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**Butcher’s Display**

The butcher checked his watch and wiped the blood from his hands on the blue and white apron that hugged his ample waist. The rolls of fat wobbled under his fingers. “Should listen to Rose,” he thought, recalling her daily sermon. “Cut down on fat, sugar and beer. You’re only fifty and I don’t fancy being a widow.”

The screech of the band-saw in the back room interrupted his ruminations. Whole sides were being divided into cuts for the front window. Later they were to be dressed with sprigs of the fresh parsley delivered earlier that morning. Some of his competitors used the plastic kind, but Bruce believed in the natural order of things. To buy it from Ramsey’s up the road was good for neighbourly rapport and therefore for his business. Their small shopping centre was constantly under the threat from the “big guys”, the specialty shops and supermarkets located at the nearby Westfield Shopping Complex, so the “small guys” had to support each other.

The wall clock chimed, the window at the top of the clock opened, a bird flew out and immediately retreated. Ever since he had bought the clock on his trip to Germany some years earlier, Bruce had never tired of the peek-a-boo game the bird performed on every hour. “Eleven am – time for a tea break.” He licked his lips in the anticipation of the sugary pastry that Harry had dropped off on his delivery rounds. “Sorry Rose, tomorrow,” he whispered “definitely tomorrow.”

He was already on the way to the back room, when the door-bell announced a customer. “Mr. and Mrs. “Corn Beef, 6 Lamb Chops, Leg Ham and Pork Sausage” entered, carrying their green recyclable bags. They were regulars, came weekly, and
rarely varied their purchase. With only a day left to the Easter break, Bruce wondered if their order would surprise him this time.

The shop’s white tiles threatened to crack under the impact of Mrs Corn Beef’s greeting. “Good morning, Bruce, how are you? Is Easter keeping you on your toes? I came across your lovely daughter the other day, the sweet baby is coming along so well, isn’t he just the most delightful little boy, I said to Paddy, look at his big feet, he will be one of those Olympic swimmers, mind my words... ” Pausing to catch her breath, she finally gave Bruce the chance he was waiting for. If he didn’t take it his morning tea would be completely ruined. “Good morning to both of you,” he replied, pulling out the pencil he kept tucked behind his ear, and paused expectantly.

“So did you watch the game, mate?” Corn Beef moved in, not giving his wife another chance. “What a bloody disgrace! I tell you, they couldn’t score a try if their life depended on it. Won’t make the premiership this year.”

“Nah, didn’t watch it,” Bruce replied half-heartedly. Rugby wasn’t his game, although he had played it at school to please his father, who as Bruce always suspected, acquired the passion for it when he dropped his father’s name Sukowski in favour of Smith. Years later, young Bruce Smith dropped the game as soon as he left the school and returned to his grandfather’s code, the soccer. Of course these days he only watched that on telly.

Waiting for the wife to make her decision, the butcher counted the passing seconds with his foot. Luckily she didn’t take long. “Here, Paddy, what you think about a leg
of lamb for a change? Look at this one, so juicy and plump. Where do you get your meat from these days, Bruce?”

He smiled proudly always ready to engage in one of his favourite subjects. “A mate of mine is the GM of the meat works at Young. It comes straight from there. Not waiting in storage for days. One day it’s alive and kicking, two days later it’s here on the counter. Can’t beat fresh, that’s my motto! I have been there not so long ago, to see my mate, but really to check it all, if you get my drift. It’s God’s own country filled with stock and cherry orchards.”

He stopped mid sentence seeing Corn Beef’s eyes growing large and his face taking on a deep scarlet hue. “Is everything all right, Patrick?” he asked, his hand already reaching for the phone. By the time Corn Beef’s words came out, his face started to return to normal.

“Isn’t that where the Muslims were sent some time ago? The papers were full of it. Afghans or whatever. They’re all the same to me: terrorists waiting their time, no matter where they come from. Shouldn’t let them work in such a sensitive industry. Just think of the damage. No need for bombs. One of them can poison hundreds of innocent families from miles away. Why does the government allow it?” He shook his head, already heading towards the exit.

The tea suddenly acquired an ethereal quality as Bruce started to count the losses. Luckily Mrs Corn Beef didn’t share her husband’s sentiments.
“Tell me, Bruce, you believe the meat to be perfectly safe, don’t you?” Her almost conspiratorial voice let him believe that another chance was coming his way.

“Absolutely, Mildred. No question whatsoever. As a matter of fact only yesterday I was talking to me mate about how well the Afghanis fit in and how hard they work. Grateful for the chance of a new life, if you get my drift.”

He leant over the steel counter top, his protruding stomach keeping him afloat. “They aren’t paid much, that’s a fact. No locals would take that kind of pay, not even the blackfellas. But these guys have a job in a town where many locals are unemployed.” His voice dropped to an intimate whisper. “I believe some of them brought their wives and kids, and their boys are talented soccer players. Young’s Under Ten team won the regional competition. First time ever. Give it a couple of years and talent scouts will be there selecting the youngsters for the National Team, mind my words.” He took a breath and continued.

“A couple opened a café selling their specialties and now even the cockies and their wives are flocking there in droves. Nah, they’re as good as any that came before them. They all had a hard time to start with but look at us now. Just look at my trays. Italian Osso Bucco, Viennese schnitzels, Greek lamb, Chinese stir-fry, Thai lemongrass chicken, Indian tandoori and Turkish kebabs. Only the Buddhists are not here, being vegetarians and all.”

Mildred interrupted his reverie. “Of course there could still be terrorists amongst them.” She called to her husband. “Remember your father, Paddy. He came here
when the old country was getting too hot, being an active IRA man back then. Involved in all manner of unsavoury deeds, I’m sure of that. A wilful old bugger he was from what I have heard. Today he’d be called a terrorist and sent packing.”

Her husband’s voice shook with indignation. “Really, Mildred! How can you? You can’t even begin to compare the situation. My father was an honest man, a Catholic, ready to fight for his religion but the terrorists these days, they’re criminals.”

In the ensuing silence Mildred checked her watch. “Doesn’t the time fly?” Casting a last wistful glance at the leg of lamb she continued, “I’ll have the corn beef, and say, six chops and some cold meat. Make it leg ham thanks, Bruce, and oh, some sausages as well.”
Window of Opportunity

It had all started to feel different some months ago. The daily routine, to which Kasim had grown accustomed, started to change with many more arrivals each week and only a few departures. A new compound was opened, separating those who had waited longest and by now had very little chance of getting out, from those arrived more recently and still held onto the hope of getting the visa.

The men now congregated in the dongas but instead of playing cards or chess they were conversing with fervour previously unheard of. Even within his group, the discussions were fierce, the men’s faces distorting in anger. “We’ve been locked up for far too long. We wait and wait for nothing,” shouted the man whom Kasim started to call an uncle after the night at the beginning of their journey, when his father together with other men went to check the trail ahead and did not came back. Those who returned talked of ambush by the border soldiers. Kasim never had a chance to even say goodbye. Suddenly his father was gone and he was an orphan, left with a small group escaping across the border into neighbouring Turkey. Returning without his father his uncle pulled out a fine silver chain with a piece of metal hanging on it. Kasim father’s last present to him. “It’s for you, he wanted you to have it,” he said, fastening it around the boy’s neck. There wasn’t even enough time to pray, they had to run deeper into the mountains. It was too far for Kasim to return, he became just another member of his “uncle’s” family. Now this man had become one of the most vocal men in his compound.
“It’s time for action,” agreed those with contacts on the outside. “The government is being tough on refugees; they need to secure votes to get re-elected at the upcoming elections.”

Kasim didn’t know what the word “elections” meant. It took some explanation from the adults for him to understand. Back home, with the Baath party in power, none ever changed the government. The leader was always there, to make his speeches and to watch everyone from the many statues and paintings, some so big that Kasim could easily fit into one of his shoes. He was everywhere, just like God was always there to be prayed to.

Others disagreed. “Don’t stir up emotions. Let’s wait and let the proper process take its course. It can’t be much longer. This is a civilised country, they know what we’ve escaped from, they won’t sent us back,” pleaded those who feared that any action would prevent them from getting their visas. Visa was something that everyone was waiting for, like a present Kasim hoped for before each New Year celebration. But no one knew when their present would arrive. With weeks passing and no decisions announced, those calling for action increased in number, and words like ‘hunger strikes’ and ‘escape’ entered their discussions.

Those trusting in God prayed ever more diligently, reading the Holy book all the time, waiting in silence. Kasim didn’t know which group was right. He just wanted to get out and go to a proper school but with the passing months he found himself increasingly worried that, like many others, he too would be sent back.
The heat inside the accommodation huts, uncomfortable most of the time, became truly unbearable during the summer. The fierce summer heat of his memories was much more bearable. Situated at the foot of the mountains, the stone walls of his grandfather’s farmhouse sheltered his family from heat, cold and dust storms for centuries. Within the thick walls, the fire was always on and the smell of his grandmother’s cooking always in the air. Outside, fruit trees provided shade even during the hottest part of the summer. The trees grew in soil so sandy that their existence there was a miracle. And still, his grandparents and others in the village produced fruit that because of its sweetness was in demand in markets of Mosul and Kirkuk. He remembered asking his grandfather, “How come our land grows fruit trees out of the sand?” The old, wrinkled face always gave the same reply, “It was the will of Allah to bring your forefathers to this valley, to show them where to dig for water so sweet and plentiful, that for centuries it continued to nourish the gardens and the orchards.”

Sometimes when he felt sad, Kasim sat with his back against the donga’s wall and closed his eyes. The smell of ripe fruit, his grandma’s cooking or freshly poured honey would drift by his nose, filling his mouth with saliva, making him believe that he was back there, under the apricot tree, waiting to be called for a family meal.

In the Australian desert the heat easily penetrated the thin walls of the huts, keeping the heat inside even at night. When the air-conditioning units broke down, which they did regularly, there was nowhere to cool off. And even the bathroom blocks were often locked up because of “accidents” that happened in the unsupervised showers.
At the beginning Kasim did not understand what the guards meant by accidents. It wasn’t like there was a river where kids would drown. They just wanted to cool down, even though the water itself was far from the clear cold spring found on his grandfather’s land. Only after he stumbled on men cutting themselves in the toilets and heard about someone hanging himself in the showers, did he realise what the guards were talking about.

When the hunger strikes began, they became big news across the whole compound. Kasim was careful not to get involved after he saw so-called trouble makers pushed about and locked up in isolation. He wanted to get out as soon as possible, get in touch with his family and find out what had happened on the farm since he left. He missed them all terribly. Sometimes his stomach hurt from his need to be with them. The nurse told him there was nothing wrong, but he knew it was his sadness that was making him sick. The sorrow sat at the bottom of his stomach and kept on digging into it to make sure he wouldn’t forget them. After some hours, the pain would suddenly go, leaving him exhausted and alone.

“I want to learn English, I want to go to a proper school, I want to be a doctor,” he kept telling anyone who’d listen. The school back home was a long way away, but his father had made sure he went every day. He enjoyed learning new things and his father took him away, for an opportunity to become a doctor. Only those well connected to someone in government were able to achieve that back there. His family didn’t have the money to bribe, nor the connections in the Ba’th Party. His teachers were strict but he was told he was a clever boy, especially at mathematics. At the detention centre he got help from Mr Karzai, an Afghani teacher of
mathematics back in his homeland. He gave Kasim problems to solve and when he succeeded he offered to teach him more. They communicated through math symbols, no English was needed. Mr Karzai set out problems and their solutions step by step, and Kasim copied them down carefully. Kasim then worked out other problems of the same kind. Mr Karzai helped him when the problems were too difficult or when he lost his way. Hours flew by as they sat working together. Kasim felt proud each time his teacher followed his solutions to the end, without crossing anything out. His uncle said that according to Mr Karzai, Kasim was at least three years ahead of his age group, which made him very smart. For Kasim, the time spent with Mr Karzai was fun, it was the only time he didn’t think of his father, his grandparents or his little baby sister, who was growing up without knowing him. Even the rock in his stomach had disappeared during those times.

Miss Mary, the Australian teacher at the Education Block, was also impressed by his work. “When you get out of here, make sure you go to a good school. You have a great brain for mathematics; all you need is to catch up in English. Then you’ll be flying.” He understood what she meant, but still he liked to think that she was telling him he could really fly, high up above the fences, across the desert and the sea, right back into his grandfather’s orchard. As each week went by without their numbers being called, he found it harder to believe that he would ever get out, that he would ever attend a school and become a doctor.

When his uncle became unpopular with the guards, after he started to ask questions and create disturbances, they used to burst into their room, at any time of the day or night, hoping to catch him using a mobile phone. No matter how often they tried
though, they never did find Kasim’s uncle’s phone. Kasim knew where it was because he had found the best hiding place for it.

After their arrival two years earlier they had been allowed to watch TV and use mobiles if they had them. Only after the “trouble” started these “privileges” were withdrawn. Kasim heard that Australians had become interested in what was happening at the detention centres, after a big ship picked up lots of refugees from a leaking boat. That was when the events started. Then another boat sank with many people on board, and it was then that the security guards started to harass everyone. But not all of them were the same. One afternoon, a guard the children secretly called Big Foot had stopped Kasim in the corridor leading to the dining room when no one else was about.

“Listen, kid, do yourselves a favour. Tell your uncle that tomorrow there’ll be a blitz on mobiles and any that are found will be confiscated. Don’t tell anyone, I need this job for a little while longer.”

At first Kasim did not understand why he was told. But Big Foot was the only guard who from the beginning had shown any interest in who Kasim was and asked his name once, instead just calling him by his number like the others did. So Kasim thought hard about the information.

In the end he decided not to tell his uncle about the warning. He would insist on knowing who told him, and Kasim wasn’t sure he could keep a secret. His uncle was likely to tell others, and if everyone hid their phones the guards would know that the
detainees had been warned. But what could he do? A saying of his grandfather came to his mind he’d heard him say it when hiding his guns from the soldiers: “The darkest spot is always beneath the candle.” During every raid the soldiers had searched the farm but never paused to investigate the doorpost, as they kicked in the front door. Had they done so, they would have found that the stone on which the doorpost rested was not as solid as it looked. When removed, it hid a hole big enough not only for the gun, but for ammunition and other arms as well. Only his grandfather, his father and, when he saw them removing the stone one night, Kasim knew about it. The soldiers who ransacked the farmhouse never discovered the hiding place.

At night, when his uncle had fallen asleep, Kasim stole the phone from his bedside and hid it behind one of the toilet blocks. The next morning, at the first opportunity, he slipped it into the bottom drawer of the teacher’s desk in one of the education rooms. He had never seen her open that drawer, which contained only papers and old textbooks.

“Did you steal my phone?” his uncle shouted at everyone that morning, Kasim included but Kasim only shook his head and pretended not to care. During the search many phones were confiscated, and in the end theirs turned out to be the only one left in the new compound.

Kasim waited a couple of days before he told his uncle what he had done. “You should have told me beforehand and let me decide what to do. You’re only a boy, not
experienced in matters of life,” his uncle replied, but Kasim could see that he was proud of his cleverness and daring.

“How much more experience in matters of life do I need?” Kasim mused. “I’ve crossed the mountain passes with all of them, lost my father without crying, gone without food or sleep, spent days and nights on a boat in the heavy seas without throwing up once, and for the past two years survived behind razor wire. Hasn’t that made me an adult?”

After the raids for the mobiles, Mr Karzai joined in the hunger strikes that started at different sections of the jail. The strikers set up a row of multicoloured tents made from sheets and blankets, just inside the internal perimeter fence. With the mattresses on the bare ground and the sheets strung from the fence, they reminded Kasim of the camps of the nomadic tribes that he recalled seeing during his childhood. In his memory, those people look happy and healthy, singing as they worked but the people inside the makeshift tents looked sicker with each passing day. During the first week of the strike Mr Karzai sat with Kasim inside a tent of deep red colour and set out new exercises for him. The heat was relentless, but the teacher’s mind was clear and his advice definite.

“Your fine brain must be exercised each day. Like a fine horse that has not been ridden it may start to buckle and bolt if not kept active and disciplined,” he declared as he set out one problem after another in a fat exercise book. Some time later Kasim thought that the teacher knew, those were the last exercises he was going to be able to give him, so he spent that whole day writing problems one after another, till the
whole book was filled. “When you finish them all, keep the book to show what you can do. Give it to your teachers once you get out of here.”

Later on Mr Karzai became too ill and was taken away. Around the time of the holy days that the Australians called the Easter, the word got around that outside the perimeter fence many people had come to visit the detainees and that they were going to breach the fence and get detainees out. Everyone rushed as close to the fence as they could to see what was happening. Kasim ignored his uncle’s order to stay with the women and children, followed the men and soon found himself squashed by the sweat-soaked bodies. With his vision obscured and his nose assailed by the pungent smell of fear and excitement, the stone in his stomach asserted itself with the now familiar pain. Unable to battle his way out of the crowd, he let his body flow with it. Every time the crowd surged, he was tossed forward into small crevices between the adult bodies and when the opportunity arose, he squeezed through them without anyone noticing him. All the men’s eyes were focused on the fence ahead.

After a little while he found himself shouting with the men, the initial fear giving away to the excitement of the moment. Above and ahead he caught occasional glimpses of the razor wire coils moving closer with each surge of the crowd until he could also hear the protesters on the other side of the fence. No one knew how they managed to get through the outside perimeter fence, but there they were, separated from the detainees only by a line of iron bars palisade.

“What do we want? Detainees out! When do we want them? Now!”
The next surge pushed him through another small gap between two bodies and the back against which he landed was covered in a sky blue tunic he had seen before. It belonged to Mr Karzai’s friend who sometimes interpreted for him and slapped Kasim’s shoulder and laughed each time Kasim solved a problem that was supposed to be particularly hard. Lately Kasim had seen him often in the hunger-striking tents. When the blue tunic moved forward Kasim followed, not wanting to lose him. With the next surge, he was pushed past the blue tunic and directly into the fence, his hands hitting the iron bars. The faces on the other side almost touching his own. Hands were directing him sideways towards an opening in the fence.

The man in the blue tunic was now wedging himself into the gap that somehow appeared between two bars. When he turned around his glance rested directly on Kasim. For a moment their eyes locked and his hand waved. “Come, this is the way to freedom.” Next second the gap was empty and a flash of bright blue disappearing amidst the cheering crowd. “Jump, jump!”

The gap was large enough for him just walk through. He stopped. His father’s words rang in his ears: “You’re smart. I want to take you away from here. I want you to study, not to become fodder for his next war. When you become a doctor, you can help your sister and your grandparents.” Somewhere on the other side of this fence a school was waiting for him. Even the teacher here said so. “Jump, jump!”

Their waving arms stretched toward him. He heard his uncle’s voice: “There’s nothing for us here. We wait and wait. It’s time for us to act.” He looked above into the sky, hoping that his mother’s smile was encouraging to take his first step.
He leapt through the gap and in the moment before the outstretched arms cushioned his fall he felt that he was truly flying. When he landed the sea of bodies closed in around him. The blue tunic was nowhere to be seen.

Hands lifted him off the ground, patted him, and pushed him sideways. A voice shouted into his ear: “Here, this way, you must run, hurry.” He understood “hurry” well. Hurry always meant danger. Hurry from the soldiers searching grandfather’s farm, hurry over the mountain pass covered in snow away from his father’s body, hurry onto a creaking wooden boat which looked like it would sink, but somehow stayed afloat. “Hurry” was a word that propelled him into action as no other did. A hand on his shoulder manoeuvred him through the crowd of bodies moving in the opposite direction.

The previously undisputed power of the perimeter fence lay trampled in the dirt, the razor wire coils were barbed snakes lying in wait to snare his feet. His guardian angel’s hands had manoeuvred him away from the trap and the voice urged him to greater speed: “Hurry, hurry!”

His lungs were begging him to stop; his heart was threatening to burst.

“You must keep going, it won’t be long,” the dismembered voice urged. Somewhere on the periphery of his vision Kasim noticed a sea of uniforms moving into the crowd. His lungs cried for air, but his legs kept running faster. Then he saw the tents; much smaller than those of the nomad dwellers, also less colourful. Some were clustered together in a large circle; others kept their own counsel. Instead of horses
and camels, cars were parked everywhere, so were small trucks, buses and camper vans.

“This way,” the voice directed, and the hands pushed him towards a small door in one of the buses. The three steps leading to the bus were all he managed before collapsing on the floor inside. Fighting for air, he looked around. A blur of colours slowly reassembled itself into a kitchen bench, a sink, a small table and a couple of cushioned seats. A curtain obscured the rest of the bus.

A tall man with a bright smile extended his hand. “I’m Tim. Have a seat.” He pointed to one of the seats, offering Kasim a tin mug filled with a fizzy drink. Kasim gulped down the drink. “Lemonade.” He liked that.

Tim moved into an opposite seat. “Do you speak English?”

His words sounded too slow for Kasim. After almost two years in the camp, he had learned a bit. “Yes,” he answered, feeling proud of his answer.

“Are you Afghani?”

“No, I’m from Iraq. My name is Kasim.” He wondered if he should add the number that the guards used to call him by, but Mr Tim nodded his head. “OK, Kasim,” he pronounced his name carefully, “tell me, are your parents still in the detention? Are your mother and father inside? Do you want to go back to them?”
Kasim’s heart lurched into his throat. Was this man going to send him back to the jail? Was he going to tell him he was too young for freedom? He took time to swallow his heart back to where it belonged, and then he answered. “My father dead, two years back, shot when crossing to Turkey. My mother dead before, when my baby sister born. No one mine in the jail, I want freedom. Been here two summers, too hot and cold in winter. We wait for nothing! I must go to school. I promised it my father. Please.”

The words came out fast and jumbled, but he didn’t care. He wasn’t going back to jail; he wasn’t going back to Iraq.

Mr Tim nodded his head but when he spoke, Kasim’s mind refused to understand. The words were all a blur; every now and then he recognised one: “Trip, car, help, away, Sydney.” He recognised enough to calm himself, and then he started to hear the rest. “Let’s get you changed fast, to make you less obvious. They are looking for you already.” Mr Tim pushed aside the curtain and called out. A girl’s voice answered from somewhere inside the bus. “We’ll change the colour of your hair straight away.”

A young woman came from behind the curtain, and motioned Kasim towards the sink. Pulling on rubber gloves, she bent her head over the sink and started to wet her hair. Then she straightened up and indicated to Kasim to do the same. He followed her example, soon feeling the cool water flowing down his skull and feeling her hands stroking his head.
“Here, take this,” she said, handing him a rag to cover his eyes. “Hold it tight or it’ll sting” she added, opening a bottle. He remembered what to do from a long time ago. His mother had found insects in his hair one day and washed his head with smelly stuff, and he had let go of the rag before she told him to. His eyes had stung and watered for hours afterwards. This time he pressed hard on the rag; after a while the smell became unbearable. Only the monotonous pattern of the girl’s talk and the fear of the uniforms stopped him from flinging the rag away and running out of the bus screaming.

Her words formed a stream of sound that carried him through the fear and the smell. After a while he felt his muscles loosen, the warmth on his skull soothing and relaxing. Then it was over. He was standing up, his head rubbed with a towel, his eyes level with hers. She clapped her hands, pleased with the result. When their eyes met, he lowered his to the ground, remembering his mother’s lessons.

Next, she handed him some clothes to change into. Kasim studied the torn jeans and not very clean shirt. “Why I change out of my new pants and top into this? I like my clothes, it’s like new.”

He looked puzzled at Mr Tim, who seemed to understand immediately. “Lisa, he’s ashamed to change in front of you, you must leave.” Before Kasim realised the mistake, she gave him a hug and was gone. Mr Tim’s voice had new urgency to it: “Get changed so you look more like one of us, hurry.”

That word again! He changed fast, but he clung to his pants and top.
A car stood directly outside the bus’s door, its engine running. “Crouch low and run straight into the car.” Kasim did as he was told. Once he was inside the car, another hand pushed him down between the front and the back seats and another voice whispered in his ear a second before a heavy blanket descended upon him: “It won’t be for long. Make yourself as small as you can, curl up into a ball.”

Kasim knew about being a ball. A small, round object, not noticed by anyone. “I am a soccer ball,” he repeated to himself, squeezing into the small space. Just like he had when a fight broke out on the deck of the boat even before they left the island. He had found himself caught between men fighting each other with machetes, knives and guns, there was nowhere for him to escape. He had curled up behind a post with a rope coiled around it, making it fat enough to hide between it and the cabin’s wall. As the fight raged all around him he had clung to his elbows, his knees digging into his chin. He had made a good ball, he had survived.

Soon the car was bumping over potholes and rocks, sending dust through the cracks in the car’s floor. He was uncomfortable; dust was clogging his nostrils, stinging his eyes making him choke and cough. A couple of times the car stopped and he lay still, holding his breath till the car moved on again. The blanket felt hot and heavy. Someone’s legs were digging into his ribs. His tears started to flow, without him giving them permission them to do so, and being a ball he didn’t even have hands to wipe them away. He controlled his sobs by counting the road bumps that threw his body one way and then another, making him feel like a real football ball, kicked and pushed from all sides.
After some time the car increased its speed, the rhythmical vibrations of sealed road replaced the bumps, and the dirt choking his lungs eased. Maybe he passed out from lack of air; maybe he fell asleep from exhaustion. The taste of his own tears was the last thing he remembered before the darkness claimed him.
Piano Removal

“This is the job from hell,” Mehran’s mind protested while his trapezoid muscle screamed at the leather strap cutting into it.

“George, for goodness sake, lift it higher! The bloody thing is killing me.” His voice seemed to bounce off the thick felt protecting the old piano, without getting any response from his brother behind it. “Higher, lift it higher!” His lungs were ready to burst, beating the almost severed shoulder to the prize for the most damaged part of his body.

The job from hell! He should have listened to the little voice that spoke to him the moment he located the correct street number. “Don’t even bother parking,” it had said. “Put the truck back into gear and run like hell.” From the cabin of his truck he could see at least thirty steep steps between the front gate and the entrance to the house. By now he knew there were precisely thirty-three, fifteen to the first landing and eighteen from there to the front door. He had counted every one of them. At the top of the stairs he looked back over the cityscape on the horizon. Only 8 am and the heat already hugged the glass buildings like a shimmering veil, heralding another sweltering day. In previous years Easter had announced the arrival of cooler weather, but this year the summer kept hanging on. “Gee, I hope there’s another way up – a back lane maybe?” he asked the woman who opened the door, appraising him carefully. He knew she wasn’t seeing what she expected. Where was the 6 foot 5 beefy neck and bulging muscles? Instead she was facing 5 foot something, wiry but certainly not big. And yes, the sleeves of his tight T-shirt nicely showed off his upper arm muscles. His accent over the phone would have given him away; she’d expected
a wog and in that she was not disappointed. His number two haircut and olive skin confirmed her expectation.

Every time he opened his mouth his accent filled the air, grabbing everyone’s attention. After all these years he still couldn’t manage to sound like them. It never worked. His sensitive ears heard the difference, his brain registered what sound was needed, but his vocal chords refused to reproduce it. The words came out with steel edges in the wrong places and long pauses replaced the torrent of expressions he wished for. Most of the time he felt ashamed, and whenever he could he chose to remain silent, letting George deal with the customers. But today George was still manoeuvring the truck into a suitable parking spot, and Mehran had no choice but to negotiate with the customer directly.

Waiting for her answer, he checked her out. Dark, wavy hair cut short, olive skin and darkish eyes. She too could have been one of them: a wog, a new Australian, an immigrant, a refugee; someone different, weird, someone other than one of them. It was obvious. So close to Leichhardt, she’d have to be an Italian.

“No, there isn’t a back lane,” she answered, “but there’s a side lane. That’s where the piano came in 15 years ago. The fence is fairly recent though. It was built with the new front deck.” Her words came out fluently and flawlessly, enhanced by that something he had learned to attribute to a “good education”. He met them often, those who spoke like her. Not surprising really, given that he was a specialist in moving expensive musical instruments.
Through the sliding door of the living room he could see a back fence overgrown with creepers, no gate in sight. Silently, she led him through the house to a back room, where the upright piano stood forlornly against the wall. It was an old piece and it felt smooth under his touch. It wasn’t particularly valuable piece, but a handsome and a decently made German instrument. One could feel its weight just by looking at it. He moved few of them over the past six years. They were solid and reliable; lasting forever if looked after properly. She brushed the top of it with her hand, removing dust he couldn’t see.

Mehran also noticed the narrow space she referred to as the side lane. It was too narrow; he could see immediately that it wasn’t going to work. The little voice asserted itself again, “Refuse the job, too much trouble already, not worth it.” He swallowed audibly, drowning the little voice. When he looked directly at her, he met brown eyes with green specks glowing with intensity he had not noticed before.

“Oh please don’t tell me it can’t be done. I need the piano out of the house. It’s been years since anyone played it and it just sits here, collecting dust. I need this space, it has to go.” He was about to say, “I don’t even need to have a look,” when he heard a familiar snort behind him. George had found his way upstairs and was standing nearby. “Not a good idea, brother,” he started quietly in Farsi. “You’ll be cursing the moment you set eyes on this house. And her too,” he added, smiling in the infuriating way only one’s younger brothers can.

Mehran felt his gaze drawn into the brown-speckled green, but resisted and instead focused on the rest of her face. She looked ill at ease. He could read the knowledge
of what George said in her face and suddenly felt ashamed for not giving it a try. Sometimes little voices and younger brothers must be ignored. “Come on, George, let’s give it a go,” he said in English. Without even looking at her, he could feel her relax, so he added for good measure: “Call me Mick. This is a hell of a place to move a piano from. We’ll need your help, get ready.”

Now, two and half hours later, the piano was firmly wedged between the wall of the house and a steel post from which, until a moment earlier, a gate had hung. They had pushed the piano back and forth through the side lane, turning it about, trying different angles, hoping the walnut veneer would finally yield to yet another approach, only to meet with defeat time after time.

“Come on, George; let’s drop the son of a bitch!” His shoulder felt severed from the rest of his body, the circulation cut off by the weight of the piano. Only seconds separated him from completely losing control, but he managed to crouch down fast enough to release the shoulder so that the piano dropped gently onto the small trolley beneath. His breath rushed out hot and furious, rivulets of sweat raced down his skin.

“Oh God, why are you treating me in this way? What are you punishing me for? Do you expect me to beg for help? Why are you doing this to me? It’s only Monday morning, what sort of week is this going to be? Is this some kind of a revenge for working at Easter? Remember, it wasn’t my lot that crucified him. These are not my holy days, so don’t take it out on me.” Exhausted, he rested against the piano.
“Here,” she said, handing him a large glass of lemon drink, tinkling with ice. He didn’t even notice her going back to the house. The drink slid down his parched throat, cooling the heat on the inside.

“Here, George, this will stop you evaporating in the heat.” She stretched across the offending bulk, passing another glass to the other side. The hand that sprang up from behind glistened with sweat; it gripped the glass and disappeared once more. An audible gulp broke the silence and an empty glass was placed on top of the piano. “Thanks.” She stretched again to retrieve it and Mehran allowed himself a quick glance at her body. He liked what he saw, she was closer to his own age than he had previously assumed.

“Definitely Italian, most likely second generation,” he thought. The icy glass grew hot as he handed it back to her.

He flung the strap back over his shoulder, released a deep breath and felt ready to lift and strain once more. “Let’s give it another try, George, push it through.” The wheels of the piano trolley moved slightly forward, the wood creaked and the piano shuddered as it wedged itself even tighter against the unyielding steel.

“You son of a bitch, you bastard of all jobs!” His fist hit the veneer and he found his foot itching to kick the bottom panel of the piano. “It’s not going to work. It’s not going to get through no matter what we do. Oh God, give me strength, no, give me brains to know when to quit.” He flung the strap from his shoulder, rubbing the angry red welt. She watched his fury in silence.
“Look, lady, we’ve tried. Three and half hours on what should’ve been a half hour job. This beast won’t get through without serious damage being done to it. It would need another three blokes lifting it over the fence and carrying it. Maybe a crane is the only answer. How much more are you prepared to pay? How much are you selling it for? To tell you the truth, I know my instruments and I’m not sure that this piece, nice as it is, is worth what it’d cost you.”

When their eyes met, the green was gone, replaced by flat brown. “I’m not selling it. I’m giving it away to a youth drop-in centre. For free. They don’t have money to buy one and they’ve got talented kids who could use it. A friend works there, so I know. I can’t afford to pay any more than what I’ve offered. I tried to sell it at the beginning, but no one wants it once they see the problem.”

The mobile at his waist shrieked. His answer was sharp and short. “Tell them I’m sorry I am late, be there in 40 minutes. I’ve finished here.”

She blocked his way. “What will I do with it now? I really don’t want it back inside.”

She took a deep breath. “How much will you charge to smash it to bits and take it away?”

Mehran froze, hoping he hadn’t heard correctly. Was she out of her mind? Sure, it wasn’t an antique, but it was a good piece. He would never do something like that, but then she wasn’t to know. He called to George in Farsi: “Did you hear? After all that work she wants us to smash it.” His brother’s smirk was the only answer.
She shrugged her shoulders, aware of the disapproval in his voice. “It isn’t an heirloom or anything like that.” He didn’t bother to answer. “Come on George, let’s push it back.”

With a mighty heave, the piano creaked again and the trolley slowly retreated to where it had come from three hours earlier. On reaching the courtyard, she barred the door with her body. “Leave it here, I won’t have it inside.”

He looked up the sky. Dark clouds had appeared from nowhere, and were now stretching from one corner of the horizon to another. “It’ll get wet here, why not put it back in?” When she didn’t respond, he pulled out a large piece of plastic from the bundle of blankets George had carried up with him, and spread it over the felt covering. George’s grin only added to his annoyance. He hated being so transparent. “Look here, I’m not one to smash pianos, no matter how much you pay me. If that’s what you want, you’ve got to get someone else. Give me time and I’ll come back tomorrow and see if there’s another solution.”

Before she could respond, he turned to George: “Get that smirk off your face and let’s get running. We have one more job and then all the paperwork to do.”

Some six hours later Mehran flung down his pencil in frustration. “Bloody GST!” For the past two hours he had been trying to catch up with the accounts, but his efforts amounted to little. The figures did not add up, receipts had gone missing and he could already hear Nasrin giving him the third degree about his incompetent bookkeeping. The silence of the house sat on his shoulders like a heavy weight, and
he realised that the music stopped without him noticing it. Out of the stack of disks he selected one, and then sat still, his eyes closed. After a second or two a piano entered the silence. It marched in with confidence, and optimism filling the empty room. Rachmaninov was Mehran’s favourite and one of the few whose music succeeded in reaching the dark cavernous spaces that existed inside his soul. In the space behind his closed eyelids he could clearly visualise the pianist’s hands. Fingers floated back and forth across the keyboard, barely touching the black and white keys. They were strong and unblemished, and the hands bore no scars. He could feel their movement, the perfect synchronicity with which they responded to the messages coming from the brain. He felt compelled to explore them further.

“Don’t even think about going there!” a little voice chimed inside his head. This time he was prepared to listen. He took a deep breath, shook his head and opened his eyes. The red, blue and gold painted wall clock showed almost news time.

The clock, depicting a hunter with his bow drawn and his arrow ready to strike a fleeing gazelle, occupied the most prominent part of the living room. Impeccable in its craftsmanship and beautifully preserved, its true value was known only to serious collectors of Persian antiques. Unlike carpets, Persian antique clocks have not been appreciated by Australians. When it had arrived together with some furniture and carpets he had inherited after his father’s death, even the customs officers had showed interest only in the obvious pieces, relegating to the clock the status of a family trinket. Mehran got up, found an elaborately carved brass key and placed it in an opening disguised as the centre of a complex symmetrical pattern. The familiar sound of the spring mechanism brought to mind the ritual his father had enacted all
through his childhood. None of the servants, or his wife was trusted to wind this clock. The key was guarded so carefully that only once during an illness that had weakened him for days, did he agree to pass to his wife the secret of its whereabouts. Mehran recalled the many days he searched for the key in his father’s study. Filled with bookshelves from the floor to the ceiling, it was out of bounds to the children. The key could have been hidden in many places and even if he was to search for it openly, he’d probably never have found it. Trying to find it only when his father was travelling, made it impossible.

During his adolescent dreams he often saw himself casually entering the main room, pulling the key out of his pocket in full view of his father, reaching to the clock and winding it. The dreams never included his father’s reaction. Of course he never found the key, not even when he became a student at the University or when he trained to fight in the War.

These days, knowing the clock’s value only too well, he too found himself protecting it. Not exactly hiding the key, but feeling his neck tensing up each time the kids threw the ball around the room. Some time he thought that it should be taken off the wall and protected inside a cabinet, but had always decided against it. Valuable or not, the clock for him bore witness to his own happy childhood and he wanted his sister’s children to have the same experience. It was a link to grandparents they never met, their culture and history, and to have it in their daily lives was their birthright. According to Mehran’s father, not many other timepieces of the same antiquity in working order were still to be found in the whole of Iran, so the clock was also an investment, should the need ever arise.
He advised Nasrin to wind it only at night when the kids had gone to sleep. Now, with the family away, the room echoed with emptiness. Gone were the toys and books cluttering the floor, the sofa and the armchairs, gone was the sewing machine on the dining table, adding rolls of materials and patterns to the piles of Vahid’s newspapers and business files. “Not precious and sterile, but a happily lived-in house,” was Nasrin’s motto.

The temporary emptiness of the house did not bother him. He enjoyed his own company and shrugged off his family’s concerns about not being married. Of course he’d had his share of affairs and once or twice he’d thought he was in love and come close to getting married, but in the end, something had always stopped him. A dread of the future or maybe a sense of guilt he never managed to get rid of. Each time he got out of the relationship before making a commitment. The nightmares didn’t help either. Of course, he’d heard of Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome, but he chose to keep this suspicion to himself hoping that he would get better with time. He was the eldest brother, the funny uncle willing to babysit, the small businessman trying to find his way back to his first love – the music. He did not want to deal with the past, he wanted to forget it.

“We won’t come back until we find you a nice Iranian girl,” Nasrin had joked as she hugged him at the airport, but he understood her intention. She was serious. Since then her e-mails indicated that she had not yet met the one she thought Mehran would like. “As if she’d have any idea.” He couldn’t imagine living with someone who had never lived in Australia, but he knew better than trying to stop her. She didn’t seem to worry about George, who although younger, had always a steady
stream of girlfriends following him. When asked, his response was always the same: “This is Australia in the twenty-first century. Not the old country where everyone lives in each other’s pockets and far too many people are telling you what to do and how to live your life.” With both of their parents dead for seven years, no one but Nasrin kept the issue going.

For a whole month now, Mehran had been staying in what they all considered the family house, although only Nasrin, Vahid and the children lived there. It was the first house the siblings had bought from the inheritance they were allowed to transfer after their parents’ death. A couple of years later they had bought another house by pooling resources, the one George and Mehran shared, but the process was not going to stop, until each of them had a house of their own. Mehran was glad that all those years ago he had sponsored both of his siblings to migrate. These days it would have been more difficult. His greatest regrets were that his mother had died without knowing that he was alive, and that he was unable to bring his father to join them before he too passed away.

“Time for a cup, to stop me brooding,” Mehran decided and headed for the kitchen. Once there, he noticed the rain pelting the kitchen window and was glad he had taken the time to protect the piano. “What a strange woman,” he muttered. In all his fifteen years as a piano removalist, he had not been asked once to destroy an instrument. If he had been, he would have refused. He’d seen enough of them trashed with revolutionary fervour during his university days in Teheran. “Inappropriate” western musical instruments became the victims of the same fanatical hatred that fuelled the burning of books in European cities some 40 years earlier and the smashing of
historical monuments and artworks during the Chinese Cultural Revolution. The recent blowing up of the ancient statues of Buddha by Taliban was the most recent abomination done in the name of a religious dogma.

Mehran recalled his heart’s lurch when he realised what she’d asked him to do. In his mind, it was a request akin to murder, but she wasn’t to know. For her, he was only a removalist who would do anything for money. Watching the falling sheets of rain he knew he would need to go back the next day or the moisture would seep into the wood despite the plastic. He needed to find another solution and, surprisingly, he also found himself looking forward to seeing the strange woman again.

With the coffee in hand he turned the TV on and sank into the soft cushions of the lounge. In front of him loops of razor wire fence were toppling under the feet of a crowd that surged forward, only to be stopped by a palisade made of iron bars topped with more coils of razor wire. He recognised the scene immediately. Images of refugees behind the multiple fences of various Detention Centres had made almost daily appearances on TV screens around the nation, highlighting the government’s tough new policy on illegal arrivals.

The demonstrators were now attacking the fence. Behind it, hanging, from the horizontal bars, were the detainees. But tonight, instead of the usual resignation and anxiety their faces glowed with excitement and determination, no longer only observing the world outside. Blankets landed on the razor-sharp coils. Bodies leapt on top of the blankets, crushing the coils beneath them. Hands joined through the iron bars. Mehran gasped in disbelief. “Where are the guards?” Instinctively, he
searched the outer edges of the crowd for the familiar uniforms. He caught a glimpse of a few, not enough to stop the crowd. Hands and tools now wedged and pushed against the bars, finally succeeding in creating a gap big enough for a body to squeeze through.

The camera zoomed in on the man closest to the gap. He hesitantly stepped into the opening. His right foot and leg first, followed by the trunk, then his right arm and shoulder. The opening was too tight for him to get through. Only when the hands and tools again pushed and pulled simultaneously the gap increased. He came through, hanging above the protesters’ heads. Once fully outside, he faced the camera, waved and jumped into the outstretched arms below.

Mehran watched, mesmerised. What until then had seemed an unassailable jail fence was disgorging one body after another with the guards standing helplessly by and not a police uniform in sight.

The next body was smaller, sliding all too easily through the opening. On the outside, the boy hesitated, his eyes tracing the path of the escapee in front of him. “Must be his father,” Mehran assumed, suddenly feeling anxious that the boy and the father not lose each other. A moment later the boy completed his flight. The arms held him aloft, passing his weightless body away from the fence, deeper into the crowd, as the camera zoomed in on a patch of dark blue arriving from the opposite direction.
The Decision

When the doorbell rang, Leigh was finishing a conversation with her mother. One of those endlessly unsatisfying ones that start with the weather and finish with the same after at least half an hour passed and not much said. She had told her about Anna’s return from her European trip and about her frenetic call trying to locate her daughter who was once again missing. Leigh’s mother enjoyed hearing about the dramas in other peoples’ lives and Leigh was saved from talking to her about her own life. Over the years Anna had become the good girl that Leigh never managed to be. Anna’s love-driven escape from a Communist state, subsequent marriage and migration to Australia had all the hallmarks of a good radio serial which her mother had enjoyed listening to for the past twenty years. Even Anna’s divorce was forgivable, while Leigh’s life was, as she was often reminded, “just a one big mess” with no opportunity for redemption.

She felt that whoever rang the bell was her saviour. “Must be the piano removalists. At long last it’ll be gone. Will ring you tomorrow.” She hung up, and on the way to the front door caught herself checking in the mirror. “Not too bad,” she concluded while opening the door. He was much smaller than she’d imagined a piano removalist to be. Muscled but in a slight, wiry way.

“He doesn’t know what he’s in for;” flashed through her mind, recalling the day some ten years earlier when four removalists took hours to bring the piano in through the front door. Since then renovations had altered the house and now there was no way to get the piano out the same way. The side passage was her only hope, although the recently erected fence took a couple of inches off its width and her measurements
indicated that the space between the gateposts was likely to be too narrow. Her smile
was one of her best. “Please come in.” He looked uneasy and preoccupied. “We can’t
bring it up this way. I hope there’s another way, a back lane maybe?”

She pretended not to hear him, wanting to show him the piano first. On the way to
the back room he was already checking the back fence for the non-existent back
entrance. “No back access, but a side lane. The piano came through, all those years
ago.”

After all, it was only a little white lie. “A white lie.” The phrase now sounded
different, full of new meanings. To make amends to her conscience, she added
quickly: “The fence is fairly recent though, could be too narrow.”

She wanted him to have a go. So many of them didn’t even try. Took one look and
refused the job. She’d advertised the piano first: “Free piano to a good home.
Removal charges only.” For a while the house had become a busy thoroughfare.
Visitors nodded their heads appreciatively at the sight of the instrument and shook
them when looking at the side lane. “Can’t be done, miss.” She heard them, but still,
she needed it out of her house, now, more than ever. The room was bursting at the
seams with memories she did not wish to keep.

In the end she decided to pay for the removal herself. Contractors came and went,
refusing the job. His was the last ad in the yellow pages. After that came only piano
tuners. By now she felt desperate and ready to use anything she had to get the piano
out of the house.
One look at the man standing next to her and she figured out her next line of attack. She needed to be subtle though, one never knew with these Mediterranean types. In a gesture that men found captivating, she brushed her hair back from her face, her eyes targeting his. Her voice dropped almost into a whisper, she needed him to focus on the plea in her voice. “Please, don’t tell me it can’t be done, I’d do anything to get it down to the street!”

There, she almost had him. She saw it in his eyes. He was ready to agree, when the other one turned up - from the look of him, his younger brother. The moment he opened his mouth she knew he was bad news. Even without the language, she could read his fast moving hands and his expression. “Don’t be an idiot,” they said. “This isn’t a job you want. Say no before it’s too late.” Her chance was slipping away, how much more should she offer? Another fifty or hundred?

Before she did anything, his answer came swift and unexpected. Then he told her their names, “Mick and George.” She wondered what their real names were. In the end George only shook his shoulders. Once the decision was made, the piano became a challenge.

Watching them wrapping it in a thick felt blanket, she felt more appreciative of the piece that had stood in the room covered in dust for so long. She’d cleaned it only recently, feeling guilty for not doing it more often. And it was now being carefully taped and padded like a valuable antique. A set of wheels was placed underneath the instrument to make it possible to push it into the side lane. After that they tried hard, all of them. Seeing the sweat soaking Mick’s back she felt guilty about the extra inch
of the walnut veneer case that was likely to be the problem, despite their skilful manipulation and brute strength. She asked for help from her God when she heard him call his, but neither seemed interested in lending a helping hand. When he gave up, she felt as angry as he did. Seeing him kicking the piano, an outrageous thought came to her mind.

“Keep kicking. Don’t stop at the warning creak or the sounds of the cracking wood. Let the side panels just cave in. Smash it to smithereens.” The thought generated a roll inside her stomach of a kind she had only experienced while boating. She could feel the sway of the boat and the head spin which normally preceded the roll. She took a deep breath. “Smash it and take it away. How much extra is that going to cost?”

