known prison and the madhouse, among other things, but what now came to me in a whole new and visceral way was a sense of what ideological conflict actually meant, of the cruel chasm between opposed views of the world, and the fact that the ideology of modernity itself could and ought to be seen as criminal. And I saw that this criminality could not be kept at a safe mental distance by seeing it as a feature of “totalitarian” systems only. It was also part of the background and the fabric of the “normal” society I lived in. It was a difference not of principle but only of degree.

All this made me recall a volume of Saul Bellow’s essays I’d read, and a comment which I now felt I understood much better. Referring to his late friend Allen Bloom, he had noted the “deadly hostility” that was focused on him by kindly, gentle, liberal people here and abroad who held all the most advanced views on every public question: people who did good works but, through some queer inexplicable shift of psychic currents, were converted into a killer mob. (Bellow, It All Adds Up, p. 277)

These were the type who felt that the slaughters they approved of were morally sanctioned, while any action of the other side was by definition wicked. This was the mindset by which, for example, King Charles, who had by and large conducted his side of the Civil War without atrocity, was to be condemned as the Tyrant, Murderer and Man of Blood, while Cromwell’s premeditated slaughters – as at Wexford and Drogheda – were not to be made too much of. And indeed, a portrait of that mass-murderer, wearing an especially mindful expression, adorned the cover of Schama’s book. What Bellow had identified in his reference to the “killer mob” of the progressive-minded was the outlook that views opponents – whether Stuart kings or Irish peasants – as having no claim to respect or justice even in the grave. Such enemies of “progress” were mere trash in History’s rubbish-bin. Whatever the limits of my intellectual grasp of these matters, I knew by every instinct I possessed that Schama and I stood on opposite sides of a great divide.
Ibid., p. 12. At the close of his preface, Professor Schama explicitly stated his own ideological commitment in relation to those “British Wars” and their “baptism of blood,” and the crucial phrase is here italicized.

The success of what he called “the party of liberty” was a genuine turning point in the political history of the world. If to tell the story again, and yet insist that that much is true, is to reveal oneself as that most hopeless anachronism, a born-again Whig, then so be it.

Thus he clarified for me the terms of my own orientation. Twenty years after my visits to Culloden and Glenfinnan, it all clicked into place. I was a born-again Jacobite, and as “unrepentant” as they come.

The first need at that point was for some clarity of mind as to the real values to which I had aligned myself. I had to have a good working sense of what the term “Jacobite” could be taken to mean. After some thought I felt able to posit an initial set of definitions:

a. “Jacobites proper,” people who adhered to the Cause in its own time.
b. “Jacobites of ancestry,” people who may or may not have been partial to the old Jacobite politics as such but who felt a natural link to their forebears and kin and ancestral experience.
c. “Jacobites of empathy,” people who have come to empathise with the Cause for its own sake and on its own merits, and who tend to see in it the Virgilian “pathos of life.”
d. “Jacobites by analogy,” people who show attitudes or behaviours which can be seen as analogous to those of Jacobitism.

These categories are not mutually exclusive. The protagonist of my novel, for example, is eventually connected to the Cause by three interwoven threads, those of ancestry, empathy and analogy.

Although Jacobitism is grounded in historical events and a cultural tradition, one needs to be able to cite some ultimate principle to which its actions and values are understood to conform and by means of which they can be identified and judged. This is most true of Jacobitism by analogy, which could operate in a wide variety of contexts. As the historical events and personalities recede in time, as the cultural heritage becomes more attenuated, the importance of the abstract principle increases. It seems to me the following points might broadly cover the matter.

a. The bedrock Jacobite principle relates to a distinction between naked “power” and legitimate “authority.”
b. The defining characteristic of “authority” is that it rests in the end on an emotional attachment. This is in contrast to a Hobbesian notion of power as requiring no support beyond its own ability to impose itself.
c. This attachment is understood as being of an ancestral or customary or deeply natural or “patriarchal” kind.
d. “Power” is seen as legitimated by “authority” rather than vice versa.
There is no inherent problem as long as “power” and “authority” are by and large vested in the same people or institutions.

“Authority” can be undermined by “rationalist” attitudes because, as James McAuley observes, “often its theoretical justification remains poorly developed and vulnerable to sophistic criticism... It can always seem superstitious and wrong in comparison with an invisible rationalistic perfection.” (McAuley, The Grammar of the Real, p. 118)

And finally and most crucially, what we can call the “Jacobite response” is triggered when “power” and “authority” diverge to the point where the latter comes under outright attack from the former.

There seems need for a single general term to cover all those who adhered to the Stuarts over the several generations of their woes, and the term “Stuartist” would do. The helpfulness of such a term can be seen in the way the essence of Jacobitism can be illustrated by means of it. With the Restoration of 1660, the house of Stuart regained at least a measure of the power it had lost by its defeat in the Civil Wars. With power and authority to that extent reunited, to be a “Stuartist” was to be a friend of power. With the overthrow of King James in 1688, the gap opened again between power and authority and to be a “Stuartist” was necessarily to be a Jacobite enemy of power.

If these ideas are at all valid, we can posit at least three essential elements of the Jacobite spirit.

The emotional attachment, which is the truth embodied in Pascal’s dictum that “The heart has reasons that reason cannot know.” A Jacobite is as “rational” as any other person, but one of the things rationality enjoins on him or her is the importance of emotional connections.

The acceptance of danger, to oneself and to all one cherishes, for to be at odds with unconstrained power is always inherently dangerous.

The counter-revolutionary mission, the task of restoring an order of things that memory holds to have been good and perennial (although of course not without its faults) and which has been wrongfully overthrown.