His refusal stung. She wanted to shout at him, “What is it to you? I have tried everything else and it didn’t work. It’s none of your business what I want to do with it. Just do what I’m paying you for.”

Of course she didn’t say any of it, didn’t even shout. He held his high moral ground and in the end she only succeeded in having it left outside. She hoped it would rain, but he left the protective felt around it and draped it with a plastic sheet. Didn’t even take the money, but promised to come back to find a solution.

That evening, watching the rain pelt against the glass door of her neighbour’s living room, she felt guilty about leaving the piano outside. She saw his hands lovingly arranging the protective cover. “I can’t believe I have asked him to do it, he took so
much care”, she found herself repeating to Alice while they waited for their drinks to arrive.

“Here you are, dears.” Ken placed a cup and saucer in front of them. Two miniature chocolate eggs sat on the side of the saucer, replacing the one plain biscuit that Alice would allow herself in her rigour of “keeping decent weight”. Despite Ken’s obvious effort, Leigh smelt trouble. She needn’t wait long.

“Don’t call me that! I’m your mate Alice, not yet some dodderly dear in a nursing home, whose name disappeared with her dignity. I’m not your ‘dear’. How many times do I need to ask you?” Encouraged by Leigh’s smile she added, “Tell him, Leigh. How many times have you heard me ask?”

Leigh waved her hand. “Leave me out of this. Just look at the effort he’s gone to. The tea looks perfect. And a special Easter touches! How could you be cross with him?” Then, seeing Alice’s growing determination, she hastened to add, “Although I do agree with you about the word.” To her relief, Alice turned back to her husband and Leigh realised she had managed to escape Alice’s wrath. But Ken wasn’t to be so lucky. “Your brain cells aren’t gone yet. If you can crack the crossword in the paper each day, then you can remember my name or any of the endearments you gave me over the years. Feel free to use them. And remember, we still have the big sailing trip ahead of us before we hit the nursing home. But if you’re so senile you can’t remember my name, you can cancel it, I don’t fancy ending up in South America instead of New Zealand.”
Ken’s response was a smile that Leigh knew well. A hybrid between seduction and a sheepish acknowledgement of being wrong, with added touch of confidence that it won’t take long to get out of trouble. Suddenly she felt a stab of envy at their closeness after their long life together.

She grabbed the remote control. “Stop fighting children, it’s time for the news.”

They all settled on the big sofa, bought from Ken’s early retirement package the previous year, but they never had too many chances to become true couch potatoes. They’d been spending less and less time on land and more on their boat, constantly planning new places to explore. Their relationship had survived forty years of marriage, a family tragedy, and extramarital affairs for both of them. As far as Leigh could see, it still challenged them in ways she hadn’t seen in many other long-term marriages.

Immediately, the silent images on the screen caught their attention. Alice gasped at the sight of demonstrators pushing against fences topped with razor wire, the security guards looking around helplessly.

“Let me have a go!” Alice grabbed the control out of Leigh’s hand.

The living room filled with shouting and chants, rows and rows of demonstrators on one side of high palisade fence facing men and young boys on the other. The camera focused on a hole between two palisade bars.
Ken’s voice brought everyone back to the room. “Surely they wouldn’t …”

“Of course they will. Why shouldn’t they? They’ve done nothing wrong. No more than any of us would do, should we ever find ourselves in their shoes, and the conditions in the detention centres are appalling.” Alice’s excitement was palpable.

Leigh’s mouth felt dry. What could she say? Basically she found Alice’s stand far too simple and, by nature, she was suspicious of simple solutions. Of course she did not like the idea of people being put in jail for only reaching Australian territory, but there were so many issues that needed to be considered. It seemed that there was a real need to keep immigration down. There was the environment to think about, water supplies getting lower with each decade and due to the climate changes, that was going to get worse. The country just couldn’t open the gates and let the whole world come in. It all seemed so complicated, so most of the time she managed to avoid these issues.

“Go on, jump!” Alice goaded a young man with a severe haircut and bare torso who squeezed through the gap and hesitated momentarily. The crowd roared. The man paused and finally leapt into the raised arms, immediately followed by others. The sea of bodies cushioned their fall, separated to let them pass and closed tightly in their wake. When uniforms flooded the screen, Leigh knew the show was over. They returned to their cold cups of tea.
“Did you notice that no women were anywhere near the fence? Those men wouldn’t give them a chance to escape. Probably they have children to look after, no escape for them.” Alice sounded agitated.

Ken’s concern lay elsewhere. “This needn’t happen. If the department had handled the processing correctly and released the detainees earlier all this could’ve been avoided. Escaping from detention is a serious offence. The runaways will now be treated like escaped prisoners, they can kiss their visas goodbye. It’s just one more excuse for the department to deport them. And they’ll get them one by one. There’s nowhere for them to go. It’s all desert and scrub. All roads will have roadblocks by now.”

Leigh watched silently, unable to share in their indignation or excitement, but somehow she was in awe of those who brought the fences down. Two decades earlier, she would have been there with them but a single mother’s life was complicated enough and by now she has learnt to choose the battles she was prepared to fight. The plight of refugees seemed far removed from her life.

After a moment she said her goodbyes and rushed out into the rain and through the opening in the fence. The short cut had been made years ago, when Sammy was little and moved between the two houses with the fickleness of a young child. It had been meant to protect her from the dangers of running up and down the front steep stairs. Now the short cut was saving their knees.
Alice watched the dark rain that swallowed her. “She just can’t see it, can she? This is so exciting! It’s like the anti-Vietnam demonstrations years ago. Started with few hippies standing up to the government and ended up a mass movement, bringing it down. We might have witnessed another historical event.”

Ken’s hand reached Alice’s face, stroking it gently. “Al, this is an entirely different situation. Our boys were being killed in a war we had nothing to do with. Now we are merely protecting our borders. Those people in detention centres have entered illegally. Many could be terrorists, and we have been lucky so far, but there are costs. Financial and social.”

She shook her head, letting his hand slip back by his side. “Now you sounding like a politician, of course it’s different. We live in a different world. Who wouldn’t want a better deal for their children, when there’s so much wealth in one place and so much poverty and misery in another? The new technology allows people to see it right across the world. They want to go where the life seems better. Many are escaping violent situations in their countries, or livings for decades in make shift refugee camps. Wouldn’t we do the same if we had to, who wouldn’t? What I don’t like is the fact that the women have no choice. You saw it. They couldn’t even get anywhere near the fence.”

She felt silent for a moment. “I also remember the times we shared during the anti-war protests.” Her smile changed as she reached for his hand and placed it back on her cheek.
One Rainy Night

Marjorie stood by the kitchen window, looking out past the starched white curtain. She had run that curtain up on her old Singer some ten years earlier. Jack had still been alive then, still polishing his faithful Holden, tinkering in the garage, fixing this and that. He’d liked these curtains, helped her to screw the runner in to hold them up, and put up the roller blinds at the same time. They were of a kind that was all the rage in the years after the war, but had fallen into disrespect and been unavailable for years even when hers needed replacing some two years before his death. And that was now some ten years ago.

She was having a jolly good peek into the rainy street outside; a regular “nosy Rosie,” as Jack would’ve called her. She still missed him, thought about him most days, especially at night. They say that grief diminishes with time, but her need for him was the same now as it was immediately after his death.

“Jack, Jack, Jack!” She shook her head to dislodge the track on which her mind kept getting stuck. Just like the needle on the old vinyls they used to play and dance to, on the old gramophone he’d fixed up during the early days of their marriage.

“You were a great dancer, Jack. Everyone envied me whenever we took the dance floor. Dorothy, May and even Mary whose husband was as handsome as they came in those days. None of them could swing it like you.” She shook her head at the sound of her own voice. “I just can’t get you out of my mind, no matter what I try. Here you go again!” Most nights, memories just pushed in, leaving her without control. Tonight it was to be different; she had a job at hand. She had to keep a watch
on the road. The rain started in the late afternoon, a big black cloud crossing the city, together with bolts of lightning and downpour, which threatened to become a hailstorm if the temperature dropped suddenly.

Ever since the big hailstorm damage the city had suffered few years back, the warnings over the radio had been unending. She thought it was a good idea, giving everyone the chance to garage their cars or at least cover them with old quilts and blankets, like her Greek neighbours did each time the warning was broadcast. Being a two-car family, they always had one car out at the kerb, so that one was likely to be in danger of damage. Of course if Jack were around, he too would make sure his pristine Holden was safely tucked away from any danger to its duco.

With her glasses on, she peered into the dark street through the falling rain. She could see the sheets of rain bending and stretching with each gust of wind like the giant soap bubbles she used to blow with her kids, until they burst and continued their vertical fall. She watched the watery spectacle, but kept in mind the reason she was standing there at ten o’clock at night.

A large Good Samaritan clothes bin situated across the road was the real focus of her attention. She couldn’t see it directly from her window, but she knew it was guarding the entry into the small car park beyond. She was confident that her vigilance would be rewarded because every time she had noticed him had been during a particularly rainy night.
Marjorie used to be a good sleeper. Poor Jack used to complain that even when the kids were babies, he had to get up to them, even though it wasn’t the done thing then. The father was to earn money; the mother did the baby care, day and night. But Jack didn’t seem to mind. In fact she always suspected that he loved being there, all gooey and mushy, in the middle of the night, with her sound asleep. It was after his death that her sleeping pattern had changed.

At first she thought it was the shock of his sudden departure and a realisation that she was alone after a lifetime of having a mate. Yes, the kids looked after her, but they had families of their own, and she decided to remain in the two-bedroom house that Jack already prepared for their old age. Before his heart attack, he had added all the features they would need. Additional handrails along the front five steps, special rails in the bathroom, taps that opened with ease and extra security features.

Following his death, her nights had become a string of never-ending rituals of sleep avoidance. The TV news followed by carefully chosen shows, a glass of hot milk, a walk around the house to check the locks, tidying the kitchen sink and the tea towels. These activities were all designed to postpone the time when she had to enter the bedroom because she hoped to see him there, on their bed, smiling. Instead, she saw him everywhere else. Sitting in the kitchen with his beer, fiddling with the ever-problematic ceiling light in the hall, taking off his top in that peculiar way she’d always teased him about: first he’d use his left hand to pull at his right arm sleeve to get his arm out; then his right hand would pull his left sleeve over his left arm; and only then the rest of the top got pulled over his head. One time when she was beside
herself from the loss, she even tried to undress in that way. She ended up tangled in the folds of her dress and frightened of falling over.

Nothing would bring him back and the only way she could avoid the pain of seeing him everywhere was to focus her mind on the street. Watch the cars go by, couples out for an evening stroll at the nearby cafes, groups of friends leaving the pub at closing time and the endless line of traffic.

“He’s dead, he’s not waiting in your bed,” she’d repeat to herself while seeing pizza being delivered every Friday night to the houses across the road and watching the stray cats and their kittens come out of the empty lot beyond the car park.
The first few times she saw the boy she didn’t pay any attention. It was only a dark shadow running towards the car park. After a few more rainy days a pattern emerged. The shadow always appeared late at night and only during the rain. Slowing down before the entry to the car park, making sure no one was watching. Even during the heaviest downpour, he’d stop and pretend to be waiting for a bus if others were getting in and out of their cars. At first she thought he might be breaking into cars, but no one ever raised the alarm, no muggings were reported, so apparently he wasn’t committing any crimes. She became intrigued by his behaviour, and later she came to anticipate his visits and waited for him each rainy night.

She even mentioned him to her son. Something to talk about instead of her always asking questions to which he answered in a hurried sort of way, not understanding that having spent her life worrying about him, his sister and their father, she felt empty without doing what she did best, giving comfort and advice and solving
problems. She couldn’t walk very fast or for very long and there was nothing wrong with her mental faculties, but no one seemed to need her experiences any more. When she mentioned the nightly visitor, Garry grew alarmed and suggested calling the police next time she saw him.

“You can’t be too careful, Mother,” he said, sounding so much older than his years. She gave up on him and talked with Jack instead. Of course she didn’t call the police; the visitor had done nothing wrong. A few weeks later she happened to watch a program on the TV, one of the few current affairs programs that she enjoyed, and it was then that the penny dropped. Now she knew why the visitor appeared only during the rainy nights.

Marjorie was never good at solving the big issues. She was better at the here and now and would leave the other stuff for Jack to work out. He worried about who’d win the elections and kept an eye on the political situation around the country and elsewhere, and at times he despained about the state of the world. She’d be there baking cakes for neighbours in trouble, organising a chook raffle for the family who needed to pay for a kidney machine, and contributing to charities. Her job was to break the big problems down into manageable tasks – she was good at that.

Once she guessed the identity of the visitor, she decided that the TV program was a sign, and that she ought to do something about it. She and Jack went to church occasionally, usually at Easter and Christmas, and they taught their children the moral guidelines, but she thought that lately even the Church had forgotten about compassion, and as the years went by, she felt less need to visit the church. More and
more she felt that every church and in fact every organised religion had become a barrier between the God and each individual, denying them the direct contact to each other. As far as she was concerned, every priest, rabbi, minister or a mullah was a middle man that only charged for his services, like the real estate agents standing in between the owner and the property renter. They cost extra but they didn’t do anything that the owner and the renter could not negotiate themselves. Faith was for her a business between the believer and their maker.

She made her peace with God by doing what she considered the right thing instead of praying and was prepared to be judged accordingly, if and when her time came. And right now she knew exactly what she had to do.

Her grandfather clock struck 11 pm. She had been standing by the window for a long time; her body was stiff from standing still. “Time to go to bed,” she decided. Then she noticed the familiar shadow dashing through the rain in the usual direction. This time he didn’t even check if anyone was around, but raced across the road and disappeared in the darkness. Small and slender, but fast.

Relieved, Marjorie walked into the hallway where Jack’s Wellington boots waited at ready. They felt huge when she slipped them on, but she knew they’d do the job. A plastic wrap-up raincoat and a golf umbrella completed her attire before she faced up to the bitter cold outside.

No one else was out. “Am I losing my marbles?” she asked herself, battling the wind and the rain. The windows of the houses were either pitch dark or winked the
fluorescent blue of the screens behind them. She made her way across the road, recalling the pleasure she had felt as a child when splashing through deep puddles. To her relief, the wind’s ferociousness eased a bit, making it possible to carry the umbrella instead of fighting with it. When she located the metal bin she stopped and listened. Nothing. Feeling exposed and vulnerable, she took a second to listen to a voice of caution. “Why are you putting yourself in this situation? You don’t know who it is that you are dealing with. An addict, mentally deranged, even a murderer. There’s still time to stop!” She snorted louder than she intended to. “Gee you sound just like my son. Yes, one can’t be too careful. How many times I’ve heard that!”

Having watched the program, she wouldn’t forgive herself if she didn’t try. Her stiff fingers curled in a fist and she hit the bin couple of times. The metal felt hard, wet and cold. Not a place to spend the night in. She listened. Nothing moved. Maybe the TV program was wrong. Maybe this container wasn’t a temporary shelter. She shook her head and banged her fist again.

“I know you’re there. It must be very uncomfortable. They came and took all of the stuff yesterday and no one has put anything else in. It must be bloody freezing there without any clothes between you and the metal. I live in number 55, just across the road. You can see the number next to the garage door. Through the front gate, on the side of the garage is a little door leading inside. It’s open and there are some blankets and a makeshift bed. The garage was cleaned out after Jack’s death, so there isn’t much left, but I’ve put a torch next to the bed. I’m not interested in who you are or why you’re here. There’s not much you can steal from me. I haven’t got any money, but you can have a dry place to sleep in tonight and on any other rainy night if you
want to. I’ll go now and leave you to it. I won’t visit the garage at all if it rains tomorrow. If it stops, I’ll go there after lunch. From now on I’ll leave the garage door unlocked on rainy nights. Jack spent so much time in there that he even put in a toilet and a sink with a hot water, if you need a wash. Goodbye now. Remember, number 55.” It was just about the longest speech she made since Jack’s death. Before she turned away, she thought she heard a sigh, or maybe a stifled cough, but then nothing else. Only rain pounding on the metal shelter.

On the way back to the house, she didn’t bother about the closed umbrella in her hand. Her job was done. It had left her breathless, but pleased with the little camping bed inside the garage. The thick quilts, which were not new by any stretch of imagination, were clean. She’d kept them folded in her linen press ever since feather doonas became fashionable few years back. “A dry bed for a child on the run from something or someone,” she thought. “He must be little. No adult would fit through the chute at the top of the bin.” When she’d seen the homeless kids climbing in and out of the bins during the TV show, she’d realised why the shadow looked so small. When she’d consulted Jack, he had agreed that something needed to be done and that she alone could do it.

“I’m providing a dry bed for a child in trouble, that’s all,” she told herself. “I’m not interested in being a do-gooder, just can’t stand the thought that right under my nose is a kid who is wet, cold and very likely hungry.” That’s why she’d made up a plate of cheese sandwiches and a thermos of sweet hot tea. Nothing fancy just thick slabs of white bread and slices of yellow cheese. “I remember that our kids used to love those, even as teenagers.”
When she finally climbed to bed, she was tempted to check if he had followed her. But then it felt like she’d be invading his privacy, so she talked to Jack instead: “I wish you were here right now, you’d know what to do next. You’d be able to go there tomorrow and sort the kid out, without scaring him away. You always had the knack.”

Her talk became a whisper, and when she fell asleep it was at least two hours earlier than on other nights.

In Jack’s garage, the visitor’s body shook under the pile of quilts that only moments earlier had been carefully folded on the bed, just as the disembodied voice had promised. With her wet clothes off and a dry jersey and a couple of quilts piled on top of her, Jodie expected to warm up fast. Instead, her teeth chattered, her body continued to dance and her head threatened to burst.

Earlier in the day as she huddled against the concrete pylons that held the freeway above her head, the unpredictable gusts of wind drove sheets of rain at her with relentless precision and the usual roar of the speeding cars had been all but drowned out by the gale. To make matters worse, she was only minutes away from the place she had called her ‘home’ for the past five months. Tucked away from public eyes, in the dark corner where the pylons of the freeway met the rock wall of the train tunnel, was a place which no rain or wind could reach. Nearby, the electric trams glided past almost silently and the thickness of the rock muffled the roar of the freeway. The rock through which the tunnel was cut also provided protection from the eyes of the residents of a recently erected high rise. The only way anyone could notice her
hideout was from the passing trams. As a protection, she had attached a large piece of black plastic to the ledge of a supporting wall, creating a small room completely protected from the prying eyes of the passengers. Anyone looking directly at her hideout could see only blackness for the couple of seconds it would take for the tram to pass. The drivers and conductors were potentially her greatest enemies. Passing up to twelve times a shift five days per week could encourage curiosity. If they had noticed, they had not reported it. Five months of heaven – well, as close as any runaway could ever get. She minded her own business and almost took for granted that others would do the same.

Her problems started when a tent appeared in an open space underneath the freeway, in full view not only the tram travellers, but especially of the high rise tenants. She came across it one morning on her regular trip to the water tap hidden amongst the clumps of landscaped natives surrounding the apartments. Luckily, she had learned to carry her water bottles concealed in shopping bags, so no one meeting her would become suspicious. She could be a local kid taking a short cut to the houses nearby or a worker at the Fish Markets.

Emerging from the tunnel’s entrance, she literally stumbled upon the collapsed tent and a skeletal looking character sitting in front of it. The vacant look in his eyes comforted her. By then she had been on the run long enough to have become accustomed to these eyes. He was so far gone from either disease, drink, drugs or most likely a combination of all that she decided he wouldn’t even remember her passing him. Still, from that day on, she avoided walking in his direction. From a distance she observed a plastic humpy appearing next to the tent, followed by others.
over the next few weeks. Some evenings she would hear shouting and singing and felt grateful for the thickness of the rock tunnel wall. Whenever she ventured to the tap, she saw broken bottles lying on the ground and men asleep around a campfire.

During this time she also discovered the Drop-in Centre. Situated on the main street, it was within walking distance and the workers there seemed cool enough for her to keep returning. There wasn’t much the place could do for her, but it was somewhere to stay during the day in a company of others, although she kept to herself, not feeling safe with some of the guys who hung around there, and made a point of not attending regularly, not wanting anyone to know she lived on her own. But she could always get a hot drink and biscuits and some days that was all she would have to eat. Occasionally people would suggest a way of making some money, although being under age was a definite disadvantage. After a while she relaxed about being there, especially when she realised that one of the workers figured out she was homeless when he saw her washing her clothes but said nothing to her, just leaving her to do what she had to.

Because she looked even younger than thirteen, she couldn’t get a job and she had to beg at train stations to get money for food. No one would give her a job unless they were pervs. She had to wait till she turned fourteen and nine months and that seemed ages away. Watching the buskers on the streets, she wished her father had made her take violin lessons instead of a piano. She’d have a way of earning some food money now.
By the time the police car and a council truck appeared at the back of the apartments, the number of dwellings under the freeway had grown to six. It had become a regular tent city, complete with a sofa and flags on the roofs of the humpies. She watched the council workers dismantle the humpies and throw everything, including the sofa, onto the truck. The tent dwellers didn’t even argue just collected their small bundles and walked off to start again somewhere else. She should’ve been lucky, but she wasn’t. On the night after their removal, as she lay on the piece of foam that made the hard ground feel like a bed, a bearded face popped out from behind the black curtain. She recognised the occupant and saw that his hand was gripping a large knife. The slurred words did not need a translation. She leapt up, the falling sleeping bag revealing her skinny body. He grinned. “What ’ave we got ere? A young girlie, is that right?” His hand reached in her direction, the light in his eyes reminder of Reverend’s, while his hands roamed her body. She didn’t wait. Grabbing the pack that was always ready by her side, she kicked the sleeping bag against the knife, pushed him hard and ran away from the only place she had called her own since she left her family.

For days afterwards she had searched for safe sites. She ought to have known better than think that she had found a home. Homeless people were never safe. Sooner or later someone finds them. Danger always lurks. Danny knew all that, and he told her what to do. He was her teacher and she trusted him with her life, but she’d grown complacent during the months in the tunnel and now she had to go back to basics.

Rule number one: Establish more than one safe site. If one becomes impossible to use, another will be always ready.
Rule number two: Find safe places to keep some provisions and change of clothes hidden near each site.

Rule number three: Never trust adults, they always have their own agendas.

He had taught her other rules as well, but the first three were the most important, and once back on the road, she vowed never to stray again from his teachings. It didn’t matter that he wasn’t real; he was still her mentor. She had found him one day, almost immediately after her arrival to Sydney, at a bus stop while sheltering from the rain. A teenager in a school uniform sat on the bench next to her, reading a big fat book. She was cold, but the size of the book intrigued her while she tried to forget the chill and the dampness seeping through her clothes. “Must’ve cost a fortune,” she thought with envy, wondering how long she could survive on the cost of that one book. When the bus arrived, one minute the boy was fumbling for his bus pass in his back pack and the next minute he was inside of the moving bus. Only then she noticed the book. After turning a few pages she was hooked, and she stayed in the shelter for hours, oblivious to the rain and the cold. Like the old times at home. On a big sofa, her feet tucked underneath and a glass of hot chocolate in her hand. But that was a long time ago.

It appeared that Danny knew everything there was to know about loss. He understood. He also had a life before and a life after, just like she did. “Before” finished when her grandmother died and her Born Again parents became even stricter. Almost immediately her old friends were deemed “unsuitable” by the Reverend of the Church and soon after even the radio and the TV disappeared from their house. During “after”, only books sanctioned by the Fellowship were allowed
and she was transferred to a school with daily scripture classes and the bible reading after school activities. The Reverend, practically worshiped by her parents, advised that she needed extra sessions to ensure her spiritual development and her need to learn humility. Her parents wouldn’t hear a word against him, although she tried to tell them about his spider-like hands. Her mother, always consumed by the bible-reading circles and by serving the Fellowship community, suffered terrible headaches that sapped her energy. She didn’t want to know anything Jodie was telling her, and her father got so angry the first time she complained about the Reverend that she never did it again. “After” was also filled with punishments for being ungrateful, sinful and destined for Satan’s clutches. When her “redemption” classes became too scary and the spider hands too insistent, she kissed her little brother goodbye one night and walked away, wishing her grandparents were still alive. She didn’t know what else to do and no one she knew was willing to listen. She became a runaway, not knowing where she was going to end up or if she was ever going to go back.

From the day she met him, Danny had led by example. The Smith Family clothes bin became one of her multiple safe sites, one for the rainy nights. It also became the source of her clothes.

The cough and the needles in her throat made her eyes water and brought her back to the camp bed. She remembered the packet of pain killers she kept in her provisions box still hidden in the tunnel. “No point going over the injustice of it all,” she decided as she clasped her arms around her chest hoping to ease the shivers.
All these months away from home and she had managed to keep well even through the winter until a couple of days ago. She started to feel tired; unable to even make it to the youth refuge across the city. And to top it all off, the clothes bin was empty when she finally jumped in hoping for a dry sleep. Her wet clothes channelled the icy cold of the metal walls straight into her body. She thought that the air outside was probably warmer, but she was too weak to climb out. Initially she didn’t worry about the slow but determined steps outside. “Probably a drunk on his way home,” her brain registered while her teeth chattered. Only when they stopped just short of the metal wall and the banging reverberated all around her, Jodie’s heart stopped and her breath hung suspended mid way between her mouth and her lungs. Someone had seen her in spite of all her caution, the police had probably been called already and in no time she would be delivered back to her family and the Reverend.

After the old woman’s voice delivered her message, Jodie continued to play the statue. Was it a trap? Then again, why would an old woman bother? If she had wanted to trap her, she could have easily rung the cops, not standing there in the pouring rain. In the end her aching head and frozen bones made her to summon up the last bit of energy, climb out and follow the instructions. The garage, the camp bed and the dry bedding were a heaven the invisible voice had promised. But the shivers got worse, despite the dry clothes and the pile of quilts she hid under, and they coupled with lethargy so profound she couldn’t even get herself a drink of water before she drifted off into an uneasy sleep.
Good Luck Charm

Thomas folded his arms behind his head, careful not to move too much. Not because he wanted her to keep on sleeping, but because he felt so completely happy and at peace that he needed to take stock of his good fortune. He realised that soon he would give in to his desire and run his hands over her soft skin, taking in her scent to which he was becoming seriously addicted. As far as he could see, the principal reason for his good fortune was right next to him and he was in love with every bit of her, but he wasn’t going to give in, not yet. The need to catch up with the events of the past few months was overwhelming and he was determined to take his time.

Until recently he had felt like he was only emerging from the emotional turmoil caused by the break up with Eve some six months earlier. Some days he blamed the break up on her parents, although during his more rational and less needy times he admitted that the relationship was doomed from the start. The fact that even after three years Eve’s parents were not able to accept him for what he was only confirmed his suspicion. They had hoped for someone from a more influential family for their only daughter, a man with a profession, or at least a businessman. Not a computer geek from an insignificant family background with an uncertain career future. Sure, he was not entirely unacceptable due to his PhD status at the university, but with their wealth to pass on, her parents planned to be much more influential in their daughter’s life. The couple’s future was dominated by the needs of her family’s business and they were expected to move to Melbourne where her family was. In the end, he and Eve managed a friendship of a kind, but the fact that she had chosen someone else had not helped his confidence.
For the first month after the break up, he had been unable to call on any of their previous friends. He had become used to being a half of a couple, and now he felt incomplete and lost. Yes, he had blind dates organised by friends and workmates, and some one night stands as well, but none of them worked, all sabotaged by his past expectations and unfulfilled desires. Self-imposed isolation came next, and he started to look for a job which would consume all of his free time. In the end he hardly ever socialised, despite his family’s constant machinations to find him another “nice girl”. He was twenty-eight and unwillingly single.

One Saturday night he found himself in a queue at his local handy bank. The usual conflagration of beeps whirs and sounds of scrunched up account receipts proceeded at an uneventful pace until the turn of a young woman standing a couple places ahead of him. He did notice her legs; no one could miss them, given that their great line was revealed by the short skirt and the way they were furiously kicking the side of the machine. Only seconds earlier the transaction had been running smoothly, then the buttons were pushed at faster pace, escalating to a frenzy of banging and kicking. Within seconds the security shield came down, swallowing her card and cutting everyone’s access to their accounts. Instantaneously she had become the most unpopular person in the queue, but soon everyone dispersed without her even noticing it.

“You stupid, stupid machine! It’s my card, and my pin number! Why aren’t you giving me my money?” Her fury at the inanimate object was soon replaced by despair. “What am I suppose to do now?” she asked no one in particular, slowly sinking on to an adjacent low wall. While everyone else rushed off to find an
alternative sources of spending cash, Thomas was also ready to leave, but the vision of her legs slowed him down. Like others, he assumed that she must have stolen the card and now was caught by using the wrong pin number, but the public airing of her anger surprised him. When caught out, offenders were more likely to slink away hoping to avoid attention, but not this one.

Seeing him hesitate, she addressed him directly. “Everyone thinks I’ve stolen it. Well I haven’t. It’s mine. God, I hate technology!”

Thomas wavered in his resolve to go. Should he believe her? She had the body, face and the temperament of a great actress, and she also read his mind.

“As unbelievable as it might sound, I don’t usually behave like this. It’s just that I’m in a complete fix and don’t know what to do.”

He asked the obvious question, having worked out already the amount he could afford to lose in case his assumption turned out correct.

She looked embarrassed by his offer, then a look of weariness and mistrust crept into her face. “I’ve only recently moved from interstate. I can’t ring and borrow money from anyone here, and if I can’t get my card back till Monday I’ll have a whole weekend without any cash. I will have to walk back to my place and Haslett’s Cove isn’t exactly round the corner.” She blushed and it was the colour in her cheeks that convinced him.
That was three months ago. The $20 he lent her that night was the best short-term investment he had ever made. They’d often joked about it since. She returned the money the following Monday, together with an invitation for a coffee. Then it was his turn to reciprocate. By the end of the first couple of weeks of meeting each other, they ended up in bed. Neither of them was a stranger to previous relationships and they both felt that something good was going on. From then on, their life together started in earnest.

Thomas stretched out, luxuriating in the knowledge that for the past two and half months there had not been a day that they had spent apart. Instead of the complications of shuttling from one place to another, they had found a small house and moved in together. Not long before that, one Saturday night, they had walked into his favourite restaurant only to bump into his parents, having dinner with his Great Great-aunt, the matriarch of the clan. They had no choice but to join them for the entire evening. It all went well but Thomas knew his mother’s and his aunt’s preference for girls from a “decent background” that meant one of two things: a Vietnamese Chinese or a Chinese girl. When Eve had broken off their relationship, his family had suffered a loss of face. Her well-to-do family in Melbourne had rejected them despite Great Great-aunt’s considerable wealth and influence. They were hoping that Thomas’s next choice would help them to regain their status in their community. He was forever asked to choose wisely. Unknown to them, by the time they met Sammy at the restaurant he had already made his choice.

Sammy not only brought excitement and love back into his life; she also brought good luck. “You’re my good luck charm,” he told her over and over. The day she
returned his money he attended an interview for a job with a small but well-established IT company that subcontracted services to government departments. On the morning they offered him the job he was in bed with Sammy, their first “morning after”. He realised that with her by his side he was doubly blessed. She was smart, gorgeous, sexy and a magnet for a good luck. What more could a man wish for? She was the one, and he decided that he’d do whatever it took to make her happy.

Soon after, his boss assured him that the government’s policies on outsourcing of IT services meant that their company was growing both in number of employees and the size of the contracts they undertook. These were coming from obvious departments like Roads and Transport, but also from less transparent sources. Once employees had received security clearance, they were to provide expertise to most jobs, as long as they didn’t ask too many questions. They were paid well not only for their technical expertise but also for being discreet. Information passed through their hands on the way from one department to another. Thomas recovered programs destroyed by viruses, rebuilt firewalls, recovered missing files, developed systems that allowed for collecting information previously unavailable. With each new assignment came new challenges, and he revelled in coming up with solutions. He considered himself a lucky man. Work was plentiful, he was in love, his life was good and getting better.

This was Easter and neither he nor Sammy had to work. Their morning lovemaking could go on and on, the way they had learned to enjoy it. Not wanting to wait any longer, he slid back under the bed covers, his hands slow and gentle.
Houdini Girl

The half empty café reminded Leigh that Easter and school holidays left the city practically empty. “Maybe that’s why Becky has not showed up.” Leigh pondered, watching her friend’s face once again grow old from her daughter’s absence. Despite her recent return from Europe, she had given Leigh only the briefest account of her mother’s illness, but the usual detailed analysis of the country’s post-Communist development was missing. Anna’s eyes kept latching themselves on every passerby as if needing to recognise the familiar gait and the fine features of her daughter’s face. Still, Leigh continued filling in the local news during Anna’s absence. Given her practically nonexistent love life, there wasn’t much else to choose from.

“So I said to him, ‘Smash it for all I care, I don’t want it back in the house, I don’t want it to sit in my backyard, I want it out of my life.’ And would you believe it, he wouldn’t do it. Obviously he needed the money, he took the job in the first place, but he wouldn’t smash ‘a perfectly good piano’. Well, that’s what he said.”

This was the moment when Anna, even in her preoccupied state, took a gulp and her eyes for the first time focused fully on Leigh’s face, as if searching for any sign that she was joking. Anna could never entertain such a thought. Her love of music equalled her love for her children. Leigh realised that while succeeding in bringing Anna’s attention to the present, this story could also shake and even threaten their friendship of more than twenty years. Suddenly she felt she wanted to take her story back, wanted to be able to smile and pretend that the conversation had never happened.
While Anna’s blue eyes continued to question and her lips formed a narrow line, Leigh rushed to the end of the story. “He is going to take it apart, piece by piece. One would think he was talking about a 13th century antique. Then he will reassemble it elsewhere and you’ll be able to have it in the centre after all.”

“Thank you.” While the eyes still showed the shock of betrayal, the lips managed a polite response. There wasn’t much to say and Leigh found an escape in the sweet froth of her cappuccino, giving Anna the opportunity to do the same. After a moment of a sipping duet, Anna’s voice returned.

“I’m so sorry, Leigh. I can’t concentrate on your story. I’m so worried about Becky I just keep drifting off. With the stories of rape and murder in the paper every day, I’m scared for her.” Her voice trailed off into a flurry of sobs.

“Oh how silly of me! Of course you’re scared. Here I go on about the bloody piano while you are sick from worry.”

Handing her a bundle of tissues, Leigh knew that Anna’s mind was roaming the imaginary landscape of the scenarios that Becky could encounter, but she hoped to distract her at least for a while. Obviously she had failed and now both were going to follow an all too familiar script.

In the privacy of her mind she called it the “baby gone missing” scenario and as the years passed she found it harder to summon the necessary emotions to see Anna through it each time it was replayed. She felt her guts tightening at the thought of the
possibilities, but unlike Anna, she immediately pressed the “reality check” button. Becky’s 20 years of existence had thrown up a long line of disappearances, missed messages, false alarms and police interviews. Leigh had sat through many of these with her friend, especially after her husband’s departure about 10 years earlier. From the time Becky entered primary school, she had become the “Houdini girl” and she had never failed to live up to the nickname. Every teacher in the school dreaded excursions for which the bright and curious girl had signed up, and extraordinary efforts were made not to lose her, yet time after time the child managed to create yet another crisis through the most innocent of reasons.

“I realise that it’s not like her not to be here on your return, she must have a good reason for not being here,” Leigh started, reaching for Anna’s hand and clasping it gently in between hers. “But I’m sure she’s all right. You’ve said her backpack and some of her bush gear has gone, so she’s somewhere wild, probably camping and not being able to get back here on time. Out of phone range, that kind of a thing. Remember the time she fell in love with the guy researching wombats? Stayed in the wilderness for a month unaware that the message she’d left on the fridge had fallen under and gone unnoticed till the police found it while searching for the clues inside the house?”

Anna’s teary smile was sufficient reward for Leigh to continue. “And what about the very first time she did her trick, remember?”

Anna nodded. How could she not? It was every mother’s nightmare come true. A three year old Becky, Anna and Leigh were waiting in line at the Department Store to pick up photos of Becky on Santa’s knees. Becky, holding Anna’s hand, was
chatting incessantly, as only three year olds can. Later Anna admitted to feeling exhausted and bored by the child’s unending enthusiasm and allowed her concentration to enter the more interesting realm of Leigh’s love life. One moment she was clasping the little hand, the next her hand was empty and Becky’s place was taken by a little boy who couldn’t explain in which direction the girl had disappeared. Two hours later, with every police officer in the city on alert and the shopping centre under siege by security, Becky was found asleep curled up in a big armchair in the Furniture Department, two floors up from where she started. Not scared, but disappointed that Santa had not left his presents while she was asleep. In the end she ended up with a big Christmas Teddy from the relieved staff of the store.

The memory of their shared nightmare had brought them closer. Leigh’s voice sounded positive and strong. “Truly, I believe she is OK, just out of town on one of her adventures.”

Anna couldn’t help but remember the phone calls she made to Leigh over the years, all starting the same way: “Becky’s missing; I’ve no idea where she is.” It was always a false alarm. She was grateful that her friend was still around, although Becky was now an adult. They continued sitting, each absorbed in her own memories.

“Peter is going to check her e-mails,” Anna announced, her voice barely a whisper. Before Leigh could respond, the voice grew legs. “Yeah, I know no need for the lecture. He won’t divulge any secrets to me, they’re as thick as thieves, and apparently she gave him her password some time ago.”
Leigh just nodded. They had known each other for over 20 years, having met in first year at uni, Anna a newcomer to Australia, her refugee status still fresh in her passport and her English almost non-existent, Leigh, a middle-class Australian, born and bred in Cronulla, with a sense of justice and rebellion strong enough to take an East European refugee in need under her wing. They shared most of their first year classes and formed a tentative friendship, which soon became a study partnership. Anna’s meticulous research skills and hard work, driven by her determination to succeed, complemented Leigh’s English proficiency and confidence, although those qualities came with a more relaxed attitude to work. They helped each other and passed their first year. When their choice of subjects separated them in subsequent years, they stayed friends and had been part of each other’s lives ever since. Over the years, they had always managed to listen and support each other, deal with problems when they arose without having to always agree.

Being with Leigh reassured Anna, and she suddenly remembered that Leigh’s life has also changed dramatically before her own departure overseas. “So tell me, how is Sammy in far flung Adelaide, and how is it living alone after all these years of having her company?”

“You wait for them to grow up and find their own lives, but when they finally do; your life becomes sort of meaningless. Working at home doesn’t help either, but I am lucky having Alice and Ken next door.”

While they swapped their stories, back in Anna’s house Peter’s concentration was fully absorbed by the assignment given to him by his mother. He wasn’t thrilled
about it, but he agreed to comply with her request, because even he was starting to
get worried about Becky’s absence, especially when she didn’t turn up when Anna
came back.

He pushed “enter” once again. The computer screen blinked and refused to budge,
and the familiar window appeared. “Have you forgotten your password?” it asked,
suggesting that the user take advantage of the memory prompt button. “Damn it! I
was positive I had it this time!” Peter hit the desktop in frustration. “She told me so
many times! Why didn’t I take it seriously?”

But he knew why. He heard her voice, encouraging and teasing. “Come on, Pete. I
know you’d never use it, but as a sign of my trust in you, I’ll give you my password.”

She had been sprawled on his bed, surrounded by his CDs, school assignment books
and other bits and pieces. He’d suspected that she was just testing him as she had so
many times in the past. He’d fallen for it before, but not this time. He’d learned his
lesson and so his memory had instantly deleted the word.

The first time she did it, he was about eight. “I trust you never to open this precious
box. I keep my treasures here. Treasures others would kill for.” After she glided out,
he pounced on the box but found only a dead cockroach and thought nothing of it. A
couple of days later he found that a single strand of her long hair placed across the
box had incriminated him. When she found him out, he blushed in shame. She used
the evidence to blackmail him for days, and their mother was puzzled by his sudden
willingness to do all of her chores.
Over the next few years he had fallen for the same trick again and again. Until the day she pretended to have a packet of cigarettes in her dresser and used her fingerprinting kit to accuse him of invading her privacy. He decided then that enough was enough. His previously blind younger-brother adoration for her was replaced by a more realistic appraisal of her qualities. “Wild, unpredictable and quite mad” was his final assessment and he decided to focus on his own growing up. Later, when she offered him her password, he wouldn’t even dream of touching her computer. He had erased the password from his memory. Now he needed to retrieve it.

The memory prompting was a clue she’d set for herself: “a childhood dislike”. He had tried many possibilities by now: spiders, snakes, warm milk, the corner shop owner who spat when he talked, raw onions, pink frilly dresses, white socks; she seemed to have so many that Peter could still remember, but the computer refused to budge.

“Try again,” he told himself, returning the cursor to the password box.

Tomato soup, Mrs Binks the primary school teacher she had in Year Six, washing the dishes, going to sleep.

The screen blinked and disappeared. The various icons of the desktop scattered across the screen. How could he have forgotten her nightly attempts to delay the inevitable? The games she used to initiate, just before their bedtime, hoping to stay up just that little bit longer? When all failed she’d tiptoe into his room after the lights went out, telling him stories and her future plans. She hated sleep, not because of
nightmares or a fear of darkness, but because she was convinced that she was missing out on something important happening while she was asleep.

He was the opposite. Couldn’t stay up past ten o’clock, his body have always let him down. By the time he entered high school he had finally trained himself to stay up so he could socialise with his friends. “Going to sleep!” How could he forget!

A click on the e-mail icon revealed screen upon screen of opened and unopened e-mails. He heard her screaming at him already, accusing him of prying into her soul, sneaking into her private life. And she would be right. He’d only agreed to do it because as the days went by, Anna, who was beside herself with worry, would get someone else to do it. Becky’s private life would be ripped open, and he needed to protect her. If he was true to himself, he’d also have to admit that he feared for her safety. Despite her many previous disappearances, this time he worried more than he let it be known. In the days before her disappearance, she would not talk to him about “normal things”, no matter how much he tried. Her intensity of involvement in her causes frightened him.

“Look what’s happening around us,” she’d say, pointing to the global warming, the Tampa crisis, the Pacific solution, logging of forests, and another impending war. Her list was endless. When he told her to get a life and stop overreacting, she called him ignorant and self-centred. While he studied for his exams, she went to rallies and political forums. She had a job in a bookshop, but she seemed to have lots of free time. After Anna left for Europe, Peter had hardly seen her, although up till the last couple of weeks she did leave signs of coming and going more or less daily.
He started with the most recent e-mails, moving backwards, and his surprise grew with each click of the mouse. She had very few personal e-mails, most were coming from groups: T-r-e-e-s, Land care, G-r-e-e-n P-a-r-t-y, Wilderness Society, Green Alliance. E-n-v-i-r-o-n-m-e-n-t was the most numerous one, at least 25 messages from them. Old Forest Action in SE NSW, campaign to save bit of rainforest in northern NSW, Snowy River Campaign, Murray River, the list just went on and on including those in other states.

The next lot of e-mails was even more curious: A-s-y-l-u-m-s-e-e-k-e-r-s, V-i-s-a, Refugees Collective, F-o-r-t-r-e-s-s-A-u-s-t-r-a-l-i-a. Mostly they contained information about detention centres Australia wide. Invitations to rallies, visits to centres, photo galleries of pictures from places that resembled jails, and calls to participate in demonstrations. Nothing specific, only dates and times coinciding with the Easter break.

He shook his head. Everyone knew that the policy stank but what could anyone do? Why to get so het up about it? Since 9/11 it was important that everyone arriving was checked thoroughly, although everyone knew that US-based terrorists arrived on legitimate visas, not as refugees. He could see that Becky disagreed with the government on refugees, but he was surprised at the number of networks she was plugged into and the discussion groups she participated in. Still, there was nothing personal in all of that, nothing to point to where she might have gone.

“Ok, this is the difficult stuff,” he told himself as he started to open the e-mails from individuals. “Sorry, Becky, I’ve got nothing else to go on.” He felt disappointed that
the group e-mails hadn’t yielded any results. He scrolled down opening each individual e-mail. Some were easy to skim through” “Sorry, Beck, must cancel the lunch. Ring me about the reunion.” Let’s go to the movies soon.”

She had kept friends from school, and none of these e-mails seem unusual until one caught his attention. It had arrived shortly before Easter.

“Hi, sweetheart, sorry I missed you. Came to see you at the bookshop to say I’d love to come for the ride. Will book the room in the motel you have suggested. Love, Jude.”

The only outgoing e-mail that made sense only increased his suspicion. “Pick me up tomorrow noon. Don’t let anyone in on the secret. I’m very excited, but the depth of my involvement is scaring me a bit, I have not gone that far before. We might like to stay another night as well, if we feel ok about it afterwards. Love, Beck.”

No other e-mails explained or elaborated on the planned trip or Jude’s identity.

“What does one really know about one’s sister? Did Becky have a secret that no one, not even Anna, would suspect?” Peter mused, opening one e-mail after another, trying to establish a more definite picture of Jude and Becky’s relationship. As far as he knew, none of Becky’s old friends were called Jude and the last known person that she had been seeing was a post-grad student tracking wombats about a year earlier. Peter had been hoping she was with him, but Jude’s message proved him wrong. And here was an e-mail from Mr Wombat himself, just on Easter time.
“Hi, haven’t heard from you for a while. The radio tracked down Podgy, the one you have felt some affinity with. It took me a few days to find him. He’s now a fully mature male moving into a new territory. Almost lost his transmitter, had to tranquillise him and insert a new one under his skin. He’s off again, sending beeps regularly. When will I see you? Was hoping you’d come down at Easter, shame that you have to work. Hope you not getting hooked with anyone else.”

“That’s it. She’s ditched him and run off with Jude.”

The logical conclusion, to which Peter suddenly arrived, made him jump. Pacing the room, his mind was generating one consequence after another. “Thank God she’s not in my school anymore. The jokes I’d have to put up with. Are you sure it’s not contagious? Can’t sit too close to you, you might have inherited the genes.”

“At least Mum won’t have to worry about Becky being pregnant, but how on Earth am I going to tell her?” He hated himself for volunteering to read Becky’s e-mails to protect her and being left with the task of revealing her secret. Either way, he was given a dud deal.
The Long Drive

When Kasim came out of the darkness, he felt a water bottle at his lips. As the cold liquid passed down his throat, hands slapped his cheeks gently and a cool cloth wiped his face. He remembered choking on the dust and the never-ending bumping of the wheels. The ensuing stillness made him wonder where he was. His face freed from the layers of dust, he forced his eyelids to open. The dark shape in front of him became the back of a seat, so he was still in the car, a stationary car. Quickly he shut his eyes again suddenly aware of voices nearby, when a woman’s voice spoke to him. “Come on, open your eyes. You’re safe; it’s ok, nothing to be scared of.” He hoped it was the girl who had washed his hair. He could still feel her fingers on his skull. This voice though, sounded different, it wasn’t her. Instead of feeling disappointed, he suddenly wanted to see what this voice looked like. When he opened his eyes fully, the wall of heat took his breath away it felt as if it surged through his opened eyes. His head spun and every movement hurt. “I must go out,” he struggled to get himself out of the oven.

“Hurray, welcome back to us!” The voice sounded genuinely happy and he let his eyes follow it. She had golden hair and was sitting right next to him holding a wet washer caked with dust. She was dressed in a variation of the clothes he was given at the camp: cut-off jeans and a T-shirt of nondescript colour. Next to her a neat backpack was spilling out onto the seat. Kasim’s bare feet felt the heavy rug under which he was hidden and the dusty taste came back to his mouth, making him gag. He must have grimaced, because she pointed to the floor and said, “Not any more, this time you'll travel in style. By the way, my name is Annie.” Her voice sounded
like chirping of birds in the orchard after the rain. It made him smile. She touched his arm, motioning him to get out. “Let’s go, we still have a long way ahead of us.”

Once outside he noticed some wooden tables and seats, a stone fireplace, a large water tank and a few struggling trees surrounding the cleared space. In a distance he could hear the continuous roar of cars. The sun stung his eyes, he felt hot and dirty.

Another car stood alongside and couple of men rested against it. While Kasim was stretching his wooden legs and arms, one of them came by. He looked different from everyone he had met since the escape. Short blond hair, sunglasses, a clean white shirt, and proper pants. When he extended his hand, Kasim noticed an expensive watch.

“Hi, I’m Ian. I’ll take you the next stretch. What’s your name?” Before Kasim managed to answer, he handed him a bag. “No, better go and wash and change first. We’ve a long way to go, plenty time to talk later. Put on the new clothes, but hurry.”

The thought of cool water excited him, although he wasn’t sure about changing yet again. Following the directions, he located a toilet block next to the large water tank. Once inside he stripped off the dusty clothes down to his underwear and found the tap. It was difficult to keep it going but he managed to wash with one hand and hold it with the other. The cool water felt divine. When he put his head under the tap, he felt the weight of the dust coming off. He continued rubbing his skin all over his body, letting the water spill over his face, down his chest and his back and down his legs, pooling at his feet. After a while, he felt clean enough and turned the tap off.
In the bag he found a towel and a new set of clothes. They looked new, just like Ian’s. While he was drying himself, he heard sounds coming from behind the wall and felt his face burning at the thought that he too might have made such sounds. He quietly stepped towards the wall, looking for a peephole; his hand was already making its way across the joints, his fingers already searching for a gap in the wood, when he heard his mother’s words. “You must never take advantage, you must always behave honourably.” His hand flew off the wall immediately and he tiptoed back to the other side, inspecting his new clothes. The orange T-shirt had funny drawing on it and big words and he liked the look of it. The shorts reached to his knees and the socks were too big, but he didn’t care. The cap was the same colour as the shirt, and when he found the wraparound sunglasses he knew he looked cool. He grabbed the pile of dust laden clothes and after a moment’s hesitation, stuffed it into a metal rubbish bin in the corner. “This is the free me,” he said to no one in particular, and rushed outside.

“Hey slow down!” The warning came too late, the collision with the pile of wet towels and clothes she was carrying came as a surprise but he caught a whiff of something that reminded him of the herbal tea his grandmother used to boil sometimes. Annie had also completely changed and she wore a skirt that seemed far too short. He was still getting used to the way women dressed in Australia. Sometimes he forced his eyes to change their direction, but other times they betrayed him, searching for the patches of bare skin, so often freely visible. He immediately noticed the way Annie’s white short-sleeved top made her suntan darker and the way her wet blond hair fell around her laughing face.
When they set off, the travel felt good. The outside heat was cooled by the air conditioning and Kasim had the whole back seat to himself except for a skateboard that was placed on the seat next to him. He had never used one but he had seen boys his age riding them in the town, when they were taken out by the Education Officer. He was dying to have a go, kept spinning its wheels; impatient to have a go, but Ian explained that the skateboard was next to him for another purpose.

“If anyone stops our car, be it police or army or anyone else, you grab the board and pretend you’re asleep. Keep breathing very slow and stay asleep until we call you. Ignore everything else and keep the cap on at all times.”

“Pretend to be asleep.” Kasim understood. Once, when the secret police had searched his grandfather’s house, he’d kept on sleeping, while holding on to a small package that his grandfather had sneaked underneath him only a moment before the door flew open and the police stormed in. He slept without any movement, although the sharp edge of the package dug into his ribs and the shouting made him tremble. Yes, he’d be a good sleeper, hugging the skateboard would be easy.

As the car drove through dry, flat plains, Annie kept singing along with the radio and occasionally even Ian joined in. Kasim felt lighter than he had felt in a long time. When they approached a small town with a service station ahead, they turned the radio off.

“It might be best for you to go to sleep, but we will be here a while. We need to get some food as well as petrol and make some phone calls. If you can’t stay asleep,
here’s what you do,” Ian explained, as they pulled into the station. “Stay inside the car with the skateboard, and if anyone approaches the car unexpectedly, look at them directly and smile, but don’t speak. It’s important that you look like you haven’t got a worry in the world.”

It sounded easy, but Kasim’s throat felt dry and his face muscles refused to cooperate when he tried the carefree smile. “It’s not working,” he decided and chose to play the sleep game instead.

Once at the petrol station, Annie jumped out immediately and started to fill the car with petrol, while Ian was washing the front window. Kasim clutched the board and pretended to sleep. After a while he opened his eyes again and saw Annie coming out of the shop, clutching a couple of cans of Coke and some chips. Back at the car, she opened the door and threw one of the bags to him. He knew it was now ok to stop pretending. He let go of the board and grabbed the packet, feeling that he could eat at least five of them. Salt and vinegar, his favourite! Focusing on the saltiness on his tongue, he didn’t see the man until his face stared at him through the side door.

What was he to do? Too late to fall asleep, so he dropped the packet and reached for the board. With his stomach turning into a solid rock he managed a smile, and a wave for a good measure. The face disappeared from the window and he heard Annie’s voice call out and a low murmur of voices to follow. When the car door slammed they were both in. By the time the engine started, the rock inside Kasim’s stomach had grown into a mountain, and as they moved off, the mountain became a volcano. They drove just far enough to get clear of the station and stopped. He
jumped out and heaved again and again, the mountain now refusing to shift, leaving him shaking uncontrollably. When he finally stopped, Annie’s arms were wrapped around his shoulders and he wished he was little and could cuddle up into them. Instead he shook them off. “Sorry to make a mess,” was all he could manage before the unwanted tears arrived.

When they recommenced their journey Annie stayed with him in the back, her words calm and reassuring: “You did real good, back there.” But he didn’t believe her. As he watched the flat, dry plains go by, the mountain shrunk to a pebble, but it was still hard enough to stop him from falling asleep even though he felt so tired he wanted to cry again. For the life to be as it was before his mother died and his father took him on the journey. He wanted to curl up and go to sleep, but felt scared that he would wake up back behind the razor wire. Instead he watched the empty countryside and wondered if Mr Karsai and his uncle were now in the solitary confinement. He realised that now he had no one except the two people who were driving him into the unknown.

“Where you taking me?” he asked after a while. “What will be with me?”

Annie shrugged her shoulders. “First of all we’ll take you as far as possible from the detention centre. You should not have been there in the first place. Then we’ll find people with whom you can stay, maybe in Melbourne or in Sydney, it doesn’t matter where. Don’t worry. I’ll stay with you until we find a safe place for you. After that, I don’t know. Try to relax now. I promise I’ll look after you.”
He decided that she looked beautiful and had kind eyes, the sort that he could trust. He wished his father could see him now, running away from the authorities, being strong and not crying.

“I must do letter for my grandfather,” he said. “They must know I am free. And for my family still in jail.”

Despite his fear, he did manage to fall asleep several times, but each time he woke up shortly after. His mind kept filling with questions he wanted to ask, but when he tried to put the words together the hugeness of the task overwhelmed him. Simple questions like “Where will I end up? Will I ever see my grandparents again?” sat like pebbles in his stomach, unanswered. Following the incident at the petrol station, he noticed Annie checking the rear view mirror constantly, paying attention to every car that appeared on the horizon.

“I didn’t do a good pretend job.” The words stuck in his throat, unwilling to shift. He felt guilty each time Annie turned around to search the road behind them, afraid of her answer and worried that the words, once released, might become a reality.

“How long?” he finally managed to ask, but when Annie spread out a map he became confused. All the lines looked long and the dots were far and few in between. Defeated, he drifted off into the empty spaces spreading between the road and the horizon. If the dried up bushes sheltered any form of life, he didn’t see it.
Upon reaching Adelaide, Ian and Annie relaxed noticeably. Annie laughed and waved the map about as she directed the car to a large city square. Kasim and Ian waited in the car while she got out and met another girl in front of a tall office building. When they hugged, Kasim diverted his attention to the tall buildings surrounding him. They were taller than any he had seen before. He got out and stood with his head twisted upwards, the sun hurting his eyes despite his sunglasses. “One, two, three, seven, sixteen.” By the time Annie returned Kasim had counted twenty-five floors and still had not reached the top. She seemed happy when they got back into the car.

“Come on, Ian. Sammy told me where to find the cafes. Let’s take him for a proper meal. He could do with one, after eating the grub they served there. Come on, don’t be a spoilsport. We all need a break. I’ll drive till late at night to make up for the lost time.”

When Ian finally agreed, she kissed him on the mouth, and when Ian didn’t move his mouth away Kasim didn’t quite know where to look, so he pretended to be asleep again but still listening for the laughter coming from the front seat of the car. When the car stopped and they all got out Kasim’s heart skipped a beat. The shops in front of them had signs done in Arabic script, and the cafes had familiar low seats. He stood mesmerised, until Annie pushed him into the opened door.

The cooking smell made his eyes water and his chest heave; he was back in his grandmother’s kitchen when he could still climb onto her lap while she was cleaning vegetables, preparing one of his favourite dishes. But now all that was gone. When
Annie put her arms around him, he heard her whispering, felt her hand stroking his back: “It will be all right.”

Luckily the tables had boxes of tissues on them. Ian pulled out a handful for him. “She is right, you know. We’ll find good people to help you.”

When he blew his nose and sat down he felt embarrassed. He shouldn’t have allowed himself to be weak; he shouldn’t have allowed her to hold him. But neither of them seemed concerned, their focus switched to the menu and soon Kasim’s mind was reeling from the choices offered. What would he choose first? What would he leave out? The food was similar, but not the same as he was used to at home. Somehow that made him happier and suddenly his stomach felt like a bottomless pit needing to be filled. He wanted to taste every single dish. After he changed his mind a few times, they got a selection of different dishes, and he just ate and ate.

After his third heaped plate, Ian warned him, “Take it easy, buddy, don’t get sick on me. I’m a doctor and I am supposed to make sure you stay well. We’ll ask for a box and you can take some away with you.”

Next came the motel with a bathroom and a bath all to himself. Surprisingly, the hot water was relaxing. He hadn’t wanted a warm bath at the end of a long drive in the heat, but Annie had insisted, “It will help you to relax.” She had even turned the taps on and put some smelly stuff in the water that made it all bubbly. When he had lowered himself into the water, white mountainous peaks had risen up all around
him. He tried to blow them away where they stuck to his skin, but after a while he gave up and just enjoyed the new experience.

Two boxes of beans and potatoes and meat koftas now sat in the little fridge in the motel bedroom, waiting for him to get hungry again. Before his bath, they had told him that the next day they would drive to Melbourne, where Ian lived. He had to go back to the hospital where he worked, but Annie was to stay with Kasim as she had promised.

Right then they were arguing in the bedroom. He couldn’t understand every word they said but he knew it was about him. His was a hard decision to make. Would he get out of the bath, ignore the raised voices and head for the fridge, or remain in the luxurious warmth of the water for a bit longer? After a moment of indecision, he chose the latter, knowing that in this place, the food will not be taken away from him.

Stretching his legs and wiggling his toes beneath the bubbles, he looked around. The bathroom wasn’t very big but nicer than any he had seen before, apart from his uncle’s house in Baghdad. That was much bigger and lined with marble and big mirrors. His father told him that the taps were pure gold. Kasim remembered visiting this uncle only once. He was his father’s cousin and a general in the army.

“Come on, Kassi, are you all right? You haven’t drowned, have you? We’re going to eat your food if you take much longer.” Annie’s voice had a tease in it; he could hear it without even seeing her face. She wouldn’t eat his food, not her. He didn’t even
mind her calling him by such a funny name. “I go now,” he called back, stumbling over his feet in a hurry to get out of the bath.

Later that night, lying in between them on the big bed, crunching on chips and watching TV, he felt happy, although he was unable to understand what the program was all about, despite Annie’s commentary and Ian’s explanations. It did not matter at all. He felt safe and even managed a giggle here and there. The biggest surprise came when he was told that for the next two days he was going to drive with Annie along the coast and swim in the ocean. The arguments he had heard earlier suddenly made sense.

“Come on, Ian! The kid is stressed out, not knowing where he’ll be next, what will happen to him. He ought to be looked after, not shuffled around the world from one jail to another, all on his own. We don’t even know what awaits him. Let him be a little kid for a day or two. Let’s give him short break before he becomes an escapee again. It’s not as if he’s going to miss a plane to freedom, is it? You can ring and tell them we’ll be a day or two late. It’ll give him extra strength to cope. He needs that.”

Now he realised that she was fulfilling the promise she had made to him, he was glad he’d met her.
Desert Sunset

The heat of the day was breaking and the horizon was already hungrily devouring the remains of the daylight. He stretched his legs in the old armchair, its bowels spilling onto the half eaten relics of the veranda’s loose boards. The beer in his hand iced his fingers, but he waited for Jan to fetch herself a glass of wine. This was their time together, one of the rare occasions when he got home before sunset. Even when the kids were small, they had tried to steal this special time together, whenever it was possible. A couple of drinks on the porch, wait for the stars to come out, watch the dust settle and the desert come alive in the wake of the heat.

Jan pushed through the wooden screen door, letting it bang behind her. “May and Bob are having a dinner on Saturday week. Young Luke’s coming from Adelaide, bringing the kids. We got an invite. I haven’t seen the youngest one yet. May says it won’t be a barbie, she’s sick of the heat. If the weather cools down she’ll do her leg of lamb.” He lifted the cool beer to his lips, too busy to reply. “Cheers dears,” she said, clinking her glass to his already half-empty can.

The first thirst quenched, he replied. “Cheers,” and then fell silent again.

She dragged a sagging banana chair next to him, her stillness a mirror image of his.

“The best part of the day,” he thought, without feeling the need to comment aloud. He knew she felt the same. They’d spent close to thirty years together, watching the sunsets and sunrises together. Being a city girl, for the first ten years she would
exclaim at the colours of the sky, the scents of the falling night and the brightness of the stars. Now they could finish each other’s sentences, so they sat in silence instead. With the sun gone, the desert air filled with the sounds of life emerging from its hiding places. Even after all these years he had not stopped marveling at the variety of life that the desert sustained. With the encroaching darkness, the subtle sounds that were easily missed and obvious only when one kept still and silent had intensified to a full crescendo.

After a while, he got up and went inside to refill their glasses. On the way back, he noticed the light blue shirts folded on the table. His hand brushed over the pile, feeling the softness of the material. After a day on the washing line, they were free of the sweat that accompanied him during his working hours. Instead, they smelled faintly of lavender scented fabric softener, which Jan used each time after the heat of the desert finally murdered the small patch of the plants she cultivated during the cooler months, to put into the clothes draws.

“I’m sure I saw one of those runaways today,” he said, measuring his words carefully. “He was only a kid, like, probably no older than young Jack. Not even twelve, I’d say.”

“Surely not” Jan’s eyebrows exclaimed as she waited for more. Sometimes he drove her mad with his measured talk, but she’d learnt that there was no hurrying him; she’d just have to wait it out.
“Of course I could be wrong. They might’ve been just tourists passing through like, but my hunch tells me different. She was too nervous, if you know what I mean, too friendly like. All chitchat once she’d seen me, but her eyes gave her away. The kid’s also, trapped animal like. He’d had a hair change too, I reckon. Gone blond, but couldn’t quite change his skin. Not real dark like, but sort of the olive colour that doesn’t sit right with blond hair – too obvious, like the Greek girls that used to walk down Lygon street, bottle blond. What do they think we are? Simpletons?” He gave a short snort and paused.

“So did you bust him?” she asked, fed up with the slow trickle now.

He rubbed his jaw, up the cheek and back to the chin. “Nah” he said finally. “Just didn’t seem right, like. Let’s face it; they didn’t do harm to anyone, just escaped bad governments. I’d do it too if I had to. It don’t seem sort of …” He paused, looking for a word. After a moment, looking most uncomfortable, he found what he was looking for “sort of humane like. Yeah, it don’t seem humane like, the whole place doesn’t. It’s like a jail, even worse.” After another pause he added, “He’ll get caught sooner or later. I didn’t want to be the one to hand him in, though.”

She nodded, not necessarily agreeing, but acknowledging what she heard, processing it all. “Better not let anyone know down at the pub. They’re all looking for them,” she said, taking another sip. “None would take it lightly, you letting him go and all.”

He nodded. “As I said, I could’ve been wrong. He was with a couple, like. Not the grunge type, well dressed, looked loaded, if you get me drift. Good car, fancy
clothes, posh talking. He was in the back, hugging a skate board like it was his lifeline, tried hard, but his eyes told it all.”

She touched his arm. “I hope you’re right and he got away. He should’ve been at school if he were that young, not in that place.”

The first stars claimed their attention. She imagined one of her grandsons making the journey across the world, ending up in a jail and becoming an escapee in a foreign country. What future would he have? She wanted to talk more, but he’d finished with the subject. Having drained the last drop from his can, he stretched in his chair, focusing on the stars. She waited until words came out again, so lightly this time she had to strain her ears to catch them: “Let’s face it; we’re not exactly crowded here, are we?”

“Yeah,” she agreed, “plenty of space to share.”
“Have you done this before?” Leigh asked Mehran, having watched his fingers patiently search the invisible lines of weakness between two piano panels. When they found what they were looking for, he carefully applied the edge of a fine chisel and gently coaxed the weakness into an ever increasing opening. After an hour watching the slow process, she found herself mesmerised by his hands and could not but notice a scar on the underside of his palm. The difference in colour and the rough edges of the joined skin became obvious once she realised it was there. Was it a burn or a deep cut? The thought of the pain he must have experienced made her shudder but she ignored the curiosity niggling inside her.

His voice brought her back. “Well, not really, in fact, never. But let’s face it, there isn’t much to lose. If I mess it up then it will be ok to smash it. At least I would’ve given it a try.” For a moment his eyes found hers, but immediately sought the wooden panels instead.

Leigh was contemplating going back inside and leaving him to it; she had plenty to do. But the sun’s rays filtered through the gum tree canopy felt warm without being oppressive, the resident wattle bird busily scoured its branches and even the planes had decided to stay away. They could have been taking a part in a scene set at a country cottage garden instead in an inner-city backyard, only minutes from the CBD. She also felt curious about this guy. He’d showed up with a bag of tools and had already spent more hours taking it apart than she could ever afford to pay him. Apart from a casual “Don’t worry about the money,” he’d worked in silence, only responding to her question.
The time came to try again. “You love these instruments, don’t you? Is that why you won’t smash it?”

He waved his hand, “It’s a long story, maybe some other time,” and returned to the job of separating the panels.

His calm manner intrigued her, even more so now, because of his scar. The fact that he was good looking and about her own age certainly added value. He wore no ring, but she still assumed him to be married. “Too good looking to be single, so probably divorced. Mediterranean or Middle Eastern, but definitely one of those men who get better looking with age,” she told herself after his first visit.

This was his second return. True to his word, he’d come back the day after the aborted removal, only to convince her to let the piano back inside to protect it from the rain. He checked the joints, that were, until he showed them to her, completely invisible. Today, he had more time and he hoped to make good progress in taking the case apart.

“Can I get you some tea?” Leigh asked, wanting to be useful, although she really wanted to help to dismantle the thing, or at least hand him the various chisels and sharp blades he kept in his sack. To her dismay, he accepted her offer eagerly and she had no choice but retreat to the kitchen. Once the tea was ready she added some of her favourite biscuits and brought her own cup to sit next to him.
“You’re very lucky, this is an unusually quiet part of the inner city,” he observed while sipping his tea.

“Don’t be fooled,” Leigh laughed. “Any moment the planes may start landing at two-minute intervals, the dogs next door will bark and the kids behind the fence will scream and fight. Only Alice’s house will remain silent because I saw them walking to their car. These backyards are so small that we can hear each other not only talk but even whisper.”

He laughed. “I know what you mean. My sister has two kids and a dog and I’m sure some days her neighbours call them the neighbours from hell. The dog only barks when the kids fight, so it’s all or nothing.” She liked the sound of his laughter, suddenly free of constraint, as if an invisible wall between them crumbled. “I suppose they’re lucky she doesn’t have two kids and two dogs.” He laughed again.

Suddenly it felt ok to be more personal. “Where do you come from? And what’s your real name?” The moment the words came out, she knew she’d made a mistake. His face closed down, the laughter all forgotten.

A pause that felt like the proverbial elephant in the room hung in the air. “I’m Persian, from Iran.”

Somehow she didn’t expect that. Greek yes, Italian yes, maybe even Turkish wouldn’t have surprised her. But an Iranian? His manner didn’t fit the images she recalled from a film about an American woman trapped inside Iran with her young
daughter or those of the religious police beating women with sticks. Words that had
been haunting the western world since 9/11 sprang to her mind. How should she
respond? All she managed was: “Really? How interesting!” and then added. “Oh,
well, I’ve already spent far too much time here, must do some work.” Gathering the
cups, she felt his eyes on her. Heat rushed into her cheeks when she made herself
look up.

His smile was dismissive. “Don’t worry, I’m used to it. The reputation of my
fanatical government always precedes my own. And no, I don’t hide a wife or two
behind thick walls and I don’t pray five times a day. Not all of us do.” He handed her
his cup and added. “By the way, my name is Mehran.”

Her hands trembled as she placed the cups on top of the piano. “Sorry I’m so
transparent and so rude.” She felt the need to explain further. He watched in silence.
“No matter how much I want to understand, the attitude of Muslim men towards
women angers me even though the women themselves accept it as part of their
culture. To see women denied education, employment or any choice just makes me
mad, no matter which religion or state dogma supports it. The so-called Western
countries weren’t much better either. It took women a long time to fight for the small
achievements we now have. And believe me; it is still far from satisfactory.” She sat
down again, not knowing what to do or say next.

He nodded, picked up his chisel but remained seated. “Not all Iranians are Muslims
and not all Muslims are the same. Fanatical fundamentalist Christians or fanatical
Orthodox Jews are as dangerous as fanatical Muslims.”
She noticed how close to him she had chosen to sit, their bodies almost touching. “You’re compensating for your indiscretion!” her mind spoke, but she didn’t move. In fact she wanted to move even closer. In her mind, she already saw her hand sliding towards his, her fingers touching the rough edges of the scar. “Take a grip,” she admonished herself, gulped down the inexplicable desire to touch him and casually slid sideways, creating a space between them.

“So where do you come from?” Mehran asked, the chisel now back on the ground like a demarcation line. “I’d say you have some Italian or a Greek in your background, going by your dark hair and the olive skin.” His little boy’s smile gave her the excuse to smile again, but it didn’t feel the same.

“Absolutely not, I’m Aussie through and through. Born and bred here, as were my mother and father and their parents as well. And before that some Irish mixed with Yorkshire. But I have never been really interested in genealogy.” She paused watching his hands relax on his knees. “Well, not till now.” She drew a slow breath and realised that the demarcation line had shifted closer to her. Had she moved it or had he?

“Oh, what the heck!” The vehemence of her own voice shocked her, so unprepared she was for speaking aloud. Even her voice sounded different to her ears, as if she had suddenly become someone else. “I’ve got to get used to saying it, might as well start now!” Under his watchful gaze, she took a deep breath. “Yeah, that’s all I would have said about my family till about three months ago. Irish mixed with Yorkshire, my olive skin a genetic mystery from unknown source. But now I know
there’s more to it.” It was hard to tell this stranger, how much harder it will be to tell her friends?

“I’ve just recently …”

The shrill of the inside phone cut in. Her eyes rolled in that “what can I do?” look and she rushed inside. The receiver in her hand felt like a lifeline.

“Hi, Mum, how are you? What you doing?” Leigh recognised the brightness in Sammy’s voice. She was well and having a good time. The usual touch of breathlessness was there, not due to a medical condition, but to the fact that her daughter’s speech always lagged behind the thoughts generated by her brain. By the time the words were out, her brain has already moved on elsewhere and Sammy often compensated by speaking too fast for her lungs to manage.

“Guess what, Mum? I’ve just met Becky. She asked me to give you a message for Anna. Isn’t that weird? Why wouldn’t she ring her, you might ask, and so did I. But she said each time she tried to call, no one was at home and no answering machine on. Anyhow, she’s fine. She came to see me at work, at lunch time. Just between you and me, I think she’s having an affair with a married man. Could be divorced, I suppose, but definitely with a son. A small boy may be ten or eleven. I saw them when I met up with her downstairs. I am sure they waited for her, although she didn’t say anything, it was as if she didn’t want me to meet them. A cute looking kid and a cute father in an expensive car and dressed in expensive clothes, both of them.”
Sammy’s voice rang with excitement. It reminded Leigh that her daughter always loved to be the one to break news, having felt that her life with Leigh was far too orderly and boring. “And Mum, wait for this. I haven’t told you yet, but a while ago I met someone here that I like a lot. No, he’s not married, just gorgeous. We have sort ofmoved in together, and it’s working really well. I’ll tell you about him next time, must fly.”

Leigh’s head was spinning from the news. She rang Anna and left a message on her service, and then she slowly walked back to Mehran.

“Is everything all right?” he asked, obviously picking up something that alarmed her.

“Yes thanks, all’s fine. That was my daughter. She moved to Adelaide four months ago, and now she tells me that she is moved in with some boy. Not sharing a flat, but living with. More detail when she’ll ring next time.”

He wiped his hands with slow, considered motions. The wooden side panels were out and propped against the steel carcass. He nodded, collecting his tools. “That’s kids these days, I suppose. You must be beside yourself with worry. At least, from what you have said, this one is behaving as most of them do and she talks to you about her life, so that must count for something, doesn’t it?” He pointed at the remains of the piano. “I’ll come back the day after tomorrow. Tomorrow I am busy at a posh school. Moving a huge pipe organ donated by an ex-student. It needs to be moved from a private residence.” He smiled. “Hopefully not like yours. Still, it will take me all day.”
Their previous conversation was forgotten, but on saying goodbye at the front door, Leigh realised that she was looking forward to his next visit.

Back in her study Leigh’s thoughts returned to the news. Sammy had moved in with her lover. Although she trusted Sammy’s decisions she wondered if the move was a bit premature. On the wall above her desk, Sammy’s life unfolded through mounted photos. From a baby on a bunny rug to a young woman wearing a graduation cloak and hat. Sammy, Leigh and Dorothy; Sammy, Ken and Alice; Sammy, Anna, John, Peter and Becky; Sammy and her uncle’s and auntie’s families.

Leigh had created a large extended family for her daughter as soon as it became obvious that the baby’s father wanted no involvement. In the end her mother had been the first to accept that she was going to bring the baby up on her own.

Her mother! Leigh glanced at the clock. “Damn it! I’m running late again, one more reason for her to be cross.” She grabbed her keys and slammed the front door behind her. She was hoping to get her mother in a cooperative mood, something that was becoming increasingly difficult to achieve these days.

A couple of hours later, with the traffic behind her and her mother’s disapproving voice still ringing in her ears, she stood in the basement that had been her father’s domain until his death. He died when she had just turned sixteen. According to her mother, she had broken his heart by getting herself pregnant while unmarried and then compounded the shame by refusing to divulge the identity of the baby’s father.
For years Leigh had carried the guilt of her father’s death like a stone inside her shoe. Each time she attempted to move faster, the stone dug in painfully, slowing her down and finally grinding her to a halt.

After her father’s death, her life with the baby had proceeded in stops and starts until the day she found in this very basement a box full of old letters and photos. She threw the stone away that day, having discovered her father’s death certificate inside that box. It was issued in the name of James Harold McIntyre, who died of diabetes-related complications. James Harold McIntyre was indeed her father, but his illness had come to her as a complete surprise. In her memories, her father wasn’t ever a healthy man, but she had never known that he suffered from diabetes. In the semi darkness of the basement many years later, childhood memories of her family’s idiosyncrasies acquired a different meaning.

One of them was the fastidious regularity with which their meals used to be served. Meal times were set in concrete and latecomers were relegated to a plate of scraps from the oven. No one was ever waited for. The same applied to family outings to the beach or picnics. She recalled long-distance car trips being interrupted by stops for food on the side of the road, and frantic dashes to final destinations in order to arrive at the regular meal time. In her memories it was her mother who orchestrated these events; her father simply acquiesced to her directives. Leigh had seen the needles occasionally, but the sickness had never been named.

He had kept his feet warm with handmade socks and his hands protected by fingerless gloves right through each winter. Again, it was her mother who knitted
them, together with the beanies and long scarves that he wore. Leigh knew of no other father who wore gloves and bed socks in winter.

The most intriguing idiosyncrasy was her family’s attitude to sugar and all things sweet. It set her and her brothers truly apart from their peers at school. Their fridge never housed a carton of ice cream or a bowl of jelly, custard was never served at their table, and chocolates were only allowed on Christmas day. Leigh used to think of her mother as mean and compulsively health conscious, gleaming with pleasure each time the children got a clean bill of health from the dentist. When pestered by them, she never explained beyond “we don’t eat those things in our family”. No further explanation was ever given and her response was always the same even when they shouted at her as they grew older. Their father never intervened during these confrontations and had never shown any desire for sweets. Despite their mother’s health regime he was often sick and in most of Leigh’s memories he was dressed in his checked dressing gown and tattered slippers when not at work or in his basement workshop. More often than not, she remembered him resting in his armchair, too unwell to do much else. Only on rare occasions would he have been well enough to attend their sports events or school plays. His health had begun to decline further by the time she entered the high school. His eyesight also deteriorated, and by the time she was a senior student he was spending regular times attached to a dialysis machine at the hospital. His death still came as a total surprise and Leigh was left with the burden of guilt.

After she had found the box, she shouted at her mother. “Why wasn’t I told about the diabetes?”
Her mother responded, unperturbed by her anger, “You remember how he was, love, don’t you? So private, always careful not to get you kids involved. You should be grateful, instead of complaining. You had no worries during your schooling. That’s why you did so well.”

Leigh had found out nothing more about his illness, and she wondered if it was her mother who kept so much of his life hidden. Now here she was, once again searching the basement, this time for the box. The shelves that used to be stacked with tins of paint and tools were empty, blanketed in a generous layer of dust. The cabinet in which she had found the box also loomed empty. Having searched every bit of the basement without success, she decided to confront her mother.

“Do you know where the box with father’s death certificate and the old letters and photos is? The one I found when Sammy was little, years after his death? You must have it somewhere.”

Her mother’s eyes looked up over the edge of her magazine with a mixture of curiosity, amusement and – what she remembered from her childhood – suspicion.

The low table was set with the silver teapot and fine china that had belonged to her grandmother and of which only a couple of cups and saucers remained. In her seventies now, Dorothy had long ago abandoned the austere regime of Leigh’s childhood. Soon after her husband’s death she had developed a penchant for baking. Leigh’s pantry was always full of tins and jars filled with homemade biscuits and
slices of the most exotic kind. Sammy’s lunchbox was the envy of her less fortunate friends, right through her school years. Since her departure for Adelaide, the main benefactor of Dorothy’s baking had become her local church. Two plates of her latest creations were now displayed on the white porcelain High Tea trays of years gone by.

“Why would you want that old junk?” Dorothy asked leaving a smudge of lipstick on the rim of the fine china cup as she returned it to its matching saucer.

Leigh carefully selected a coconut creation of a deep red colour and while chewing it slowly she considered her answer. Over the years she had learned to engage her mother’s attention by stealth, something she had not done well during her childhood. She had always felt that her brother and sister were her mother’s favourites. Not that she would ever admit it, but there were incidents that Leigh noticed as a child, and did not forget. As far as Leigh remembered their relationship always had an edge. This edge and the distance between them contributed to her considering the possibility of having been adopted. Only after realising how much alike she and her father looked, did she reject that idea.

“Leigh is her daddy’s girl,” her mother used to tell to anyone who’d listen. Her dark hair, olive skin and brown eyes were a far cry from the fair hair and grey eyes of her siblings.

It had taken years to learn how to get her mother’s full attention, but she had finally mastered it. Now Leigh waited before responding, making sure that Dorothy’s
appetite has been aroused. Having gained her full attention, she decided not to give anything away just yet. “Is this a new recipe?” she asked, knowing that her mother was anxious for her verdict on the slice.

“Yes, it is. I used dried cherries; not those glace ones, but proper dried ones.” Dorothy now put the magazine away, a sure sign that she was expecting the conversation to continue for a while. “They’re hard to get. Only some of the shops in Arncliffe and Rockdale have them. Those specialising in Middle Eastern food,” she added.

“Goodness gracious, Mother, where have you been shopping? Is there anything wrong with your local supermarket? ” Leigh’s voice sounded too alarmed even to herself. Her mother’s lips puckered in the way that brought back the daily battles they fought over everything that Dorothy considered an affront to her sense of decency. “Of course I did, why shouldn’t I? The minister and his wife made a special welcome gesture to the newcomers, those who are Christians in particular, but they also spoke of those who are of the Islamic Faith. They said that these people are no different from the Jews, Buddhists or Hindus who came before. In every religion, there are good people and others who are not, and then they are the extremists. In fact there’s a family who moved into number 64, where old Bill used to live. The wife’s scarf must be a bother in this heat, but they seem like decent folk and their kids are ever so helpful and polite. I am thinking about helping the wife with English conversation. She’s at home all day, the husband goes to work and I suppose he learns there. Should I pour you another one?” she asked already reaching for Leigh’s empty cup.
Leigh simply nodded, needing to wash away the taste of the red slice, which had suddenly turned bitter. A long-forgotten face had swum into focus. There he was, with the straight dark hair that had the habit of flopping over his forehead, fine cheekbones and eyes that mesmerised her every time she stood nearby. He was her first love, more than a quarter century ago. How would her life have turned out had her mother’s attitude been different then? “Romeo and Juliet”, that’s what their friends called them, their love doomed from the start. “Chink, spick, yellow peril.” He was called all those names at times and his broken English didn’t help, so he ended up fighting one school fight after another. Both their families went hysterical about their innocent love, and while his family sent him off to Perth to live with relatives, Leigh was grounded for weeks on end and Dorothy made her promise not to get friendly with “one of those foreigner boys” ever again. Of course that only increased her resentment and once her prison opened she went “boy crazy”, this time making sure she was making out with only “nice Aussie boys.” Sammy was the outcome of that period of her life.

“So when I got this new recipe I had to go and get them, to see what they tasted like.” Dorothy’s voice re-entered Leigh’s consciousness, reminding her of her quest. It might be easier to talk to her now, with her newly acquired tolerant attitude. Leigh steadied herself, pushing her tea cup aside.

“The reason why I want to find the old box is because I need father’s childhood photos.” She took a deep breath and continued, aware of having her mother’s full attention. “On my way from Adelaide, after helping Sammy to move, I stopped for a
drink in a pub in the middle of nowhere.” The familiar pouting ring started to form on Dorothy’s lips, but Leigh chose to ignore it. “An old Aboriginal woman sat next to me and asked me who my mob was. I had no idea what she was talking about and said so. Her reply floored me: ‘Come on sista, just look at yourself in a mirror. If you don’t know where your face comes from, ask your mother.’”

The puckered lips parted, leaving her mother with the most unladylike expression, Leigh had ever witnessed.

“It took me a couple of months to figure out what she meant, but now I want to know if there’s any truth in what she said. And it can’t be on your side; Nana and Pop came out from Ireland after you were born, so it must be on Dad’s. Like the diabetes that no one ever talked about.”

Her mother’s words lashed out. “A pub somewhere in Boondocks, how could you even go anywhere near these people? How could you listen to her? What could she know? I bet she’s got a routine going, getting money out of gullible tourists. I bet, she tells that to everyone, to get a drink. They’re all the same.”

Leigh had expected a reaction of a kind, but the ferocity of this outburst stunned her. She sat there, waiting for more, although her mother’s reaction has said it all already. Now she wanted the details. Surprisingly, it took only a moment and Dorothy composed herself, took another sip of her tea and continued in a milder tone.

“I don’t understand what you’re trying to achieve by sullying your father’s good name. Wasn’t it enough that you broke his heart when you got yourself pregnant?
Don’t get me wrong, I’ve loved Samantha from the day she was born, but it didn’t happen the correct way, you not being married and all. He took it badly and went downhill fast. Now you’re telling me that he was” she paused, “one of them. How could you? He never even drank. On the odd occasion he’d have shandy or a little nip of sherry, that was all. Your father was a good man. He deserves better than that from you. You were his favourite.”

“Was that because I looked like him?”

If her mother saw through the question, she didn’t let up. “Maybe your personality was more like what he would’ve liked for himself. You were very healthy and feisty, full of spirit, although that made it difficult sometimes. He could’ve done with some of your pluck, that’s for sure.”

Despite the outburst, Leigh took note of the fact that there was no definite denial, just avoidance, so she tried again. “Tell me what you know about his childhood. We never met his parents, never visited them, only Nana and Pop.”

Dorothy smiled: “Yes, they adored you, doted on you, and spoiled you rotten every time you stayed there. We have been told that your father had no parents, orphan I suppose. He grew up in boys’ homes, raised by the nuns and monks. He got an education and managed to make the best of what he was given, even learnt to play the organ and the piano, but he never played for me. He told me that he was forced to learn the hardest way possible and it put him off playing music for life. Still it was more than many other kids from poor families could ever afford. He grew up to be a
hardworking man but he never talked about his childhood. Sometimes he got morose about his past; I don’t think he knew where he came from. In those days, no one kept records, not like today.”

She was calm now, and Leigh decided to push her luck. “Was he in one of those awful places that all the fuss was about a while ago? Child abuse and belting? Was he really an orphan or was he stolen? Please tell me anything about him, I know so little.”

“There isn’t much else I can tell you, love.” Dorothy passed another slice to her. “Just because you have dark hair and tan easily when you don’t take precautions against the sun, it doesn’t mean you are one of them. Get that silly idea out of your head. Your father was a good man and his box has nothing in it of interest for you, and besides I can’t remember where it is.

Now, try this one.” And she handed Leigh a piece of cake to gag her.

Leigh had misjudged her mother’s willingness to discuss the past. There wasn’t going to be any more information forthcoming. The outback woman was right. Through her eyes Leigh had discovered what everyone else had forgotten to mention for four decades of her life. Even her father’s dislike of the old piano made complete sense, she knew he hated it with vengeance, but Leigh never asked why. Not till now.
Voice of God

The first time Mehran heard the voice of God speaking to him directly was shortly after he turned seven. He was visiting one of his father’s business acquaintances, a man whose wealth was talked about with envy and who, although not directly, was a member of the Shah’s family.

The house was many times bigger than Mehran’s father’s, built out of yellow stone and marble, filled with heavy furniture carved out of exotic timbers, gold-painted mirrors and fine carpets of beautiful colours and ancient designs. According to his father, the house was divided into numerous wings, separated by gardens and hidden courtyards, one of which, he was told, had a pond full of goldfish.

While the men who were smoking and discussing world affairs questioned him about his studies whenever he came near them, the ladies insisted on pinching his cheeks whenever he asked for sweets. With no other boys of his own age to play with, he grew bored and decided to find the fish pond his father told him about. He set off through the maze of corridors, mesmerised by the large paintings depicting the previous rulers of Persia and the battles they had fought. He became so absorbed in the stories they told, he forgot about the fish pond and didn’t notice when he entered the guest wing of the house until the most heavenly sound entered his ears and simultaneously paralysed his limbs. The sound echoed off the stone walls, multiplied with every deflection and in a completely mysterious way got hold of his soul and soared with it high above the house, into the blue summer sky and beyond the stars that Mehran saw come out each night. Having not heard it before, Mehran assumed
that anything with the power to elevate one’s soul to such heights must be the voice of God himself. He didn’t know how long his body waited for the soul to come back.

Upon its return, when his eyes adjusted enough to search for the source of the sound, he noticed a large room, which he was about to enter. He didn’t known that it was a concert room, especially designed to house a grand piano, one of the finest in the land, imported from Germany years earlier. Standing spellbound at the entrance to the room, Mehran was afraid that even the tiniest move might dispel the apparition and cease the magnificent sound. A man, whose appearance indicated that he was one those people that mullahs called infidels, sat in front of a large, black, shiny instrument, his hands moving in a spider like fashion in front of him. The spiders seemed to generate the heavenly sounds that so entranced him. For the rest of his life he was to remember the complete elation he never experienced before or since.

“This must be the voice of God,” he repeated to himself without knowing what he was supposed to do in its presence. What followed had become the subject matter of many family tales, repeated by his parents on every occasion during his growing up. He himself had no other recollection except for the impact of the piano music.

The man was a distinguished Italian pianist Marcello Luciano, who had accepted an invitation to perform at a concert in the Shah’s palace. He was rehearsing his pieces, when he became aware of another presence in the room. Without interruption he turned around, only to face a young boy walking toward him in a sleepwalking manner. Not knowing what else to do, Marcello gestured for the boy to come closer to the piano. The boy edged in a little and then stood perfectly still, his eyes closed.
According to the Maestro, he remained statue-like throughout the rest of his rehearsal. After the music finished the boy’s eyes opened and a smile lit his face. Unable to speak Farsi, Marcello indicated for the boy to join him at the keyboard and to share his seat. He played couple of simple scales slow enough for the boy to follow with his eyes, wanting to show him the workings of the instrument. To his surprise, the boy, unable to reach the keyboard from the stool, stood up and with his fingers spread out in a most peculiar fashion, replicated the scales to perfection. Assuming him to be already a student of music, the Maestro increased the tempo and complexity of the scales, attempting to assess the level of the young musician’s skills. Each time the boy reproduced the scales to perfection, despite the awkwardness with which he held his tiny hands.

By the time they were found by the owner of the house, the Maestro and the student were engaged in a game of follow the leader of such complexity that only an advanced student would have been able to perform. When Maestro Luciano was told that Mehran had never seen a piano before, he not only offered him a special seat at the Shah’s concert, but he also taught the boy during his remaining days in Tehran. That event marked the beginning of Mehran’s love for the instrument. As the story goes, for the rest of that day little Mehran told everyone that he had heard the voice of God and that he was going to follow him all his life.

Apart from his family and his close student friends back at Tehran University, not many people knew about his great love for the piano, how it came about and how he dreamt of becoming just like the Maestro who inspired him. As for most people, life
had other plans for Mehran and when he found himself in Australia his story was the same as for most other refugees.

His choice of jobs was as limited as his English. For years he washed dishes, laboured at construction sites and worked at a pineapple factory in Queensland. Counting every dollar he made, he put away as much as he could. In Queensland, after a minor accident at the factory, he realised his hands were in danger if he worked for others. He still held to his dream, which although virtually blasted away was not entirely destroyed.

Using all his savings and sponsoring his brother, his piano removalist company was born. Ten years later, with three excellent pianos to his name and a room especially designed as a music room, he was ready to resurrect a future out of the ashes of his original dream.

But now here he was, spending time in the company of a woman that he didn’t wish to be with, using her garage to put together a piano he had taken apart bit by bit, in order to stop someone else from destroying it and, to be fair to himself, also because that somebody was getting more and more interesting.

“The trick is to fit the translated words into the exact space that matches the relevant action on screen,” he explained while adjusting the long clamps that held the re-assembled panels of the piano together while the special glue was setting. The metal clamps jutted out in different angles making it difficult for him to move around the instrument. Putting the piano back together had proved to be more difficult than he expected, but he hoped that he saved it.
The garage light was not strong enough for him to see the joints easily; the whole process had taken much longer than he prepared for. The fact that Anna appeared at the garage door instead of Leigh only added to his frustration, despite the excellent coffee she delivered. He wanted her to go away, so he could finish his job, but he still managed to make small talk about the ins and outs of film subtitling, hoping that the fine technical details would eventually wear her out.

“So how long have you been a sub-titler?” Anna asked. She wished she’d listened to Leigh more carefully, she truly didn’t remember subtitling being his profession.

He shot her one of his probing looks, unwilling to share his mind. How was it possible that she was Leigh’s best friend? How come Leigh inspired in him feelings of confidence and comfort, while her closest friend reeked of mistrust and suspicion? According to Leigh, they should have felt easy with each other, both immigrants, something they had in common. Instead, Mehran only felt her hidden hostility and his own unexplainable suspicion.

Despite his unwillingness he continued, “Only about two years. It’s only a part-time job. I needed to find another way of making a living and this was a good beginning. After ten years of moving pianos I’ve had enough, my back is not getting any younger either. George can carry on with the business. I need to do something else.”

What he really wanted to say was, “Something more appropriate to my education and my background. Something less slavish than dragging heavy loads up and down the stairs day after day.” But he didn’t say any of it. He continued re-adjusting the
clamps, suspecting that this woman couldn’t see him for what he was, that she already didn’t like what she saw, or rather what she thought she saw.

“I’m thinking of giving piano lessons. It has taken me a while to get the quality instruments I need for teaching, but now I’m ready.”

He was sure that something in what he said annoyed her. Her eyes truly searched his face for the first time. “Can you play? I mean play well enough to teach? What other talents do you have?”

It was obvious that she thought him a liar, doubted his qualifications and though he was making it all up. With a rag in his hand he started to wipe the glue off his fingers, acutely aware of the scar. “I’ve been teaching my sister’s kids for two years. The girl has natural talent, but she’s lazy. I know I’m not strict enough with them. We all spoil them, but they both passed their first level exams at the Con, so I’m not doing too badly.”