These three elements can be summarized as the “Jacobite Trinity” of Love, Risk and Memory. And what we have called “Jacobitism by analogy” may be recognized by the presence of these three factors.

Erikson, Young Man Luther, p. 112. Another pertinent comment has the more haunting connotation of fairy-tale. Writes Adrienne Burgess: “Children are never fatherless in their imaginations, for if they do not know their fathers, they make them up.” (Fatherhood Reclaimed, p. 181) And Thomas Moore indicates the plight of the modern atomized and orphaned individual in terms of the urgent question: “How can I evoke a fatherly myth in a way that will give my life the governance it needs?” (Care of the Soul, p. 33)
Quoted from Camus, *The Rebel*, p. 195. The sentence is referred to as being from Lenin’s 1917 work *The State and the Revolution* and is given as follows: “Even the head of the military power of a civilized State must envy the head of the clan whom patriarchal society has surrounded with voluntary respect, not respect imposed by the truncheon.”


Wilson, “There He Goes Again – More of the Way We are Now.” *Chronicles Magazine*. http://www.chroniclesmagazine.org/cgi-bin/wilson.cgi/There_He_Goes_Again.html (Accessed 15 May 2007). I myself can call to mind only one recent instance of honour being mentioned or invoked in relation to the public realm. In his book of 2005, the former Federal Opposition Leader Mark Latham asserted that “the politics of smear and personal destruction,” are prevalent in the Australian Labour Party, and he declared: “This type of politics shatters the code of honour and respect on which a working-class organization should be based.” (*The Latham Diaries*, p. 6) The reply of course is that the Labour Party has not been “a working-class organization” for a long time. Nonetheless, the book does contain some accurate analysis of the ills of current Australian and Western society. This, for example: “The new political divide is between insiders and outsiders — those who occupy the centres of authority and influence in society and those who have been disenfranchised by the power-elite… This is why the old politics is dying and a new paradigm is needed.” (p. 161)

Buchanan, *The Death of the West*, p. 264.

For an unusually succinct statement on this topic, see Casey, “Democracy and the Thin Veneer of Civilization” in *Quadrant* (November 2006), pp. 36-40. Casey writes that, “Political religions are the product of two factors: anthropological necessity and secularization.”


Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, p. 34.
Lewis, *The Wisdom of Narnia*, no page number. On the recent state of the Catholic Church, “The facts speak for themselves,” wrote Australia’s best-known Catholic lay activist in 1986. He noted that the number of Australian Catholics regularly practicing their faith had halved in the previous twenty years, the period in which those he called the “progressives” had attained “control of the machinery of administration and policy.” Of the Catholic secondary education system, he observed: “Within two years of leaving school, approximately 80 per cent have abandoned the practice of the Faith.” In another decade or so, he warned, “the position of the Catholic Church in Australia may well have gone beyond repair.” (Santamaria, *Australia at the Crossroads*, pp. 95-107) The only positive Santamaria could see at the time was the hope he placed in the steadying influence of Pope John Paul II, who had just visited these shores. But whatever his merits in other respects, that Pope was to become the proponent of what Australians call “black armband history.” That Pope would become the “Great Apologizer” for pretty much everything from the Crusades down. A recent commentator indicates what endless quicksand the Pope was leading the Church into: “the 14th century mystic St. Catherine of Sienna supported the Crusades. John Paul II’s way of getting round this was to note, in a 1995 statement, that ‘she was a daughter of her time.’” (Bethell, “Is the Pope Overdoing the Apologies”) This was surrender to the glibdest cant of progressivism, and a suicidal endorsement of the “rubbish bin of History” approach. It opened the prospect for every Catholic that the Church might repudiate any action or belief of theirs in the future and at the behest of whatever zeitgeist happened to be current. (One need only note the banning of the Latin Mass and the victimization of its continuing devotees, a victimization only just recently relaxed.) The way had been opened for past Catholics to be shamed in the eyes of both their present-day enemies and their own posterity, just as the Crusaders have been ritually shamed. (Perhaps some future Pope will feel the need apologize for John Paul II’s part in the downfall of Communism, and unctuously ascribe the error to him having been “a son of his time.”) Of course there was no reciprocal apology from the Muslim side for its various transgressions. Nor was one expected, for we know the sons of Saladin do not stoop to shaming their ancestral “holy warriors.” Only in the West could such a thing be considered chic. That John Paul II could be so widely acclaimed as one of the greatest of all Popes is of itself an indication of how utterly things had fallen apart. For an example of how bitterly some have resented John Paul
II’s behaviour, and have perceived it as a betrayal of the West as well as of the stewardship of the Church, see Fallaci, *The Rage and the Pride*, pp. 81-83.

It is worth quoting a general comment by Pat Buchanan on the Christian churches in our time: “No court forced these churches to make fools of themselves. They wanted to be relevant and they made themselves irrelevant. And before berating fifteen-year-olds for caving in to peer pressures on sex and drugs, consider the performance of their moral superiors.” (*The Death of the West*, p. 192)


41 Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination*, p. 100.