Her eyes followed his movements as if she was trying to find who he was by the way he held his body or extended and flexed his arms. It made him feel uncomfortable; he fumbled while undoing the clamps. “Where on earth is Leigh?” He asked under his breath. She had promised to meet him here after work; he couldn’t wait much longer. “If she doesn’t turn up by the time the last clamp is taken down, I will go.”

“Where on Earth is Leigh?” Anna prayed silently. She didn’t feel comfortable with this guy, no matter how intriguing he was turning out to be. Probably couldn’t relate
to women anyhow, given his background. Was he Iranian, Iraqi or Afghani? She tried to recall Leigh’s words, but failed.

She didn’t hear his question immediately. When he repeated it louder, it startled her. “Sorry,” she muttered. “I’ve been off with the pixies lately. My daughter went missing last week. Now we know that she’s all right, but I still haven’t talked to her and don’t know where she is. What was it you asked?”

“I only wanted to know who will play the piano. Leigh told me that you know where it’s going.” While he spoke his eyes took in her ash blond hair, blue grey eyes, traces of lipstick, her neck, which like her eyes was showing her true age. They stopped at a fine chain with a gold symbol hanging of it. He didn’t need to look any further.

A voice from long ago whispered inside his head: “She is one of them, watch out.” Even when he tried to ignore it, it continued: “Remember the ghetto in the Old City? The place that no self-respecting believer would ever set foot in?”

Mehran was shocked at the power of this voice. It came from a long time ago, when only one way of life was known, only one God was acceptable, only one lot of people worth his glory. But now he didn’t have to listen to it. Over the past thirty years he had learned to listen to more accepting voices. They allowed him to walk into their houses, perform services for them, accept their money, eat their food, and become their friend and love them. If his God did not like his attitude, he didn’t show it. Mehran’s life did not suffer, nor, as was claimed by the fierce clerics of his distant past, had God punished him. In fact when he really thought about it, the only time he
felt that he was truly punished was when his God was supposed to have been on his side, protecting him when young Mehran fought in his name.

He blinked away the memories, focusing back on Anna’s words.

“It’ll go to a drop-in centre used by kids with lots of problems. Many homeless, unhappy childhoods, abuse, poverty, crime – you name it, they live it. Every now and then a talent shines through the layers of problems under which it’s hidden. For these kids the piano may become a lifeline to a future. For most it will be only a toy they muck about on without really doing any work. Thank you for spending so much time on fixing it.”

This time she sounded as if she meant it and maybe he ought to give her the benefit of the doubt. He nodded, his hands busy with the last clamp. They both heard the car engine cutting off in the driveway. A car door slammed.

When Leigh rushed in, she quickly appraised the situation. “How amazing, it’s back in one piece! I can’t believe I ever asked you to smash it! And it looks better than ever!” She paused. “I wish I’d never decided to give it away, in fact I want it back in my house. Is there a way to get it back?” She stood facing them, but speaking only to Mehran.

He shook his head in disbelief. Had he understood correctly? What was the appropriate answer? Was she making fun of him? Every muscle in his body grew taut.
Anna read his confusion immediately. She knew the panic when a silly joke, made in an effort to break the ice, was interpreted as arrogance or a slight on one’s character or ability. She knew Leigh only too well to be taken in and she felt that one turn deserves another. “Oh come on, Leigh! The poor guy might think you’re serious! Not that you’re not fickle, but wanting it back would be your best yet!” She smiled at Mehran, hoping to ease his discomfort, to read her effort as a truce in a war that hasn’t even been officially declared.

Leigh realised her mistake. “I’m sorry, it was a joke! Don’t look so distraught. There is no way I want it in my house, especially not now. My father’s hate of the nuns’ teaching methods always prevented him from ever playing it for joy. Instead, he had stories of punishments that spoilt it for me as well. Now, I actually suspect that there was more to their teaching methods, no way would I want it back!”

Now it was Anna’s turn to wonder, what Leigh is talking about, she seemed on fire. “I’ve already bought a bookshelf to put in its place – much easier to deliver up the stairs. I am truly sorry, you have been so kind.” She stepped towards him, her hand landing on his arm.

His knotted muscles started to relax under her touch, then, within a moment the gentle warmth became a heat so intense that he was thrown into a conflict of two equally overwhelming desires: To grab hold of her hand and to put as much space between the source of the heat and his own body. “This is what an electrocution must
feel like,” The thought struck him as bizarre and despite his confusion he smiled, wondering if she also felt it.

Not letting on, Leigh broke off the contact, leaving him wishing for more.

Looking at Anna, Mehran wondered if Leigh realised that he and Anna had not exactly become best of buddies, had not bonded over the piano pieces, although he did appreciate her intervention. Wanting to convey his thanks, he raised his eyes but they lingered on the necklace and before he had the chance to disengage, Leigh was bundling everyone out of the garage.

“Let’s go and have a pizza. We can celebrate Becky’s sighting and the completion of this project.” Despite his concerns, Mehran was ready to give it a go, his insides reeling from the effect of her touch.
An Invitation

“Sorry Sam, there’s nothing I can do about it.” he said, feeling short-changed. The dinner and a movie was something he had been looking forward to, and now he had to work extra hours.

If Sam was disappointed, she did a good job of not showing it, but continued to chat unperturbed: “So she rang me to check out what time I was arriving for the party, and believe it or not I hadn’t even booked the ticket yet. I’d completely forgotten. And this is my mother’s best friend and someone who came to my birthdays from the day one and I have spent days each week in her place. Can’t understand what happened, forgetting her fiftieth!” Sam sounded genuinely upset and Thomas wished he could be with her, holding her hand and saying all of the stuff that one says to be supportive, or just holding her hand and listening. It wasn’t the same doing it over the phone. He felt annoyed with Brian. This job was something anyone could do and Brian knew Thomas had planned an evening out with Sam. He didn’t want Sam to sit at home by herself, nor did he want her to go to the movies alone. “Let me ring Angie, she is always keen to see a movie.”

Sam laughed as if he said something particularly amusing. “Listen, I don’t know about your family, but in mine, if one wants to go to the movies, one does it. Alone, if there is no one else around. I don’t need a chaperone to take me out. I’d like us to go together, but if you can’t it's not a big deal. We can go another time.” She sounded like she meant it and Thomas relaxed, getting ready to end the conversation, but she continued. “If you feel guilty, you can make it up to me in other ways.” She
paused to give more impact to what she was to say next, and Thomas smiled in anticipation of where the conversation was heading.

“This party I’ve just been telling you about, well it’s as big as they come in my family. Not as big or as glam as your family’s, from what I gather, but big by our standards. Anna’s kids and I grew up together. They’re younger and we used to go on holidays, stay over at each other’s places, have birthday dinners, that kind of thing. Like the sibs I never had.” She paused. Thomas could hear her taking a deep breath, and he realised that his own breath had become shallower in response. This wasn’t what he had in mind, of that he was now positive.

“Sam, where’s this heading? Should I get worried now or later?”

She answered after a moment of hesitation: “I want you to come with me and meet my family.” The sentence came out so fast he was unsure he’d heard it correctly.

“Are you asking me to meet your mother?” His throat felt parched and he was certain she could hear him swallow. “Do you realise that where I come from, such a visit would constitute a public statement of commitment? If my parents found out they’d go berserk for not telling them.” He stopped, realising the absurdity of the argument.

“Wow, what a reaction! I didn’t expect you to choke on my offer.” She sounded teasing but there was an underlining tension that frightened him.
“Do you think it’s a good idea? It’s not as if we’ve made any future plans or anything like that.” He could hear himself babbling and despised himself instantly.

Sam ignored his question. “Haven’t they accepted yet that your current girlfriend is not Chinese? Haven’t they stopped talking about my hair, my style or should I rather say the lack of it? Coming with me to the party doesn’t carry any expectations on my or anyone else’s part. For Christ’s sake, it is only a fiftieth birthday of a family friend, hardly a lifelong commitment. It’s going to be better than the United Nations. Some Aussies and Irish, Japanese and Portuguese celebrating a Jewish birthday, and to top it off my mother is apparently lusting after some Iranian guy I haven’t met yet. So, what do you have to worry about?”

Thomas laughed. He loved the way Sam dealt with the world, straight on, with no hesitations. He couldn’t imagine his mother lusting after anyone, even the thought of it seemed somehow wrong. But in Sam’s world, the possibilities were endless. Her family seemed weird too. No father, one of her uncles living in New Zealand, another in Western Australia. Very different from his own large extended Chinese Vietnamese family with the great great aunt’s links in Australia for the past four generations and Thomas’s parents’ arrival only twenty years ago. Suddenly he felt that meeting them all, would tell him more about Sam, the person with whom he secretly planned to share the rest of his life. Yes, he wanted to meet them all.

“Ok,” he said. “It sounds just like the kind of chill out I was thinking of for next weekend. Can you organise the tickets and the accommodation? But I’m drawing a
line at sleeping in separate bedrooms. If you want me there, I’m not hiding anything.”

She laughed. “Neither am I, my mum’s cool.”

After she hung up, he felt that he made a significant commitment, that their relationship had shifted another notch. He would have liked to think about it bit more, but there was the job at hand. The screen of his computer was still in saving mode. The task was easy, almost routine. He was to get into a list of websites provided by a client that Brian seemed secretive about, in fact, the nature of the assignment was a bit of a mystery. Thomas was to track the e-mail addresses of every Australian who visited them, paying special attention to those who visited more than once. Where possible, he was to produce street addresses for the multiple users.

His brief did not contain any details, and after working with the company for four months he knew not to ask questions. Government departments engaged them openly to provide services of one kind, but often asked for additional jobs which might have contravened privacy laws. Brian was convinced that they had nothing to worry about because of the recently introduced anti-terrorist legislation. If challenged, many of these jobs would fall under the new legislation.

Re-booting his machine, Thomas looked around the floor. At 7 pm on Friday night, only those suffering from the worst cases of workaholism were still about and, despite his presence, Thomas did not intend to become one of those cases.
Letters Home

Through the open door of her office Anna saw Tony heading in her direction.

“Damn!” she thought. “I’ll have to cut this conversation short.” She lowered her voice, hoping he’d stay out for a while longer. “I’m telling you, she’s either somewhere in South Australia with a married man and his young son or, if Peter’s interpretation of her e-mails is correct, she’s having an affair with someone called Judy and she could be anywhere. These are the good options, the bad ones I don’t even want to think about.”

The gasp on the other end of the line was audible. Anna imagined her ex-husband’s prominent Adam’s apple bobbing up and down, eyes bulging, the onset of hyperventilation only seconds away. “How did he suddenly get so old?” she asked, pushing away the disturbing image.

The question that he asked was not a surprise. “What do you mean an affair with Judy? Surely she’s not that way inclined?”

He sounded incredulous, not unlike the time when she asked him to move out after she realised that the long working hours and business trips were not related to the demands of his law practice. The affair with his personal assistant seemed such a banal way to end their marriage that, by the time he actually moved out, Anna felt relieved, despite the fact that she was left alone with two young children.

“Hasn’t she had boyfriends? Didn’t you tell me about an emu man she ran off with a while ago?”
Anna found herself smiling involuntarily. “No, Brian. He was a wombat man. He researched their habitats and, yes, she did spend some time with him in the bush. Then again, young people these days are much more fluid about their sexuality. What is a wombat man one day can be a wombat woman the next.” She had to admit she wasn’t really excited about that possibility, but it was almost worth it to hear his unease. He, who so rigidly divided the world into the male and the female, could not accept that he produced what he would consider a sexual misfit. Such reality would reflect badly on his own performance and cast doubt on his genetic material.

“But she’s so pretty and feminine when she dresses up, how could she be one of them?” He was genuinely puzzled. Although Anna enjoyed his discomfort, she had to remind herself that he was a father interested in his children, although his was a conservative style of parenting. After their separation he had always been there for them and even when he remarried, there was a place for them in his new family.

“I was hoping she had rung you. Where she is is my first concern, who she’s with is only my second.” Anna was now only too happy to end the conversation. “His wife can nurse his injured ego,” she thought with satisfaction. “Someone’s waiting for me here, must go.”

With Tony engaged in a conversation outside her office, she had time to reflect on the man with whom she had left her country some 30 years previously. Brought up in countries on opposing sides in the cold war, they found each other during the explosive events of the late sixties, he with the birthright to travel, she the prisoner of the political system into which she had been born. With no common language and
little understanding of the worlds they grew up in, they had fallen in love during the Prague Spring of 1968. Following the Warsaw Pact’s occupation of her country and the brutal end to the hopes for reform, they took advantage of the chaos at the normally impenetrable border and crossed to West Germany, leaving all her family behind. A year later she was married and on the way to Australia. Now she often wondered if she’d do it again. A few years later, their true personalities had started to assert themselves, unfettered by her need to be saved and his to be the rescuer. With her independence growing, she found he could not adapt. In the end she decided that he needed an appendage, not an equal partner. It took another few years before the marriage ended, and by then there were school children to consider.

The knock on her door stopped further rumination. Her staff briefing was not going to wait any longer. Tony, the Aged Services worker, was a rare combination of efficiency and compassion, and Anna felt lucky to have him on the team. She smiled and motioned him to take a seat next to her. “So what have you got for me?”

“It’s about Marjorie Williams. She’s eighty something, husband died maybe 10 years ago still lives at the family home in Salisbury Road. Her home overlooks the parking lot at the back of the village shops.” Anna nodded her head, she often parked there. “She’s basically all right, considering her age. Her knees give her problems occasionally. Anyhow, her roof developed some leaks after that big storm a couple of months ago and we organised the repair, but I’ve never followed up. A couple of days ago, I was in the area and decided to check on her and ended up having the ubiquitous cup of tea. Among other things she told me she might need some help with a street kid. She doesn’t have any problem and is not being threatened or
anything like that, but she wanted to talk to someone who’d be ‘in the know how about youngsters’. Those were her exact words.”

He paused, waiting for Anna’s response. When none came he continued.

“She’s ok, usually gets on with her life without much fuss. Amazing really, how she manages on her own and still has the energy to join in everything the Day Centre offers. A while ago she had some blokes, much younger than herself, interested, only they had no chance, she’d run them off their feet. She claims she’s always been a one-man woman and won’t change now, although she told me that she ‘wouldn’t mind some of the young passion’.

He displayed that good-humoured laughter that Anna had learnt to appreciate. Their job wasn’t always easy, so many of their clients did not fit the images of happy and healthy couples that the government brochures were fond of producing when selling aged care places.

She wished he were a town planner or a building inspector and then she would not be his boss. He had a talent for being trusted and liked by even the most difficult seniors, and was adored by many of the widows he worked with. As the head of the Community Services she needed his help when things went wrong at the Seniors’ Centre and couldn’t afford to jeopardise their working relationship. Occasionally she caught herself flirting with him, despite feeling awkward about her age. It never seemed to matter to him, and there were times she felt that he even orchestrated opportunities to be with her.
“The tight black T-shirt is definitely looking good on you.” The thought only flashed passed her lips, and she was grateful for it. Realising her distraction she nodded her head in that all encompassing clichéd gesture. “Keep going, I am listening carefully.”

“Anyhow, I gave her your number. I didn’t think she’d get on with Alex from the drop-in. She didn’t want anyone too young or anyone who’d be too hard on the kid. I thought you’d fit the bill, I hope you don’t mind.” He managed to look both sheepish and cheeky.

Anna’s attention was now genuine. “I’m glad my age is becoming one of my more desirable attributes.” Her eyes found a big scratch on the top of her desk and she compelled her mind to explore it for a while, anxious why her lips didn’t protect her this time. After a moment she found her voice again. “She seems too good to be true. Don’t they usually complain the minute these kids start to congregate anywhere in their streets? Is she a Mother Teresa or what?”

Tony shrugged; “Nah just a tough old bird, who hasn’t lost her oomph.” Anna laughed, feeling the tension dissipating. The roller coaster of emotions during their meetings has often driven her to resolutions she couldn’t keep. Today was no different. She promised to give Marjorie a ring over the next couple of weeks if she hasn’t heard from her, and then they both pored over the plans for the new Seniors Centre that the council was proposing to finish within the year.
By the time Tony left her office couple of hours later, she had agreed to have a drink with him soon, but only to discuss his intention to apply for the position of Director of the new facility.

With the door closed behind him, she felt exhausted. Instead getting on with the reports as she intended, she found herself comparing Marjorie’s story with that of her own mother. She had the overwhelming need to find out how Milada was, what she had eaten for lunch and how many moments of lucidity her diseased brain had granted her the previous day. But she couldn’t find any of this information; the time difference between the two countries would not allow it, even if she wanted to make a phone call. The feeling of guilt returned as she helplessly searched the framed pictures on her desk for evidence of happiness her mother experienced as a result of her youthful escape. Yes, she had visited the down-under land that she would otherwise have only read about in the books, and she had sat by the sea spellbound, as only those brought up in a landlocked country can be, but it all felt too little and too late.

Anna had never dreamt that the decision she made in her late teens was going to separate them for the rest of their lives. It had all seemed so clear back then. She’d marry, resettle, and then invite her parents to join her. No one anticipated the level of vindictiveness to which the Communist regime was prepared to rise. Punishing the family for her escape, it had prevented her parents from leaving the country for decades.
She never saw her mother grow old. When Anna left, Milada was in her forties, when they were reunited she was an old woman with permed white hair and osteoporosis. Of course Anna could not attend her father’s funeral either. Even the telegram of his death had mysteriously disappeared and she did not find about the death until weeks later. He had died long before her first visit back home. When the Communist regime finally released its hold on the family, it was too late. By then the Australian Government had introduced a compulsory Health Check. The tests for permanent residency were so stringent that an average old person could not pass it, let alone someone with a history of TB. After 1989, following the break-up of the Communist bloc and the influx of immigrants, even temporary visas became a problem. Anna’s mother had fallen into the category of “high risk of overstaying” and even a visitor’s visa was denied to her. Anna cried each time her mother’s appeal was rejected and still, even now, she remembered how grateful she had been to become an Australian citizen. Australia had been good to her as it had been to many others. It provided security and freedom she had not experienced previously. In return, like most other refugees, she had worked hard, re-invented herself and above all paid the taxes and contributed to the multicultural Australia of today, while rushing to visit her mother at every opportunity. But it never was enough.

She sat at her desk; overwhelmed and paralysed by the conflicting needs of those she loved most. The rest of the day proceeded according to her expectations. Meetings with other staff, phone calls to the department. When Peter rang to say that he was staying at a friend’s place, she rang Leigh to suggest dinner, but Leigh was elsewhere, so it was an evening at home, alone.
She didn’t mind. Whenever something reminded her of her mother and she felt disturbed there was only one way she could deal with it. She had perfected it over the previous thirty years. Back home, a glass of wine by her side; she was ready to purge her conscience once more.

“Dearest Mother,

I dreamt about you on the plane coming back. I dreamt that you’d decided to go on a journey on which I couldn’t follow you. I woke up convinced that the time I’ve been dreading for the past thirty years had finally come. When I rang you, they told me that you were in fine form – well, as fine as one in your predicament could be. Despite your inability to move properly and the general effects of the cancer, you never complained about the pain. Your standard expression, ‘My back’s hurting, the weather’s about to change,’ seems funny reasoning for pain a caused by cancer but it seems to work for you.

I wonder if you are really as unperturbed by the prospect of dying as you’d like us to believe, or if you simply don’t realise what’s ahead of you. Or are you in fact only too familiar with your fate and stubbornly refusing to acknowledge it. As an ex-nurse it’s hard to believe you wouldn’t be.

When I ask you, the answer is always the same: ‘I’m not interested in knowing. If my candle is to go out, so be it. I don’t want to know when it will happen.

Isn’t it curious that with your mind seemingly wandering and unable to remember what you say or do from one moment to another, in this instance
it never fails to give you the same answer to that particular question? How come it remembers that?

It greatly puzzles me, and some days I’m convinced that you’re more in control than you let us know, and simply refuse to engage on that topic. If it means that you have to pretend that you’re not quite there, so be it. You’ve always made your own decisions. Often they were difficult for those around you, but you’ve not wavered. I’d like to believe that even now, you’ve decided how you want to deal with the end of your life and you’re sticking to it. Other days I believe that you simply forget the pain you had the day before, or even a couple of hours previously, as you seem to forget everything else. Your short-term memory is all but gone; the past has completely reclaimed your mind. It comes as a blessing as it allows you to make the best out of the time you have. You seem to be contented now as you haven’t been for most of your life. Of course I realise that I’ve greatly contributed to your unhappiness by my decision to leave you all those years ago. For what it’s worth, I’d like you to know that I’d think differently about the consequences of such a decision, should I have the opportunity to turn the clock back. But unfortunately I can’t undo the pain I’ve caused you and I feel sorry about that, despite my love for this country and the life I have made here.

When I rang you, you recognised me immediately, but you gave no indication of remembering that only 48 hours earlier I stood in your room, bidding you yet another goodbye, like many others over the past 30 years. We always try hard to make it ok for each other, even though our hearts are about to burst. We’ve perfected the art of withdrawal as each visit draws to close. The last couple of days are always different from the rest. You are cranky,
busy and preoccupied, me wanting to talk ‘a real talk’. At the same time I always feel that I shouldn’t insist. After all I have no right to stir emotions which I am the cause of, and then leave you to deal with them alone.

With children of my own, I’m aware of the conflicting emotions you must have felt when I left the first time. The pain, the hurt and the sense of rejection. A fear for my wellbeing, and also not knowing if you have in any way contributed to my decision by your behaviour. These emotions would persist and the only way you could deal with them was to bury them as deep as you could. If years later I come back and ask you to talk, of course you refuse. To expose the pain each time your child leaves you is akin to a self-flagellation. I understand; but when you refuse to talk, I retreat, wishing to get over the parting as soon as possible. I also bury the pain, but it keeps escaping at the most inappropriate times.

Even the last time, on the balcony of your nursing home, we had let go of each other long before our hugging bodies separated. I saw the tears in your eyes, your smile pushing them back. Not letting them out yet, not until you were alone once more. This time it was harder because we both knew, and I am convinced that you did know, that the fast-spreading cancer was unlikely to wait till my next visit.

How I wish our current Immigration laws were driven by concerns for humanity and compassion, rather than by political expedience and excuses of national security. Anyone can see that to reunite families with old parents, where isolation is an issue, should be a priority. But laws being what they are, I am here and although I am your only living relative with the resources to look after you, I have no way of bringing you here.
How have the past five weeks been for you? Did you realise at the end of each day that I would be there again the next morning? To help you get dressed, to push your wheelchair around the lake to the fields of yellow dandelions or to the main town square for your favourite ice cream. Or was it a daily surprise that I happened to pass by and stop for a visit? Even by the end of my stay, I couldn’t tell with any certainty how you perceived my daily visits. Your jokes about me dropping in might not have been jokes at all, it has simply been impossible for me to tell. Again, I tried to get you to talk about your fears and wishes for the future, no matter how short it might be. Call me old fashioned, but I think there are things people ought to say when they suspect that they might not see each other again.

‘They ought to?’ I hear you ask. ‘What would be achieved by it?’ I didn’t have the answers; and as you know only too well, I especially didn’t have the words to convince you, so we talked about the rising price of petrol, unemployment and the impending war in Iraq, because surprisingly your brain still allows you to read papers and keep some ideas about world events.

Next week I’m going to be fifty. It is the milestone birthday and having realised how important it feels for me, I now wish I was able to celebrate when you turned the age I am now. I would’ve wished, like it is a custom here, to publicly acknowledge my love and an appreciation of your mothering and of your love for me. I’ll be sad that you won’t be celebrating with me, that you won’t see your achievements being honoured in mine. You’re the greatest role model my children and I could have asked for. You’ll be my greatest hero. Forever your loving daughter.”
With a deep sigh Anna signed the letter, added the day, month and year, smoothed the two pages, and then folded them in half and half again. From the top of the bookcase she pulled down a large hat box, opened it and placed the letter on top of others. With another sigh, she closed the box and replaced it on the shelf.

Tomorrow she would write a real letter to her mother. In her mother tongue it wouldn’t be, never had been, filled with emotional revelations and insights. She simply didn’t have the words. Her mother tongue had not developed since she left the country at the age of nineteen. The language of any teenager is hardly sufficient to articulate the intricacies and nuances needed for an adult conversation. One’s language grows in direct proportion to one’s experiences.

It didn’t seem to matter now. Her mother enjoyed letters full of news about the children’s school achievements, the garden, and the daily issues. Her letter would contain photos and chitchat about cooking attempts that didn’t work, the story of Leigh’s dismantled piano sitting in her garage and Peter’s soccer victories. It would be entertaining and easy for Milada to read. The letter of tears and love, like all the previous ones, would remain in its box, untouched and unread by anyone but her.
Beach Holiday

The rock against Kasim’s back felt warm, the sand between his bare toes reminded him of the times he used to run across the enormous canvas sheets covered in bunches of grapes drying in the sun. The sheets stretched over the sandy hills surrounding his grandfather’s orchard and stayed in the piercing sun until the grapes shrivelled into dark, sweet currants. Although the grains of sand were much finer, the heat burning his soles felt equally hot. The skin on his face felt dry and at least one size too small across his cheekbones. When he licked his arm it tasted salty, the white salty ridges forming patterns clearly visible against his darkening skin.

In front of him, the ocean waves kept rolling in relentlessly and it took him some time to feel reassured that he would not be ambushed by them. By now he realised that they always broke at a safe distance from the rock he was resting against.

At the first beach where they stopped, Kasim had been too scared to walk anywhere near the water’s edge. The giant waves battering the old boat, which eventually broke, leaving him and others in the mercy of the few rafts, kept returning in his mind. He saw some rafts overturning and people disappearing into the angry sea. His raft was lucky to be saved by a passing boat, even though it had delivered them into the arms of the police some days later.

Even now the memory of the giant waves produced fear that he couldn’t forget. The boat had made him so sick in the stomach that when it started to sink, he didn’t really care, although thanks to his new family he did not drown.
That feeling had continued even when they were sent into the first of the detention centres. On top of being sick, he was suddenly locked up. Was he a bad person? The kind that usually end up in such places? He wasn’t a thief, a murderer, had not spoken against the government, so why was he kept behind the high fence with security guards all around? Why was he not allowed to go to school? He was told that the Australian government did not want likes of him in the country; they wanted to keep it only for those already here. And still, when they flew them into the next jail, the brown land underneath was big and empty, no settlements to be seen. Only empty land.

He ended up telling all this to Annie while she drove the car along the coast road, looking for their first stop. When they found it, he just watched the waves from a distance, refusing to go anywhere near them. Seeing Annie run into the waves and disappear into the green mass seconds later, a terrible fear clutched at his heart, squeezing his lungs. Unable to move he couldn’t stop the tears rolling down his cheeks. What was he to do now? The only person he trusted in this land had gone, leaving only a pile of clothes on the sand next to him.

Seconds later, her head appeared above the white foam. She stood up and waved before another wall of water claimed her. Waiting for her head to come up again, he remembered her words: “Watch me to swim through the waves, I’ll be all right, I’ve done it many times before.”

That was five hours ago and since then he had tested the saltiness of the sea himself, having followed Annie into the shallows. When the cool water embraced him, the
memories of the heat in the detention centre floated away with the seaweed and the
churned-up sand. Once out of the water, they dug big holes, waited for them to fill
with water and watched them collapse.

As the day progressed they passed one beach after another. Some were full of
swimmers and red flags; others were empty, with only giant rocks guarding the sea
like watchful gods.

On one of these they stopped for lunch. Afterwards, Annie curled up in the sand. “I’ll
have a kip,” she said sleepily: “To stop me from falling asleep behind the wheel.
Wake me up after three. And don’t go anywhere near the water, I want you to stay
right here, the whole time I am asleep.”

Kasim didn’t mind at all. The letter to his grandparents was still waiting to be written
and he needed to be alone to focus on it.

“Dearest grandparents,” he paused, wondering how on earth he could explain to them
everything that happened to him since he left the farm. After a while he decided on a
simple note, which might not raise the suspicion of the secret police.

“I am writing to let you know that I am well. I hope you have received my previous
letter and I hope you are all well. I am in Australia, travelling to Sydney and learning
how to swim at the beach. I will write to you again when I can and will send you my
address when I stop moving. Give a big hug to my baby sister, your loving grandson,
Kasim.”
He checked the watch. Another 15 minutes before he’d wake her up. It felt good to be her timekeeper and to look after her while she was asleep. They would have a few more hours of driving before spending the night in another motel. Tomorrow would bring more beaches and more opportunities to practise what Annie was teaching him. He wished he could dive into a wave without fear and just rely on his arms and legs to do the right thing and bring him up through the churning water. What would he hear down there, in the green coolness? What would he see?

“You can’t keep your eyes open,” Annie had said earlier. “Your eyes start smarting from the salt.”

Another five minutes to go. He returned his gaze to the green expanse of the water.

“One day I’ll learn how to swim real well. One day, when I stop running!”

While she was asleep, Kasim thought of all the questions he needed to ask her and he practised aloud, so that he was sure he got them right. By the time he woke her up he was prepared.

“Why you helping me?” he asked when she started to pack. “You’re nice, but others don’t want us here, so why you not the same?”

He was looking directly into her eyes, something he did rarely. When she looked back at him, he knew she was not going to treat him the way other adults did, to tell him not to worry and make up some simple explanation.
‘I’ve a very sick grandmother who lives in Europe. My grandfather died years ago and she isn’t allowed to live here because she can’t pass the health check. She’s too old, but even when she was younger she couldn’t. Ever since the Second World War, she was always sick. You see, she and her family were Jewish. At the beginning of the war her parents wanted to escape and sailed with many others on a big boat from one country to another, asking for asylum. No country would have them because of their religion. In the end they had to return to Europe. My grandma was only young, but she always remembered what it was like being unwanted. Not long after their return her parents were taken away, she never saw them again and the rest of her family perished in the concentration camps. She was hidden in a convent, but caught TB because of the cold and she couldn’t go to hospital when she needed to. Now, she has no one to look after her, because Mum escaped before I was born and came here. I’m named after my grandma.”

For a moment, while Kasim rehearsed a suitable reply, only the roar of the sea broke the silence. Then he asked. “Was your grandma called Annie?”

Her face flashed deep red. “Well, not actually. I haven’t given you my real name. In case the police caught up with us. My grandmother’s name is Rebecca and so is mine. Call me Becky, everyone else does.”

He thought about her lie and felt pleased that now she had told him the truth. He understood that she had to protect herself from the police, he knew all about that.

“Is your grandma going to die?” he asked, remembering his mother.
Becky nodded. “She’s old and has cancer. My mother has just been to see her, but had to come back. No one knows how long Grandma might live and Mum had to come home to do her job.”

The hug that Kasim found himself giving her wasn’t from a child needing reassurance. His thin arms tightened around her shoulders with unexpected strength, he had experienced enough pain to recognise it in others and was ready to share it.

After that, they sat in silence, watching the waves crushing into the yellow sand. Finally, Becky thought it was time to go. The salty tightness around Kasim’s eyes made him feel tired by the time they got back in the car.

He vaguely remembered walking into a hotel room. When he woke up she was packed already. “Come on sleepy head. Have a shower and then we can find a place to have brekkie, I’m starving.”

The longer they travelled along the coastal road the fewer beaches they saw, instead they drove through larger and more spread out towns and forests. When Becky stopped in one of the small towns to find a public phone, Kasim’s premonition got the better of him. He observed her making the call. “I know something is wrong, terribly wrong!” The stone lodged itself once again at the pit of his stomach. It took him by surprise; he thought that with Becky around he wouldn’t ever feel it again.

The stone grew heavier, the longer he watched her through the glass of the phone box. Her hands swung the receiver back and forth as far as the cord would allow it.
He couldn’t hear her, but he guessed that she was shouting. Something was definitely wrong. When she hung up and walked outside, her face was closed like a good book suddenly slammed shut. Gone were the smiles that made it easy for him to see into his future, a good future. Her face might have been cut from the same rock that was now painfully digging into his flesh. It took all his strength not to show his fear, not to show his pain. He managed a smile when she crossed to his side of the road.

“Ian sends his love,” she said, placing her hand on his shoulder. He knew there was more to come, that she was using the pause to find words, just like his grandmother did when she returned from the hospital after visiting his mother. “You have a beautiful baby sister,” she had said, but her bottom lip had trembled and her eyes filled with tears. The most important words had come out after the pause. Not good words. One can’t find good words to give a bad news. “Your mother is with God now. Remember, she loved you very much, she will always look out for you from Heaven, no matter where you are.”

Pauses were dangerous. His grandmother’s was the first he remembered, others had followed. The man who woke him up in the goat’s herders’ shed up in the mountains near the Turkish border had also paused. Then he had told him about his father. Kasim knew all there was to know about pauses in a conversation. Pauses made his stomach feel like a giant mountain of rocks.

Becky’s lips didn’t tremble, but her eyes lost their laughter. “Apparently there have been police raids already. On Iraqi businesses, mosques and family homes, not only in South Australia but also in Sydney and Melbourne. They’re looking for all
escapees. It’s not safe to take you where we had planned. We will find you another safe house, but it’ll take time. Ian is already working on it. He’ll let us know by the time we reach Sydney, but it may not be with one of your countrymen.” She must’ve seen his shock and read his thoughts. “Don’t panic. Remember what I promised? I’ll look after you, make sure you’re safe.” The tears that flooded his eyes, halted. “It’s still a long way to go. I will not think about what happens after.”

Kasim willed himself to believe what she was saying because he liked her and thought that she was kind. He felt safe and would do anything to be able to stay with her, but he realised that soon someone else would be looking after him.

To cheer him up, Becky took him to McDonalds for lunch. While eating his meal, he noticed how many police cars came into the car park or drove through. Lulled into security by Becky’s presence, he hadn’t noticed them over the past two days, but now he saw the police uniforms everywhere. Still, he enjoyed McDonalds. On the kids’ one outing from the detention centre, they had stopped at McDonalds for dinner. All the families eating there had looked happy, just the way they were in the ads on the TV. He had envied those kids then. It wasn’t the food, because his grandma’s cooking was much tastier, although he did like the soft ice cream. He envied them because they had someone to look after them. Now with Becky ordering him a double choc sundae, he could almost believe he was one of those children. By the time they reached Sydney, Becky would be gone. The sweetness of the ice cream did nothing to melt the rock inside him, although the pain eased a little.
In the afternoon, they stopped at what he was told was an outer suburb of Sydney. Again Becky made a series of phone calls. This time Kasim didn’t bother to leave the car, didn’t want to watch her getting more bad news. It was all he could expect, bad news with pauses in between. He took himself off to his grandfather’s orchard. The sun-ripened juicy apricots were falling into his arms after he shook the tree, when he heard the car door open. Her face told the story. Problems lay ahead. She smiled. “Cheer up. I’m taking you home to meet my mum and my brother. You’ll like him. He is fun. You won’t be safer anywhere else. You’ll stay until things cool down. And guess what? We’re having a big party. My mother is turning 50 and it’s a big deal. With so many people around, no one will even notice you. I hope you don’t mind.”

Would he mind? Was she joking? Kasim’s dream had just came true. There was still good news to be had and he just received some of the best. His mother must be looking after him, giving him what he wished for. Now he felt really excited about entering the city that many people in the jail thought of as the most beautiful in Australia.

“Will you take me to see the Bridge?” he asked, not knowing if his luck would last. “Sure,” she smiled, “one day we will even walk across it, I promise.”
The Young Patient

The storm continued through the night, but she woke up in a sun filled morning, only the puddle in the hall attesting to her night adventure. When she stepped out into the garden, the air, filled with ozone particles and eucalypt oil released by leaves and branches damaged during the storm, was a heady mixture to breathe in. She remembered her father standing outside their farm after summer storms, inhaling deeply while encouraging her and her siblings to line up and do the same.

“It’s God’s way to keep your lungs healthy, without travelling to the sanatoriums in the mountains!” he used to exclaim, oblivious to the children’s unwillingness to follow his example.

Once outside, she had to fight the urge to peek into the garage. After winning the battle of wills with Jack, who felt a compulsion to check his territory, she returned into the house victorious and self righteous but, for the rest of the morning, she hovered near the windows hoping to catch a glimpse of anyone going out.

All through the day a silent dialogue was going on inside her head. One voice was positive: “Surely the homeless kid would have accepted your offer. Anyone in their right mind would.” Of course she couldn’t know the child’s state of mind. He could have been a child who preferred the streets to the safety of his home. Then Marjorie had to correct herself. The TV show had stressed that, for many youngsters, home was the most dangerous place to be and was a source of abuse and denigration. She needed to keep that in mind.
The other voice disagreed: “You old fool! Why should anyone believe you? He’d see you as another meddling old woman, wanting to lock him up and call the police. He’d run away the moment you discovered him.”

Ignoring the argument, she was definite about one thing. If the visitor took up her offer, she’d make sure that the bed would always be there on rainy nights.

Following afternoon tea, which she and Jack continued to have at 3 pm, she decided that the time was right to make a quick call to her friend Dotty and then check the garage. The visitor had been given plenty of opportunity to leave.

“You really do know how to make me mad, Dotty, you truly do. Always did. Even when we were kids you drove me insane because of your pigheadedness!” Marjorie’s voice shook with fury; the hand holding the receiver could have been an artist’s study in blue veins and white knuckles. Her anger erupted when her friend described the afternoon tea she and her daughter recently had together and Leigh’s earnest search for her father’s past.

With the silence mounting at the other end of the line, Marjorie noticed her near to bursting veins and carefully released the pressure, wiggling her fingers. Her voice became quieter and more conciliatory.

“Dotty, you and I have done some stupid things in our lives, but I would’ve expected you to know better by now.” She waited for a response. Nothing. The silence on the other end could mean that Dotty was either considering Marjorie’s words or that she’s just placed the receiver on the bench and walked away to grab a cup. Another
habit, that Marjorie found infuriating. “Dotty, you old bag, are you there or have you put me on hold again?” She was ready to hang up.

A distant sniffle replied. “Oh, Marjorie, I just can’t let her do it to him. All his life, he wanted to put it all behind him, he suffered so much as a child. You remember, he even refused to go to church and wouldn’t let the kids attend the local church school, so they had to travel a long way. He said to me: ‘The church sanctioned the all wrongdoings done by the priests and the nuns. I can’t let them do it to our kids.’”

Marjorie interrupted her: “Dotty, you know me. We’ve been friends since school days, but I can tell you now, I’ve never thought it right to deny the children their past. Sooner or later they were bound to ask. It’s surprising it hasn’t come up earlier. And as for Jim, well I reckon it had eaten up his life. It would, wouldn’t it? The abuse and not knowing where you came from. No need to have the children feeling the same though, is there? And Dotty, I sincerely believe that if he were alive he would have told them what he knew by now.”

Another sniffle made her feel guilty for being too harsh. “Just listen to me, Dotty, you’ve been a good wife to him, and he couldn’t have asked for better, you always have. You’ve stuck by him through it all. You loved him and looked after his health, and that itself was a task and a half. There’s nothing you need to regret. And your kids were always a credit to you both. Even the wild one, once she’d calmed down. Maybe she knew, way down deep. You know people have ways of knowing without knowing, if you get my drift. Acting out during her youth might have been her way of looking for something. Anyhow, Jack and I always thought it was.”
Pausing for breath, Marjorie wondered how far she could go, how much her friend would take. Hearing only a laboured breathing in response, she continued: “She must’ve felt different, being tanned all year round, don’t you think? Having siblings looking like her but as fair as they come, that would make anyone question.”

To her surprise, Dotty replied, “Marjorie, she couldn’t have known. Jim and I were so careful. We told her that on my side some of the Yorkshire folk were dark. God bless my mother, she even came up with photos to show her. Anyway, shouldn’t she have had some feeling for the bush? Isn’t that what they’re all supposed to have? A connection with the land? Isn’t that what they call it now? She didn’t have any. I did sign her up for the Brownies, with their bush huts, camping, knots and what have you. Remember her tantrums every time she was supposed to go? Always some excuse – the trees, bugs or being scared at night. Jim used to make it worse, telling her she was right to be scared, that there were things in the bush one had to have respect for. I never knew what he meant. When I asked, he told me I could never understand. But she didn’t understand either, I’m sure of that. The other two were so easy, contented with football and ballet lessons. Leigh was the difficult one. God knows I’ve tried to do the best by that girl, but I often feel like I’ve failed her.”

Marjorie heard her shuffling about and then the sound of nose blowing confirmed her fears. “Come on, Dotty. You’ve done your best, but she needs something different now. That’s why she’s asking. You’re the only one with the answer she’s looking for. Think about it, love. I’ve got to go now, the home help’s at the door. Must fly, but call you soon.”
No one was really at the door, it wasn’t the right day for anyone to come, but Marjorie needed to check the garage, and she also felt that her friend wasn’t seeing clearly. These days people were proud to be Aborigines, and history was proving them right. It was time for Dotty to change her way of dealing with the fact, that some fifty years earlier, she’d fallen in love with a handsome and wonderful man who was an Aboriginal, brought up in a boys’ home. The only way he knew how to deal with his terrible loss was to deny it or hide it. In his wife, he found a perfect accomplice to the denial. Their love got them through the life of denial, but the one thing they couldn’t hide or fix killed him prematurely. But Marjorie was certain that now it was time to put an end to that kind of thinking.

She walked to the photo on the sideboard. “We should’ve told them all those years ago, we’ve talked about it often enough. In this you’ve been wrong, Jack. I shouldn’t have listened to you. Women know these things. All I can do now is to pay Dotty a visit and get her to change her mind. For the girl’s sake.”

As so many times before, she wished she had learnt how to drive. The trip to Cronulla took a long time on the train and was costly by taxi. But she had to spend as much time on Dotty’s problems as she could, they went back a long way and each was there for the other when their husbands died, although Jim passed away when the kids were still at school, Jack only a few years back.

She checked the watch. Surely now was the time to have a look in the garage. She had given him plenty of time to clear out. A little while later, having carefully
descended the small hill which separated the house and the garage, she was faced with her second conundrum for the day. Her life was turning out to be more exciting than it had been for a long time.

As she approached the garage door, she remembered the cheese sandwich; she had left near the little bed. “I must remember to clear it away immediately,” she kept reminding herself. It would encourage back the mice Jack had spent years eradicating. He had been scrupulous about keeping food away from the kitchen benches and cupboards and was always presenting her with new and improved airtight containers. He had never allowed the children to bring food into the garage. Since his departure, Marjorie had become more careless, and occasionally mice stormed the house and the garage. Once she’d had to call in the pest man to get rid of them.

When that happened, Jack was unbearable at nights: “Remember what I taught you, no food must be left anywhere.”

Opening the garage door, she waved a hand as if shooing off a fly. “Oh blimey,” she chastised herself, “Here I go again, never getting too far away from Jack.”

The child was sick; there was no doubt about it. She could see it the moment she laid eyes on the sweat-drenched forehead and flushed cheeks. Already shocked to find that the garage was not empty, she hadn’t expected to deal with fever and sickness as well.
Now, as she watched the youngster gasping for air, the voices returned. “Well, she isn’t what you have expected, is she? What on earth are you going to do now?” the picky one asked again. “Why did you have to get involved? Decisions will need to be made and you might not be able to make the right one. You always had Jack to decide for you. You don’t even know what she’s sick with. Could be drugs, could be AIDS, could be Hepatitis …”

“Oh, will you two just shut up! You’re driving me up the wall.” Marjorie almost screamed so angry was she with the voices telling her what to do. “Mind your own bloody business, I’ve raised three kids. How many illnesses do you think I dealt with? How many decisions have I had to make? My brain hadn’t gone to mush, only my knees have gone and I’ve never been known to think with them. Most likely it’s only a virus, easily fixed with couple of painkillers and plenty of fluid. All we need is to get her up into a proper bed.”

“Now, that felt better!” Her confidence had returned. She lowered herself to stretcher level, every one of her vertebrae protesting all the way down. With her hand on the girl’s shoulder, she shook her gently. “Come on, missy, time to wake up.” The girl showed no intention of waking up. The pain in Marjorie’s back became intolerable and she had to let go of the girl. Wincing, she straightened herself, limped back to the bench, pulled out a wooden stool that Jack used to sit on, and carefully eased herself on to it. After a minute or so, the pain retreated. “I need some help. Maybe I should ring John.”
The moment that thought crossed her mind she knew it was wrong. She could already hear his preachy voice. “Mother, how many times have I warned you not to collect strays. They’re a danger to the elderly. No matter what good intentions you have, they’re after one thing only. They’ll do anything for a fix, and they’ll use violence to get what they want.” That was the sermon he had delivered when she told him she'd bought a cup of coffee and a pie for a young man who used to sit in a shopping mall, asking for money. One would think that she was aiding and abetting Osama himself, that’s how he carried on.

She couldn’t listen to his voice. Not now. She got up and shuffled towards the garage door, hoping the pain would not come back. The body hidden by the blanket was far too skinny for her liking. “I wonder how you managed to get in and out of that bin,” Marjorie asked aloud, recalling the coldness of the metal. “What would happen if you had to stay there, with nothing to lie on, only the wet clothes?”

Shaking her head, she turned and made her way back to the stretcher for another try. When she bent, the pain was stronger than before. She knew she had only a couple of minutes before she would have to get up.

“Wake up, dear! Let’s take you upstairs.”

To her surprise, the girl’s eyes opened, looking directly into her own. They were grey and shrouded in pain. “My head, my head’s killing me. Mum, my head hurts, make it stop!” If she at all noticed the old hands clutching to her jersey, she didn’t show it. “My head!” she repeated, her eyes closing again.
Seeing her like that made Marjorie change her mind. “No point trying to get her up,” she mumbled, struggling to her feet.

On her return she managed to administer tablets and plenty of water, which she hoped would take away the fever and the profusion of sweat.

The night found them both still in the garage, the girl asleep on the camping cot and Marjorie, wrapped in a woollen shawl, ensconced in a padded, collapsible chair, a birthday present from her son. The child now slept almost peacefully, but Marjorie knew that the symptoms could return once four hours had passed. She wanted to be nearby with another dose of pills and water. The chair wasn’t really made for anyone her age to sleep in, so she watched Jack tinkering at the bench as he always did. Right now he was making a mirror frame, she found one in a shop, but he decided to make her a new one for her birthday. His presence was familiar and comforting and, despite the stiffening of her limbs due to the awkward position, sleep finally claimed her.
Desert Hunt

The stench of stale beer, cigarettes and the heavy BO of male bodies was getting too much for her. Usually she didn’t mind it but, today her feet were killing her already and it was only 8 pm. Easter Monday, usually the slowest day of the year and the bar was packed. May was sick and tired because Bill’s slipped disk was playing up again so she was the only one serving behind the counter. It wasn’t shaping up to be a great shift but, when Rodney started to breathe down her neck the moment she stopped to rest, she was ready to chuck the job in and leave him there all by himself. With the blow-ins multiplying like flies on a carcass, he could have hired extra help but no, as far as she could see, Rodney was after the extra business without paying for it.

“Greedy bastard,” she thought watching him rush in and out of the kitchen like a chook without a head. His normally meaty face took on a purple sheen and she wondered if he was going to have a heart attack before closing time. “Time to call his missus,” she thought, watching another half a dozen schooners walking off the counter.

The pub was full but none of the locals were spending big. A beer here, another one there. A week before payday and everyone was low, everyone except the blow-ins. They seemed to have plenty and were ready to shout in exchange for a story. From behind the bar, she could pick out every one of them, their boots shiny under the red dust, their Akubras smelling of leather dressing instead of sweat. Ready to latch onto anyone willing to tell them their version of the events, what they thought of the break-out or the possible whereabouts of the escapees. “Local knowledge,” as one of them called it.
“Local knowledge my arse!” May snorted in disgust, oblivious to anyone watching her. No one did, they were all preoccupied with the excitement of making the news for the rest of the nation.

The box was showing half time between Port and the Magpies, but even the game attracted little attention. Only old Robbo had his eyes glued to the screen. “Hasn’t heard the news,” May thought. “No one has bothered to tell him.” He’d lost his hearing years back in a mining accident, and the voiceless box had been his entertainment ever since.

The break-out from the jail, as the Immigration and Processing Detention Centre was generally known, had brought the township its second chance at national fame. In the 50s it was the atomic bombs that lit the desert, but since then the town had lapsed into obscurity. With 30 escapees still at large and most of the demonstrators and troublemakers on their way back to where they came from, it was up to the locals to provide the media circus with something to write about. For a few beers they were happy to share their ideas with anyone who paid. May had heard many of the ideas before. Propped against the bar after one or two beers, solutions were simple and plentiful.

“The government shouldn’t bother to find out if they’re genuine or not. Send them all back to where they come from. Should count themselves lucky they didn’t get flogged.” These ideas were not as extreme as others she’s heard: “Shoot the bastards!”
Even now, she could hear Bernie’s loud voice across the bar, proposing his own idea. “I’m tellin’ you, if I ever come across one of them outside of the jail, I’ll cut his throat by meself. I’d do it as quick as a flash, before he’d do me in first. With these types, you can’t take any chances. My father was in Egypt during the last war and he told me all about them. He’d turn in his grave, knowing we have them here now.”

Bernie’s hands were slashing invisible throats, while others voiced their agreement. “That’s right, cut their balls off, they want our women. They’re after our jobs, they want our land.”

Watching Bernie, May had no doubt about the depth of his convictions, but she also knew that, unless the escapees actually walked into his house just across the road, handed him a knife and showed him how to use it, he was no great threat to anyone. After years of alcohol abuse, he now had trouble crossing the road for his next drink. He was all talk, but there were others who were a real menace, dangerous to anyone who wasn’t like them. May had her experiences to draw on. Years ago she’d fallen in love with a blow-in teacher five years her junior. After quitting her marriage to an abusive husband and the father of her two children she was ostracised and threatened by some locals. She had to take an AVO to stop them from running her out of town. Luckily she and her new lover could work her father’s property, so they were independent. It took 15 years of marriage, four grown-up kids and two grandchildren for her to be finally accepted, although the memories of snide remarks, overt threats and a variety of covert “incidents” had stayed in her memory.
In a small town like theirs, the local bullies had power way above that of those in bigger cities. She felt sorry for the escapees, especially those who were going to be found by the locals.

She wasn’t sure about the rights or wrongs of the immigration policies but she was not happy to have people who came for a better life jailed on her doorstep. She wondered what happened to the Australian ethos of a fair go when men, women and children sat for years behind bars, waiting for a decision that often sent them back to where they had managed to escape from. All she wanted to know was: “What crimes have they committed?”

Rodney was worse than any she knew. He talked about “shooting on arrival” as a deterrent for the people trying to land on Australian soil. If she wanted to keep her job, she had to keep her views to herself.

By 10.30 pm she was ready to close up. Her bunions were killing her, yet the trip to a podiatrist was a long drive away, and right now she was needed in the pub. The cigarette smoke was so thick she felt like she had smoked several packets herself. All she wanted was to be home in bed with her husband snoring next to her.

“Almost there,” she whispered to herself, pushing a strand of sweaty hair off her flushed face. The trays of clean glasses filled the counter; the dishwasher was running yet another round. Even Rodney was collecting glasses left behind and reminding drinkers of closing time.
A sudden roar of vehicles from the patch of dirt used as a car park next to the pub aroused everyone’s attention. A moment later, the door swung open, and a bevy of young studs rushed in. May recognised the son of the mayor among them. No wonder they felt confident to storm inside. “Come on, everyone!” shouted Jacko, who was famous for his occasional scuffles with the law. “The blackfellas have spotted some of the scum heading for Dead Horse Rocks. Course they didn’t think of bringing them in, so it’s up to us to flush them out!” The mayor’s son’s face suddenly appeared directly in front of her. She could count the number of drinks he’d had already, they were oozing from his pores. “Giz us some beer, will you, love?” May sensed trouble and questioningly searched Rodney’s eyes. His head nodded slightly.

She was reaching for the clean tray to fill the glasses when Jacko’s voice stopped her. “Davo’s got the ute with the roo lights, all we need is a couple of cartons to set us on our way.” Davo’s hand threw some money on the counter and Rodney stepped in, took the money and turned towards the fridge.

The mayor’s son now spun on his heel and faced the silent room. “What are you? Fucking sheilas or something? The Arabs are on the run. Are youse just going to let them get away with it or what?” For a moment no one moved. May prayed that none of the blow-ins would try to capture the moment on camera. Davo’s voice rose higher. “The fucking cunts are going to get away with it, the cops are too weak to get them, so what are youse waiting for?”
Three of the locals got up. “You’re right, mate, can’t let them take over the country,” one of them exclaimed, already moving towards the door.

Jack laughed. “It’ll be better than a roo hunt, mate! They won’t know what hit them.”

With the cartons in their arms, they rushed out, leaving behind a silent room. May stood still, her hands gripping the counter’s steel edge. After a moment she recovered her sensibilities. She walked to the set on the wall and dialled a number. “It’s the pub here, you better get some of your blokes and head towards Dead Horse Rocks pretty smart, if you want to avoid bloodshed. The local boys found out some of the runaways are headed there. The men are legless and after some action, better than a roo hunt.”
Voting with His Feet

The Registry of Births and Deaths Office was in Chinatown, opposite the Burlington Centre. The overnight rain had cleared the air and washed the streets, and Leigh marvelled at the city’s ability to metamorphose from a dust and pollution-choked warren into a sparkling jewel, all in a matter of hours. With the markets already opened, the street bustled with locals laden with vegetables, flowers and other produce, as well as tourists and backpackers chasing their souvenir bargains. Chinatown was one of her favourite landmarks. Filled with unpretentious shops and cheap stalls, it was a far cry from the glitzy and over polished mega-malls of the CBD precinct.

She found a parking spot directly opposite the given address, and felt that everything was progressing according to some magical plan. The decision to apply for her father’s birth certificate came as an obvious solution following her mother’s lack of cooperation. Leigh had to remind herself that the box could’ve been thrown out when she and her siblings moved in and out of the house over the past twenty years.

“Must ring them and ask,” she promised herself. With John settled in New Zealand and Clare in WA, Leigh realised it might take time to find the box. She’d also have to tell them why she wanted it, and she wasn’t quite ready for that.

When she located the office, the ticket numbering system confirmed her fears. It was the musical chairs system, minus the music. She was number 68 and officers in four windows were processing enquiries. The government-issue orange plastic chairs formed long rows, the first six rows already fully occupied. The number counter
above the tellers’ windows blinked 22 and a large woman in the first row got up and walked to one of the windows. Everyone else stood up and moved one seat forward. “It’ll be a long wait,” she decided.

To her surprise a voice next to her responded: “Yeah it will. But I don’t mind ’cause I haven’t done my work for the science test. The longer it takes the better.”

Leigh looked up and smiled at the shock of blond hair and tanned skin occupying the adjoining chair. “Excuse me, how many seats have you moved since you arrived?” she asked.

The boy’s face contorted in an effort to remember, then relaxed into a big grin revealing a perfect set of teeth. “None, that’s why I’m so hopeful.” The boy’s good humour was catching and Leigh preferred a chat to the mindless gaze at the opposite wall. She decided to join in. “Are you waiting for a birth certificate for your passport?”

The shock of blond hair nodded. “Yah, I’m applying for a German passport. My mother’s German. After my HSC I’ll be able to work anywhere in the EU.” He paused as if sizing her up. She must have passed the test. “Australia sucks! I want to live somewhere else right now.”

Leigh straightened her spine in surprise. Behind the suntanned surfer exterior, something else was hidden. The determination in his voice told her that she was going to have a conversation she hadn’t expected. His blue eyes bore into her and she
started to wish she hadn’t spoken to him. She took the easy way out. “What do you mean it sucks?”

His eyes grew darker. “When I was growing up,” he said pushing the blond cowlick from his forehead, “I got teased: Gestapo, Jew-killer, Kraut, STASI - those kinds of names. Being blond didn’t help either. I wished I had Irish or Scottish blood, or English, anything but German and being blond. Now, it’s all changed. The Germans are the good guys. Our government is letting people drown on leaky boats and advocating environmental practices that the rest of the world shuns. Unfortunately too many people like what the government is doing; they will vote them in again. My parents like this government; they don’t want more people coming here and they don’t want me to go there but I’ll vote with my feet. I prefer to be German right now, although I will have to repeat the last school year there.”

“I see,” was all that Leigh managed to say, feeling like a fraud in face of such a clear statement. When had she last thought seriously about politics? She read the papers, watched the news and voted on Election Day. Beyond that, she left it to activists and politicians. Oh yes, she also separated the recyclables and non-recyclables, used green bags to go shopping and felt virtuous when refusing the plastic bags. When had she grown so complacent, so comfortable with her lot?

The young man next to her was expecting some response. “What are you here for then?” he asked, filling the void.
“I’ve just found out my father was Aboriginal. No one ever told me. I’ve come here to get his birth certificate, to find out where he came from. He died way back, about 25 years ago.” Once the words were out, she felt horrified. What possessed her to talk to a total stranger, even worse, a school kid?

At that moment the sixty or so people got up and moved by one seat closer to the counter, giving her an opportunity to regroup in private. “Keep my place. I have to find the bathroom,” she said, already heading in the direction indicated by the signs.

In the solitude of the toilet cubicle she cradled her head in her hands. The lanky teenager had become the repository of her secret because she desperately needed to tell someone. Since her chance encounter in the outback pub, her mother was the only person she had tried to talk to about it. Since their fight she couldn’t even do that.

Hearing the water flush again and again reminded her where she was. She was ready to go back.

The line of chairs in front of the boy was shorter now, his school bag sat in her chair. He lifted it and brushed off the seat. “Sorry,” she said. “It’s all still new to me. Not used to talking about my father in that way.” He nodded in silence. After a while he asked. “How did you find out?” Sounding so young and eager; she ended up telling him.
His eyes grew bigger as the story progressed. “You might have another family somewhere, cousins and aunts and uncles, like I have in Germany.” Her mind performed a somersault. The kid was right. Most likely there were siblings, her father’s brothers and sisters, and their children – her cousins. By the time their numbers came up, she felt excited about future possibilities. Their goodbyes were quick; each one hurried to a separate window.

“I’d like to apply for my father’s birth certificate. He passed away years back,” Leigh explained to the young woman.

“When did your mother pass away?” the woman asked, her pen poised to tick off another box on a form. Leigh looked up, surprised. “It’s my father who passed away, my mother’s still alive.”

Without any consideration of her comment, another box was ticked off. “Did he re-marry prior to his death?”

“Oh no, my parents never separated,” Leigh felt like she was being asked to defend the love that bonded them until his death.

“I understand,” the woman replied. “If your mother is alive and they weren’t divorced, then she’s the only one who can request the birth certificate. If she can’t apply personally, you must produce a consent form signed by her and identification.”

It was as simple as that. Until her mother agreed to tell her or till she died, Leigh could not find out where her father was born or who his people were. Walking back
to her car she found a city once more choking on fumes and the dust. Even the thought of a movie and a dinner date with Mehran could not dispel the sense of dislocation and sadness that had descended on her with each word that the young clerk uttered, and she still had a full day to get through.

“Would you like to come with me to Anna’s fiftieth birthday party?” Leigh asked, hoping to break the awkward silence that had invaded the car. They were sitting in front of her house and until few moments earlier the date had seemed a success. Having got over the shock at the Registrar’s office, she was ready to enjoy the evening out and she wasn’t disappointed. Mehran was charming and funny, and his optimistic outlook on life lifted her spirits. It was only now that the spaces between their bodies grew uncomfortably close and the confines of the car threatened to burst with unspoken questions.

“Is it ok to ask him upstairs? Will I be seen as too forward? How should I respond if he makes a move? Do I want him to make it? Should I make a move?” She liked this guy, she could feel the chemistry working both ways but still she hesitated to show too much desire. “For goodness sake,” she silently admonished herself, “you are a grown woman, some would even say old, so why are you behaving like a love-smitten teenager? In case it hasn’t occurred to you, he is no spring chicken either. No doubt he’s had his share of affairs, so why be so prim and proper?”

Despite the self-talk, outwardly she made no move. The whole night, she had felt that he was going to say something important, but now she felt uncertain about her own response. With one hand already on the door handle, she thought her message was
clear. He seemed to understand, kept the engine running and the gears engaged. Both of them were ready to take off. When the idea of Anna’s party entered her mind, she grasped it immediately. It was a safe topic that indicated her interest.

He took his time to respond. “She doesn’t like me. You shouldn’t be asking me. She wants you there, not me. I will only annoy her by my sheer existence, and on her big celebration only her friends should be there.” He’d spoken in a quiet voice, but with a conviction she found infuriating.

“That’s because you don’t know her well enough to either like or dislike her. The same goes for you.” She surprised herself at the razor edge of her voice. “Where did that come from?” she wondered silently, anticipating his response.

When she finally looked up at him, he had switched the ignition off and turned to face her. Lit by the street lamp, his face looked serious and vulnerable. She felt an intense desire to run her fingers down his cheek to feel its muscle tension melt under her touch.

“Damn, don’t do it to me, stop looking at me like that!’ she ordered him wordlessly, knowing that the longer she stayed, the more control she would need to exert over her hands. When he spoke again, his words were slow and deliberate. “The Iranian Jews and Muslims have lived side by side in a relatively peaceful co-existence for centuries. Families accepted each other’s differences, sticking to their own kind but respecting
the others. Muslim neighbours were known to help their Jewish friends with jobs they were not able to perform during their Sabbath days. Some neighbours fought, others were friends, regardless of their religion. The situation changed dramatically following World War Two, despite the fact that the Muslims were not responsible for the Holocaust – for that only European Christianity is to take blame. But it was Muslims’ land that was taken to make a way for the new Jewish state, to appease Christian guilt over the death of millions of Jews. Ever since then, our identities seem to be inextricably bound by hatred and suspicion of each other and a systematic destruction of “the enemy” on both sides. I am afraid that, despite the distance in miles and years from the horrific events of the war, your friend and I are still hearing the voices from our pasts that counsel suspicion and hate. You might need to give us time, the party might be happening just little bit too soon.”

Leigh expected him to stop there, but he continued, “The Muslim–Jewish conflict seems to be so all-consuming and yet one of the longest and most destructive wars in recent times was inflicted by one Muslim state on another. It lasted close to a decade, killing hundreds of thousands on each side. The world’s superpowers supplied one side with up-to-date machinery of war in exchange for oil.”

He paused, and Leigh seized her opportunity. Her hand tentatively moved towards his, her index finger tracing the jagged edges of the scar. The muscles of his palm tensed and she’d swear she heard him take a deep breath. “Is that where you got this from?” she asked, hoping that he wasn’t going to move his hand away. “Yes, I fought in that war. While I was growing up I was a bit of a musical prodigy and ended up studying piano at the University of Tehran. With the fall of the Shah, I,
like many other students fell under the spell of revolutionary rhetoric and, when we got attacked, I was stupid enough to volunteer and ended up in the air force. The Republic promised so much and delivered so little. The piano and all other Western music was declared evil and many instruments were destroyed by the guards. Not dissimilar to the Chinese Cultural Revolution; strong dogmas and ideologies seem to be scared of the arts. ”

His words trailed off, but Leigh wanted to hear more. "How did it happen?"

“My plane got shot over enemy territory. The pilot crash-landed in the fields. God only knows how I managed to get out and away before the plane exploded. I think I was thrown out by the impact, but I’m not really sure. I was a total mess physically. This’ – and as he turned his hand to better show the scar, he took hold of hers – “was one of the lesser injuries. My luck didn’t stop there. Before the military arrived, I was found by a local man who managed to hide me in his orchard, without anyone realising that one of the pilots survived the crash. His youngest son had just been excused from military service due to extremely bad asthma, his eldest was a martyr already and the middle one was fighting somewhere. Needless to say, he wasn’t well disposed towards the government for starting the war. For weeks they nursed me from the brink of death back to health, hiding me in big wooden barrels in the orchard barn. While I was unconscious right at the beginning, they brought someone who stitched my hand and my other wounds, drip fed me drink and food. Without them I couldn’t have survived. In the end, my career as a concert pianist was over, but I was alive. Officially declared a martyr back home, I couldn’t contemplate returning. When I recovered, they helped me to cross to Turkey. They put themselves
in lots of danger to save me and I feel forever indebted to them. After one refugee
camp after another, I ended up here. It was easier to get a visa then. I’d hate to be in
the same situation now.”

He grew silent, gently caressing her hand. It felt good; she didn’t want him to let go.
“These people, did you ever find out who they were? Have you ever got in touch
with them?”

He shook his head and his eyes grew shadows. “I wasn’t even told their names or
their address. In case I got caught and tortured. The regime was brutal, and while
they saved me, they weren’t naïve. No point in thinking I could keep in touch, it was
most unlikely that I’d actually make it out of Iraq in one piece. The less I knew the
safer they were. I only have a vague idea where their farm was. During the first Gulf
War I was hoping that, if Saddam got defeated, I’d visit the country and try to find
them. I had nothing to give them in return for their kindness, but the farm was very
simple and I thought I could help them with some funds. But the war ended with
Saddam’s regime still in power, so none of my plans could be put into action.”

In the silence that ensued, Leigh wondered about the complexities of other peoples’
lives, and thought how sheltered she had been. “I hope Anna and you will get to
know each other, you have so much in common.” The statement came out without
her thinking about it, but once it was out she realised how much she wanted them to
become friends. Her fingers found his lips, sealing them tight before he could
respond. “I’m sorry. I know that history doesn’t go away just because I wish it
would. I guess I just have to hope that one day it might happen.”
When his lips parted she released the pressure, expecting him to respond in words. Instead, he proceeded to kiss the tip of each finger in a slow and deliberate manner. It was her turn to take a deep breath and hold on to it. In a moment of clarity that preceded her mind’s surrender to her body’s growing desire, she remembered her earlier resolve and gently withdrew the protesting hand.

“I also have a story to tell you. It is a lesson in Australian history, one that you might not have come across yet.”

He shifted in the seat, his hands now folded in his lap, his face that of a child eager for a story. Leigh’s eyes searched the growing darkness outside the car’s windscreen, hopping to acquire the anonymity which comes from blending into the shadows.

“I’ve just found out that my father was Aboriginal, most probably stolen from his parents when he was a baby. He spent his childhood in a church institution with other so-called orphans. He had no other memories of his childhood. Been dead for the past twenty-five years so I can’t ask him. But, wait for this: my mother completely denies it, making it impossible for me to find any information about his folks. I might even have another family somewhere in the bush.”

There, she’d said it! A wave of gratitude to the suntanned teenager overwhelmed her and she felt glad that Mehran’s reaction was not immediate. He took his time.
“You, an Aboriginal? You must be kidding! I don’t think I’ve ever met one. Aren’t they meant to live in the desert or way up north? I saw them when people walked across the bridge, but not many since. I suppose not many need pianos moved. Except that bloke from the travel show, he lives up the coast. I moved a piano for him once. Oh and that woman opera singer, she also plays piano, have also moved her.” To observe his face became more important than the shadows in the dark. His smile was encouraging. “What makes you think you are one of them? What does it feel like?”

The sigh of relief emptied her lungs so completely; she needed to take time to inhale again, before she could answer. He seemed genuinely interested in the story, nothing more and nothing less. She ended up telling him about her trip to Adelaide, the visit to her mother and her response. “Can’t you see? It must be true. She reacted so badly, she’d have no reason to otherwise.”

By now they had sat in the car for a couple of hours, their bodies had taken on the shapes of the seats, but neither of them made any move to get out. Their hands were intertwined in his lap, her head resting on his shoulder. “It’s as if my life was all one big lie. Growing up I felt odd at times, I often wondered if I was adopted. My siblings were so fair by comparison. They took after my mother but I looked so much like my father I had to give up the idea of adoption.”

She paused, and then continued. “All my life I’ve seen them only in the movies, mostly drunk, living in shantytowns or in the desert. How could I see myself as being one of them? And yet a stranger claimed me. What am I supposed to do with this
new identity? I don’t like the bush, can’t stand it. It’s full of danger. The snakes, spiders, ticks and centipedes – they’re all waiting to get me. And what does it actually mean to be an Aboriginal? How does it make me different from who I was before that trip? And why does it matter anyhow?” She had so many questions, and she realised how good it felt to be asking them aloud for the first time.

Mehran laughed. “Hang on, slow down! Take one thing at the time. Maybe it’s not about being one or the other. Your identity grows and changes all the time no matter who you are. Surely you can be both, or when the time comes you can choose one over the other. But you’ll have to give yourself time to find out about your ancestors. When I came here I just walked around, listening to all the new sounds and watching everything around me. I made myself sniff the new smells, although I didn’t like them at first. Instead of the sweet scent of cooking spices and overripe fruit, the inside of houses smelt of cleaning chemicals, like hospitals or petrol stations. And don’t even mention the colours. I had to forget what I was used to and open myself to new ways of being. You are having another kind of migration experience. Explore your father’s culture as if you’re encountering it for the first time. You don’t even know yet what your father’s legacy might be.”

Surprisingly, Leigh felt that he was right. After all, he had undertaken a similar journey and Anna also had experienced it. Suddenly she felt lucky. She already had two friends who knew what it felt like to start anew, and she wasn’t alone.

“I can’t even admit it to my friends. I feel like a fraud. Not even Anna knows yet. I’ve been brought up an Anglo-Australian, how can that be changed? But as you
said, maybe I can start small, by getting to know the bush and the land, talk to the people who know it. I will need a companion on this journey. Will you come with me?"

She felt the squeeze of his hand and they continued sitting there, unwilling to let go of the comfortable silence.
The Young and the Old

The pounding inside Jodie’s head stopped long before she became conscious of waking up. With her eyes still closed, she savoured the luxury of listening to the sounds surrounding her: a car passing by, a barking dog, the whooshing sound of the wind and the rain on a roof.

“A roof. What kind of a roof?” Ever since she had left home she had not heard rain and wind performing a lullaby for her as they had through her childhood. Wind and rain had become enemies, something to fear and avoid hearing at all cost. The sound of raindrops pelting a roof meant that she was somewhere inside. Inside a house, but how did she get there? She had no memory of entering any houses, not for a long time. Without success she tried to recall the most recent events. A full day of wind and rain and the shock of finding herself drenched in an empty clothes bin, aching from head to toe. After that, the cold and darkness claimed her mind. She couldn’t add anything else. Alarmed, she lifted her hand and moved her fingers. Softness and warmth! She recalled something else she had forgotten. “A mattress!” The word jolted her eyes open. Darkness broken only by a low voltage globe suspended from the ceiling. The ceiling was a rough white painted job, not at all bedroom-like. Remaining completely still, she moved her eyes to the right. The same rough painted wall broken by a floor-to-ceiling roller door. “A garage!”

Right on cue a distant voice came back. “A small door leading to a garage and a dry place for you to sleep in.”
“I must’ve made it here, but how long ago?” She decided to explore the other side of the bed and almost jumped out in fright. Next to her bed sat a giant insect. Bulging eyes, fat shapeless body, stick like legs protruding from the abdomen. While her mind performed the necessary connections leading up to a leap, her body simply refused to move. Her limbs were weighed down by extra-planetary gravity, her trunk simply sank into the mattress. In desperation her eyes shut once again. A moment later, her mind re-asserted itself. “Calm down,” it directed. “Take another look.”

In the end her curiosity got the better of her. This time she saw an old woman asleep. Her face was hidden behind large glasses and she was snoring. Wrapped in a woollen shawl, her legs were thin sticks by comparison with her large abdomen. Jodie took her time, studying her carefully. She was old, really old. Older than Jodie’s nana was when she died. Her snores reverberated through the garage and Jodie wondered if the visible teeth were real or, like her nana’s, made out of the hard pink and white plastic.

Next to the comfortable bed stood a low stool with a water jug, some tablets and a plate of white bread sandwiches. A pile of what she recognised as her wet clothes stained the concrete floor nearby. Under the cover, her hand searched for bare skin and instead found a warm cotton jersey and trackie pants at least five sizes too big for her skinny body. “Did she change my clothes?” The thought struck her as ridiculous. The woman under the shawl looked so frail that Jodie had a hard time believing she even managed to stand up. “Nah, I must’ve done it myself while half asleep or far too sick to remember.” Still, despite her conviction, other image filled
her mind. A hand lifting her head and water flowing down her throat. A bitter tablet on her tongue, more water, and then sleep.

“She did it all!” A wave of gratitude washed over Jodie. With a great effort and spinning circles in front of her eyes, she hauled herself up, pulled off one of the quilts and staggered between the swaying walls towards the chair. She placed the quilt over the woman’s shoulders, the insect metamorphosing into a white cocoon. The snoring continued unabated.

“Us oldies sleep lightly,” her nana used to say, each time she caught Jodie sneaking out of the house at night. “Well, this one doesn’t!” Jodie chuckled, making her way back to the bed. She wished her nana were inside the cocoon and she could snuggle up to her. Instead, she climbed back to bed feeling cold and exhausted. She decided to wait for the old woman’s next move, but in no time she too was asleep.

When she opened her eyes again, she found herself staring directly into watery blue eyes, the kind her nana called “rheumy eyes”. Behind the thick spectacles, they were large and bulging. They also looked kind.

“Hello, dearie. Feeling any better? You gave us a bit of a fright. I wasn’t sure whether to get a doctor or not, you didn’t look well at all but Jack suggested I wait a bit, so I did.” The chair scraped the floor with a sound that made Jodie’s arms grow goose bumps, and the rheumy eyes moved closer. A wrinkled hand covered in liver spots smoothed the quilt around Jodie, bringing on a sudden attack of breathlessness.
In response, the hand immediately retracted and the face moved back couple of inches. Jodie breathed out with relief.

“You don’t need to worry dearie. I’m not interested in hurting you in any way. I’ve had kids myself; they’re grown up and gone their own. By the way, I’m Mrs Marjorie Wilson, and as I told you the other night I live behind the garage. Would you care for a cup? A nice cup of sweet tea, freshly brewed, not a teabag, but proper leaf tea. It’s been a long night, well, couple of days really.” Seeing the question on Jodie’s face Marjorie was eager to explain. “It’s almost 4 o’clock in the afternoon and I found you yesterday just after my afternoon tea. As I said before, you didn’t look good, I had to get water and tablets into you, to get the fever down. I am not so steady on my feet any more, so it took a while for me to get down to your level, if you get my drift.”

After Marjorie mentioned the tea, Jodie could think of nothing else but the sweet taste of three teaspoons of sugar in a cup of strong hot brew. “I’d love a cup, Mrs Wilson,” she replied and, with her mother’s lectures on the importance of good manners in mind, she added, “Thank you for the bed. I must’ve picked up a bug somewhere.”

She tried to get up but the old woman’s hand pushed her back with surprising strength. “Well now, dearie, I do have to ask you a couple of questions, for no other reason than that I want to know for myself, if you get what I mean.” She stopped as if to give Jodie an opportunity to object, but Jodie only shrugged her shoulders. “All
right, dearie, what’s your name? I don’t mean to pry into your private affairs, but I need to call you something.”

Jodie saw the sense in what she asked. Despite her usual unwillingness to reveal anything of herself, the eyes behind the thick lenses comforted her. She felt safe and that was enough. “I’m Jodie,” she volunteered, but drew the line at her surname.

“Nice name,” Mrs Wilson remarked, obviously satisfied with the information. “Now I have to ask you something more pertinent.” When Jodie didn’t respond, she continued. “Do you have a problem? I mean a drug problem. You see, I’ve been thinking. You can use this garage any time you need a place to sleep, but I don’t want to be bothered with any of the troublesome stuff. Not at my age. You can understand that, can’t you? So if you do have a drug problem I’ll bring you the tea back here. I’d rather not have you inside. I know I might seem like a silly old woman to you, but I do have to think of my safety. And Jack, kind as he is, would not recommend you coming in either.”

Her earnest look made Jodie smile. What a weird woman, so naïve. As if anyone would tell her the truth if they were using. “Nah, I don’t do drugs. They turn your head into scrambled eggs. On the street you need a clear head to survive. Too many sickoes about, and you get no second chance with them.”

“Glad to hear that, my dear,” and Marjorie heaved herself up from the chair.
Jodie tried to follow but the walls of the garage spun about, the ceiling swayed first to the left, then to the right, and a bolt of pain shot from the base of her skull to a spot behind her eyes. Her stomach drowned in a super-wave of nausea as she collapsed back onto the mattress. She became aware of the shuffling footsteps back by her side. Her head cradled in her hands she managed to sit up. “Sorry, Mrs Williams, I don’t think I can get up yet.”

The old voice lost none of its patience. “That’s quite all right, dearie. You probably tried to get up too fast. Have a rest and try again, because I don’t think you should spend another night here. The bed inside is much more comfortable. Jack made sure we always had two good beds there. For visitors, that is. We never did have separate beds. Never had need for that.” She waited for a moment, watching Jodie slowly straighten up. Then without any warning she grabbed her arm and with surprising force pulled her up to her feet. For a moment the walls started to spin again and Jodie’s head felt like a pot having water poured into it from a great height; but, almost instantaneously the spinning stopped and all was still. Her headache disappeared, only a weakness in her knees remained but, with the old lady supporting her, she felt ok to try. “Let’s get the cup of tea” she grinned at her companion and raised her foot.

Hanging onto each other, they edged insect-like out of the garage. Once outside, the afternoon sun felt warm and energising. With arms around each other they progressed steadily along the concrete path towards the house, taking rests between each step.
First-born Son

The bowls of fresh chicken laksa, for which the market’s Happy Chefs Café was famous, were steaming in front of them and the fragrant aroma of spices and chicken made her mouth water. It was still too early for lunch but, with their shopping already stowed in the car, it was either coffee in one of the European cafés or an early bowl of their favourite laksa washed down with a pot of special blend jasmine tea.

Great Great Aunt took a sip of piping hot tea and smacked her lips appreciatively. “Ah, this is still the best tea one can get this side of the South China Sea. And they won’t tell me where they get it. Van’s Tea House in Sydney doesn’t have even one blend that would compare with the subtlety of this flavour.” She took another sip and sat in silence, savouring its taste. Ming Cheng waited, knowing that Great Great Aunt would get down to business sooner or later.

She didn’t have to wait long. “So how’s my favourite grand nephew getting on? Is he still madly in love with his new girlfriend?” She placed an undue emphasis on the last word and Ming Cheng couldn’t decide if she felt uneasy about the actual word and the connotations it carried, or the tinge of sarcasm with which the Great Great Aunt imbued it.

She nodded her head while her jaws were already working hard at the spicy chicken. “Yes, he’s rather fond of her. As a matter of fact I talked to him last night. They will be going to Sydney this weekend, attending some family function and staying with Samantha’s mother.”
Another mouthful was too tempting. After a split-second decision, the food won and their conversation lost a minute or two while a satisfying duet of muted slurps and sips was played out.

Finally, Great Great Aunt let out a deep sigh. “Don’t get me wrong. I think this Samantha is very pretty young woman, despite her unrestrained fondness for sun. I’d have a chat with her about her skin if I were you. Her mother has obviously not installed proper sense of caring for her skin. Australians remain so careless. We’ve known about the danger of sun for centuries. Just goes to show, there are traditions and traditions lacking. She’ll look like a prune in another couple of years, a regular peasant.” She paused, but Ming Cheng guessed that more was coming. Great Great Aunt didn’t issue an invitation for shopping and lunch without a motive. These days, when she just wished to see any of her relations, she’d invite them to her opulent house.

Following a string of delicate manoeuvres of chopsticks and chicken bones, she sucked the bones dry and continued. “It’s no surprise they get sunburned. They spend too much time on the beach. Too much relaxing, if you ask me. I’ve been born here, but my family retained the hard Chinese work ethic. They never adopted the Australian attitude. That’s why we migrants prosper here. The Australians are too laid back. I call it lazy.” She picked up another chicken morsel, chewing it thoughtfully.

Ming Cheng knew better than to disagree. “Well, yes, they do take lots of holidays and such. We didn’t have any holidays for the first fifteen years after we came here.
Everyone else was taking them every year, sometimes more often. And the Aussie kids at school wouldn’t dream of studying during the school holidays. Their parents think it’s terrible to pay tutors for the kids during that time. But how else are they going to get into the best schools? How else are they going to learn to work hard? These days it’s even more puzzling. Young Johnny doesn’t even get homework and his teacher tells the parents that he’ll learn from play, not from sitting down and studying. I must admit he enjoys school, he is always ready first in the morning, says that it is fun at school. But should school be fun?”

Great Great Aunt spat a mouthful of chicken bones on to the ceramic spoon. “What a lot of hogwash! How else will they learn to work hard? It starts at school. School should be a hard work.” The disdain in her voice was stronger than when Ming Cheng heard her talking about the Communist regime in China and the motherland’s takeover of Hong Kong. All of a sudden she felt wary of what was to follow.

“Just imagine what it would be like having a girl brought up with such attitudes for your daughter-in-law, especially when you grow old.” Her eyes now bore directly into Ming Cheng’s, who belatedly realised the cost of her lunch invitation. “If she were not to die from melanoma years earlier, that is. Thomas is your first-born. He will have the responsibility of looking after you in your old age.” Great Great Aunt paused, letting the full impact of what she had said sink in. “He will be busy supporting his family, so it will fall on your daughter-in-law instead. She’ll be running the house, looking after the children and you. Would you trust yours and Harry’s wellbeing into the hands of someone who was not properly trained to work hard, venerate the elders and give them the utmost respect?”
With Ming Cheng silent, the Great Great Aunt played her trump card: “She’d probably talk him into sending you into an old people’s home. That’s what Australians do to their elders. Push them out of their houses and pay others to look after them. A shameful practice if I ever saw one, no sense of family obligations.”

Ming Cheng felt like a turnip waiting to be picked, unable to make any move. If she disagreed, Great Great Aunt would take it as an insult. If she agreed, Great Great Aunt would take it upon herself and talk to Thomas about getting rid of the girl he loved, and about that she had no doubt. She remembered rumours of similar interventions, one that unfortunately led to a disaster about which the family never talked directly. She hovered on the edge of a precipice, waiting for the earth to crumble under her feet. Great Great Aunt was a great boulder that was just about to start rolling and Ming Cheng was powerless to stop her. The great boulder seemed happy with her impact so far and continued to demolish the last bits of chicken in her bowl.

Ming Cheng did not believe that Thomas could be persuaded by anyone to send them to one of those places she had heard of. He had heard her views often enough, he was a good son. At the same time she realised that she had never made the connection between the young woman Thomas was so obviously in love with and her future role as the wife of her eldest son. Even during his relationship with Eve, Ming Cheng had never thought of her as that, despite the comments of her female relatives. While waiting for Great Great Aunt to continue, Ming Cheng wondered if, due to Angela’s upbringing, she had actually changed her own views without even realising it. Great Great Aunt’s opinions seemed too callous and harsh.
Great Great Aunt finished with the soup. “Look, love, she’s not good for him. Pretty and smart, but can you imagine her looking after him like you look after Harry? I can’t see her making dumplings or taro cakes either. They’d end up living on frozen pizzas, no fresh food, no home cooking. His health would suffer. But you’re lucky. I just happened to chance on a nice family in Melbourne, gem traders and general imports and exports. They have lots of connections and diverse business expansion going on in the old country. One daughter and one son. The daughter is the younger of the two but the boy is not real well, not too smart if you know what I am talking about, needs constant care. Not good for business. It will all go to the daughter and her husband. They are very good prospects. The girl is pretty as a picture but has studied business and got her MBA is what I have been told. Very smart. She’d be right for him, believe me, if only he’d give her the chance.”

Having now realised Great Great Aunt’s intentions, Ming Cheng was formulating the best response but nothing had come out of her mouth before Great Great Aunt continued. “Right now, you must stop him from going with her to Sydney. Once he goes, the marriage deal would be as good as done. A visit to a girl’s family carries expectations. You must find a way of stopping him or the wedding is as good as announced. I bet Harry would be also smitten by her looks, men are so predictable, and you will not get any help from him, that’s for certain. Just think about your old age.”

Once they finished their soups, Great Great Aunt paid the bill and Ming Cheng found an excuse to return to the markets after Great Great Aunt drove off. She needed more time to process the conversation. Her head was full of thoughts she couldn’t share
with Harry. He was always preoccupied with the here and now; the future was something that would just happen and, in that respect, she agreed with the Great Great Aunt. He probably wouldn’t mind having Samantha as the daughter-in-law. He never was a practical man; he always had her to look after him. She definitely wasn’t going to get any help from him, in that respect Great Great Aunt was right, Ming Cheng was on her own. She spent the rest of the day pondering the situation and she couldn’t come up with any solutions that would make her feel resolved about the issue. By the time she was ready to go to bed, she feared the night, wishing that Harry would share the load she was carrying. It wasn’t easy for her to fall asleep; not even the TV could dispel the sense of gloom she was experiencing. When sleep finally claimed her, it was only temporary relief.

In the night she woke up, her hand searching for the warmth of another body. She found only a cold pillow to remind her that Harry hadn’t been at home for almost a week. Finally her mind caught up with the reality. “Of course, he is away, fishing with Angela.”

Half awake, and still half asleep Ming Cheng felt that in her sleep she had been given a sign, and all she needed to do was work out how to interpret it. She sat up, determined to make sense of it. The winking green numbers of the bedside alarm clock confirmed that the dawn was close. She could already hear the more impatient members of the morning chorus. With the orphaned pillow behind her back she sat up and focused on her dream.
The air was thick with burning incense; the fine grey ash from burnt offerings settled on every surface, including her clothes chosen especially for the day. They had all came to pay respects to their ancestors but, even in her dream, Ming Cheng understood that this wasn’t a normal Grave Sweeping Festival. She felt more like an observer at the ritual, not like a participant in an important family event. This was an auspicious occasion when a new bride was brought along for the first time to be presented to the groom’s ancestors, just as, many years back, Ming Cheng herself had been presented to Harry’s family’s ancestors. Now, the time had come for Thomas to step close to the grave and present his bride. When no one moved she turned around, expecting to see her son and his bride waiting behind her, but she saw no one, only rows of empty graves. A terrible fear besieged her. Without an auspicious occasion such as a bride presentation or a festival, she had no right to be there, cemeteries were powerful and polluting places and visiting them inappropriately only invited a disaster of some kind.

After only a moment, Ming Cheng was satisfied that she had found the answer. She didn’t have to search for the multitude of meanings the dream might have offered, it was there in front of her eyes. Her oldest son was missing in her dream, he was not attending to his filial duty, and he was bringing the wrath of ancestors upon the family. Ming Cheng was positive that Thomas’s visit to his girlfriend’s family represented imminent danger to the family, just as Great Great Aunt had predicted, a danger that every mother senses the moment just before a toddler steps into a road full of traffic, or when he unexpectedly reaches for a teapot filled with boiling water. And just like the moment when mother’s hand instinctively pulls the toddler back
from the source of his future pain, she knew that the dream came to her to prevent impending doom.

The cushion behind her back suddenly felt like a sack of bricks, each corner digging into her flesh, the sharpness becoming unbearable. She considered getting up, but then resolved to sit it out and focus back on to the meaning of the dream. Was it really warning her against Thomas’s trip? How was she to know what it was about?

Harry often provided the alternative view to her desire to provide more traditional way of bringing up the children. “You must let them take their own decisions. It is their country, they know it better than you and I do. We can only show them what was proper in the old country, they have to steer their lives between the old and the new. This is their home.” He had reasoned this way when the children were little and had convinced her to send them to an Aussie kindergarten rather than having someone looking after them at home. “We must give them the freedom their school friends have. If we fear such freedom it’s because we ourselves have never experienced it,” he argued, the time Thomas was invited to a party less supervised than she would have liked. Then it was Angela’s “unsuitable” clothes and her “far too early” interest in boys to which she objected, and Harry excused. The pattern seemed set from the beginning. While Ming Cheng always took the side of caution and tradition, Harry advocated “the Australian way”.

She had to admit that the kids had turned out all right and she was proud of both of them. “So why am I so concerned now?” she asked aloud. She decided to get up, wrapped herself in her dressing gown and set out for the kitchen. Passing Angela’s
room she felt the temptation to push the door open and tiptoe inside, as she had every night for the past twenty-eight years. Always checking that they were safe, never completely trusting the nights without gunfire and explosions.

But Angela was with her father. “Bonding,” they jokingly called it. She did it for the first time during her HSC year and they both enjoyed it so much that ever since they would spend one week fishing each year. Mostly they would arrive back with stories of a shared time and no fish. Thomas, like Ming Cheng, was never interested in fishing and, like her, he was always in too much of a hurry to sit still.

In the kitchen, Ming Cheng boiled the kettle, made a pot of tea and slowly sipped it, savouring the familiar taste. The subtle tea flavours brought back the dream and Great Great Aunt’s warning. Thomas’s wedding was the only disaster she could foresee, and his impending visit to Sydney was definitely bringing it closer. She’d like to think that Thomas would always do the right thing by them, that they brought him up well. Then she remembered the influence she had over Harry once he’d fallen head over heels in love with her. He’d do anything to please her; oblivious to the consequences, and so much in love that nothing else mattered. He wouldn’t have left the old country had it not been for her determination to go. If Thomas had inherited his father’s capacity for love, then he would do anything the girl asked and Great Great Aunt’s prediction would come true. She felt as if an iron hand had grabbed her guts and squeezed them tight, sending them into a spasm of pain.
By the time she was on her second cup of mint tea, she had examined Great Great Aunt’s words from every possible angle and tried to recall some of the stories she’d heard about those places. Her heart grew heavier with each story she remembered.

First, there was the one about Mr Shou, a widower of a considerable wealth. He had decided to pass his wealth on to his only son, hoping to be looked after in return. All was well and, after few years, Mr Shou moved in with the son’s family. All that time he was a happy and a healthy man. Unfortunately, tragedy intervened. His son was killed in a car accident and the non-Chinese wife inherited the whole estate. She continued treating him well until she remarried and followed her new husband to France. Mr Shou was separated from his grandchildren and unable to look after himself. He was resettled in a nursing home. Not exactly cheap one - but no money could buy the care that a Chinese family would provide. Those who visited him brought back complaints that he had no one to play mah jong with or speak mandarin to, not to even mention the food he was given. He was unhappy and within two years had died of pneumonia. As the story went, his body was covered in bedsores that must have greatly contributed to the misery of his final days.

The second story, that Ming Cheng remembered was an article in a local paper. Dubious care practices were revealed in the treatment of residents in a local nursing home. She remembered a story about the elderly residents being doused with a dangerous pesticide when a plague of biting insects got out of hand, leaving them with chronic and untreatable skin problems. She couldn’t remember any more stories, but she felt she’d had enough.
“I’m not going to let that happen to us. This time, Harry, I’m not letting you talk me into the boy getting his way. Luckily, you are not here!”

Ming Cheng paced the ground floor, from the kitchen to the living room, and through the hall back to the kitchen. Each time she stopped, an invisible hand tightened its grip inside her abdomen; when she resumed the walk, the grip eased. She repeated her resolution, mantra like, still hoping to find an acceptable solution. Occasionally, her resolve was interrupted by a less fearful voice: “Calm down, he’s not exactly talking marriage yet is he? Lots of water will pass under the bridge before he gets to that point.” She really wanted to believe in this voice, but everything she’d seen so far told her that he was more smitten with this girl than he had been before. Her instinct was telling her that he had found what he’d been looking for.

“Anyhow,” the rational voice continued, “haven’t you heard of bad Chinese daughters-in-law? History is full of them.” She knew that the voice was right. Traditional and modern novels and plays were full of family conflicts, playing up the rivalries between mothers and daughters-in-law, but she did not want to hear it. Not now.

The voice was unstoppable. “What exactly is wrong with her? What is she guilty of?”

Ming Cheng snapped back, “Without having been taught reverence towards elders during her childhood, she won’t know how to behave properly. It isn’t something one can learn later in life. She hasn’t been brought up like that.”
And that was that. The facts were irrefutable, there seemed no stronger argument. Her decision was made, she had to act. Her pacing stopped, the grip on her insides tightened further and shifted upwards. The next wave of pain was so intense her breath stopped half way between her lungs and her throat, unwilling to move either way, leaving her gulping for air like a fish out of water. Sweat beads that formed on her forehead slid down her face and neck. “I am having a heart attack,” was the last thought she managed before reaching for the phone.
The Drop-in Centre

“Two days before my 50th birthday and what does she give me for a present? Is it a book or a beautifully crafted brooch or a silk scarf? No, of course it’s not; not even a dinner out. I get from her a refugee kid. To be precise, an illegal refugee kid, an escapee from a detention centre and, as an extra, I get a possible visit from the Immigration Department as well. A prison sentence, should anyone dob us in. I know, after all these years, nothing should surprise me, but I have to admit, this still did it. I truly don’t understand what she thinks she’s doing. Surely she must know that we can’t just keep him like a lost puppy.”