42 Kristol, *Reflections of a Neoconservative*, p. 27. Modernity might be summed up in the following way. There have always been some who have had both the power and the inclination to wreak great harm in the world, but they either never seriously thought of trying to attack the inherent nature of things or simply did not have the means, even if they wanted to. Modernity can be defined as the age when the will to attack the very nature of things began to acquire the power to do so. This is surely the point that Lyle Lanier is making in *I’ll Take My Stand*: “Francis Bacon… is the precursor of the spirit of modern life.” (p. 128) For Bacon was the prophet of what we could call “the science of impiety” that is, impiety as an intellectual doctrine and an organizational principle. Bacon pronounced the right of the naked human will to overthrow and subjugate Nature herself. Compared to that, attacks on mortal kingdoms were small matters. That this impiety is ultimately self-destructive is obvious. Perhaps Nietzsche glimpses the psychology of it when he writes of those who have so great a need to dominate that, “in default of other objects” they “at last hit upon the idea of tyrannizing over parts of their own nature…” (*A Nietzsche Reader*, p. 215)


44 In Twelve Southerners, op. cit., Introduction by Louis D. Rubin, Jr., p. xvi.


47 Black, *Culloden and the ’45*, p. xiii.
48 Pittock, *Jacobitism*, p. 89.
49 Black, op. cit., p. xiii.
52 Hogg, op. cit., p. xiv.
53 Pittock, Introduction to Hogg, *Jacobite Relics*, p. xiv. In this volume Hogg’s original Introduction repeats the page numbering of the new Introduction by Pittock which preceeds it, and this may create slight confusion in the referencing.
54 Ibid., p. xiv.
56 Kenneth Minogue, for example, indicates how Gnostic thought accords with the alienation and elitism of the Puritan mindset and with the “adversary culture” of today. He describes “a structure of civilizational self-hatred which exhibits its own morality, liturgy, demonology, and eschatology.” It derives from various sources, he says, but ultimately from “beliefs that proliferated at the time that Christianity was developing.” (“The New Epicureans” in Kramer and Kimball, eds, *The Survival of Culture*, p. 23)
58 Scruton, op. cit., p. 1. Herder and *Kultur* are now widely seen as suspect, as linked with Nazi-type “blood and soil” fanaticism. But one only need contrast the genuine “blood and soil” idea with the Nazi concept of the “Master Race” to see how alien Nazism was to the real thrust of Herder’s thought. The matter comes down to the relation between the particular and the universal, and also to a genuine understanding of honour. Those who value their own *Kultur* have good grounds to acknowledge the *Kultur* of others, and so adhere to the principle of live and let live. By contrast, the “Master Race” thesis is predatory by definition and dishonourable at the core, for it flouts that basic mutual recognition which is the essence of what this essay calls the Common Dish of Honour.

One needs to remember that the Herder view of culture became influential in Germany and elsewhere partly as a form of resistance to the predations of Revolutionary and Napoleonic France. It grew in opposition to a notion of Mastery — the special modern kind that feels entitled to fashion the human race into universal ideological correctness. Like Bentham, the great commissar of Utilitarianism, asserting that he “could legislate for all India without ever leaving his study.” (Nisbet, *Conservatism: Dream and Reality*, p. 17) Or there is the opposite folly – as
with militant “multiculturalism” – where the whole Western tradition is required to grovel in apology for its own existence, and to set about abolishing itself. As David Gress rightly comments: “the only West that can be accommodating to other cultures is a West that knows itself… An empty vessel, a historically illiterate people, cannot give to others the respect it does not give itself…” (Plato to Nato, p. 556) The Herder concept of a culture could be viewed as the collective social equivalent of Jung’s notion of the balanced “Self,” the “Self” that is a particular identity within a universal framework.

59 Ibid. p. 46. In the General Introduction to their great anthology, Eighteenth Century Literature, Tillotson, Fussell and Waingrow reflect upon “the dark awareness of mutability and loss” and the accompanying “sense of fragmentation” which grew ever more pronounced after Culloden. They write: “When [Prince] Charles was driven from the Scottish moors in 1746, much else seemed to retire with him…” For after that, they suggest, it was clearer to people “that the old world had drawn to a close and that the modern era had begun” (pp. 13-15).

60 Jung, Modern Man In Search of a Soul, p. 201.

61 Pittock, op. cit., p. xxxiv.


63 Duffy, Christopher, “The ’45”, p. 25.

64 Lord, The Stuarts’ Secret Army, p. 234.

65 Ibid., pp. 234-236.

66 Ibid., p. 235.

67 Ibid., p. 235.

68 Ibid., p. 235.


70 Murray, A Working Forest, p. 29.

71 Black, preface to Culloden and the ’45.

72 Pittock Jacobitism, p. 7.

73 Ibid., p. 7.
99 Pittock, op. cit., p. 11.
100 Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven*, p. 529.
101 Ibid., p. 225.
102 Lewis, *Of This and Other Worlds*, p. 25.
103 Booker, *The Seven Basic Plots*, p. 3.
104 Ibid., p. 3.
105 Ibid., p. 6.
106 Ibid., p. 6.
107 Ibid., p. 7.
109 Booker, op. cit., p. 305.
110 Ibid., p. 305.
111 Tawney, op. cit., p. 229.
112 Booker, op. cit., p. 702.
113 Weaver, op. cit. p. 176.
115 Scruton, op. cit., p. 114.
116 Ibid., p. 64.
117 Moore, *Care of the Soul*, p. 223.
118 Postman, *Building a Bridge to the Eighteenth Century*, p. 9. For a succinct outline of the case that the Reformation was the main destroyer of the West’s own great and sustaining Story, see Karen Armstrong, *A Short History of Myth*, pp. 119-149.
120 Gordon, *Under Which King?*, p. 17. In a longer essay one would wish to pursue the whole topic of “love” in this kind of context. Allen Bloom, for example, reflects on, “the de-eroticization of the world, a companion of its disenchantment…” (*Love and Friendship*, p. 15) Czeslaw Milosz sums up
key aspects of modernity when he states: “Nothing evokes such horror in the land of dialectics as a writer who depicts man in terms of elementary forces of hunger and love.” (The Captive Mind, p. 124) And Denis de Rougemont goes to the nub of our concerns here. He looks at the love story of Tristan and Iseult and at what he calls the mythic and psychic “laws” of love which it illuminates, and he observes, with original italics: “Profaned and repudiated by our official legal codes, these laws have become the more compelling in that they wield no power over us except in our dreams.” (Love In the Western World, p. 19) On a different plane, Dean Ornish writes at length about “The scientific basis for the healing power of intimacy.” (Love & Survival)