It was early afternoon and the tram was almost empty. The nearest ear that Anna’s conversation could reach was attached to a traveller at the far end of the tram, involved in a discussion with the ticket collector. She stretched her legs and focused back on the mobile in her hand, her voice sharpened by anger and frustration.

“I can’t even ring you from home and have a whinge. I’m afraid that the kids might hear me. How terrible of me not being supportive of the little waif, not wanting to collect the world’s flotsam that’s landed on our shores! Suddenly I am being judged as heartless by my own children.” With no response from the other end, she continued, now in a less irate tone. “I am on my way to the drop-in centre. While I check on the delivery of the piano, I can also make some surreptitious enquiries about the options open to this kid.”

She paused, allowing for Leigh’s questions. “I did tell her, ‘Glad you’ve finally decided to grace us with your presence, we were all worried senseless not knowing
where you were. A phone call was all that was needed.’ Of course she prattled on about security and what not. As if she cared. If she did, she wouldn’t bring him with her. We are now all in danger. I told her so; no, of course not in front of the child, he was asleep at the time.”

She listened again, predictably not surprised by Leigh’s defence of her daughter. “You *would* be saying this. You’ve always been her mentor in the conscience department. First it was the trees and the whales, then Amnesty International and now this. And let me remind you, I’ve heard it all before: ‘You should be grateful that she isn’t a junkie or a mindless consumer.’” She managed a perfect rendition of Leigh’s voice with the slightly evangelical tone that was so characteristic of her speech whenever she felt that the good news she was spreading was worth listening to – by everyone. Anna even managed to avoid the slight accent that still tinged her own speech, always betraying her origins. There was a giggle on the other end of the phone and then... nothing.

Her performance was cut off while the tram moved through one of its numerous rock tunnels. When the phone came back on, Anna continued, “Can’t you see that the situation is getting out of hand? Every cause she espouses is more dangerous than the one before. No longer is it enough to bob on a rubber dinghy in protest against the water polluters, now we expect the anti-terrorist task force to bash our doors down at any time of day or night. If they’re anything like the secret police back home, then between 4 and 5 am is the time we are in greatest danger. Maybe you should call us each morning to make sure we’re still there. Really, Leigh, this is far too close to what I’ve lived with for years and years. I just can’t go through it again.”
She heard her voice taking on a less decisive, almost fearful tone and she hated the fact that Leigh, too, would recognise it. The 30 odd years of living in Sydney had concealed her fear of authorities under a patina of sophistication and confidence, but it was still there. Her hand holding the phone grew clammy, Leigh’s voice became a lifeline to hang on to: “Anna, please, just calm down. From what I’ve heard, Becky got into this situation by accident. It seems that her friend was the one involved in the network. Becky found all the information through some web sites and decided to join the demonstration fairly spontaneously. Except for the visits to the web sites, she didn’t attend any meetings, had not talked to anyone, so she is unlikely to be known to have any connection to the break outs. When her friend was staying longer and she decided to return, she was given a special delivery job. There is no reason for anyone to know that the boy is with you and …”

At that point the already breaking line went silent and Anna turned the phone off. She felt scared. The past was always with her, but now more than ever. The Gestapo raids on her mother’s childhood houses, the Communist Secret police’s raids during her own childhood. The ongoing state of fear cultivated by all dictatorial regimes created a state of mind that lasted a lifetime and no rational explanation could dispel it.

Becky had tried and failed. “Mum, how could I ignore it? Knowing what happened all those years ago to Grandma and her parents. They, too, were refugees and no one helped them. Can’t you see that I had to help? You of all people should have some feeling for the refugees no matter where they come from. What has happened to your heart?”
No, frankly speaking, she didn’t see it. The times were different. Then the Jews were being herded into trucks and killed off at camps. It was a different now. Each of the so-called refugees had left for different reasons. Some were out of favour with their government, others truly feared for their safety, and still others wanted better economic futures for their children. Instead of following acceptable process in the refugee camps, some took it upon themselves to jump the queue and arrived here illegally. No matter how carefully she looked, she could see no parallel. All they had in common was the fact that they were all refugees hoping for a new start. Those travelling round the world on the ship in 1941; her arriving by plane with a document bearing the stamp “stateless” in the early 70s; the ones coming on leaking boats with no papers whatsoever.

The tram stopped at the Fish Markets. Without thinking about it, she placed herself against the carriage window at an angle that allowed her an unrestricted view of the far side of the tunnel through which the tram was about to move. As it slid off the platform, she surveyed the familiar scene. Steps leading up to the street level, a metal barrier separating the end of the platform from the “no man’s land” leading into the darkness beyond. Above it all, the freeways crisscrossing each other, providing protection from the elements like a giant umbrella supported by concrete piliions. As the tram moved towards the tunnel’s rock wall opening, she focused on the spot where the rock wall and the concrete piliions of the freeway met. Yes, he was still there. She caught a glimpse of an orange glow breaking the darkness of the far corner of the “no man’s land”, a glow barely visible behind a large sheet of dark plastic suspended from the concrete ceiling to the ground. It took only a second to notice that it was there, before the tram entered the darkness of the tunnel. She saw it by
accident some time ago when the tram stopped unexpectedly and now she looked for it each time she travelled that way.

Two stops later she got out. The Youth Drop-in Centre was only ten minutes from the tram stop via a set of steep stairs. By the time she reached it, her lungs were burning, reminding her of her dislike for exercise. The Drop In Youth Centre was a big hall with few pieces of broken-down furniture, old lounges, table tennis and a pool table. A blaring CD player occupied one of the seats, while a group of young men squabbled on the couch. They ignored her as she passed by; it was a long time since she had worked here and, on her occasional visits since then, she hadn’t got to know many of them. Adjoining the hall were a couple of smaller rooms. With a desk, a couple of chairs and the ubiquitous computer, one served as the office, but it loomed empty so she headed for the other, where the youth worker and a couple of other kids stood admiring the piano. Alex ran his fingers over the keyboard. “Not bad at all,” he smiled, acknowledging Anna’s entrance. “Whoever took it apart knew what he was doing. It sounds all right to my ears. Wouldn’t mind one of these myself, what do you reckon, Ricky?” Alex addressed one of the lounge lizards, who had followed Anna into the room. He stood behind her, his hands in the pockets of his tight jeans, swaying back and forth on his toes. “It’s sick, now we need Shorty to come back. She said she played for years and that she could teach us. Maybe she’ll come back when she hears we have this.”

The words came out slowly as if Ricky was not used to making long speeches; in fact Anna thought he looked exhausted by his effort, and suspected that he might retreat to the lounge. Alex nodded in agreement, “Ricky here is sweet on a chick we’ve had
coming here for a while. Independent sort, never found out much about her, but she
stole his heart. We haven’t seen her for a while. Isn’t that so, Ricky?”

The boy’s face grew red but he seemed to enjoy Alex’s remarks. “Know nothing
about that, but she was cool. She lived somewhere near. I hope she isn’t dead.”

Anna remembered the plastic sheet wall inside the tunnel. “By the way, Alex,
someone’s living down by the light rail, near the Fish Markets. A while ago I saw a
youngster down there. Today I saw the light there again. It’s in our area – maybe you
should check it out.”

“Yeah, I know the place. The Mission went there when the cops turfed out the
makeshift shantytown under the freeway next to the tram line. They talked about a
young kid living there, but when I went there a few days later, he turned out to be an
old burnt-out case. I was surprised he had it in him to make it so cosy and neat. With
all the rain lately he’ll be the only one dry and reasonably warm.” While he was
talking, Alex moved towards the door, herding the others in front of him. “You guys
are on your own for a while. Anna and I have to sort out some budgets, so take it
easy with the action.”

Once out of the piano room he locked it carefully and motioned Anna into the office.
They disappeared inside, shutting the door against the onslaught of the CD player.
The Visitor

“These drinks are all alcohol. I’ve heard that your people aren’t allowed to drink it. Is that right? Don’t people in your family drink alcohol at all?” Becky asked while stacking some of the cartons behind the cupboard in the garage.

“How do I answer?” Kasim pondered the question. What answer was the correct one? Should he answer the way he would if his teacher or any other official asked? Or should he reveal what he saw happening each year, when the fruit season finished and most of the produce was either sold at the markets or stored away for the winter?

Should he tell about the large wooden barrels of overripe fruit that at the end of each season hid in his grandfather’s barn, the sickly sweet smell growing more pungent the longer the fruit stayed in the barrel? Should he reveal how it was later made into a clear, strong-smelling drink used strictly “for medicinal purposes” and as such included taking it prior to any festive meal for it was said to aid good appetite as well as good digestion, or drunk on occasions when the extended family gathered together?

He couldn’t quite make up his mind, so he ignored the question, a strategy he’d learned at the detention centre. It worked. Becky had already moved her attention to re-arranging the cartons. She had been involved in the preparation for the surprise birthday party ever since her mother had left for work that morning.

Kasim was surprised to find out that the woman who stood at the door on their arrival dressed in jeans, T-shirt and sneakers was Becky’s mother. She didn’t
resemble any mother he knew, he thought it was Becky’s sister when the door opened.

“How old is she going to be?” he asked when Becky talked about the surprise birthday party. When he translated the answer into Arabic numbers he was shocked into silence. His grandmother turned the same age not long before his departure, but as far back as he could remember she was always an old woman. Her brown hands were covered in calluses that scratched when she stroked his arms, and her old face broke into a wrinkled smile when she handed him sweets she had specially prepared for him. The smile assured him that he was her favourite and over the past three years it came to him when he was sad or confused, while he found his mother’s smile almost impossible to conjure up now. Sometimes he felt her presence, like the light summer breeze he used to feel while playing in the orchard. His father’s face was also becoming difficult to picture, but he could still feel the grip of his hands on his shoulders, steadying him when the stone at the bottom of his stomach made him too wobbly.

To find out that the woman who left for her office every morning was the same age as his short rotund grandmother was a shock. As different as they were, he found out that they had one thing in common: Home-cooked food. On his arrival, the house was filled with the smell of unfamiliar dishes that turned out to be as delicious as his grandmother’s. The food made him feel welcome despite Anna’s angry face. “She’s awfully busy,” Becky explained, but Kasim thought that she wasn’t terribly pleased to have him there and that Becky was making excuses for her. “Don’t worry, she’ll come around. Just get out of her way when she arrives home from work. She is often
cranky but after a little while her mood improves.” He tried to do what she suggested. In fact he tried to be seen by Anna as little as possible because he felt scared that she might call the police.

He also noticed that Becky had become different since their arrival and Kasim wasn’t sure what to make of it. The decisive and bubbly girl whom he trusted unquestionably, turned into one who constantly argued with her mother. She seemed more upset and not in command. “Maybe today her mother will make her send me away,” he worried every time he watched yet another fight between them, without really knowing what the fights were about.

Instead of talking about his fears to Becky he started to spend more time with her brother. Peter was easy to be with; he had no arguments with his mother, in fact no arguments with anyone. He showed Kasim how to play computer games and took him to the park to play soccer. When Kasim sat at the controls of the computer, directing bullets and missiles at the soldiers on the screen, he imagined he was killing the border guards who ambushed his father or the police who beat up his grandfather.

Peter didn’t ask many questions, but he listened when Kasim had something to say. He also corrected his English and was a good teacher. Kasim liked being corrected, it made him feel that he was getting closer to his dream of becoming a doctor.

Today was his third day with the family, and everyone was busy storing all the deliveries for the party in two days. “Won’t she find it here?” he asked. “How could it remain hidden from her for such a long time?” There wasn’t a part of the farm that
his grandfather wouldn’t check over every day. Inside the farmhouse, the barn, the
orchard or the surrounding fields. Nothing would escape their vigilant eyes.

“She doesn’t visit the garage unless she absolutely needs to,” Becky explained, “our
car is always parked on the street.” Kasim nodded, but deep down he could not
understand how casual these people were about their property. His grandparents
would call it lazy not to check and Kasim silently agreed. Soon, however, he found
himself getting more and more excited about the party. He became so caught up in
the talk about special food and drink, the guests, the musicians and the speeches that
some visitors were going to give on the night. It almost felt as if he was going to
have a party and get presents. He decided that one day, when he’d become
Australian, he too would celebrate his birthday the way Australians do.
Desert Capture

He squeezed himself into a gap between two large rocks that rose out of the plain like sentinels guarding the entrance to the underworld.

It was still night, but the light on the horizon was growing brighter with each passing moment. Had he been stronger, he would have dreaded the coming of another day, but his blistering skin and a water-deprived mind would not allow him that level of thought. All he could manage was to feel the coolness surrounding him at that moment.

He had walked through the night, knowing that he could not move in the heat of the day. The nine months in the Detention Centre taught him that. “It’s the heat, the flies and no water anywhere, unless you are an Abo and you know where to find it,” was how one of the guards described it. “Not to mention the snakes and scorpions.” It happened on the rare occasion when the guard was keen to dazzle them with the vastness and inaccessibility of the place they found themselves in.

What he didn’t tell them was that the surrounding land spread out for miles and miles like a piece of flat bread, devoid of decent vegetation, hills or mountains filled with caves to shelter in from the unrelenting sun. The sort of terrain he was used to hiding in, back in his war torn homeland.

He couldn’t even remember how he had found himself alone, away from the hands that stretched out to him while he jumped through the fence. They cushioned his fall and then manoeuvred him towards the tents and cars parked outside the perimeter.
fence. One of the hands thrust a large water bottle into his hand and he grabbed it, not realising how essential it would become to his survival. Before he jumped, he’d caught a glimpse of Kasim following him. He wasn’t surprised. The boy was forever hanging around the men, listening to everything that was said. “Maybe I should wait for him,” he thought for a moment but, with the hands propelling him forward, there was no time. When the uniforms arrived, the bodies closed in protectively around him, but they were also obscuring his vision. The physical current that carried him changed direction constantly and he found himself weaving in and out of the gaps between tightly-packed bodies and over the remains of fences now crushed under their feet. He remembered reaching more open space while still heading in the direction of the tents and the cars.

When he stumbled into the shallow ditch, he was passing out from lack of air –the nine months in detention had done nothing to improve his health. The ditch might have been a dry creek bed that had not seen water in a long time, or a crack opened due to erosion. One moment he was still running; the next, his back and head felt the impact of his fall and everything went dark. When he opened his eyes again, the intense blue above him seemed to stretch endlessly in all directions. He tried to move his neck, but the pain that shot through his spine made his eyes water and his breath stop. After a moment of staying motionless, the pain subsided and his breath returned to normal. To his surprise he was still clutching the water bottle and, when he could move again, he took couple of gulps of the water. He was waiting for someone to appear at the edge of the ditch. Minutes flew by, with only the flies noting his presence and multiplying in numbers. After some time he rolled over and pushed himself to the top and carefully raised his head. Only a couple of hundred
metres away, the uniforms were searching the tents and cars, and checking identifications. They were everywhere, making it impossible for him to join the demonstrators. He withdrew to the bottom of the ditch, expecting that sooner or later someone would find him, especially if the dogs were called in.

He didn’t want to be cornered like a rabbit, but he could do nothing but wait in the unrelenting heat and listen to the occasional gust of wind carrying to him bits of conversations and sounds of retreating cars. By the time darkness protected his movements, he climbed once more to the rim of his hide-out, only to witness the silhouettes of the uniformed police walking among the remaining few campers, now sitting around small cooking fires. In the coolness of the night he decided to walk to the township. The detainees often talked about a caravan that provided legal aid to those who made it to the outskirts of the township; the help he needed was there.

His mind followed a map he had been shown earlier, but the dark land surrounding him defeated his best efforts to navigate. By the time he had walked for over four hours and the lights of the township had not shown up, he realised he was lost. Retracing his steps was impossible; he had taken great care to make trackers’ life as difficult as possible. His eyes adjusted easily to the light provided by the moon, but the dark desert spread out endlessly. The sky above him was a navigational chart he could not read, the constellations were different from those marking the skies above his homeland. At daybreak, the countryside surrounding him looked no different from what he saw before nightfall. At sunrise, he chose the largest clump of the spindly bushes he could find and, using his shoe as a shovel, he removed enough dirt from underneath the bush and created a shallow depression into which he managed to
squeeze. Convinced that they would search by air, he took off his blue tunic and covered himself with dirt and all the vegetable matter he could find. His skin was pricked by thorns and burnt by the sun, but he knew he blended into the colour of the desert.

When the sound of the rotors broke the morning air he was ready, curled up in his shallow grave. The helicopter crisscrossed the desert back and forth until the burning sun drained him completely and he fell into a feverish sleep. When he came to, the sun was setting. In the cool of the night he managed to walk again, but his burnt skin hurt and each time he lifted his leg it carried an iron ball that he had seen pictured attached to of convicts that settled this country some 200 years ago. During the second night he found the rocks. The first rise in the landscape since his journey started.

Having finished the last mouthful of water hours earlier he realised he will not last much longer. The thought of dying did not really bother him, but the knowledge that the flies, followed by carrion-eating birds will be the first to take advantage of his death, did nothing to raise his spirit. All his medical knowledge was useless at this particular moment. He could only predict the rate of disintegration of his organs and observe them as they failed one by one. He never planned to die this way. He was one of the few Hazaras who had been given the opportunity to study medicine in Moscow and, when his country disintegrated into chaos, he spent years hiding in the mountains and providing medical care to the fighters before he managed to escape, driven by the dream of practising his surgical skills in freedom. He knew how to fight the enemies in the mountainous terrain of his homeland. He knew how to repair
gunshot wounds with no expensive surgical equipment or western medicines, using instead a basic surgical kit and local herbs. But here he was nobody; unable to read the landscape; incapable of finding water. Soon he would be a corpse wedged between two rocks, decaying in the sun, an unexpected but welcome addition to the diet of carrion-eating desert dwellers.

He awaited his death, falling in and out of consciousness, hearing the voices of the people he had once loved as well as those of his enemies. The sun was up when he heard the car engines, mistaking their roar initially for the sound of a plane engine. Unable to see through his sunburnt eyes he managed to roll out of his hiding place oblivious to the consequences. “Water,” he whispered through blistered lips. “Give me water, please.”
Family Lunch

It was a couple of days since Jodie arrived and Marjorie felt a definite sense of déjà vu. Looking after a sick child came back to her fast. “Like riding a bicycle, once you learn it you never forget it,” she mused as she struggled with the build-up of ice blocking the freezer compartment of her fridge. Using one of her big knives, she attacked the icy lumps with a vengeance, hoping to release the freezer door. The mountain of ice testified to her lack of interest in that particular section of the refrigerator. Meals on Wheels provided for her needs and she rarely cooked. In fact if she stopped and thought about it, the last meal she had prepared herself would have been at least a year ago although, thinking about it now, she did miss her weekly chats with Bruce the local butcher, who always made sure she got the best value for her money.

The chicken that she wanted to liberate for Jodie’s dinner had been inside the freezer for at least the past 3–4 months, after her daughter in-law-decided that Marjorie needed some supplies at home, in case she got the flu and couldn’t go out to shop. After few minutes of attacking the ice, her hands grew sore. She released her grip on the knife, frustrated.

“Come on, Jack! Where are you now? You’ve always done this job! How am I supposed to do it without you? Don’t just stare at my helplessness, do something! I need to make chicken noodle soup for the child.”

The sound of her own voice startled her. The last thing she wanted was to wake the girl up by shouting. “Oh dearie me, Marjorie, do shut up. The child will think she’s
dealing with a harridan, and that wouldn’t do at all!” She wrapped a tea towel around her sore hand and picked up the knife once more.

A moment later, over the sound of the crushed ice falling to the lino floor, Jack’s voice rang out loud and clear: “Never use the knife. You can easily damage the cooling system. Use hot water instead, the ice will just fall off.” She felt like dropping to her knees and thanking him, but instead she nodded: “About time! I couldn’t have lasted much longer. What’s taken you so long?”

When the phone rang, the smell of cooking permeated the house. “Hello, Mother, how are you?” Her son sounded cheerful as usual, offering little titbits of his family life, which she would normally have enjoyed, but this time she grew alarmed. Friday evening calls inevitably meant an invitation to lunch either on Saturday or on Sunday. Mostly she was grateful for the outing but, this time she hoped that he was ringing only for a chat. She was wrong. “So I’ll pick you up tomorrow at noon. Jenny’s making your favourite.”

At the risk of sounding unappreciative, she tried the only excuse she could manage: “I wish you’d told me earlier, Garry. I’m just cooking a chicken and I was going to have it tomorrow.” She hoped she sounded relaxed, but even over the phone she heard the alarm bells ringing in his voice.

“You are cooking chicken? Mother, you’ve hardly cooked anything since Dad died and that’s way back. What’s going on? Have you got a visitor?” When she did not respond, his voice became the whine she had put up with all those years ago. “Why
don’t you tell me what’s going on? You are entertaining, aren’t you? Oh my God, you’ve got a man there. You’re having an affair! That’s it! Mother, surely not! At your age!”

He sounded so outraged, she had to laugh. Then she heard the cough next door. “I certainly wish I had a man here Garry, be handy when defrosting the fridge, but who do you think would want an old gal like me? Just can’t see them queuing up somehow. You can relax, there is no man here to replace your father, I just felt like a nice chicken soup and the chicken that Jenny got me a while ago needs eating, that’s all. Don’t you fret, I’ll be ready waiting. And mind to tell Jenny I do appreciate her effort.”

By the time he hung up, she was beside herself. “What will I do with the child? He’ll panic if he finds her here.” She knew she wouldn’t be able to protect her. Her son had his mind made up and nothing would shift him. And fortunately, she’d heard him talking on the subject, so she knew she had to hide Jodie from his overzealous mind, otherwise he would indeed call the police the moment he saw her. “Come on Jack, we are in the pickle. Put on your thinking cup and come up with a solution. You have until tomorrow, that’s all.”

The continuing hacking cough in the spare room prompted her into action. “I need a strategy, Jack, and I need it fast,” she said aloud while ladling the pale yellow liquid into the prepared bowls. “And while you’re at it, keep your afternoon free. You’ll be needed for a spot of child minding once more,” she added, closing the door behind her.
At the airport

The Friday afternoon airport hall was filled with the usual business suits clutching their laptop bags on wheels and kids in school uniforms returning from boarding school for the weekend. She also noticed a number of kids accompanied only by single adults. Their faces reflected the anxiety so palpable, it was clear that they were the casualties of interstate divorces, as she recalled a magazine article she’d read in her dentist’s surgery some weeks back. She wondered if the airlines really employed additional child friendly crews during weekend flights, but she immediately returned to her own problem.

It had all happened so fast. One minute she was packing and waiting for Thomas to get home from work; the next she was standing in their kitchen, ready to hurl the silent handset across the bench. “Why does it matter so much?” she tried to reason with herself, as her undies, T-shirts, jeans and her one party dress flew into the suitcase. “It’s not his fault, he can’t help it,” she repeated to herself, without conviction. The words only bounced off the wall of hurt and anger that had risen up when she first listened to his excuse.

“Do I feel betrayed?” she asked, once the intensity of her emotion had died down. The answer was a simple affirmative. Although their first meeting with his family had been an accident and she had felt judged and found wanting, she had made an effort to meet them again. Yes, she had made an effort despite the judging eyes of their relatives, who pretended to be kind, but whose eyes and mouths were judging every move she made, every word that passed her lips. It was all so obvious, and still Thomas denied it.
After she had spoken to Angela, she had grown more confident. “You’re just fine,” Angela had laughed. “Of course they’ll check you out, that’s our way, and you can’t get away from it. They all do it, but Mum and Dad aren’t like the more traditional relatives. If Thomas likes you, that’s all that matters.” It was then that Sammy had realised how much she wanted to be accepted by his family, how much she’d fallen in love with him. She was so looking forward to introducing him to her mother, hoping that he would like her.

“I don’t care what anyone thinks,” Thomas declared, once she revealed her doubts. “It doesn’t matter if they are your folks or mine. I want to be with you, not with them.” As far as he was concerned that was the end of that.

When the call came Thomas was in the hospital with his mother. “I’m the eldest son,” he said. “It’s my duty, and Angela and Dad are away. I have to stay, I am sorry.”

She realised that his familial obligation would always win. He apologised profusely, but his voice betrayed him, it almost felt as if he were relieved that he couldn’t go. She realised that she was angry with Thomas’s mother, believing her to be manipulating him. “Pull yourself together and stop these thoughts. You’ve watched a few Chinese movies about downtrodden-daughters in-law and now you judge everyone by those standards. The trip is hardly a marriage proposal. It’s only a party, and Thomas recognises it for what it is. It is a coincidence, nothing more to it.”
Now, a couple of hours later, she was suffering a guilty conscience. Instead of offering him support while his mother suffered terrible abdominal pains, she was angry that he was making his mother his priority. How would she feel if the tables were turned, if Leigh was the one in an undiagnosed pain? The guilty feeling grew so strong that she rang him from the airport and offered to stay back and help him look after his mother.

After a slight hesitation Thomas politely declined her offer, and she felt relieved. Before they hung up they chatted some more, the tension dissolving completely.

By the time she was boarding the plane Sammy was happy to leave Thomas and his family firmly behind. She looked forward to having time to spend with her own family, unfettered by a newcomer’s presence. She couldn’t wait to see them all.
The Odd Couple

“Jack used to make this soup when I was pregnant and when I had the flu. He learnt to make it during the war somewhere in Europe. Not that they had plump chickens like this one, but they shared whatever they had.”

Seeing Jodie’s outstretched hand with an empty bowl, Marjorie’s face glowed with pleasure. “Here you go. It’ll put you back in the land of living. That’s what he used to say too.”

Jodie spooned the soup into her mouth, unspoken words sliding down with the warm liquid: “God, doesn’t she ever shut up about this Jack?” She immediately felt guilty. “She’s been looking after me without knowing anything about me and she didn’t call the cops, she is just lonely.”

Marjorie must have read her thoughts. “You must forgive me, dearie. Most of the time I’m alone and Jack’s always with me. When you’re my age, you spend lots of time talking to the dead. Those who are still alive are often too busy, and don’t have the time to listen.”

Jodie felt her cheeks burning; her eyes were fixed firmly on the soup bowl. “This is awesome soup, Mrs Williams. Better than anything I’ve had for a long time.” She noticed that the old woman hadn’t touched even one spoonful of her soup. Her hand twirled the spoon in the bowl, lifted it up and then let it fall back into it. “Why aren’t you eating, are you feeling sick?” she asked, suddenly hearing her mother’s voice in her own.
Marjorie waved her hand. “Never you mind, child. Later on today my son’s coming around. He rang last night while you were asleep and I am being picked up for a family lunch. They do that most weekends and I ought to be grateful, so I can’t fill myself up beforehand. They always make me eat as if there was no tomorrow.” The blue eyes fixed on Jodie. “I don’t think, dearie, you’d want him to find you here. He’s unpredictable, but very set in his ideas. And believe me, he has strong ideas about youngsters running away from their parents.”

Jodie’s heart lurched. “She’s chucking me out,” she thought. “Serves me right. Shouldn’t have been cross with her about her old man. She must’ve felt it. I suppose I can make it to the refuge and stay there till I feel better. It is a long walk, though.”

At the thought of getting herself across the city to the youth refuge, a sudden wave of tiredness swamped her body. Just thinking about having to find yet another safe place made her head dizzy and she had to close her eyes to stop the world spinning.

“My goodness, dearie, you’re looking like a ghost all of a sudden, as white as a sheet. Not listening to me either, are you?” Marjorie’s hand was shaking Jodie’s shoulder. She didn’t know for how long the old woman had been doing it. “I am not asking you to get out, but trying to tell you what you have to do to avoid my son. Jack would never forgive me if Garry found you here. It isn’t that he is not helpful or anything like that, just a bit too cautious is my Garry. A stickler for the law book he is.”
Jodie could hear the anxiety in Marjorie’s voice, but she could also hear her kindness mixed with fear. “Sorry,” she stammered. “I was already packing my bags.”

“No need to do that, dearie. You aren’t out of the woods yet. We just don’t want him to find you here, that’s all. I’ll go and wait for him outside and if we’re lucky he’ll just drop me off at the gate on my return, he usually does that. But I must ask you to keep this door locked at all times, in case you fall asleep and he decides to come in. Keep it locked and stay quiet, especially if you hear us. I’ll make sure we don’t sneak in quietly like. I’ll make enough noise to wake the dead if I have to, believe me. Just as well Jack got the locks fixed before he went. I was at him for years to do that, never had the time.” One of her knobby hands flew over her mouth. “Here I go again, just can’t help it. Sorry, dearie.” She collected Jodie’s bowl and walked out.

“I should get her a dog or a cat,” Jodie reflected with some sadness “At least she’d have someone to talk to. Having only Jack to talk to is sending her round the bend.”

In the coming days Jodie would marvel at Marjorie’s foresight but, on the day, she simply followed Marjorie’s directions, locked her door and made sure she left the key in the lock. Her exhaustion was overwhelming and she felt into a deep sleep almost immediately. The last thought she had, was for the man who had fixed the lock. “Thanks, Jack” she whispered. “Just keep your son away from me if you can.”

As far as Marjorie could judge, the lunch was a complete success. Garry was his usual self and, as many times before, he tried to talk her into moving in with them,
offering to built a granny flat in the backyard, if she was not prepared to move into a nursing home. Luckily, he soon retreated to watch the footy leaving them alone.

Jenny, who Marjorie believed to have a much less neurotic attitude to life, was relaxed and easy going. The lunch was up to her usual standards, tasty and well prepared. With the grandchildren away, the two women shared a coffee and a cake in peace. Marjorie always felt that Jenny could have been her other daughter and felt herself lucky through Garry’s choice.

“You know he won’t stop hounding you till he gets you settled somewhere, don’t you?” Jenny winked conspiratorially. “He’ll wear you out eventually, he’s good at that. That’s how I ended up marrying him, worn out by his persistence-well, I also liked him.”

“Oh, good old Garry,” Marjorie sighed, knowing exactly what Jenny was talking about. “He was always like that, even as a baby. Incorruptible like. Mind you,” she continued after a moment, “he was born with a worry furrow across his forehead. Born already thirty years old and by the time he was four he was already octogenarian. I suppose every family must have one. Neither Jack nor I were like that, so he must have decided in utero that someone had to do that job for us.”

Laughing, they recalled instances of Garry’s worrying excesses. After a while, Jenny placed her hand over Marjorie’s. “I want you to know that you are most welcome here at any time. I don’t need to tell you that life with teenagers is one big roller coaster, you’ve lived through it and I don’t blame you for not rushing into it again.
When Garry and the kids get stuck into each other it’s not a pretty sight, and I wish I could move out myself. But they’re not bad youngsters. We’d love to have you living with us, but I am also thinking of your independence. I am prepared to do whatever is necessary to keep you at your place as long as you can manage, but don’t tell him I said so, I am supposed to run his argument with you.”

A warm tingle moved through Marjorie’s body, making her feel that even without Jack, life wasn’t shaping too badly. “Thank you, dear, I hope I will be there for a while yet. Once you get me, it will be for good and I know you have enough on your plate already. But, you never know …” She stopped and smiled. “I might meet someone who’d want to move in with me and that would solve your immediate concerns, wouldn’t it?”

Jenny simply nodded, amused by Marjorie’s optimism.

Soon it was time to leave, and Marjorie was glad she had resisted the unexpected pull to share her secret with her daughter-in-law. “Her loyalty would be to him and he’d spoil it all,” she consoled herself when saying her goodbyes. She was ready to go home and deal with the youngster in her own way.

All was running smoothly until Garry asked to borrow Jack’s handyman’s books. He had some repairs to do and wasn’t sure how to do them. “I miss Dad,” he said, momentarily lifting his eyes from the road ahead. “I miss him fixing things in his garage. The way he could always work out how to fix anything.”
Suddenly Marjorie saw next to her the twelve-year-old boy showing her the wooden toolbox he’d made for Father’s Day, worrying that it wasn’t good enough. On that occasion, she had given him a reassuring hug. Now the hug didn’t seem right, with the gearstick between them. She patted his leg. “I miss him too, son,” she replied

“You don’t mind me getting the books now, do you?” he enquired, not really expecting objections. “Of course not, dear.” She heard the deceit in her voice. “I’m bit tired, that’s all. Jenny’s cooking always puts me in such a lovely sleepy mood.” Then she added. “I appreciate you inviting me over and collecting me, truly I’ve had a wonderful time.”

He nodded and the sweet, vulnerable boy became a middle-aged man preoccupied with roofing problems. “I won’t keep you, just get them and go.”

They drove in silence, Marjorie sending one prayer after another, hoping that the youngster had done as she was asked to do. The spare key was hidden safely at the bottom of her bag, underneath the powder case, lippy and a freshly ironed white hanky where no one would ever dream of looking. She could only hope that Jack hadn’t left any spares lying in the garage for Garry to find when he cleaned it up after his death.

Walking up the hill across the front yard, she chatted in a loud voice and took so much time looking for the house key, that she noticed Garry’s concerned look. “He’s chalking up one more reason for me to have to move with them,” The keys came out of the bag real fast then, although she thought the damage was done already.
Once inside, Garry walked directly to the bookshelf containing the last of Jack’s books as well as some of the historical romances that Marjorie loved. She breathed a sigh of relief. The house had nothing to show of Jodie’s presence except for the clothes drying in the laundry and Marjorie had the presence of mind to go in there, pull them off the line and stuff them back into the washing machine.

Back in the living room Garry was still searching the shelf. “Can’t find the one I want. Complete House Maintenance. Have you seen it anywhere?” Disregarding her negative reply, Garry wasn’t giving up. “It might be in the spare room or the garage,” he announced, heading for the door.

“You can’t go in there!” Marjorie almost shouted, stopping him in his tracks. “Why not?”

“I, I mislaid the keys somewhere, had them just yesterday but can’t find them anywhere today. You know I keep them on the same ring as the garage keys and God only knows what I did with the lot of them. I was doing some tidying up there one minute and next minute they’d disappeared.”

Instead of feeling guilty or worried about being found out, Marjorie realised that she was actually enjoying her role as the slightly demented geriatric. She thought she played it well. But was he convinced?

“You lock the spare room? What on earth would you do that for?” It might have been a genuine question but Marjorie heard suspicion and within a moment she had
chosen the best defence – an attack! She stood right behind him when he turned the
door handle and pushed. “How dare you question my actions like that? Just imagine
that you’re an old woman in an empty house. Every room with a window opening
onto the ground is a potential break and entry. Given my hearing I couldn’t be sure to
hear them. Given my creaky joints and my dud knees it is not as if I can run fast
either so I feel safer with the spare room and the back veranda door both locked. And
who are you to tell me that I shouldn’t be locking my own house.” She run out of
breath, paused and then added: “And the newspapers are constantly full of stories of
attacks on old people, everyday something happening somewhere.”

He stood by the door in stunned silence.

“Your father told me to do that, before he got too sick. He told me what I’d need to
do when I was alone. He was good in that respect, wanting me to be independent but
considering all possibilities. So don’t you go telling me what I should or should not
be locking up!”

She hadn’t planned on the tears welling up, or that he was putting her through the
memories again, but she liked the fact that he turned away from the door and
embraced her in a bear hug. “I am sorry, Mum. I know you miss him more than you
ever let us know. It must be hard to be here all by yourself. That’s why I want you to
come and live with us.”

“Yes, yes, “she agreed, moving swiftly away from the door towards the kitchen,
thinking that she might get away with it, after all. Nodding her head, she was grateful
for the growing distance between them and the spare room, while Garry was already designing the garden flat. They were about to enter the living room when she heard it. They both did. A hardly disguised sneeze, coming unmistakably from the spare room. “Keep walking, you heard nothing!” She continued walking towards the kitchen chatting amicably.

If Garry heard the sneeze, he didn’t show it, although she caught him sneaking a look back. Watching him walk away and wave from the front gate, she felt a pang of guilt and a desire to confess. The guilt weighed down on her, making her feel every one of her eighty years. She filled the kettle, plugged it in and located two cups. Her hands shook uncontrollably as she measured three teaspoons into the teapot.

“I’m way too old for this,” she said aloud, pouring fresh milk from the fridge into the cups while waiting for the kettle to boil.
The Past is Ever-present

“I want him out of here. Why is it impossible to find him another place?” Anna asked as directly as she could, after a full day of thinly veiled hints. She wanted Becky to realise the seriousness of her intention to get the boy out of the house. Despite the fact that she had hardly seen him since his arrival, his silent presence made her nervous and was stopping her from just getting on with what she needed to do.

“I’ve tried to explain so many times, but you don’t seem to get it.” Becky’s voice trembled, making her seem more vulnerable than she usually did during their fights. “There is nowhere safe for him to go right now. I have spent the whole night on the phone to find him somewhere to go. Everywhere is too dangerous.”

Her pale face and the dark circles under her eyes testified to what Anna suspected already. “She’s up to her neck in this, too emotionally involved. Maybe I should let it go.” Anna’s feelings for her daughter were starting to sabotage her previous intentions, but the bullets flew out fast. “I want him out of my house as soon as possible.”

The moment she had said it she wished she could take it back. Becky’s face grew scarlet. “You’re unbelievable, what a hypocrite! Like those cowards during the war that killed your grandparents, my great grandparents, in case you’ve forgotten! And if I remember correctly you came here as a refugee yourself – but of course you were the deserving one, running away from a Communist regime, not like those coming today, they are not deserving enough to be here.”
Having thrown the words at her mother’s feet like a toddler’s rejected toy, Becky turned on her heels and rushed out of the kitchen, slamming the door behind her. Anna sat at the breakfast bench where she had retreated earlier for a cup of coffee and the papers. It wasn’t meant to be a peaceful morning. First, Peter had walked away with the papers, leaving her exposed to Becky’s unending pleas to let Kasim stay longer than she had originally promised, and now the slam of the door still resonated in her ears.

“A failure!” A red neon sign flashed in front of her eyes. “Unable to communicate!” Voices screamed inside her head. She could already predict that sooner or later she’d walk into Becky’s room, pleading for a chance to explain why she couldn’t have the boy stay.

Their relationship had always been complex and volatile: always on opposite sides of the barricades was how Leigh had described it some time before and that description still rang true. Whatever was important to one of them was scorned by the other. “Never the twain shall meet …” she quoted aloud and then added “well, at least not yet.”

It was her birthday the next day. Some time ago, she had made both children to promise that they’d spend the evening with her, that they’d all go out to celebrate. She had been looking forward to it, fantasising about the phone call they’d make together to call her mother, and wondering what presents she’d get from them. Now she wished they would forget the occasion and wanted the day to be like any other. “What’s there to celebrate?” she asked herself. The love story that had gone sour but
ended up in an amicable divorce? Her children who had grown up well adjusted but so busy with their lives that she hardly saw them once a week, or the fact that she had a good job to go to each day?

Should she celebrate her virtually non-existent love life, occasionally spiced up by one night stands with men whose wives had deserted them or were on the verge of doing so? She hadn’t been impressed by any of them enough to become the other woman in someone else’s midlife crisis. There was Tony, but he was simply too young. The thought of being seen by him as an aging woman desperate for sex was too scary and she kept her distance from him as much as she could, despite their obvious attraction. As far as she was concerned, once a woman passed the magical forty, the choices became few and far in between. For a woman her age, the earlier cry of: “All the good ones are either married or gay” became: “All the good ones are still married or have had a heart attack”, and the real choices were down to zero, despite the proliferation of introduction agencies and dating websites. And if she were frank with herself, Anna would admit that it was easier to just remain alone, instead of pumping up an emotional energy that was in short supply already. So what else she had to look forward to? Hot flushes, sagging bits and, if she were lucky, maybe a grandchild or two. Nothing much, really.

The now lukewarm coffee tasted bitter and synthetic. She got up and slowly poured the content of the cup into the sink, watching it swirl into the drain, grimacing at its lingering aftertaste.
Of course there was John. A widower, whose wife had died of breast cancer in years when the survival ratio was way below the current one, and she had left him early, without any children. After her death he had dispensed with a city career and moved down the coast, only to appear when his environmental studies required him to attend a city institution. Although he was a loving and thoroughly decent person, Anna felt that their relationship was doomed, not only because she did not want to live in his late wife’s shadow, but mainly because she wasn’t prepared to live away from her children and he did not want to come back to the city. They seemed to oscillate between need for each other’s company and long periods of living their separate lives.

Having now crossed off all of the reasons for celebrating her birthday, she felt better. “At least I have the invitation for birthday drinks with Leigh in the late afternoon,” she remembered, cherishing the thought. Despite Leigh’s falling for the foreign piano removalist, cum sub-titler, cum piano teacher, Anna was certain that their friendship would endure. It had done so in the past; in the face of marriages, children and other relationships, for over twenty-five years. That was an achievement worth celebrating! Leigh was Anna’s anchor and she often thought herself lucky to have her for a friend. “Yes, the birthday will be ok.”

That over and done with, she turned her attention back to the argument with Becky. “Why can’t I be as clear as she is about the rights and wrongs?” she asked, tugging mindlessly at the edge of her T-shirt. With each tug, bit by bit, another image grew in front of her eyes. Baby smooth olive skin, sad, dark eyes and dyed blond hair already showing the dark roots. Obviously the boy wasn’t the problem. How could he be?
She was used to working with more difficult ones full of aggression and bravado. Not so this quiet child, with his strangely self-deprecating manner who, as she already suspected, was afraid of her and spent most of his time hiding. Caught in the adults’ violent world, a casualty of different political agendas—but, if he wasn’t the cause, then what or who was?

“Why can’t I find enough kindness in my heart to help him?” she asked, feeling sadness, as well as admiration, for Becky who didn’t need to ask these questions. Her actions were not lawful, but even Anna had to admit that, morally, she’d done the right thing. Under any other circumstances, she would have been proud of her courage to act on her beliefs. Peter didn’t seem to suffer any ambiguous feelings about the boy either. He willingly offered his friendship, advice and companionship, which the boy clearly appreciated. Peter became the big brother, taking him away when Anna and Becky engaged in their all too frequent collisions. By offering himself, he introduced an element of normality to the boy’s stay. Anna heard him explaining patiently to the boy: “It’s not about you, they’re always fighting but they still love each other.” After the first day, the boy seem to prefer Peter’s company, hanging on to his every word and following him like a lost puppy.

Anna observed him, when he outmanoeuvred Peter in a computer game or kicked a soccer goal against him. Pure delight then lit his face, revealing for a fleeting moment what remained hidden at other times—a carefree child. At those times, Anna’s heart contorted from contradictions. She wished for him to experience what she considered the birthright of every child, those moments of pure happiness which
she witnessed and at the same time she desperately wanted him to disappear from her life. Why was it so hard for her?

At night she lay awake, waiting for the anti terrorist squad to kick the doors in, guns drawn. She visualised fatigue-clad bodies shouting orders, hands searching her body, the frightened faces of her children. She went to bed fully dressed, leaving her summer nightie in the dresser. Every time she left the house she feared that immigration officers would block her path on her return. In the darkness she listened to police sirens and, when falling into an exhausted sleep, she dreamt that the secret police was waiting on her doorstep, the secret police of her childhood.

The Secret Police of her childhood – even the words unleashed inside her a chain reaction of memories, experiences and emotions that, by the time they subsided yet again, had led her to another discovery.

Down in her psyche, untouched by thirty years of living in Australia, buried under the more recently acquired sensibilities, still lurked the monster of her formative years. A terror of authorities so deep that it indiscriminately bowed to and sent panic through her body, regardless of political systems and uniforms that reinforced them. A dread that regularly turned her dreams into nightmares. With the passing of time the fear of being hurt or killed was gradually superseded by one of being rejected by the new authorities and returned to where she had escaped from. This monster could never be rationalised away, nor forgotten.
Thinking now about the boy, she realised that from the way he averted his eyes when spoken to by adults, the way he moved his body around objects and people, he too was already in the clutches of the monster, already perfecting the Art of Invisibility. Her heart suddenly ached for all the future opportunities that he would chose to miss, from fear of not standing out or being noticed.

Having acknowledged the common ground between the boy and herself, she was struck by a sudden realisation. “I’m afraid to help him, because I still see myself as a refugee, still afraid of being sent back or punished for not supporting the current government.”

This thought, although totally absurd, slowed her breathing down so much, that only when her lungs started to protest, could she acknowledge the validity of this perception and decide to act upon it as soon as possible.

She drained the now completely cold coffee. It tasted so bad she set out to make a fresh pot and take it to Becky, explain to her the complexity and absurdity of her psyche, and ask her for understanding. Immediately following her birthday, she would talk to the boy and reassure him that he was safe in her home, welcome to stay and that she’d do anything to help him.
Party Time

When the mobile vibrated in her pocket she felt annoyed. She spent a few moments ignoring it, but curiosity got her in the end. As inconspicuously as possible in a crowd of rapt listeners, she pulled the phone out of her bag and checked the miniature screen. Thomas’s number glowered fluorescent blue. “Damn it, why now? Can’t you find a more reasonable time?” she silently snapped at her absent boyfriend. Yes, she had asked him to ring her, but surely not during Peter’s congratulatory speech. Her finger found the silence button. “I’ll do it after the speeches. It’s nice to be wanted nevertheless,” she decided and turned her attention back to the speaker.

So far the party had progressed with an efficiency worthy of a professional events organiser. Everything was running according to the plan. Anna was dumbstruck when she returned to what she expected to be a dark and an empty home, after having had a few drinks with Leigh, only to be welcomed by musicians performing “Happy birthday” and her friends appearing one by one from their hiding places. By the time the last of the well-wishers finished she was in tears. Sam felt happy that the surprise had worked so well, despite her trepidation when Becky and Leigh first mentioned it. She believed that Anna wasn’t the kind of person who appreciated surprises and was in fact convinced that she hated them. But the expression she saw on Anna’s face that evening convinced her otherwise. Anna was enjoying every minute of the attention and fuss she was receiving. The blown-up grainy photos of her school days back home showed her neatly dressed in a white shirt and a red scarf. Pictures of her teenage years were a mix of black and white pre-departure images, followed by the post-arrival Kodak colours of the sixties and the seventies. One life,
spanning two cultures thousands of miles apart, and two political systems in direct conflict with each other. She had a family in each camp and her whole life consisted of series of adjustments and readjustments to bridge the gap. The pictures and anecdotes all pointed to a common theme. Here was a woman whose life had been lived in full, regardless of borders and political systems she continued to move between.