121 Murray, A Working Forest, p. 151.

122 Ibid., p. 187.


125 A good illustration comes from Parfit, “Powwow: A Gathering of the Tribes,” National Geographic Magazine (June 1994), pp. 88-113. This article looks at present-day Native Americans who seek to maintain their traditional lore of song and dance, costume and heritage. Two statements occur on the same page, barely an inch apart, but at opposite ends of the spectrum. The first exemplifies Anti-Story, the utterance of the commissar, with its typical blend of domination, sanctimony and legalism: “The supply of eagle body parts is regulated by federal authorities, who provide the feathers of dead birds to qualified Indian applicants.” The second exemplifies Story, with its poetic vision, its sense of the pity of things, its feeling of fellowship with the past: “The long wind of the western plains sings a song of desolation… If I whistle, ghosts will come around, of people and hopes dead before their time.”

126 Conrad, Heart of Darkness, p. 60.

127 Ibid., p. 81.

128 Ibid., p. 65.

129 Ibid., p. 66.


132 Berger, op. cit., p. 424.


136 Ibid., p. 117.


140 Bellow, op. cit., p. 277.

141 Nisbet, *Conservatism: Dream and Reality*, p. 15.

142 Barzun, *From Dawn to Decadence*, p. 34.

143 Damrosch, *God’s Plot and Man’s Stories*, p. 25.

144 Nisbet, op. cit., p. 17.


146 Ibid., p. 216.

147 Yeats, *Selected Poetry*, p. 147.


149 Ibid., p. 42.

150 Ibid., p. 30.

151 Ibid., p. 24.

152 Ibid., p. 35.


155 Ibid., p. 55.

156 Ibid., p. 36.

157 Ibid., p. 49.

159 Jones, op. cit., p. 10.
160 McAuley, *The End of Modernity*, p. 36.
162 McAuley, op. cit., p. 35.
163 Weaver, op. cit., p. 10.
166 Clark, op. cit., p. 116.
167 Tolkien *The Lord of the Rings*, p. 423.
174 Ibid., p. 66.
176 Scruton, op. cit., p. 8.
177 Duffy, op. cit., p. xiii.
178 Ibid., p. xxxii.
179 Ibid., p. 495.
180 Ibid., p. 475.
182 Weber, op. cit., p. 73.
Gelber, “Intellectuals and International Relations” in Quadrant (December 2006), pp. 9-16. The full implications of this can be seen by means of a simple thought-experiment. Left in “benign neglect,” innate natural forces ensure – to an amazing degree of exactitude and consistency – that human beings are equipped with ten fingers each. But imagine if the supply and allocation of fingers were determined on the basis of social policies, judicial decisions, bureaucratic rules, religious and ideological doctrines, political pressure, economic interest, intellectual fashion, moral vanity and media hype. Human fingers would very soon be as badly distributed in the world as hundred-dollar bills are now. “Gelber’s Law,” as I make use of the term here, comprehends Modernity as that mindset whose relentless drive and inherent tendency is to bring such an insane and unjust world into being. In fields like genetic engineering that world is already upon us. Put into Biblical terms, Modernity is a repeat of the folly by which the Tree of Life was rejected in favour of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

Lasch, op. cit., p. 528.

Weaver, op. cit., p. 23.

Burke, Philosophy, p. 240.


Buchanan, The Death of the West, p. 230.

Furedi, Politics of Fear, p. 165. Over the last decade, no one has shone more light on the malaise of Western society than Furedi, a sociologist. Part of his value, from our perspective, is that he writes from an avowedly pro-Enlightenment viewpoint, and thus seems a prime example of a Whig appalled by the world Whiggery has made. He writes, for example: “Those who contend that people now possess greater choice than before misunderstand the fundamental processes at play. Whether they like it or not, people have been ‘freed’ from many of the relations that linked individuals together in the past. So, in principle, people are free to choose their lifestyles and relations. But in the absence of new forms of social solidarities such freedom helps to intensify the sense of estrangement and powerlessness.” (Culture of Fear, p. 172)

Weber, op. cit., p. 34.


Buchanan, op. cit., p. 148.

Nathanson and Young, Spreading Misandry, p. 233.

Gray, Straw Dogs, p. 124. As Furedi and others have shown, this issue comes to the fore in the current climate of “therapism.” If the commissars
and their cadres are themselves hag-ridden by depressive and/or obsessive-compulsive disorders, they also promulgate those disorders as a means of control over others. As the Australian science academic Dale Atrens puts it: “Imagine Big Brother with a cattle-prod in one hand and a bag of Prozac in the other.” (“Black Dogs, Molecules and Madness”) Atrens has written extensively on the present-day Puritan mentality as it operates from it power-bases of “therapism” and “healthism.”

196 Quoted from Barzun, p. 36.
197 Barzun, op. cit., p. 34.
198 Lewis, Christian Reflections, p. 95.
199 Pasternak, Doctor Zhivago. p. 420. As Laurence Lerner puts it: “If a ‘new’ movement has to be seen as a rejection of all that has gone before, it will have to take up extreme positions that no-one has previously been crazy enough to adopt… the effect on understanding can only be reductive of both elements. The ‘traditional’ will be dead, the ‘new’ will be lunatic.” (Reconstructing Literature, p. 3)
200 Conway, op. cit., p. 78.
201 Ibid., p. 16.
202 Erikson, Young Man Luther, p. 61.
203 Ibid., p. 118.
204 Ibid., pp. 59-61.
205 Sommers, Who Stole Feminism?, p. 27.
206 Sennett, Respect, p. 107.
207 Howard, The Death of Common Sense, p. 47.
208 Ibid., p. 153.
209 Ibid., pp. 138-140.
210 Bryan, Codes of Love, pp. 28-32.
211 Burke, Philosophy, p. 130.
212 Schumaker, The Age of Insanity, p. 10.
213 Ibid., p. 79.
214 Ibid., p. 122.

215 Ibid., p. 31.

216 Ibid., p. 126.

217 Ibid., p. 24.

218 Ibid., p. 16.

219 Barzun, op. cit., p. 35.


222 Ibid., p. 9.

223 Ibid., p. 93.

224 Wilson, *The King and the Gentleman*, p. 337.


226 See, for example, two profoundly misandric books of the last few years, *Adam’s Curse: A Future Without Men*, by Bryan Sykes, Professor of Human Genetics at Oxford, and *Y: The Descent of Men*, by Steve Jones, Professor of Genetics at University College, London. Such works may be viewed as analogous to the kind of material that came from German academic and scientific sources in the Nazi period, the whole tendency of which was to help to legitimate the idea of a world “cleansed” of certain categories of people. In other words, it was in the service of a homicidal zeitgeist. Nathanson and Young stress the similarities between misandry and anti-Semitism, observing that “belief in the full humanity of men has been dangerously undermined by stereotypes based on ignorance and prejudice, just as that of Jews was.” (*Spreading Misandry*, p. 4)


228 Weil, *The Need for Roots*, p. 217. Even in so routine a sphere as urban planning we can observe Modman’s contempt for those whose lives and well-being are deemed expendable. Jane Jacobs writes: “people who get marked with the planners’ hex signs are pushed about, expropriated, and uprooted as if they were the subjects of a conquering power. Thousands
upon thousands of small businesses are destroyed, and their proprietors ruined, with hardly a gesture at compensation. Whole communities are torn apart and sown to the winds…” (*The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, p. 7) This might not be quite of the same degree of moral criminality as Hitler or Stalin or Mao disposing of entire populations in the name of remaking the world, but the principle is the same. John Gray makes the connection on the broadest level in likening the global free market to communism: “what these Utopias have in common is more fundamental than their differences. In their cult of reason and efficiency, their ignorance of history and their contempt for the ways of life they consign to poverty or extinction, they embody the same rationalist hubris and cultural imperialism that have marked the central traditions of Enlightenment thinking throughout its history.” (*False Dawn*, p. 3)

229 Boot, op. cit., p. 54.

230 Ibid., p. 114. The issue of ultimate good and evil is not to be addressed lightly, but Tom Shippey has discussed it in a context relevant to our concerns here. In *Tolkien: Author of the Century*, he outlines the “Boethian” and the “Manichaean” views. The first contends that “there is no such thing as evil. What people identify as evil is only the absence of good.” (p. 130) This seems to be the view of C.S. Lewis who held, as Shippey puts it, that it is no more possible to create a “counter-morality based on evil” than it is to “revoke biology and live on poison.” (p. 133) The second view holds that “the world is a battlefield between the powers of Good and Evil, equal and opposite.” (p. 134) William James, for example, seems to endorse the latter view when he writes of those times when “radical evil gets its innings and takes its solid turn.” (*The Essential Writings*, p. 235) Shippey’s own compelling suggestion, based partly on a reading of two lines of the Lord’s Prayer, “Lead us not into temptation/But deliver us from evil,” is that we must take both propositions into account — that evil is a falling away from the good, and also a separate force in the world. He argues that this is Tolkien’s view, a “double or ambiguous view of evil.” (p. 141) The same might be said of Edmund Burke’s view of the Jacobin mentality. On one hand he declares: “The evil is radical and intrinsic.” (*Reflections*, p. 339) On the other he asserts: “Its spirit lies deep in the corruptions of our common nature.” (*Philosophy*, p. 239) And Shakespeare seems to illustrate this double aspect in those plays where figures of outright evil seem to operate as autonomous forces, but are given their openings by the folly of people like Othello and Lear. And this appears to me to link very much to the issue of honour, for it is hard to see what other quality or attribute could perform the dual task of resisting a ferocious outward enemy while trying to remain inwardly decent.


232 Boot, op. cit., p. 166.

233 Quoted from Gress, *From Plato to Nato*, p. 363.
234 Hemingway, *A Farewell To Arms*, p. 115.
239 Ibid., p. 208.
240 Chesterton, *Essential Chesterton*, p. 77.
241 Leavis, op. cit., p. 110.
242 Saul, op. cit., p. 27.
247 Jung, p. 240.
249 Ibid., p. 204.
250 Ibid., p. 205.
251 Clark, op. cit., p. 201
253 Ackroyd, op. cit., p. 111.
254 Digby’s book appears to be out of print, but good account of it, and of its influence, is given in Girouard, *The Return to Camelot*, pp. 56-80.
255 Chesterton, op. cit., p. 431.
256 Krause, *Liberalism With Honour*, p. xi
257 Ibid., p. 4.
258 Ibid., pp. 186-187.
Ibid., p. 187.