Sam squeezed her mother’s hand. “She loves every minute of this. You’ve done a great job.” Leigh smiled, her eyes focusing on Peter’s speech.

“My mother is not only someone who’s always been there for me with her love and care; she’s also my best friend.” He finished his speech to applause, and raised glasses.

Sam felt admiration for the lanky sixteen year old who so openly acknowledged his feelings. He seemed poles apart from the sixteen year olds she had known during her teenage years, some ten years earlier, sulky, inarticulate boys whose ability to express their emotions was limited to the occasional grunt and whose prime concerns were football, cricket and groping girls. Even harder for her to accept was the idea that, according to Thomas’s own admission, he would have been the same. “Yes, Thomas,” she reminded herself, “I’ll ring him in a moment.”

Her eyes shifted to Becky, the more complicated of the two siblings and the closest Sam had ever come to having a little sister. She remembered the blue-eyed baby girl who had been her living doll at first, someone on whom she exercised her nurturing
instincts. Not that Becky had ever let herself be nurtured with ease. Even now Sam could recall the horror that everybody experienced each time Becky went missing. During her teenage years, Becky grew wilder than Sam would even dream about, experimenting with what Sam considered a fast and dangerous kind of living. What drove Becky’s restlessness, propelling her from one edge to the next? She never found the answer, only picked up the pieces when Becky got herself into trouble yet again. In many ways, Becky was the elder of the two, despite Sam’s head start of five years. The age difference had all but disappeared over the past couple of years with Becky finishing her education and working.

Occasionally, Sam’s life felt dull by comparison. Becky’s life was filled with causes and commitment to issues which Sam didn’t even think about. Anna’s constant worry was a problem and often it was up to Sam to negotiate between the two of them. “Thank God you didn’t have another kid,” she used to say to Leigh. “I wouldn’t want to do this at home as well.” But today Becky had done everyone proud, and Anna seemed at peace with her wild child. They stood side by side, Becky’s arm protectively around her mother’s shoulders in a gesture which Sam found surprisingly touching. On Anna’s other side stood Tony who, with increasing regularity, took part in Anna’s social events. Leigh had told her that Anna would like to have an affair with him, but the age difference discouraged her. Having been left for a younger woman once already, she seemed unwilling to take another chance. Sam had to admit that they looked good side by side and she made a point of remembering to ask her mother what the age difference actually was.

When Peter finished his speech, kissed his mother and moved aside for another
well-wisher, Sam noticed a young boy immediately moving to his side, his adoration almost palpable. He looked familiar, but she was unable to place him and, having searched her memory in vain, she decided that he was one of the kids from the drop-in centre, some of whom Becky employed as waiters at the party. She even managed to get them dressed up in white shirts and dark pants, and to slick and gel their hair. Anna was obviously well liked, judging by the cross-section of visitors and well-wishers.

Having surveyed all of the visitors, Sam hadn’t spotted anyone who’d fit the description of her mother’s latest love interest but she wasn’t prepared to ask her directly. Despite their closeness, neither of them was particularly inquisitive by nature and, when it came to private matters, they often took their time, mostly waited for an opening made by the other. She waited for Leigh to introduce him to her but at the same time she was hoping to secretly observe him interacting with others in the room. She felt that she’d be more objective as her mother was rather smitten by this man. The fact that mother and daughter were going to introduce their lovers to the other felt incestuous in some indescribable way, and she’d spent lots of time thinking about it. She hated to think what Freud would make of it, but, given that his treatment of the female psyche was not what she’d call spot on, she decided to be amused by it rather than worried. Now she was simply curious about the man; but try as she could, no one she saw fitted the bill. Most of those who attended were either people she already knew, or they were too young, for as far as she knew he was her mother’s age. To her great disappointment Ken and Alice were missing, having gone for another practice run down the coast and apparently been delayed by bad weather,
which was forecasted to hit Sydney as well. Luckily, the good weather was still holding up, so the party was spilling outdoors as well.

Despite her genuine enjoyment of the celebration, she wished that she and Leigh could secretly skip the rest of the party, go home and have the mother–daughter kind of time they used to have in the past. The two of them just lounging around in their PJs, sharing a bowl of salted chips or having endless cups of tea with the bottomless tin of Danish butter cookies, with plenty of time to talk. Even in her infatuation with Thomas, she missed Leigh and she yearned for the easy companionship they’d developed through their years of living together. There was so much she wanted to tell her. But the party was really just beginning and Leigh wasn’t going to leave till the last visitor had gone and the post mortem carried out over the washing up.

“Never mind,” she thought, “we’ll have the whole day tomorrow, just the two of us.” Then she realised that Leigh might have invited her new man to meet her family, and panicked. She didn’t want him to intrude into the already limited time with her mother, and she realised that the only way to prevent that from happening was to talk to Leigh as soon as possible.

The vibration in her pocket disrupted her thoughts once again and she checked the number without answering the phone. “Thomas, again. He’s keen, must be missing me!” The thought pleased her. To her surprise, the clock on the phone indicated that a full hour and half had passed since the previous call. By the time the speeches finished another half hour had passed. Finally, with a plate full of food and a refilled glass, she took herself to the front porch to return Thomas’s call. By then it was past eleven o’clock and the Saturday nightlife jostled by while she waited for him to
answer the phone. A previously sleepy street, it had become one of the casualties of a commercially successful main street nearby. Filled with restaurants and cafes that opened till early morning, it turned the local side streets into parking alleys night after night. Tonight wasn’t an exception. Car after car cruised by, looking for a parking spot. Groups of visitors meandered back and forth, their conversations too loud and offensive to those not softened by the effects of alcohol.

When Thomas finally answered, his voice sounded anxious and tired. Sam remembered that she hadn’t checked on his mother’s health for the whole day and her heart leapt in fear. “Thomas, is your mother ok?” In the ensuing pause the entire spectrum of guilt flashed through her mind. “She’s fine.” The tone of his voice told another story. “What’s wrong?” she asked, her anxiety rising. “Where are you, Sam? What’s the address?” he asked, ignoring her question.

“Oh Thomas, I’ve told you. I’m at Anna’s, at her party. Where do you think I am? In hiding with one of my other lovers?” She giggled hoping that the joke would take the edge out of his voice, then moved back inside the hall and waved the handset to pick up the sounds of the party.

Thomas’s voice came back even more urgent. “Sammy, listen to me. I need to know your address, the actual address of where the party is!”

The penny dropped. “Oh, you’re here! In Sydney! Is that right? How silly of me. You’ve decided to surprise me and with your mum’s health in the clear, you came after all! Have you been waiting all this time to find out where to go? I thought I’d
given you the address already.” She felt elated now, her previous resolve to spend the next day with her mother completely forgotten. “It’ll take you about fifteen minutes by taxi, no matter where you are. I am at a number one, Annandale Street, Annandale. It’s the inner west, so if you’re near the city, it won’t take long at all. I’ll wait outside the house so you can see me.” She felt breathless from excitement and had already started to move out of the hall and back on to the front porch.

“Sammy, I’m not in Sydney. I’m in the office, working. Listen, you’re in danger, everyone in the house might be. Can you understand what I am telling you?”

The sound of his voice brought her back to school days, when she was caught smoking behind the shed. The principal’s controlled intonation during the assembly reflected the seriousness of the offence. Thomas sounded identical, gravity laden. She listened carefully, not taking in everything he said. Lots of it made no sense, but she listened. By the time he’d finished, her picture of the man she’d fallen in love with had few large cracks that grew bigger the longer he talked. “Hey, what is it you are saying? This is the biggest piece of nonsense I’ve come across in a while, worse than a bad B grade movie. And what does it say about you? Who are you? A cyber spy! Paid to check on people through the footprints they leave visiting web sites! Why haven’t you told me before?”

His explanations just raced through her head. “Technical expertise only, an urgent job, working extra time after leaving mother in the hospital.” So much of it still made no sense, surely he must be making it all up.
Still listening to his frantic torrent of words, Sam faced the street in front of the house once more. A sudden realisation hit her. If Thomas’s information was correct, then any of the cars cruising by or parking on the other side of the street could be a government surveillance vehicle. Behind the darkened windows shutters could be clicking furiously, looking for a particular person. Out of nowhere her mind conjured up an image; olive skin, orange cap and a skateboard. Then, the same face devotedly following Peter’s every word, then sidling up to him.

“Thomas, hang on! I think I know what this is all about. I’ll ring you back as soon as I can.” She broke the connection, waving her hand to attract Leigh’s attention while trying to appear as casual as possible to any hidden audience.

When Leigh reached her, Sam turned her back to the street. “Mum, do you have any idea why this place could possibly be under surveillance by the Immigration?” She didn’t even mention the raid that Thomas was worried about.

The sharpness of Leigh’s reaction confirmed her fears. “Who’s asking? What is it all about? I wish I could tell you I don’t know, but in fact it might have something to do with a young escapee from Woomera detention centre that Becky brought back from her trip.”

In spite of the severity of the situation, Sam managed a giggle. “And I thought she was having an affair with a married man. Should’ve known better, shouldn’t I? Nothing as simple as an adultery would do for Becky.”
They both laughed when a male voice interrupted. “Excuse me, what number is this? It’s impossible to tell in the dark.”

The owner stood at the far right, barely visible behind the privet fence. He appeared out of nowhere. The voice was casual and friendly but Sam’s heart stopped and her tongue froze. Leigh recovered instantly. “This is number 2. There’s been lots of renumbering since the light rail opened. Some numbers are now out of sequence. Which one are you after?”

The man who now stepped out was tall, well built and dressed in a manner allowing him to blend into any crowd. Sam detected a pause before he responded. “I’m after number 15. It’s probably on the other side and down the road. Have a good party; it sounds like a good one.” He stepped back into the darkness and disappeared before they managed to reach the front gate. When they leaned over the low wall and casually surveyed the street, he was nowhere to be seen. Sam would swear later that she heard a car door slammed nearby, but no car moved out of its parking spot. Leigh leaned against the house; she was a picture of relaxation, only the rippling wine in her glass betrayed her emotions. “I am starving, let’s get inside, the food is being served.”

Once inside the hall, with the front door firmly shut, they both sprang into action.
Another Move

The sobs seem to originate from the part of his body where his lungs and stomach met. At first Kasim felt a string of sharp pains, as if the mountain of rocks, now reaching at least half way up his stomach, had decided to rumble and roll even further up. When they reached his lungs the pain eased but it became a vibration so strong that his upper body shook uncontrollably, like a volcano ready to erupt.

The stream of air that would normally flow into his lungs and vibrate the vocal chords to produce a crying sound was now cut off by the corner of a bed cover pushed far back into his mouth. His lungs screamed for air while the tears and saliva soaked the cotton gag. When his lungs started to plead with his hands to free the airways, his brain’s command stood firm: “No one must hear you!” After a while the brain’s power weakened and the lungs’ last stand brought about a burst of retching. The gag, now unprotected by his hands, catapulted out of Kasim’s mouth. A deep groan followed.

Exhausted, his lungs gasped for the stale air mixed with the odour of his sweat. He didn’t know how much time had passed since he crawled under the bed cover, closed his eyes and pushed his fist into his mouth until the teeth bore painfully into his skin. In spite of all his efforts, the tears kept on coming. It was then that his body had taken upon itself to deal with the fear that besieged his mind and the pain that was breaking his heart. His brain created an illusion right there in front of his eyes. The picture bore a striking resemblance to the one that Kasim would have chosen himself, if he were to think of his grandfather’s orchard. In fact he has done it so often since his departure from home, his brain decided to act independently in the
last-ditch effort to protect the boy from further pain and created the very place to which he would willingly retreat to calm down. After some time the brain achieved its aim.

With his eyes closed, Kasim now lay almost relaxed, his lungs rising and falling with increased regularity. The sounds of the internal struggle had given away to the silence of his surroundings. With his eyes closed he listened carefully for another presence in the room. Nothing. He opened his eyes and let them adjust to the darkness before he shifted into a sitting position.

The bed was a big one, like those that married couples slept in. By the bedside was a small table with a lamp and books. The only streak of light was coming from outside, through a narrow gap between the curtains. His head felt empty and as he tried to recall the events of the past few hours, but his memory, of which he was so proud, just wasn’t there. Where did it go? All he could remember was that everything happened too fast.

One moment he was enjoying the party, talking to Peter and wishing that Becky would come and talk to him. He wanted her to comment on the new outfit that Peter had helped him to buy earlier in the day: dark pants, a white shirt and a pair of black shoes. He wanted to know who was paying for the clothes but Peter told him not to worry and to choose whatever he liked. So in his new clothes he watched Becky enjoying her time with her mother. Kasim was glad to see her like that. He knew she’d been in trouble with her mother ever since she’d brought him home. His English wasn’t very good, but he could read people’s faces, and Anna’s face was sort of closed, and her smile never reached her eyes on the rare occasion that she talked to
him. His new uncle’s wife’s face had looked like that after his father got killed, but when he made himself useful with her other children she had changed and afterwards her smile was always opened and her eyes showed kindness.

When he asked Becky she denied it, but he caught a word here and there making it clear that Anna didn’t want him in her house. Probably she wanted him not only out of her house but also out of the country, like so many others. He was waiting for Becky and him to be alone so he could ask her to take him to an Iraqi family, because he believed that Iraqi people were kind, that they would want to help him, especially as he was prepared to work for his keep. He waited for his turn to talk to Becky but it never came. Instead, Leigh rushed to Becky’s side just when everyone was having a real good time and Anna was about to unwrap her presents. Curious to see what presents a woman of his grandmother’s age would get, Kasim stood still, keeping his eyes on the colourful parcels in her hands. He saw Leigh talking to Becky, and then her face had gone white and her eyes searched the room.

By the time she located him, she looked positively ill. A bad premonition seized his heart and he remembered his grandmother’s saying: “If your heart suddenly grows cold, you know something bad is about to happen.” He should have run then. Instead, he had nodded when Becky indicated that she wanted him to follow her. He walked away when Anna started to unwrap her biggest present and never even got to see what it was.

When he met them in the hall, Becky’s eyes were already red. Something was very wrong. “You must leave right now,” she whispered, hugging him. “The police could
be here any moment, they’ve found our address.” He didn’t understand how or why, but the words “you must leave” were clear enough. His chest tightened. It became difficult for him to breathe and the pebble in his stomach started to grow as Becky continued, “Go with Leigh, she’ll look after you, you can stay in her house. I’ll come and see you tomorrow.” She kissed him on the cheek and at the last moment she added: “Leigh is my auntie, she likes you and you’ll be safe with her.”

Then he was ushered through a darkened backyard into a lane where a car was waiting. He was asked to lie again on to the floor; his new pants were getting dirty, the white shirt soaking up his sweat. “Where are we going?” he wanted to ask, but didn’t know how. His mouth refused to open to let the words out, the fear came back, gripped his insides, twisted his guts, and once again clawed at his stomach.

By the time the car pulled into the driveway of an unfamiliar house his lungs had loosened up, but the pain in his stomach had intensified. When the car stopped he rushed out and vomited at the bottom of stairs. They helped him inside, cleaned him up and talked to him, but he only heard Becky’s voice: “You must stay away from the police at all costs or they’ll send you back to the detention centre.”

In the end they made his bed, and Leigh offered to stay with him while he went to sleep. “No,” he answered. “I’m not a baby.” He wanted to feel that he was a man on the run, but he felt scared and thought he didn’t hide his fear well enough. Leigh showed him the bathroom and the light she was going to leave on outside his bedroom door, and when he again declined her help she left the bedroom.
He distinctly remembered sitting down on the bed, gripping his stomach and rolling into a ball, his knees pushed against his chin. The picture that he tried to keep out of his mind each night just slipped in: giant ocean waves relentlessly washing over the deck, tossing the boat one way then another; his hands gripping a piece of rope attached to the wooden cabin, the waves breaking over him. He felt the rope slipping out of his hand, his fingers letting go no matter how hard he tried to cling to it. Then, at the precise moment when his fingers gave up, big hands grabbed him and pulled him inside the cabin. Ever since then, the waves kept coming back night after night unless he managed to visualise the walnut tree that stood in front of his grandfather’s house and imagined himself climbing on a rope that hung from the highest bough. Left hand over the right, then left again; usually he fell asleep before he reached the top.

Now the room stood still. He felt cold and his hands were shaking while he climbed under the bed cover, too exhausted to change into his pyjamas. Curled up, he hoped for sleep, a deep merciful sleep filled with pleasant dreams, but he didn’t even get the chance to get the tree into the focus.

Instead, the red droplets appeared. Seeping through the incisions in the skin, they crisscrossed the bare arms. The hand doing the cutting was fast and efficient. The man must have done it before. Kasim heard himself screaming the moment he saw the blood. The man was silent, but fast. He didn’t even raise his eyes to the screaming boy next to him, just kept on carving his flesh with the movements of a robot. Soon other voices echoed off the concrete shower block walls; hands led him
out into the blinding sunshine. He never walked into the showers by himself again.

Like the waves, the red droplets kept coming back.

In the dark bedroom, only the bedcover gag could stop him from screaming. He listened to the silence of the night, his breathing almost back to normal.

“Police.” The word still brought terror into his heart, but now he felt too tired, and resigned to being caught. If Becky, who had protected him all the way to Sydney, could no longer keep him safe, how could he avoid being discovered? How long would it take before they found him in this house? A day, two days, a week? He had no answers and didn’t know anyone who could have them. He suspected that even his grandfather wouldn’t be able to tell him. At the thought of the old man, Kasim’s bottom lip started to quiver, his eyes turning to water once more. Deep inside his chest the sleeping volcano had stirred yet again.
Midnight Call

She was walking some distance ahead of him, but something in the way she held her body or the way her hair was cut told him who she was. Mehran couldn’t tell in which direction she was going because the olive trees obscured her each time she passed behind a tree trunk. Before she disappeared altogether he started running. It was then that his ears picked up a distant sound high above the trees. “A strong wind,” he concluded only to realise that his eyes couldn’t register even the slightest movement of the branches. The sound grew in intensity, soon resembling a desert sandstorm, but no sand was hitting his skin. He stopped running and when the silhouette and the olive grove disappeared altogether, only the sound in his ears persisted. It no longer resembled the wind in the trees or the howling of a sandstorm. It grew louder and shriller. When he found himself in a narrow street lined with ancient houses, he finally recognised the sound. His stomach turned queasy and his heart’s palpitation reached into his throat. He responded in the way he had responded in the past, to the sirens announcing an imminent air raid.

Looking desperately for cover away from the falling bombs, he needed to find an entry leading into cellars. As the sirens grew louder he chanced on an old wooden door painted blue. It looked weaker than all the rest but it too was locked. As the shrill of the sirens merged with the roar of the planes directly above the rooftops, his hands frantically banged and scratched the old paint. Despite its shoddy appearance the door stood solid. When the bombs started to explode all around him, he gave up and hurled himself to the ground, his hands folded to protect his face. Then he noticed the blood, oozing out of a wound in the middle of his left palm, soaking into the sandy soil. The sight of the blood woke him up. Having taken couple of seconds
to steady his heart, he stretched out his right arm, turned the bedside lamp on and surveyed his left palm. Relieved by what he found, he noticed that the shrill sound of his dream continued. “Oh no, it’s the phone. It must be Nasrin, running on Iranian time.” He leapt out of bed, reaching the phone before it cut off.

The voice on the other end surprised him; it took him a while to recognise it. “Mehran, I’m sorry to get you up but I need you here. Right now!”

Her presence in his dream was still palpable, now made real by the sound of her voice. The ancient wall clock showed two am. He rubbed his eyes and looked once more. Still only two am. “Where are you ringing from? Aren’t you supposed to be at a party?”

A deep sigh and a pause followed. “It’s a long story; I tell you when you get here.”

Not hearing panic in her voice, he tried a joke. “Are you desperate for my body or is it my professional services you’re after at this time of the night?

She chuckled but then her voice grew serious. “I can’t talk now, but please come straight away.”

“Give me a clue! Are we going to be alone? I’d like that.”

Another sigh followed. “We won’t be alone, far from it. I’ve a visitor and I need your help.”
Although he did not detect any sound of distress, the mention of a visitor made him uneasy. Was it a code perhaps? With so many stories of peculiar crimes, he felt a tinge of worry and his sleepy brain swarmed with possibilities. “I’ll be with you in 30 minutes,” he promised, and hung up. Two o’clock and he’d only gone to sleep at midnight, having spent most of the evening wishing he accepted the invitation.

The trip across the bridge was uneventful. With hardly any cars about, the traffic lights co-operated as if synchronised for his benefit as he hit one green after another. By the time he reached the inner west suburb of Glebe, he was only fifteen minutes from his home and after another four he was parking the car in front of Leigh’s house.

The windows of her house shone like a beacon in a dark sea, the nearest working streetlamp a couple hundred meters away. Parking his car, he recalled his first encounter with the twenty-five steps. “So much has changed since,” he observed, feeling excited as well as anxious. He ran up the stairs, almost colliding with Leigh who was already opening the door. “You must be desperate for me.” Relieved at seeing her he surprised himself and kissed her on the lips. He felt her mouth responding for a fleeting moment, but then she stepped back and offered him one of her disarming smiles instead.

“Unfortunately I’ve been telling you the truth. I didn’t get you here under false pretences. But later on, maybe you’d like to stay.” Before he could respond she added. “I’d like you to.”
He nodded, still savouring the taste of her lips, while she took his arm and led him into the living room. A tired looking young woman rose from the deep armchair. Her eyes were already half shut when she offered him her hand. Her looks told him immediately who she was.

“Samantha,” she volunteered, sounding confident that he would have been told of her existence. “Nice to meet you.”

The hand was soft and small, practically disappearing into his. What was he expected to say next? What does one say to the daughter of a woman one is about to fall in love with? What kind of chitchat should one offer at 2 am? He wished he had listened more carefully when Leigh told him about her daughter’s new job. Was it in banking or in public service? With no idea he decided that the best strategy was to be the first to ask a question. “You both look like you could do with some sleep. What couldn’t wait till morning? Will either of you tell me?”

Leigh motioned him to sit next to her on the lounge and he obliged happily, making sure he sat as close to her as possible, without appearing too lecherous. Samantha slipped back into the deep chair, showing every indication of not lasting past the first five minutes of Leigh’s explanation. “As you know, Becky, Anna’s daughter, has been missing for a while and when she returned from her latest adventure, she came back with a young boy.”

“Surely that wouldn’t be a problem, would it?”
Responding to Mehran’s raised eyebrows, Leigh continued, “Not that kind of boy. She brought home a twelve-year-old escapee from a detention centre in South Australia. A young Iraqi boy.” Acknowledging his surprised look with a nod, she continued. “Yes, it seems that our children don’t do anything by halves.”

Astonished, Mehran couldn’t think of anything but the most obvious question: “What about his parents? Are they still in or have they also escaped?”

“The boy’s mother died shortly after the birth of his baby sister and his father was shot dead during their escape from Iraq. The boy came through Indonesia, on the boat with a family of a man whom he calls his uncle. His grandparents back home are looking after his little sister. Apparently he had been in the detention centre for three years.” She paused and when no questions came she continued. “He developed an attachment to Becky and doesn’t seem to trust anyone else. I don’t know why she ended up with him, but her mother isn’t thrilled about it.”

“You’re not wrong!” Mehran thought, remembering Anna’s stern gaze and her aloof manner.

Before he could respond, Samantha jumped in. “I’ve talked with Becky. She was only supposed to deliver the boy to Sydney and pass him on, but the thought of him having such a hard time was too much for her. She wanted him to have some good memories of Australia, not just razor wire and guards, so she took him back to Sydney via the coast to let him enjoy the beaches for a while. That saved him from being captured. The Iraqi family he was to stay with was raided the day before they
reached Sydney.” Samantha yawned and Mehran still wondered why he was summoned.

“The boy escaped during the break-outs from the Detention Centres this Easter. That is where my boyfriend comes into it.” When she said “boyfriend” she blushed, and Mehran wondered if it was because of him or because of Leigh.

“Your boyfriend? This is getting complicated by the minute. Where do I fit in?”

Leigh responded with her wait-and-see smile. She patted his leg in a pacifying manner, and left her hand on his thigh. His mind shifted immediately from the story to the heat emanating from her hand and the almost imperceptible circles her fingers traced. “How distracting,” he admitted to himself, trying desperately to focus on the story while Leigh appeared unaware of her effect on him.

“Well, Thomas, that is my boyfriend, is a computer spy. And just for the record, Mother, I truly didn’t know till today, what exactly he does for living, and believe me I will find out. Anyhow, he swore that he didn’t know how his findings are being used, but that’s beside the point. He is a cyber spy and luckily he alerted us. His job is with a company that works for government departments and he ended up chasing the addresses of people visiting certain websites. As it turned out, these websites were offering support to the escapees. He was supposed to come to Anna’s party, but his mother got sick, so he stayed in Adelaide, and when she got better he went to finish an urgent job that someone else couldn’t finish. He recognised one of the addresses on the list and as some of these places were under surveillance and
possibly about to be raided by immigration officers, he warned us and we got the boy out. He’s here now.

“Truly, Mum, I didn’t know what he did. IT, that was all I wanted to know, never asked for details. Now I am not sure what to think about him. At least he had the decency to warn us.”

Her voice trailed off, leaving an opportunity for Mehran to ask his next question. Leigh got in before him. “If someone was working on the report last week and if Thomas was only finishing it today, it’s quite possible that Anna’s home had been watched already. With so many people at the party, we decided that it was better to move the boy immediately.”

Mehran’s face must have shown how in the dark he still felt, and she continued while her fingers stopped moving. “When he went off to bed earlier on, he was terribly upset. He tried hard to hide it, but he is only a little kid. This is his first night away from Becky since his escape. I’m sure he cried when I left the bedroom, although he refused my attempts to comfort him.” She paused. “I feel for him, but I know nothing about giving comfort to boys like him.”

Mehran was slowly filling the puzzle piece by piece. “Does he speak English?” he asked, realising suddenly what it was that Leigh was asking him to do.

“He does a bit, but probably not enough to feel reassured.” “So what exactly do you want me to do?” She smiled, but he could see that she was stepping into a lion’s den.
When she replied, her voice trembled in a way he hadn’t heard before. “Well, I thought that being from that part of the world; you might be able to talk to him. Give him support. Being a man might also help.”

The more she tried to explain, the more Mehran felt his disappointment rising. He took a deep breath and counted to three, the way he learnt to deal with difficult customers. Why should he be surprised? To most Australians, all Asians still looked the same and all Middle Easterners were the same; religious fanatics and possibly dangerous. He liked Leigh and he wanted her to be different. He wanted her to know the distinction between two very different cultures that fought each other in one of the bloodiest wars in the Middle East. Was it too much to expect that a tertiary-educated Australian would know the difference? His disappointment was rising until another question crossed his mind. “How much do I know about one of the oldest living cultures? How much effort have I taken since my arrival to get to know the true owners of this land that I now call home?” The answer to his question made it easy to respond to Leigh’s request calmly.

“It’s unlikely that I can speak with him. We are neighbours and although Islam is the main religion in both our countries, the schools of Islam are very different and we don’t use the same language. We speak Farsi, they speak Arabic. But let me see what I can do. Of course he could see me as the enemy, depending on how religious his family is and whether they are Sunnis or Shiites. The war is also still a living memory.”
They walked to the bedroom door and knocked lightly. No answer. Leigh quietly opened the door. In his sleep, Kasim looked small and pale, almost transparent in the light coming from outside.

“He’s far too young to be going through this; he’s only a baby really,” Leigh whispered, closing the window curtains.

“Yes, I agree, but what is best for him now is the difficult question. Should he be deported back to Iraq or should he spend more years in the detention centre? The boy has no future here. He should be returned home.”

Watching Leigh suddenly stop and stare at him while shutting the door, he wondered if his words were too harsh. “What do you mean, no future?” she asked. “The boy chose to escape from his country and to escape from the detention centre. He’s making his own future. He talks about wanting to go to school, of becoming a doctor.”

Mehran could taste the bitterness in his own words. “As you said, he’s been in Australia for almost three years. Has he been to school? Been encouraged to learn anything? Been encouraged to show what he can achieve? The answer is no, and being on the run from the government, what future do you think will he have as an illegal minor? What future does any child have, with no adults to look after him or guide him? Back there, he has loving grandparents who have his best interests at heart. Here, he has nothing.”
Leigh did not want to hear what he was saying, that much he could see. In her eyes he was sending him off to uncertain future. She wanted to save him. “But you’ve chosen to escape, to start elsewhere. Would you’ve preferred not to have made that decision?” She wanted his answer and he realised that she wasn’t going to stop till she got it.

“No point in rehashing history. It’s all past. I have made certain decisions and with the benefit of hindsight I’m not sure that I’d make them again. Anyhow I have made the decision as an adult; he was a child when they left, it was his family making the decision, not him. You all seem to assume that to leave a third world country and resettle here is everyone’s idea of blessing, but I know that to lose one’s identity and history is an isolating experience. To grow up between two cultures and not fitting into either could be much worse without proper guidance.”

That answer clearly wasn’t what Leigh expected. She wanted him to suggest places for the boy to hide; she was caught up in his short-term protection and not considering his long-term prospects. Before he could continue, Leigh’s voice interrupted him. “What do illegals end up doing? I mean for a living? Call me ignorant but I’ve never considered these issues before. Never had a real reason to. I might sound naive to you, but that’s what happened to most of us.”

Mehran took a deep breath, considering the enormity of the task ahead of him. “First, he might get exploited and abused by his own people, the “good guys,” who give the illegals their first opportunity to work. Of the same language group, they promise good pay and protection for hard work. You can believe me, I’ve been there, done
that. Construction, domestic help and the rag trade are the prime examples. For girls especially, the sex industry is the big worry, but even a boy his age might end up anywhere, working for food and so called protection from the Immigration. Occasionally, one finds good-hearted people who might help him or take him in and treat him as their son. But these are few and far in between. If he’s lucky enough to survive the first couple of years, learn the language, not get into trouble with the law and find a way of getting a new set of papers, he might get a job outside of his own community. If he’s really lucky there’s an amnesty and he can become legal. Unfortunately there hasn’t been one for years and this is not likely soon.” When he finished and looked at her, he could read the pain in her face, while her eyes were being drawn towards the doors behind which the child slept. “Welcome to the real life of refugees,” he thought and yawned. “I take it you want me to stay in case he wakes up. Is that correct?” This certainly wasn’t how he imagined his first night with Leigh but, by now, he felt tired and just wanted to get back to sleep not knowing what to expect of the night.

Leigh read his mind. “Not very romantic, is it? Sammy’s in my bed, the boy is in hers. You and I can squash on this lounge here, or you can have it all to yourself and I sleep with Sammy.” The smile she gave him was both teasing and apologetic. His tired brain refused to decode the possibilities. Was the pause in her speech an invitation for him to reach for her or was it just one of the ways the exhausted brain copes? Should he make some move or would she see him as too insensitive, given the situation? He pondered these questions while his body was propelling him towards her and his mind was pulling him back.
Neither of them moved for an eternity and then Leigh got up. “Let’s get some sleep; we’ll have so much to deal with tomorrow. The blankets are here in the cupboard.” She pointed to an intricately carved Indonesian linen press and, before his slow brain would suggest the best way to respond, she was gone.

The lounge was comfortable and he soon dreamt of a young boy’s hands working a keyboard, feeling the vibration of the strings inside the piano through his fingers, saturating the heavens above with the most beautiful sounds he was capable of creating.
**The Job**

He was sweating profusely. The nylon fibres from which the uniform was made did nothing to absorb the moisture. Sweat pooled along his spine and, when driven by gravity, it slid down his back it finally ended its journey in the waistband of his cotton underpants. Droplets of sweat starting under his arms became rivulets by the time they reached the folds of fat that until a few years back were muscles. Having nowhere else to escape, they pooled within the folds and, when disturbed by a sudden movement, they spilled and also soaked the waistband. “The bloody underpants are the only part of the uniform designed for this heat,” he muttered, adjusting the sticky elastic around his ample waist. “Time to check on 251,” he reminded himself, pleased that this visit would conclude his shift. The open spaces between the dongas were deserted. In the middle-of-the-day heat, those lucky enough to have air-conditioning still working in their huts retreated into their controlled climate, the rest either congregated in the dining room or sweltered inside their prefab huts, praying for the time to pass faster.

He turned the corner, reaching the isolation block. When he unlocked the main door, the cool air inside surprised him. This unit was still co-operating, while many others were breaking down constantly from overuse.

“So how are we doing?” he asked the figure curled up on the concrete floor. No response. “Listen mate, this ain’t gonna help you, you understand? ’Member, you already have points against you ’cause of the hunger strike. Now you need to cooperate.” He leaned over the prostrate figure, trying to decide if the man was asleep, unconscious, or just refusing to act. The trickles of sweat on his back and
armpits changed their course and the soggy waistband cut uncomfortably into his stomach. He straightened up again feeling dizzy. With the toe of his boot he nudged the body. Not kicking it, he’d never do that, no matter who he was dealing with. He was finicky about not crossing the line. Firm but fair. “C’mon, man, I know what you’re up to. If you won’t cooperate, I’ll have to handcuff you to this rail. You understand? Cuff you so you can’t harm yourself. Can’t have no more self-harmers. The bosses are coming heavily down on us. Way too many accidents been happening, and no staff to be checking on you lot all the time. I’ll have to handcuff you for your own good.”

No response. Watching the crumpled form on the ground, he almost felt sorry for the man the figure once was. “Who knows what I’d feel?” he thought. The poor bastard didn’t have much going for him, since he found out that his wife and children drowned off the coast of Indonesia. A professor, they said, a pure mathematician, whatever that was; Eric didn’t even know those jobs existed. Probably not much call for them in Australia although his English wasn’t bad either. One of the Afghans that has been around for longer that Eric could remember. Apparently someone thought they weren’t from where they said they were, although he claimed to have evidence he could show. The officers had hard job to prove if they told the truth or not, lots had no papers to even prove their names. Fancy not taking enough care to keep them that would show what kind of person the Immigration was dealing with – well, as far as Eric was concerned, the papers were the main evidence, no matter what excuse.
He nudged the man again. “I’m sorry about your missus and kids, but I’ve a job to do and that’s stop you from offing yourself.”

With no response from the ground, he just stood there. It wasn’t right, he decided after a moment. The way they treated them wasn’t right, they shouldn’t have been allowed to have their mobiles here in the first place. Even after confiscating them, some were still about. This one wouldn’t have found out about his family till he either got out into the community or got deported. Hearing it here only created trouble.

He tried to bend down once again, his wet stomach obstructing his way. “Look mate; try to snap out of it. I know how you feel. I’d be ripped too if my missus gone on me. And the kids, well …” Faced with the futility of his action, he straightened up. “Well, I’ve given you warning; someone will be back shortly to see you. Might not be as understanding as I am. You try anything and the cuffs go on. You hear me?” The boot once more nudged at the man’s ribs.

This time his eyes opened. “Yes.”

Once out in the 40C Eric considered his bad luck. “Hellhole of a place!” Not at all what he was promised when he applied.

Since the riots, when some detainees escaped, the staff had discovered that the equipment they had was useless, couldn’t prevent future riots or escapes. They asked for more protection gear, more staff, and high-risk pay. Management ignored their
demands. Eric’s anger was mounting with the sunrays mercilessly striking his back. “We’re being exposed to danger. Where is the Union? These people would to do anything. Hurt themselves, hurt others. It’s their religion, nothing can be done about that. 9/11 showed it. They’ve no respect for human life. That’s why the isolation wing is always full. No respect.”

He repeated these words often enough; to co-workers, his wife, and mates in the pub. Sometimes he just had a gutful of this job. It felt worse than working in a jail. There, no one questioned why the guys were there. Here every Tom, Dick and Harry took it upon themselves to say something about the refugees. But only he and his mates here knew what these people were really like. Ruthless queue jumpers, ready to do anything to stay.

Working in the detention centre was a real conversation stopper. Now he told no one. Even his kids were turning against him. The eldest asked him the other day, “Dad, do you think you are a sadist? Some of my friends call you that.”

Boy, did he get mad. He slammed his fist on the table, something he’d never done in front of his missus, and he could see immediately that he was going to get “words” later when the kids were in bed. But then he couldn’t stop. “Sadist!” He shouted. “Do I hit you? No! Do I beat your mother? No! Do I let you starve? No again! And where do you think the money for your fancy school comes from? The food on your table and the pretty things in your bedroom; they all come from this job, the one I hate as much as any other person would, but I have responsibility to you and your sister and your mother. Don’t you ever dare to call me that again!”
He could see she didn’t mean it; just didn’t understand the reality of life. Not yet. And those do-gooders who filled her mind with their ideas didn’t know what they were talking about either. Of course he’d prefer to work on the farm, but that option had gone years ago. With no rain, there was no income; he had to take on outside jobs to keep them in the black. At least he had a job; many of his mates didn’t and their farms got repossessed. And really it wasn’t that bad. Sometimes it got to him. Like right now. The heat and the constantly breaking down coolers didn’t help. If he closed his eyes and shut his ears to what at times was a horrible spectacle he could pretend it was just a bad case of mismanagement. Then he could get through his shift ok. He knew the living conditions were not as they ought to be. He’d seen better in jail. At least there they knew how long they’d got. Here, some were kept in for far too long. Got mentally deranged and tried to kill themselves. When he said to his missus, “Who knows how long I’d last,” he meant every word of it. But that was strictly in private. He couldn’t spend too much time thinking about them, it was the only job he could get in the region and his family needed the money coming in.

He looked at his watch. Thank God, it was time to go. In less than sixty minutes he was going to have a beer at home. “I surely deserve it,” he muttered while opening the door into the staff’s locker room.
“How deceptive can appearances be,” Leigh sighed, mentally stroking the unshaven cheek of the man sleeping soundly next to her. Contrary to her misgivings from only a couple of days earlier, she felt completely at ease with one of his hands resting on her stomach and the other intertwined with hers. But for the clothes, socks and shoes that they were both wearing, his deep sleep could have been mistaken for a rest taken by a satisfied lover. Her desire to lean over, kiss him full on the mouth and catch his sleepy surprise was overwhelming and she started to carefully disengage her fingers, but halfway through the delicate exercise, she changed her mind. This wasn’t a sleep break from a night of passionate love making. Her skin still yearned for his touch; even his hand was kept at bay by the layer of her cotton T-shirt. When they had fallen into bed a couple of hours earlier, their exhaustion was complete but not from romance.

Having left Mehran on the living room lounge in the early hours of morning, she had hoped for sleep, but lying next to her daughter re-ignited the uncertainty about her father. What was she supposed to tell Sammy? What did she really know?

On top of these questions, it became obvious that their planned mother–daughter time was as good as gone. With the boy and Mehran in the house the time with Sammy had to wait. What was she supposed to do? Shake Sammy from her sleep and say to her. “Your grandfather was an Aboriginal man, but your grandmother won’t tell me who he was so I can’t tell you whose blood is flowing in your veins.” She tossed and turned, trying to find the best way to say it but in the end she decided to do nothing until she found out more from her mother or from someone else.
For the rest of the morning she tried to reboot her memory to pull out the names of all of her parents’ friends. Names came and went through her mind. Some complete with obituaries, others lost in the passing of time. Few continued through the stories her mother had occasionally told during her visits. One name in particular kept eluding her, although the picture of the couple and their children seemed permanently fixed in her mind. Their occasional visits had continued through her childhood, especially when other visitors became rare during her father’s debilitating illness of her adolescent years. Even now Leigh could visualise the hat’s net shading a tear-stained face during her father’s funeral. Aunty Em, her mother’s best friend from as early as primary school. She visited after the funeral, bringing a semblance of normality to their lives, while their mother spent all of her time locked up in her bedroom. With her pregnancy, Leigh’s life took over and Aunty Em and Uncle Jay simply disappeared from Leigh’s radar of childhood acquaintances. Only a small handmade quilt kept in Sammy’s trunk of baby memorabilia attested to their love and care. Occasionally, she had heard snippets about their lives from her mother but, like any young person, she hardly ever listened. Now, close to thirty years later, she couldn’t even recall their proper names, but she wondered if they were alive and if they would share their knowledge. Listening to Sammy’s regular breathing next to her, she resolved to ask her mother about them at the next opportunity.

She must have fallen asleep at some point, only to be woken up by voices coming from the living room. She crept out of bed, hoping the sounds were only an illusion and she could go back to sleep. Instead she found Mehran and the boy involved in a conversation using just about every part of their bodies, English words and snippets of a language she couldn’t even guess at. Neither of them paid her any attention,
concentrating fully on their communication effort. The boy appeared more fragile than before, and she grew concerned. His skin had the almost transparent quality common to long-term hospital patients. Large black rings circling his eyes contributed to his haunted and almost slightly deranged appearance. She grew even more worried. When Mehran finally noticed her, his smile was not enough to hide his concern. Seeing his earnest attempt to communicate with the boy only convinced Leigh that he was advising him to give himself up and return home.

In panic, Leigh decided to make breakfast and to take the opportunity to consider Kasim’s options. Half way through cooking the second batch of bacon she became alarmed. “Do Muslims eat pork or not? Can pork be halal? What constitutes halal?” Totally confused, she started to pull the half-cooked bacon out from under the grill and then hesitated. Kosher diet forbade eating pork, she was positive of that. But Anna told her many stories of the idiosyncrasies of the European Jewry, many of whom adopted the pork dishes of their countries while still conforming to the rest of their Judaic traditions. “If the Jews and the Muslims are in conflict over so many issues,” she thought, “then maybe the Muslims do eat pork after all.”

She felt embarrassed for not knowing but wasn’t going to ask Mehran, given her previous show of ignorance about Iraq and Iran. She resolved to ask Becky instead. She didn’t need to wait long; her first phone call for the day came almost immediately. It was Becky enquiring about Kasim, and Leigh felt like she had been sent to save her.
“Do Muslims eat pork? What should I cook for them?” Leigh asked, and without giving Becky time to answer she blurted out, “I can’t imagine life without my Saturday morning ritual of bacon and eggs, so my budding romance is not likely to survive.”

Becky laughed. “How would I know? All I know is that not all Catholics eat only fish on Fridays, and some Jews eat ham. So Muslims won’t be any different. Some will, others won’t. Some Jewish women wear wigs, some Muslim women wear scarfs.” Then she added. “Make them scrambled eggs. Just use different utensils. I know about clean and unclean utensils and food mixing, believe me.” She also promised to be there soon and help Leigh with the disposal of any of the leftover bacon. Her heritage was not going to keep her from the joys of a hot breakfast.

As it turned out neither Mehran or Kasim showed any concern about the bacon. Mehran’s tiredness stopped him from eating anything except a cup of strong coffee and a piece of toast, Kasim picked bits and pieces of everything that was on the table, not even questioning its origin. Having Becky around brought a smile to his pale face, and when the heat of the morning increased to a midday scorcher, Becky and Sammy decided to take Kasim to the beach for the afternoon.

“This definitely isn’t how I’ve imagined spending my first night with you,” Mehran admitted while closing the bedroom door behind them. He had agreed to have a rest before rushing off to his late afternoon job, having left George to deal with the morning one. A moment later, they were both sound asleep, chastely holding hands like a long term married couple.
According to the clock beside her bed, that was about three hours ago, and Leigh was already conscious of the swimmers returning soon. “Better get up and organise the coffee,” she decided, feeling annoyed at having to curb the desire that her now refreshed body was waking up to. “There will be another time, only pity it won’t be tonight,” she sighed, carefully lowering herself out of the bed, giving Mehran another few minutes of sleep.

By 4 pm, with everyone but Kasim gone, she accepted an invitation next door. She reasoned that the cable plasma TV would have a lot more appeal for the boy than her much smaller set. She also wanted their opinion about his future.

“I’m sure he’s the boy I saw on the telly. Don’t you think, Ken? Fancy seeing him escaping one day, and a week later he is in our living room. That’s what I’d call fate if I were that way inclined.” Alice pushed the coffee plunger in and a geyser of hot coffee shot up, spilling over her hands, slacks and the tablecloth. “Oh damn it! I can’t ever wait long enough.” She impatiently waved off Leigh’s solicitous efforts and, shaking her burnt hand, she left the table. “Better go and clean myself up.” She rushed through, almost tripping over their sailing stuff which was still being unpacked and scattered all around the room.

Ken got up and stood by the sliding door. “Well, just as well we got back. The low front that was trailing us from down south is finally here. Now we can expect rain for at least couple of days. It will be good for the garden, but I hope it will clear up before we take off next week.”
As he talked, Leigh could already see huge rain drops coming down from the dark sky, which was rapidly acquiring a yellow tinge. She shivered, suddenly feeling a gust of unexpectedly cold wind. “Boy, it is freezing, is that what you sailed through this last trip?”

Ken nodded while shutting the door to the outside and with an exaggerated shiver, he grabbed the half empty coffee pot. “Let’s see what’s left in the pot,” he suggested, and Leigh rapidly pushed her cup over, hoping that there would be enough. She was positively dying for a cup. It had been a long day. With Sammy, Becky and Mehran finally gone, she only had to last till Kasim was ready for bed and then she could do the same. It felt nice to have someone making fuss over her.

“So, do you think Alice is right? Did you see him?” she asked, impatient for the coffee hit.

Ken turned his head towards the living room where Kasim was ensconced in front of the large TV. “Can’t say if I did or not. All I remember is being totally shocked by seeing them escaping. I didn’t really pay attention to details. But trust Alice. She has a memory like an elephant, never forgets a face when she sees it. She’s probably right.” With the cups filled, Ken lifted a jug of milk. Leigh shook her head, already sipping the strong black brew. “I shouldn’t really; I think it is full cream.” He topped up the cup and took a satisfyingly long sip, sitting himself back in his chair.

Leigh watched him with the indulgence one might reserve for one’s father. It was only recently that he and Alice had taken notice of their health. “Age gracefully – the
natural way,” used to be their motto, and that did not include concerns about what they ate or drank. This preoccupation with their health was a recent development and Leigh was still getting used to it, unable to decide if this new approach was their way of preparing for the trip or if they were noticing mortality nipping at their heels.

“So what are you going to do with him?” Ken asked, making sure his voice could not be heard in the living room.

Leigh shrugged. “To tell you the truth, I have absolutely no idea. I’ve only been told that many houses where he could have found refuge have been raided. More breakouts across the country were successful, so there have been a lot more raids going on. Apparently lots of neighbours are behind the ‘information sharing’, as everyone is scared of terrorism.”