260 Ibid., p. 128.

261 Quoted from Schivelbusch, *Culture of Defeat*, p. 64.

262 Shivelbusch, p. 48.

263 Ibid., pp. 48-51.

264 Boot, op. cit., p. 122.


267 Solzhenitsyn, *Alexander Solzhenitsyn Speaks to the West*, p. 44.

268 Quoted from Jung, p. 225.


270 Abrams, in Lodge, ed., *Twentieth Century Literary Criticism*, p. 3.


272 Wilson, *The King and the Gentleman*, p. 403. One historian’s estimation of King Charles is worth noting here, both for its own sake and because it ties closely to a central idea in my novel — that of the “Rightful Task.” Writes Conrad Russell: “Charles I was not a successful man, let alone a successful king, but he was a very successful martyr.” (*The Crisis of Parliaments*, p. 383)

273 Ibid., p. 404.


275 Camus, op. cit., p. 79.


277 Camus, op. cit., p. 38.

278 Gray, op. cit., p. 194. For a vivid and poignant illustration of Gray’s essential point, see George Mackay Brown, *An Orkney Tapestry*, especially the section called “Rackwick.” In the small context of an island community, the renowned Orkney poet conveys the tragedy of the Reformation, the destruction of the authentic West, and the ensuing doom of all traditional societies. He writes: “The notion of progress is a cancer that makes an
elemental community look better, and induces a false euphoria, while it drains the life out of it remorselessly.” (p. 50)

Australia’s premier historian, Geoffrey Blainey, touches on these matters in the course of observing that, “Our civilization lacks a collective memory but requires one more than ever before.” He asserts that, “the excessive faith in progress” rests on a highly loaded value-judgment, “a belief that primitive societies were abject.” And he writes: “If, however, primitive societies had been seen as successful in their own way, then part of the evidence for human progress – for the superiority of present over past – would automatically have disappeared.” (The Great Seesaw, p. 303)

Peter Conrad, in his Everyman History of English Literature, adds a related angle. “In the beginning is the epic. Literature begins there.” (p. 1) And this is the case because, as he illustrates by reference to Beowulf, the epic hero “embodies social solidarity.” (p. 7) “Epic exists to keep the monster out.” (p. 13) And “Epic is about what is necessary to us: shelter, safety.” (p. 20) In other words, is about Gray’s “tragic contingencies.” For our purposes here, Peter Conrad makes a most important point when he observes: “Beowulf is thus about both why the human tribe needs, at least at first, a hero to defend it, and about why the human tribe needs, in the longer term, the more abiding defence it finds in literature.” (p. 2)

279 Bredvold, The Brave New World of the Enlightenment, p. 130.
280 Sennett, p. 173.
281 Boot, p. 136.
283 Ibid., p. 249.
285 For views of this phenomenon see Washburn and Thornton, eds, Dumbing Down. Also Postman, Amusing Ourselves To Death. And on the closely related rise of “therapism” see Salerno, SHAM: How the Gurus of the Self-Help Movement Make Us Helpless; Weldon, Godless In Eden; Glasser, Reality Therapy.
286 Murray, The Quality of Sprawl, p. 234.
287 Gray, Heresies, p. 17.
288 Solzhenitsyn, op. cit., p. 41.
289 Hirst, “Kangaroo Court”: Family Law in Australia, p. iii. Agencies like the Family Court exhibit in concentrated forms the anti-male hostility that is
found right across the society, but the contemporary plight of women is no picnic either. A strong article by Amanda Platell parallels this essay’s view of “revolutionism,” arguing that much of what is touted as “emanicipation” is in fact dispossession and disinheritance. In “The Silent Conspiracy That Has Hurt Women,” Platell defines herself as among “a growing band of one-time feminists looking back on our own lives…” In her view, the “feminist crusade” has “laid waste to much that had made women happy in previous generations.” She is now willing to “stand up and ask the unthinkable,” which is: “Could it be that the freedom we now enjoy is part of the problem?” Platell reports on her interview on these matters with the novelist Fay Weldon: “She called women like me ‘the lost generation’—the ones who had inherited a barren landscape after the revolution had marched through.”

290 Ibid., p. 47.

291 Ibid., p. 48. For insights into judicial mayhem in the American context see Bork, *Slouching Towards Gomorrah*; Baskerville, “Fathers Into Felons”; Anderson, “The American Inquisition”; Roberts, “At Christmas, Remember the Falsely Imprisoned”; Coombs, “An Inquisition for the Children.” In the British context see Furedi, *Culture of Fear*; Colebatch, *Blair’s Britain*, “Despatches from Britain’s Culture War” and “Britain’s Policing Madness”; Dalrymple, “Brutish Britain”; Hitchens, “Keep Quiet or Face Arrest.” And for an overall comment on the modern West, John Ralston Saul observes that the “reforming elites” have long practiced in the manner advocated by Hobbes: “He argued that the populace would run amok unless kept in awe of some kind of authority. And fear of punishment was the best way to control us… our reforming elites have… accepted almost entirely his view of social organization as a control mechanism.” (*The Unconscious Civilization*, p. 166) In other words, they adhere to the “Crime-Scene” ideology.


293 Berger, in Hoff Sommers, ed., *Vice and Virtue*, p. 416.

294 Ibid., p. 416.

295 Ibid., p. 418.

296 Ibid., p. 419. A recent article by Bettina Arndt, about high suicide rates among farmers, illustrates the social and psychological dissolution of rural life in recent decades. It also usefully points up the way that certain categories of people are quietly consigned to the rubbish-bin. Arndt quotes a professor of primary health care. He cites the daily figure for men killing themselves and observes that if the same number of whales were beaching themselves every day “there’d be an outcry,” but when the casualties are men, “no one seems to care.” He adds that, “Back in the 1990s, we spent $31 million on youth suicide strategies, but now that it’s adult men who are the major problem, we’re lucky to get $1 million a year.” But in fact all this
is readily explicable. “Adult men” constitute one of the categories of person marked for large-scale elimination, and letting farmers waste away in despair and cull their own numbers by suicide is “philistine” Modman’s version of “nihilist” Modman rounding up the “kulaks” for liquidation. (“Every Four Days, An Australian Farmer Kills Himself…”)

297 Ibid., p. 419.

298 Ibid., p. 420. On the work of Sir Walter Scott, David Daiches makes a most interesting observation about the novels dealing with Jacobitism: Scott’s theme, he says, “is a modification of that of Cervantes, and, specifically, Redgauntlet is Scott’s Don Quixote. (A Critical History of English Literature, p. 836)

299 Ibid., p. 422.

300 Ibid., pp. 422-423.

301 Ibid., p. 426.

302 Furedi, Where Have All the Intellectuals Gone?, p. 84.

303 Bauman, Community, p. 48.

304 Kimball, Survival of Culture, p. 242.


307 Gray, Heresies, p. 28. In a longer essay one would wish to pursue the issue of “democracy” which Gray raises by this seemingly rather dismissive reference, although the thing itself can better be understood as a brutal and tawdry democratism. One could start by quoting Boot’s assertion: “No king ruling by divine right ever had the same power over his subjects as the modern political state, in either its totalitarian or liberal incarnation.” (How the West was Lost, p.136) One could then reiterate Naipaul’s view: “The politics of a country can only be an extension of its idea of human relationships.” (The Writer and the World, p. xiii) And one could then elucidate that idea by means of a poem written by the great Royalist general, Montrose. He bids his mistress to be governed in her affection for him “by purest Monarchie” and never to hold “a Synod in thy Heart.” (“To His Mistress”, Penguin Book of Scottish Verse, ed. Scott, p. 239) Montrose went to the gallows for his allegiance to Charles I, and his poem articulates a profound truth that few of us are keen to admit. We praise “democracy” (which of course in its true form has many virtues) while knowing that
none of us would ever want the deep essentials of our lives to depend on something as crude, as feckless and yet at the same time as merciless as “democratic” opinion and decision-making. We sense all too well that humans can’t remain human on that basis.

And Paul Gottfried notes: “Democracy and total control, as Robert Nisbet stressed in his classic *The Quest for Community* over sixty years ago, are not only compatible but increasingly in the Western world indistinguishable.” ("Kathy Is Correct")


309 Buchanan, *Death of the West*, p. 267.

310 McAuley *End of Modernity*. p. 8. Thomas Molnar informs us: “Social engineers and ideologues in the Soviet Union used to complain that all the “enlightened” efforts to modernize the family failed on the grandmother’s resistance who taught the children that there is a God, moral commandment, good and evil, and other superstitions weakening the child’s Soviet loyalty. Some critics attribute the Soviet collapse to the “subversive” influence of the older generation, active within the family while the parents were working...” (“Causes of Demographic Implosion In the Late Twentieth Century”) We might say then that one of the tasks of the “symbolic institution” in the present-day West is to perform the function of the Subversive Grandmother.

311 Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action*, p. 3.


313 Ibid., p. 922.

314 Ibid., p. 923.

315 Rueckert, *Kenneth Burke and the Drama of Human Relations*, p. 64.

316 Ibid., p. 61.

317 Ibid., p. 67.

318 Ibid., p. 65.

319 Bloom, Harold. *How to Read and Why*, p. 183. And E.D. Hirsch, Jr, states an elementary truth intolerable to the progressivist mind: “The more computers we have, the more we need shared fairy tales, Greek myths, historical images, and so on.” (Cultural Literacy, p. 31)
Lewis, *Of This and Other Worlds*, p. 67. An outstanding example that I would have liked to quote and discuss at some length in the text is John Buchan’s poem “Fratri Dilectissimo.” (In Wavell, ed., *Other Men’s Flowers*, p. 436) It is addressed to a childhood friend who is now dead and it recalls a time “When we were little wandering boys/And every hill was blue and high.” Back then they had played at being various heroes of Scottish history, especially Montrose, the great and loyal general of Charles I. They learned a code of honour together, partly from their historical heritage and partly from within themselves through the natural instinct to attach their affections to their heroes and to each other. The key stanza runs:

The obliterating seasons flow –
They cannot kill our boyish game.
Though creeds may change and kings may go,
Yet burns undimmed the ancient flame.
While young men in their pride make haste
The wrong to right, the bond to free,
And plant a garden in the waste,
Still rides our Scottish chivalry.

The old friendship now functions as a symbolic institution in which Buchan can fortify himself against vicissitude, as indeed can we to some extent by means of the poem. Though times and powers roll over our lives, and though evil doctrines appear to triumph, “they cannot kill our boyish game.” There is a place undimmed where true authority resides, the authority by whose warrant “Still rides our Scottish chivalry.”

Though there may be a slight overlap of meaning, the idea of “symbolic institutions” should not be equated with Benedict Anderson’s influential concept of “imagined communities” which comes from an intellectual milieu of progressivism. From that perspective the common human attachments and affections are viewed with some suspicion, and the word “imagined” has strong connotations of falsehood and ignorance, of “redneck” prejudice that requires policing. It is a concept in various ways congenial to the Party of the Snare and its Crime-Scene view of the world. For an overview see Dixson, *The Imaginary Australian*, pp. 145-151. Also Windschuttle’s comments in “The Struggle For Australian Values In an Age of Deceit.” The notion of “symbolic institutions” comes from the opposite milieu of the Party of the Sacrament and the Honour-System. The difference is one of essentially opposed outlooks on reality. It is the difference, say, between taking the word “myth” to mean “a story false and pernicious” and taking it to mean “a story deeply true and wise.”

Coleman, “Was Georges Sorel an Andersonian?”*, Quadrant* (September 20002), pp. 54-57.

The moral secessionist principle – that of a refusal to co-operate – can be seen in pristine form in a 1999 TLS article by an American law professor. Writes Kenneth Anderson: “the overbearing power granted to lawyers generally, and to prosecutors in particular, to invade lives with questions they have no business asking already constitutes a massive failure of the judicial integrity of the United States. Non-cooperation with its unjust claims seems altogether warranted. (“The American Inquisition”)


Ibid., p. 5.

Ibid., p. 53.

Ibid., p. 157.

Ibid., p. 99.

Ibid., 183.


Ibid., pp. 276-278. Steve Sailor identifies a basic dilemma when he observes: “It’s often assumed that low-trust societies can be fixed just by everybody deciding to trust each other more. But that can only work if people become not just more trusting but more trustworthy.” (“Fragmented Future”) I think of this as “the Street Party Problem.” A few years ago some local residents where I lived set out to organize a “street party” with a barbeque and children’s games and so forth. The hope was to make it a regular event and the stated aim was to encourage neighbours to “get to know each other” and so foster “trust” and “a sense of community.” At first I took this as a positive sign, as an act of grass-roots resistance to the dominant forces of alienation. But I quickly saw otherwise. Although the organizers appeared to be quite sincere, the only concept of “community” they had was essentially the one approved of by the Regime and the zeitgeist. It was the one in which good neighbours are those willing to inform on each other, to mount mutual surveillance in the name of political correctness and the Crime-Scene ideology. What the organizers saw as creating “trust” was in fact just another scheme of atomization, of mutual treachery incapable of seeing itself for what it was. The rot had gone too deep in the social fabric. The offered remedy was an aspect of the disease. This kind of experience raises painful questions about the scope and degree of “moral secession.” What must one “secede” from? Just from the direct sphere of the Regime and its cadres? Or from the whole contaminated society?

Ibid., p. 279.

Scruton, op. cit., p. 67. And Iain McGilchrist makes the same essential point in relation to art: “Art exists precisely to transcend those patterns of thought which criticism imposes on it. Art exists to repair the damage…” (Against Criticism, p. 65) “Art” and “Criticism” are yet another set of terms and another way of conceptualizing the two sides in the “paradigm wars” of modernity. Thus, for instance, the Cavalier is the “Artist” and the Roundhead is the “Critic.”

Ibid., p. 18.

Curry, Defending Middle-Earth, p. 129.

Tolkien, The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays, pp. 145-149.

Camus, p. 184. Reflecting on those “new cadres” for the restoration of the world’s honour, it might be useful at this point to re-cap and summarize, and there is a handy conceptual framework. Roger Scruton writes of the three kinds of knowledge possessed by human beings (“Intelligent Person’s Guide to Culture, p. 15). On an ascending scale of value, he defines them as follows:

Knowledge THAT, which is information, or The Facts.
Knowledge HOW, which is skill, or The Means.
Knowledge WHAT, which is virtue, or The Ends.

We can equate the general ideas expressed in this essay with these three categories.

At the level of Information is our grasp THAT things have gone ill in the world, our perception of the facts that tell us great evils are on the loose. On that level the essay holds that we are 500 years into the most crucial contest of all time, that of the Modernity Wars, that our opponent is “the worst criminal in history,” and that everything seems to hang in the balance.

At the level of Skill is our sense of HOW we might combat the ills, of the means available to us. On that level the essay advocates a strategy for the times – one by which, encouraged by “redemptive myths,” we make an act of “moral secession” out of the realms of the usurping power and into those of “symbolic institutions” where true authority is still to be found.

At the level of Virtue is our conviction of WHAT the good is, and thus what ends we are striving for. On that level, the essay seeks to show that the guiding virtue is Honour, and more specifically (since we are of the “church” and not the “sect”) what we have chosen to call the Common Dish of Honour.

And to recap on why we place Honour at the very apex, we can mention at least four general considerations.

Our fundamental view of the contest is that between a vision of the world as a Crime-Scene and the vision of it as an Honour-System. Being able to comprehend the idea of Honour would seem to be the prerequisite for being on our particular side.
The contest can also be expressed as a struggle between “power” and “authority.” In that context we define “authority” at its best as something that stands “on its own honour and the honour of those who are to obey it.” A sense of Honour seems the basic requisite for being on the side of “authority.”

The contest can also be stated in terms of the difference between the fanaticism of erecting a single virtue as the *unum necessarium*, and a proper respect for the integrity of the Tao in its balanced fullness. As Marcus Aurelius put it: “All things are connected, and the bond is holy.” And in that context Honour is to be understood as *pietas*—not so much a value *within* the Tao as the spirit of reverence which *upholds* the Tao against those who would pillage and destroy it in the name of some brand of zealotry. Or as John Carroll writes in his *The Wreck of Western Culture*, “For companionship and community there has to be an ethic independent of them. It is that of Honour…”(p. 336)

Our view of the contest also rests on a belief that the enfeeblement of Honour has left people unable to register *insult*, and that this blindness is the enemy’s greatest advantage at the present time. This makes the recovery of Honour essential, for without it people cannot see when they are being attacked and degraded, and thus they will not resist, or even recognize when others resist on their behalf.


341 For an intelligent outsider’s assessment of the real element of *gemeinschaft* in Southern life, see Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven*, pp. 386-406. He cites, for example, the assertion of a civil rights activist that, even with all her sins, “the South inspired her sons and daughters, even the suffering black ones, to love her.” He quotes Martin Luther King on “our beloved Southland,” and observes of King: “Once the scene of his activities shifted to the North, he no longer addressed a constituency that cared to hear about self-help, the dignity of labour, the importance of strong families, and the healing power of *agape*.”

342 Quoted from Finley, ed., *The Portable Greek Historians*, p. 151.

343 Quoted from Wavell, ed, *Other Men’s Flowers*, p. 434.


345 Gress, op. cit., p. 452.

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