“He’s only a baby,” Ken’s voice sounded matter of fact but she knew that inside was one very caring and concerned person. “What about his education? Will he be able to go to school if he continues being an illegal? Of course, that is if he doesn’t get caught and somehow someone gets him a new set of identity papers. I suppose, if people can organise a break out of the detention centre a set of papers should be a piece of cake.”

“Well, what about his future?” Without either of them noticing, Alice was back, next to Leigh, carrying a plate of biscuits. “Do you know when they were planning to send him back to Iraq? Was it before the war we are going to have, or after? What do you think?” Having placed the plate on the table, she started to dab the spilled coffee
from the tablecloth, acting agitated. “Just look at him now. Telly is all that matters, just like any other twelve-year-old boy, and I tell you, he should be too. But when you look into this boy’s eyes you know that they’ve seen too much pain already. By the way, I’ve left him a little plate of his own, he could do with some extra weight on, he is so skinny.”

At the mention of biscuits Ken chuckled. “Are these your special biscuits we’re talking about? Dearest, you must be falling in love with this boy; you never share them with any of us.”

Alice responded by grabbing the tea towel and chasing her husband around the room. The unpacked bags of clothes and other sailing paraphernalia provided enough obstacles for Leigh to feel concern but, instead of trying to stop them, she felt her own tiredness lifting as if their enthusiasm for life was contagious.

In the living room, Kasim looked up from the screen taking notice of the commotion next door and caught glimpses of the old people running around. They sounded so happy he wanted to join in the fun and he stood up, one of the biscuits still in his hand. After he took a couple of steps towards the room they were in, his legs refused to move. “What do you want to go there for? You’ll never understand what’s happening, you don’t belong here.” They argued, simply refusing to bend at the knees. He looked around to see if anyone else was talking to him. The program he was watching seemed too childish although he couldn’t make full sense of it but the news was what he was waiting for. Had the Americans started the war yet? In the jail they had talked about it all the time. Some men had even taken bets on when it
was going to start. His uncle wanted to get rid of the Iraqi government and even if
that meant war by the Americans he was happy about it. Not everyone agreed with
him. The women were scared for the men who would be sent to fight the Americans.
All of them were scared of bombs falling on the families left behind, and Kasim
worried about his grandparents in the village. “And,” they all said, “we’ll be sent
back, just like the Afghans.”

Kasim had asked Mr Karsai, before the hunger strike started, if he wanted to go back.
“No freedom for a long time yet, Taliban is still in power where I live. But my wife
and children are now on the way here, so we will be ok.” Kasim didn’t know what to
think. He only remembered that his grandfather and his father had guns ready to use
against the government. On the other hand, some of his uncles worked for the
government in high positions and he often wished his family also worked for the
government and had big houses and cars.

Looking still for the source of the voice, Kasim found himself in front of a low shelf,
attracted to a large ceramic jar of a bright green colour. His heart jumped the moment
he saw it. His mother owned a smaller version of the same shape and colour. It was a
treasured present brought from China by her brother. He was a scientist and Kasim
was always told to look up to him because he studied hard and ended up being one of
the few scientists who travelled abroad. When the jar had arrived it was filled with
pieces of ginger preserved in thick syrup. Even now Kasim could recall its sweet and
biting taste. Luckily only his mother and he had liked it, so they shared all of it. He
recalled sitting with her in the kitchen and taking turns, each one taking one piece
every round. That happened shortly before she left for the city and did not come back.

The jar on the mantelpiece was bigger, but exactly the same green colour and with the same round lid fitting over a six-sided jar. Was it his mother who spoke to him from heaven? Was she here with him? The jar stood between a vase filled with flowers and a framed photo of a boy a little bit younger than Kasim. The picture must have been taken on the beach, because Kasim recognised the big blue waves behind the smiling boy. He must be their grandson, Kasim decided, feeling sad. Everyone here had someone, only he didn’t. For a couple of days he’d had Becky, but now she couldn’t look after him any more, so he was on his own again. Maybe Mehran, whom he had met in the morning was right; he should go home to his grandparents. It seemed that all Becky’s family wanted him to go back home. Didn’t they know that he might be in trouble with the government and he might never see his grandparents and his sister again even if they did send him back? So why did they want him to go? He didn’t think Becky wanted him to go back, because she had told him he should hide from the police. It seemed to him that she was the only friend he had.

Everything was so confusing; nothing was as simple as it used to be when he was little. His eyes started to smart, and he automatically reached for the jar and took it down from the shelf, but he couldn’t work it out if it was empty or full. “Maybe there’s still some ginger in it,” he thought, already taking the lid off. When he opened it, disappointment made the tears flow. A sandy grey mixture filled the jar’s bottom, not a piece of ginger in sight. He quickly replaced the lid and put the jar back.
on the shelf, wondering why anyone would want to keep sand like that in such a
pretty jar. He rushed back to the TV set, and back on the lounge he found himself
clutching at the chain around his neck. Each time he rubbed his fingers against the
uneven edges of the metal he felt his father’s presence. Kasim knew there was a story
attached to this strange necklace because his father had promised to tell him when he
was older or after they crossed the border. With his father’s death that chance was
also lost.

After a little while his sadness passed and he returned his attention to the program,
hoping for the news to start soon. The three remaining biscuits on the plate blinked at
him and he knew that he was going to finish them off before long. They wanted to be
eaten, that was definite, and besides they were delicious. “Delicious” was a new
word that he had learnt from Peter’s dictionary just before they left for the party.
Now he was repeating it over and over, making sure he got the spelling correct. If he
only learnt one new word a day, in one year he would know 365 new words and that
would be very useful. He must ask Leigh if she has a dictionary he could borrow;
maybe he could learn more than one word per day.
Warning Sign

The door of his mother’s bedroom was closed, but not shut as it used to be during his childhood. He recalled the times when he and Angie tiptoed so close to the door that their noses caught whiff of the oily paint and listened to the muffled groans and moans connected to that mysterious activity their parents engaged in, but that Thomas and his sister knew better than to ask about, or to knock.

That he should recall those times now puzzled him as he paused before pushing the door with his foot. The tray with a steaming pot and cups was getting heavy. He was taking it in to have a cup of tea with his parents before he was due to pick up Sammy at the airport. He had no illusions about being let out without severe questioning about his job and he needed to get ready.

The moment he hesitated proved crucial. In the stillness, his mother’s voice was clearly audible: “I’m sure it was the thought of him marrying this girl that did it. Anyhow I dreamt about her. She made me unwell. I had to stop him from going there.”

He stood there dumbfounded. Is that why the hospital tests revealed nothing and why she started to recover almost immediately after he cancelled the flight? How could he fall for it? Poor Angie had fallen victim to these so many times in the past. “Well, of course, you go out and enjoy yourself, Angie. I’ll manage here by myself. You have a good time and I’ll do the best I can.” In those days he hadn’t paid much attention. As the eldest boy his only responsibility was to perform at studies. Having seen Angie red-eyed Saturday night after Saturday night, he’d finally blown up. “Why do
you give up so easily? Why don’t you just go? Leave her to it.” He couldn’t understand what stopped her from living her life the same as he did.

A mother’s guilt trip so simple, so many years later, he’d fallen for the same, only belatedly recognising the pattern: “Oh no, I’ll be fine, don’t mind me. If the pain gets worse, I can always call an ambulance. You go with your girlfriend.”

Yes, he had been duped into believing that something was seriously wrong. He felt his face getting hotter, his chest muscles tightening. He took another deep breath and braced himself for more.

“My goodness woman, what’s got into you? It’s not as if he’s talking marriage and even if he was the girl is perfectly acceptable. I know she’s only an Australian, but it’s not as if she were a native girl with lots of drunken relatives waiting for her to support them. She’s just a common Aussie girl, in fact, better than that. She has a good education and a well-paid job. We know nothing about her family, but that is the Australian way and we have to accept it.”

His father’s voice sounded almost teasing. He was not taking his wife’s admission too seriously. “His fishing trip wasn’t cut short by his wife’s manipulations so he doesn’t need to worry,” Thomas muttered angrily, although his anger was abating as he heard his father’s defence of Sammy.

“It’s the thought of us getting old that I am worried about. Without a Chinese daughter-in-law we’re going to end up in a nursing home, mind my words.”
“Oh come on! And what do you make of the fact that the community now has three nursing homes that it fully runs, employs Chinese doctors, and nurses and other staff. Have you forgotten the donations that we make and the fundraising we attend? Do you think the residents there are non Chinese? Remember - even the biggest river rock changes its shape by the action of the water that flows around it.”

Thomas quietly backtracked down the stairs and then noisily walked up to the door and kicked it open. Surrounded by silk-covered cushions, his mother was the perfect image of an ailing lady with her husband by her side. They both smiled. “Oh, a cup of tea, how nice of you.”

His mother’s smile provoked in him an instant urge to drop the tray into her lap. Instead he returned the smile: “I’m running late for the airport. I’ll have to have the cup with you some other time.” Before either of them could object, he was gone.

When seated in a café, he performed his parents’ conversation: “Woman, she isn’t a native girl with a horde of relatives waiting for handouts.” Sammy laughed wholeheartedly. “Can you imagine anyone saying that? Where have they been living for the past twenty years?” Thomas shook his head and felt thankful to have her back in his life. Of course he didn’t tell her the whole story, not even a hint that Ming Cheng’s illness was anything but a legitimate sickness. He also moved the timing of the conversation to the early days of their relationship, before she’d met them.

Sammy laughed appreciatively at his performance but then she stopped. “Why haven’t you told me earlier what you actually do? I think it’s pretty rich not letting
me know that you are a cyber spy. How was I to explain it to my mother? She’s right into the civil liberties stuff, an old leftie and practically a Communist, that’s who we are talking about here. And this is the person who was next to me when you rang. It wasn’t a pleasant moment, I can assure you. She went on and on, one would think that you’d committed a heinous crime; although I must admit she has a point. I’m way less radical, but boy I don’t like to think that our rent is getting paid by you spying on ordinary citizens. Neither do I like the idea that you are the kind of person who would do that, not to even mention the issues of privacy laws.”

Thomas was ready, he had done his homework. The two hours he’d spent in the morning preparing his argument were going to pay off. He felt nervous energy racing through his body and he had to stop his fingers tapping on the imaginary keyboard.

“You have to believe me; I didn’t know who this particular job was for. We work for various government departments as well as private concerns. As an IT company, we do the job we’re asked to do. It is all about our technical expertise, often we don’t know who we’re working for. That’s management’s role. We are the cyber geeks, not concerned with anything except getting the machines to do the job someone paid us for. I could’ve been tracking web sites visited by paedophiles. Would you have a problem with that?”

She watched him with the look that could mean anything from, “I’ll listen to you before I’ll make up my mind,” to, “It doesn’t matter what you say, I’ve decided already.”
A sudden wave of fear seized him. Had he lost her? Was this explanation not convincing enough? He needed to do more damage control fast.

“When I found out what report I’d produced, I was horrified. Well no, not immediately, it sort of took a while. I’ve not paid much attention to all of these issues, you know. Terrorism, refugees, the anti-immigration arguments. When you’ve been brought up in a refugee family, your life is always about the reality of being a refugee. You can’t avoid it, it is always with you. This fear that your parents live with; no matter how long you stay in one place, one day someone might kick you out. Not even send you back where you came from, but just chuck you out. Their nightmares are made out of that fear; long after all legal aspects are fixed. We, the children of refugees must succeed, so they validate our parents’ decision to leave all they had and all they knew for some distant and unfamiliar future. Our success proves that our parents’ decision was a correct one, that their sacrifices were worthwhile. When the fear finally stops, you ignore the issues. Your only concern is with success.”

Sammy’s eyes were the only part of her body that moved. They followed his lips, although they kept returning to his hands that now moved freely about in an effort to emphasise his points. He stopped and waited for a reply, needing some reassurance that she was willing to believe him. Her inaction seemed damning of him.

“For Christ’s sake, I’m child of refugees. They came here on a boat in the eighties – also not wanted. They lived in a migrant centre, but a different kind. No razor wire and prison guards, just ignorant bureaucrats who didn’t really care but didn’t yet see
each arrival as the usurper of the great Australian way of life, a non-deserving queue jumper or a terrorist in waiting. We were only seen as Chinks and Spicks, and people feared that Australia would become asianised. When I realised how many people accessed the web sites offering their help to the refugees I felt ashamed because I grew up with the advantage of my parents being allowed to stay. Who knows what would have happened to the man now called Thomas? I could have been one of boys roaming the streets of big Vietnamese cities, orphans whose parents didn’t survive the re-education camps, or I could have become a rice farmer. It’s not really important what would’ve happened to me, but I realised that ignorance is not an excuse. It is important for me to find out what will happen to those still waiting for the same chance that I got. You can tell that to your mother, or better still I’ll tell her myself.”

She was now wavering; her eyes stopped roaming, her gaze met his. “That’s why I warned you. Yes, I didn’t want you in the way of any police action, but I didn’t want anyone who might have been hiding there to be caught. Please, believe me.”

Sammy’s hand gently landed on his upper arm. It felt reassuring and steady. Her voice was calm. “Hey, it’s ok, I believe you. The kid’s safe; he’s now in my mother’s house. He is a small kid, twelve or so, sort of cute looking, apparently from Iraq. And don’t worry. I’m sure everyone would have been warned through Becky.” His relief must have been so obvious; he wanted to embrace her right there. Instead, she got up. “Let’s go home, I’ve missed you.”
Back on the Street

The golden stars blinked their artificial cheerfulness with a sickening regularity, despite rain battering the streets. Intersections had turned into torrents of water escaping the blocked storm drains and a section of a car park became a knee deep pool that threatened to engulf the parked cars. Family station wagons disgorged their cargo at the main entrance to escape the downpour. Those seeking a fast dinner joined the queues that now stretched from the five cash registers right to the front door.

“This downpour will fill their coffers,” Jodie mused, watching the ongoing parade of vehicles entering and leaving the car park. Huddled in the oversized jersey top on the seat of a bus shelter directly opposite the golden stars, she waited for the crowds to fill all of the indoor tables and then spill out on to the sheltered outdoors. Her stomach complained about the time this process was taking, reminding her that having left Marjorie’s place the previous day, she hadn’t eaten anything since.

The weather had still been dry when she left, but the storm had blown in a couple of hours later, bringing rain and a strong gale. Luckily, she had found another clothes bin to spend the night in. With plenty of clothes inside she slept cramped but warm. When she’d finally emerged with no place to go she’d ended up drenched on the way to the nearest train station. The security guard had turned her out as soon as she sat down to beg coins from passers-by. The same fate awaited her after she trudged through the rain to the nearest shopping plaza. She hoped for a few coins to buy a hot drink and hot chips, but two burly guys in uniforms with yellow shields on their breast pockets put an end to that fantasy, turning her out into the rain once more. For
the rest of the day she knelt and shivered in a church pew, her head propped by the wooden rest. She managed a kip and searched her soul for an answer as to why she had left Marjorie’s place.

“Yes,” she told herself. “Marjorie’s constant talk about Jack drove me nuts.” Unfortunately she had to admit that had she mentioned it to the old woman she’d have stopped it immediately. So it must’ve been something else that drove her out. Over and over she returned to the moment immediately preceding her flight from the house.

She clearly recalled Marjorie fussing about, ready at least half an hour early for some outing organised by the local council and asking her for what seemed like the fiftieth time. “Wouldn’t you like to join us, love?” The same answer given to her each time didn’t seem to register: “No thank you, Mrs Williams, I think I will just rest.” Secretly, Jodie couldn’t think of anything more dreadful than a day spent with a bunch of Marjories, but she kept her manners as her mother taught her. Still, Marjorie wouldn’t listen. “I’d tell them you were my granddaughter. They wouldn’t know any better, half of them can’t even remember what they had for a breakfast.”

It was the way she’d pronounced the word “granddaughter” that made Jodie take notice. Something in her tone set Jodie on edge. “I don’t want to be your granddaughter; I don’t want to be anyone’s granddaughter. Grandparents make you love them and then they go and die when you need them most.”
Of course she had not said that aloud. She had just watched Marjorie’s silent disappointment. In search yet again for her second set of house keys, she uttered the sentence that made Jodie squirm at first and then run away as fast as she could. “You won’t go anywhere, love, will you? I’ll leave this set with you, but I’ll be depending on you to be here for me to get back home.”

These words made her run only a moment after Marjorie’s lift arrived, taking with her only the clothes she stood in and Jack’s footy jersey that Marjorie has given her. She locked the front door and left the key in an envelope addressed to Marjorie, stuck in the door. “Thank you for everything, keep well,” was all she could think of while she was fighting tears and hoping that no one burgled the house before Marjorie got home. As she crossed the road and headed towards the train station, she felt angry. Why did the old woman have to spoil it? She was already getting used to Jodie being there permanently like. She was counting on her being dependable and Jodie hated it. She’d been in that situation before and where had it got her?

She could hear her mother, incapable of standing up to her father, when she must’ve known that Jodie was right in refusing to meet the Reverend. “You do what your father wants you to, he knows best.” She kept repeating it despite Jodie’s tears and her growing anger. Then, she’d added. “I’m depending on you Jodie, I just can’t take any more of his rages, and I know you won’t let me down.” Having experienced her father’s rages, Jodie had gone back to Bible classes week after week, and the Reverend’s attentions had got more difficult to avoid each time.
No, Jodie was never going to be dependable ever again. Especially for an old lady, who reminded her of her grandma: “You love them and they die on you or they depend on you and you get hurt.” She wasn’t going to fall for any of that ever again. Her other choice was to run away.

Waiting in the bus shelter kept her reasonably dry once the church started to fill with people attending the evening service, but it didn’t stop her stomach cramping. She had chosen this place hoping that her next meal would come from the diner across the road.

“It’s easy,” Ricky at the drop-in centre had told her some time ago. He’d done it many times, always with success. “Make sure you work the outdoor tables only. Inside, people feel they have to clear their own stuff; outside they leave it behind when they leave. Families with preschool kids are the best. They never finish their meals, leftovers galore. But don’t even bother with school age boys, they are piranha fish, eat everything in sight.” With his instructions in mind, she could already taste the sweet, cool thickness of a chocolate milk shake in her mouth. “Just watch them carefully. When they leave, move in casually, grab the tray with the leftovers and walk towards the bins inside. Along the way, finish off whatever you want or stuff it into your pockets. Dead easy and you don’t even have to steal.”

She was damp, hungry and cold enough to have a go. The bus shelter was practically underneath the arches marking the way in. Having watched the tables changing occupants continuously, she was ready. In the easing rain, she strolled across the car park, aiming for a recently vacated corner table, and along the way she scored an
almost full container of Coke from a tray overflowing with empty wrappers. She deposited the contents of the tray in the trash bin and with the cup in hand she casually rested against the low fence separating the playground, a watchful teenager looking out for a younger sibling. With so many kids climbing the structures, any of them could have belonged to her. She surveyed the closest tables.

“Come on, David, just one more bite,” a voice pleaded nearby.

A five-year-old regarded his father with a defiant glance, and then returned his attention to his plastic figurine. “Don’t want it, only the chips.”

His tone conveyed immediately what Jodie remembered only too well from the days of minding her little brother. This kid wasn’t going to be made to change his mind. The cheeseburger in front of him would be hers, unless the father decided to take it away. She also realised how much she missed her little brother; his outstretched arms and his bossy voice. “Jodie, carry me!” She craved the warmth of his little body glued to hers, his arms strangling her. “Go away!” She pushed the memory into the rarely visited part of her brain, allowing herself only to concentrate on the opportunities surrounding her.

Predictably, the boy won the battle and Jodie was about to win a meal, seeing them walk away with only chips and drinks in their hands. This was her chance. Only a couple of steps, then a stretch of her arm, she could already taste the melted cheese.
“Excuse me.” The brisk voice seemed to belong to a pink rubber glove that reached over her shoulder and lifted her dream away, tossing it into a black garbage bag sitting on the top of a trolley.

With gritted teeth, Jodie managed a smile. “Sure.”

The pink hand belonged to Jason, his nametag sitting in the dead centre of his red and white checked shirt pocket. “Let me wipe it for you first.” He flashed a McClean smile, swished the sponge over the tabletop and went back inside, leaving only a squeaking wheel song in his wake. She sat down at the clean table, her trembling hand steadied by the Coke cup.

She again searched the tables, her ears now attuned to the trolley’s song. On her left, a man of her father’s age cradled a half-eaten meal while observing her hungrily. “Creep, what you staring at?” she asked silently, making sure to avoid his eyes. On her right, a recently seated couple with a boy her age discussed their choices, and having left the boy to mind the table they rushed inside. “Nothing here for me at the end of their meal,” Jodie thought and turned her attention elsewhere.

Having scanned the tables further afield she returned her vision back only to realise that her neighbour was now focusing on the lone boy. She thought she noticed a smile flashed in his direction and the boy’s obvious discomfort. “Kick him in the balls, that’s what you should do,” she advised him silently. “Believe, me he’s a real sicko.” Her own advice still sounded outrageous to her ears. Only 18 months before, she would never have considered even thinking those words, certainly not seriously.
acting on them. She did not think she would even have known anyone who could bring up those emotions. And anyway, thoughts like that were considered a sin. The last year and half had taught her a different way of looking at people. Some were predators and others were victims. She sure wasn’t going to be one of those. Her attention returned to her surroundings. A couple close by had left their unfinished meals on the tray as they took off after a red-faced toddler who screamed his way through the tables with unexpected speed. Jodie’s empty stomach rushed into action ahead of any caution. She stepped towards the table, grabbed the tray and turned away, when a hairy arm barred her way.

“Stealing food, are we?” His sly smile hung on as he pushed against the hairy arm. He was enjoying himself. “I’ve watched you, I know what you’re up to, you little slut. Do you want me to call the management or are you prepared to make a deal? A job at the back of the car park, out of the rain, I do have a car.” His face showed contempt and his eyes were dark caves in which only serpents lived. She wasn’t going to wait any longer. When his hand moved to her shoulder, her knee automatically shot upward with all the force she was capable of. Exactly the way Dino had taught her at the drop-in centre. It connected with her intended target, his scream was the confirmation she wanted to hear. His hand released her shoulder and she ran, dodging the tables and leaving a commotion in her trail.

“Police, call the police, catch the thief.” She heard his voice and for a split second she wished she could stop, return and give her side of the story. Maybe that would put him where he belonged. People these days were aware of pedos, but she was on the run and couldn’t afford to be involved in any skirmish.
The rain hit her face with unexpected force. Her feet slipped on the wet ground and she realised that anyone chasing her would quickly gain on her. “Darkness, head for the darkness!” she directed her feet, jumping over the low brick wall separating the car park from the main thoroughfare.

She recalled a dark lane on the other side of the road beyond the bus shelter. Without a backward glance, she sprinted across, weaving between the two lanes of traffic waiting at the traffic lights. When she reached the darkness of the alley it smelled of cat piss and rotted garbage. She didn’t mind the stench, or the water soaking every shred of her clothing, she was sure that she escaped. A couple of hundred yards into the smelly darkness she stopped running. With her head tilted back she opened her mouth and let the rain fall in to put out the fire burning in her lungs. After a moment she noticed that the raindrops sliding down her cheeks tasted salty. There was nothing she could do; she just stood there drinking the salt.
Lost in the City

Kasim’s eyes focused on the computer screen, mindful of the instructions Peter had given him. The room was quiet except for the purring of the computer and the rain falling on the roof. When he stopped playing he could hear Leigh and Mehran talking in the kitchen at the end of the hallway. Becky had come to visit him in the morning and brought some games that Peter sent when it became obvious that the planned soccer in the park wasn’t going to happen. Kasim was happy for having seen her; she always made him laugh and told him he was going to be fine. He knew that she was working out what was best for him. After she left he watched telly and played the computer. Having spent the entire day inside, he felt like he was now truly in hiding. On the mid-afternoon news he saw some of the recaptured escapees but he didn’t recognise anyone.

Mehran came late in the afternoon and while he and Leigh talked Kasim again played the computer. He could see that the two of them liked each other and wondered who would arrange their marriage. Mehran was still a puzzle for him. Like the ones Peter had in his room, the coloured pieces of cardboard that didn’t mean anything until they were put in the right place, and then suddenly a picture came up. With Mehran, he felt that he was still missing many of the pieces of information and until he had all of them nothing would make sense. For a start he couldn’t understand if Mehran really had asked him to give himself up and return home or if he had asked him not to give himself up. Kasim just couldn’t be certain what it was he said. Surely Mehran would have known that Kasim would either be immediately killed or sent to prison or drawn into any future war, just like his father was. He would never see his grandparents again, of that he was sure. And he was scared of being killed, and
anyhow he didn’t ever want to be in the army. He remembered his father telling him that, despite what he was told at school, not all Iraqis wanted to fight the Great War and not all agreed with Iraq attacking Iran. Some even preferred to escape rather than fight, not because they were cowardly but because they didn’t believe in killing. Others had found different ways of refusing to be drafted into the army. On top of that, his father told him that among the Iranians, their great enemy, were also many who refused to fight, and if they ended up as soldiers they deeply regretted the lives they took. He knew lot more then he told him then, but never the details. Kasim remembered him saying, “The less you know the less the secret police can get out of you.” Often when he said it he touched the chain that now hung underneath Kasim’s T-shirt, way too long for his skinny neck. He knew it was his good luck charm, both his mother and his father were looking after him, as long as he had the chain on he was going to be safe.

Maybe Mehran was a spy and worked for the Iraqi government. Maybe he only pretended that he couldn’t understand when Kasim spoke. In the Detention Centre, rumours circulated about people that were paid by the Australian government to convince refugees to return. Those who accepted were paid lots of money to go back home with. Some Afghans who came from Kabul accepted the offer and used the money to set up a business. Maybe it was Mehran who convinced them. Then again, Mehran might have been just an ordinary guy who thought that kids should live at home. But Kasim didn’t have a home to go back to, he had been away for too long, had seen too much, he couldn’t just go back. To confuse him even further, now Mehran brought sweet pastries and dates, telling Leigh that they were for Kasim only, and he hadn’t mention his going home again. Instead he offered to play a
computer game, but when Kasim chose a “soldier fighting” sort of a game, Mehran kept excusing himself, saying that he wasn’t good at fighting, even on the computer. When Kasim asked if he had fought in the past (he seemed old enough to have fought in the war his uncles died in) he pretended not to understand. Kasim just couldn’t make him out, he got confused every time they met. Still there was also something about him that Kasim liked. He couldn’t quite put ‘his finger on it.’ This was another combination of words he learnt from the dictionary, this time one that stood on the shelf in Leigh’s study. In the end Mehran agreed to play a soccer game and just when Iraq scored its first goal against Afghanistan, Leigh walked in.

“Would you like to have a dinner out?” she asked. “Becky told me your favourite is a cheeseburger and chocolate sundae.”

Kasim nodded his head so hard it almost hurt, wondering how far they had to drive in the pouring rain. Once in the car he completely lost his sense of direction immediately after they turned the first street corner. The dark and the rain made it difficult for him to see, although it didn’t take long at all before they reached the diner.

After parking the car, they ran across the car park, trying to find inside seats. With the constant downpour and zillions of people inside, Kasim felt lucky when they found an empty table outside. He wished he was younger and could crawl into the multicoloured tubes and slide down the slippery slides. Instead, he was told to mind the table while Mehran and Leigh went inside to order. “So many people eating out even on a rainy night, they must all be rich,” he thought and decided to count them.
Number one was a large man already eating at a table directly next to theirs and Kasim did not like the way he watched him while chewing on his bun. Two was a girl about his age also waiting for her meal. Three, four and five were an old couple and a young woman with a funny pouch attached to her front – he realised that inside was a tiny baby that became a number six. He was about to start counting the other side, when he saw the big man leap and grab the girl’s arm. Before Kasim could properly decide what was happening, the man was on the ground and the girl was running away. The scream that reached his ears, struck deep inside Kasim’s heart. “I’m the police, I’m the police.”

“Secret police, that’s why he was watching me so intently,” Kasim did not think twice. He leapt from the table, dodged the man on the ground, managed to avoid a collision with the mother and her baby and sprinted out, into the rain. “Run, run!” His mind filled with the TV images of the escapees being led back to the detention centre. “Never, never again!” He sprinted faster, needing to gain distance from anyone pursuing him. “Don’t turn around!” a little voice ordered. “Cross the road, find a park, there are dark places in there, even the police won’t be able to follow you in the park.”

While his body moved, the little voice was issuing directions and orders: “Go right, go left!” and “Turn here, cross there!” His legs started to protest but his mind insisted: “They’ll look for you everywhere. You can’t stop till you find a park.” He rounded another corner and then came to a sudden halt, his feet slipping on the wet pavement. Ahead of him a high fence blocked the road. There was nowhere else to go. Having regained his balance and without having any other choice, he spun
around to face his pursuers, but no one was there. He was surrounded only by rain, a yellow light from the street lamps and the occasionally lit window. Relief flooded him; he relaxed and licked the rain of his face. Then he remembered. Leigh and Mehran were still at the diner. A flutter of panic and then he calmed down. “No problem. You’ll walk back and when all the fuss has died down, you’ll join them. They’ll be still waiting there.” The little voice sounded pretty confident, so Kasim immediately started to retrace his steps to the beginning of the street, entering a busier road.

“Is it left or right?” His mind refused to direct him and his memory drew blank. After a while he decided to go right and try to recall anything he might have noticed during his flight. “Have to find the golden stars; all I have to do is to find those lights.” He started to walk fast now, looking for the road, one on which he’d find the diner. The rain increased in intensity and he was now completely soaked, his hair plastered against his skull. One corner after another, the golden glow lights eluded him as evening turned into night. Only when his body started to complain, he admitted to himself that he was lost.

A police car cruising past triggered in him another instinct. He imagined what the car’s occupants would see through the windows; a rain-soaked boy walking outside in the middle of a stormy night. Such a picture would easily raise suspicion, regardless of who the policemen were looking for. One of the things he had noticed about Australia was that there was nobody on the streets at night. Other cities he had visited had people doing business, eating out and families strolling and shopping, people visiting each other until the early hours in the morning, but in Australia the
streets went to sleep early. Anyone wondering around in the rain would be easily noticed. Shivering with cold he returned to his original idea. He needed to find a park and a shelter from the rain and the wind, away from prying eyes, so he could take his time and decide what to do next.

He immediately followed a side street that opened on to a path leading alongside a wide canal. Even through the rain-driven darkness he could see the raindrops breaking the water surface and he wondered if he would feel any colder if he jumped in. Only a low fence stood between him and the canal, and he found himself following it, not for any other reason than the hope that it would bring him to the sea and a better chance of hide-outs away from unwanted attention. To his surprise, the glowing lights in the distance were soon blocked out by a solid wall of darkness.

“Trees,” he thought, propelling his exhausted body into a run. The faster he ran the less solid the wall appeared. It became a patchwork of darkness of different textures, embroidered with occasional lights sparkling through. Soon he could recognise a large cluster of trees through which he could see open ground that stretched out towards what he judged to be the water line. Above, flickering lights outlined a giant shape that made his heart jump with joy. He recognised an unmistakable outline of a bridge.

He’d noticed this bridge previously when he drove across it with Becky. It wasn’t the famous Sydney Bridge, but one that hung on steel ropes that had made him feel unsafe the first time they crossed it. He was worried that the bridge might sway in the wind, but once on it he didn’t feel it move at all. Becky laughed with him when he told her about his fear and she showed him the statue of a soldier at one end of it. It
was there in memory of a battle long time ago when Australian soldiers fought the
Turkish army in some place in Turkey and lost. He could’ve told them they would.
The Turks had a reputation. No one would take them on lightly. Everyone in Iraq
knew that they were fierce fighters.

Now the dark bridge silhouette crawled with yellow and red fast-moving beetles. It
took him a while to realise what they were and where they were heading. If he waited
till the morning he could find his way to the end of that bridge and maybe than he
could remember the way to Becky’s house, which stood in a street not far from the
road leading up to the bridge. That decided it for him. All he had to do was to survive
till morning and then find Becky. At the thought of her his nose started to run. The
wet sleeve of his top felt slimy after he wiped it, but it didn’t matter. The rain was
going to wash it in a few minutes anyhow. He needed to hide till the morning and
then find Becky before the police found him; otherwise she would never know what
happened to him. Kasim wouldn’t like her to think he had run away.

Becky had thought of everything. The first day in her house she had given him a
piece of paper with the address and phone number on it. “Keep it in your pocket, in
case you get lost,” she’d said. He visualised the paper lying on the bed in Leigh’s
room, he’d placed it there only moments before they left, never thought he’d need it
again that day.

His pockets were empty now, his mind hijacked by fear and his body exhausted and
shivering. The only way he was going to survive the night was to keep moving, no
matter how tired he felt. So close to the sea, the rain was driven by a fierce wind,
making the air very cold. Underneath his feet, the lawn was turning into a lake, ankle deep in some places. When his foot completely sank into the water a moment after he stepped off the hard path, Kasim laughed despite the water filling his shoe. He jumped in and out of the deep puddle, enjoying the loud squelching sound. It wasn’t as if his shoes were dry, they have not been for a long time. “Not even one bit of me is dry,” he announced to the blowing wind, feeling the water entering at his neckline and leaving via his underpants. The effort of jumping exhausted him, but he knew that the wind and the cold would claim him immediately if he stopped moving.

Following the paved path, he saw a large shadow rising from the wet lawn ahead and decided that it must be a shelter of some kind. Closer to it, the roof looked solid but he could see cars crossing the bridge through the spaces where walls should have been. Still, his spirit rose in the anticipation of a roof and his legs managed another sprint. When he stopped against a low wall that would offer a level of protection, his lips whispered involuntarily. “Please God, make it be empty.”

The low wall did not deter the wind, making it the likely reason for the pavilion being empty. The rain, driven in by the wind, had formed puddles on the concrete floor. “Not much better than outside” Kasim concluded, until he recognised a table and seats set up in the darkest spot inside the shelter. Crouching on all fours he managed to crawl underneath. In the very corner he discovered a tiny space protected from the wind and the rain. After a moment of stillness, he crawled out of his shelter, back into the wind’s fury. With trembling hands and frozen fingers he unbuttoned his pants and took them off, quickly pulled of his jumper and his T-shirt, and after a quick look around dropped down his underpants. Before putting every piece of
clothing back on, he squeezed and twisted it hard to get as much of the water out as was possible. When he dressed again, he felt warmer and he crawled back into his shelter. The warmth didn’t last long. With his knees folded underneath his chin his body started to shake uncontrollably. He tried to stop it by holding his knees tighter but with no success. His hands shook, so did his arms and legs. Even his head shook with the force of his chattering teeth. Not knowing what to do, he continued to grip his knees and brace his chin against them. Where his outgoing breath warmed his knees, the small spot of warmth claimed his attention. He could feel it despite the goose bumps, the chattering teeth and his numb face, hands and feet. “Direct your mind on it,” he heard a voice say somewhere inside him. He followed the advice and later, underneath the shakes, right inside his body, he saw a small spark glowing fiercely. A red spark, just like the ones he had seen when his grandfather stoked the fire. He kept watching the red ember grow bigger, feeling its warmth expanding.
First Day

They searched all night long; in cars, on foot, trudging through the rain, calling his name. They visited all the petrol stations in the area, asked at corner shops, cafes and pubs, and watched the car park for hours, long after the diner’s closing time. They even inquired at the local police station, asking carefully about a youth with an autistic condition who couldn’t speak to reveal his address, but retreated quickly when too many questions headed back at them. “Don’t worry,” they lied after a pretended phone call. “The grandparents picked him up from home and forgot to tell us.”

Above all, they blamed themselves for not preparing him for all contingencies, for not having had a plan, for leaving him alone. The reality kept staring them in their faces. Kasim was nowhere to be found. Immediately after the incident they called for reinforcements. Alice and Ken, Anna, Becky and Peter, they all came despite the rain. They divided the area and re-checked every street and back alley, every bus shelter, extending the covered area way beyond the walking capability of any twelve-year-old. They found noone.

The rain did not make it any easier; it kept coming down with an intensity that even Noah would have found worrying. Finally, at an all night convenience store, they thought they had a breakthrough. The wife recalled seeing a drenched youth battling the wind when she was restocking the window shelves, but her husband soon quashed their hopes: “It was a girl and I got worried about her, if you know what I mean. This is no place for a girl to be out at night.” He kept repeating it so vigorously they had to believe him although, despite his assurances, they followed
his wife’s directions to an inner city foreshore park. Popular with dog walkers, picnickers and families during the daytime, the place was notorious for its nocturnal activities. Disposable syringes and lines of constantly vandalised park lights testified to its nightlife.

They parked near the kids’ playground where a couple of roofed picnic tables, the kind that provided shelter when rain showers disrupted birthday parties, attracted their attention. Mehran got out with an umbrella and, calling Kasim’s name, he ran towards the tables. As he neared the first one a small figure shot out and, ignoring his calls, sprinted towards a wooden bridge across the canal ahead. He followed, his umbrella turning inside out in the wind. When the runner reached the light cast down by one of the unbroken lamps, it became obvious that she was a girl.

He stopped to catch his breath. “Hey, wait!” he shouted. To his surprise the girl stopped for a moment to look at her pursuer. “Wait, we aren’t after you, we’re looking for someone else. But you don’t need to sleep here tonight either, you can have a bed.” The moment his words got swept by the next gust of rain and the wind, she flexed her middle finger in an unmistakably rejecting gesture and disappeared into the darkness.

The absurdity of his action dawned on Mehran. “What an idiot I am! As if!” Struggling with the umbrella, he trudged back toward the car. By the time he reached it and refolded the umbrella, he was completely soaked.
“Must’ve been the kid the shopkeeper talked about,” he explained. “Pity you weren’t with me; I was trying to get her to come with us, and of course I must’ve sounded like a dirty old man.”

Leigh shook her head. “I doubt she’d stop for anyone. Looks like she’s a survivor and wants to stay that way. A smart kid, probably with more experience than you and I can put together.” She stopped halfway through the thought and added, “Well, certainly more than I’d had at her age. Sorry, I keep making assumptions on your behalf. Keep forgetting how little I know about your past.”

He smiled, but she felt that she’d blown it again. With a deep sigh she dialled a number on her mobile and waited. “Any luck?” Listening to the reply, she made the next decision. “Let’s call it off, we won’t find him now. See you at my place.” When she rang off she sat still for a moment. He thought he could see the tears of defeat welling up, but then her hand stroked his cheek. “You’re soaked, let’s get you dry.”

Half an hour later, they were all in. Each one preoccupied with the ghosts unleashed by Kasim’s disappearance. Leigh was convinced that Becky’s red eyes were accusatory and blaming, despite her words talking of bad luck and hope.

“How do we look for someone who isn’t even supposed to be here?” asked Ken, going straight into the cracks of the issue and echoing everyone else’s question. Becky’s response was depressingly obvious. “I’ve no idea. I suppose we can’t continue doing what we’ve been doing tonight. Hoping to bump into him or hear by accident. Of course if they get him, the first and possibly the last we might see of him
would be on the telly.” As she spoke her words clipped and cut. Leigh could hear the frustration and anger, but hesitated to give her comfort. Under the circumstances, she wasn’t the person. Luckily, Peter got up and without a word wrapped an arm round her shoulders.

Ken took the floor once more. “We need to decide who will go and talk to the refugee advocacy groups, the people who got him out in the first place. They must have experience in dealing with these situations.”

Becky’s voice sounded calmer but more defeated. “I’ve got those contacts, I can do that. Tell everyone to keep an ear out for any news about recaptures.” She fell silent and then added. “Some media people are on side too, they’d let the networks know if word came around. In fact even contacts within police would, it’s the department that would make sure it’s kept out of headlines.” She fell silent once more.

“Look, for what it’s worth I’ll check the hospital emergencies departments, to see if anyone fitting his description was admitted. Then I’ll drive around again and ask everyone I can find; won’t be able to sleep anyhow. We might still find him sheltering somewhere from the rain,” said Alice.

Leigh felt that she needed a different plan of action for the next day. Imagining Kasim spending the night wet, cold and full of fear made her worry about his state of mind. She felt concerned that he might snap and retreat to a point of no return, or that someone savvier but more dangerous than the immigration officers would find him. How much does he know about the ways of the West, the dark side of freedom? Her
fears crowded her mind but she couldn’t find a way to respond to them in a useful way. She sat there listening to her friends searching for solutions. When Anna’s turn came her voice was calm, and she offered what Leigh considered the most promising way to success.

“I’ll offer a reward to the guys at the drop-in centre. They know all the places where runaways shelter. Of course he’s completely new and not likely to follow any patterns, but these guys know places we wouldn’t even dream to look, places and people that even cops know nothing about. If he’s still anywhere around the Inner West, they’ll find him. Hopefully someone will come across him before the cops do.”

Despite her calm exterior Anna too felt guilty. “You bitch,” her little voice asserted itself the moment she got the call, “you wanted him to go away so you wouldn’t be reminded of your own vulnerabilities. You couldn’t find in your heart a little kindness toward a kid who didn’t ask to be born into such an unsafe world. Just like your mother didn’t and for that matter any of us do. Once we become aware of who we are it’s often too late for some things to change. Your children have always been looked after, you’ve made sure of that. You left your country to get a better life. You’re lucky you got here early, that’s all. Does an escapee from one oppressive regime deserve more of a chance than those from another one?” All of these questions haunted her as she drove the waterlogged streets searching every shadow hiding in doorways and bus shelters. In the light of her car’s beam, each shadow revealed a life even more soul destroying, because no one was looking for them.
The guys at the drop-in centre were her only hope. She was convinced that those with the knowledge of the dark side of Sydney would be in a better position to locate him than the police would.

Mehran’s main preoccupation was to control his anger, although he wasn’t exactly sure with whom he felt angry. The government who locked the boy up? Those who helped him out, but couldn’t guarantee his security? Those who opened their hearts to him, but lacked the skill or power to change the situation to secure him a decent life? Himself for having decided to spend an opportune moment with the woman he’d fallen in love with while leaving the boy outside by himself? He was waiting to tell her that he wanted to spend the night with her when the commotion outside had put an end to his desire. They had spent the night looking for the boy and returned wet, exhausted and empty-handed. Initially, he wasn’t even interested in the boy; he felt so strongly that he belonged with his family. In his mind, that was where he should return and therefore he didn’t truly search for ways to help him. Neither had he listened to the boy’s reasons for wanting to stay. Now he felt that he had failed him, blaming himself for not doing more. On top of everything, he alone knew what Kasim was running from and what he was being returned to if captured. The entire situation was riddled with contradictions that Mehran found irresolvable, and his frustrations and anger were leaking out at inappropriate moments.

As the night progressed, their ghosts grew taller and more confident and threatening while they themselves shrank under the weight of their private guilts and recriminations.
Dancing in the Rain

Lulled into a state of oblivion by the endless wind and the rain, Kasim’s mind had withdrawn into the most distant region of his consciousness, the zone where the mind no longer recognises itself and the shivering body with its chattering teeth as belonging to the same entity, and where it feels free to distance itself from that wretched body for progressively longer periods of time. It wasn’t sleep that Kasim was experiencing. That particular condition required a level of comfort or exhaustion, while the only sensation he was experiencing was the intense cold and pain caused by his bones being contorted into a bucket-sized space. The cold seeped into the core of his bones and the red spark of warmth on which he had focused previously now eluded him. His mind had already started the journey to somewhere else.

Anyone vaguely familiar with basic human physiology would recognise the progressive stage of what, in the medical circles, is commonly known as hypothermia, a bodily state in which the shivers are superseded by an ever-deepening lethargy, followed by decreased activity of all organs, including the brain cells. The process eventually results in a complete shutdown of all bodily functions. While Kasim’s body was still fighting the cold, sending shivers from his toes to his teeth, his brain cells were already shutting down.

It was at this point that, in spite of his slowing-down brain, some of his senses registered another presence in the midst of the falling rain and the howling wind. Maybe it was the heat of another body close by, or the sparking of the electric impulses in some other brain. Although unable to move or open his eyes, he could
hear a definite sound of feet moving across the concrete floor. Instead of moving across and then disappearing, the sound persisted, refusing to be pinned down to one area. It shifted in direction and it resisted being identified with one speed. Maybe because of its irregularity Kasim’s mind found the strength to escape the all-pervading lethargy and decided to act. When the sound of the feet paired up with shouting and yelling, Kasim was getting ready to investigate. He forced his eyelids to move, to dilate his pupils sufficiently to focus into the darkness and his ears to listen beyond the gusts of wind. Eventually he understood.

“Go on, it’s enough. Stop it now!” The voice repeated these orders in so many furious mutations that Kasim’s curiosity was roused enough to crawl forward until his eyes detected a body moving in the centre of the pavilion. Its flailing arms and stomping feet performed the kind of dance that would have made him laugh under different circumstances. In the present situation he just watched, too exhausted to react.

Unknown to him, his brain cells executed certain circuitries and within a split second his brain had produced a startling revelation. The wildly dancing and shouting apparition was a girl, totally oblivious to his presence. Having acknowledged his discovery, Kasim felt so overwhelmed that he shut his eyes and started his retreat back into the darkness. It all felt too much. The promise of total oblivion was much more enticing. No more fear, pain or disappointment. He was choosing the last possible freedom available to him. He was feeling comfortable with his decision when, like a bolt from the dark sky, a thought broke into his fading consciousness.
“She’s on the run like me; why else would she be here? She could help me to find Becky.”

That thought jolted him into action. Suddenly he was frightened that she would rush out into the darkness, and that unless he acted immediately he would lose her. He opened his eyes and this time he also unclenched his arms from around his knees and attempted to crawl out from underneath the table. His joints felt stiff and painful, and straightening each of his limbs took a long time. He was expecting her to disappear before he could move enough to crawl out completely but he needn’t have worried. She was still dancing, shuffling and jumping when another thought struck him. She was simply keeping warm. “I mustn’t scare her,” was uppermost on his mind as he waited for the pins and needles to stop running up and down his legs. The wind and the rain must’ve blocked all sounds of his movements because she didn’t notice him until he moved out into the more illuminated side of the shelter.

Her body tensed even before she spun around, ready to fight. “No, no!” Kasim cried out, lifting his arms in a gesture of surrender. “Help me, I’m lost, please.”

Her defensive response quickly turned into surprise. “What the heck? Didn’t I see you last evening at the diner with your mum and dad? Did youse have a fight or something?” She continued hopping from one foot to another while talking and pointed to his wet clothes. “Don’t just freeze there, move! You’ll dry out if you move.”
“Yes,” he said, and then “No,” when her eyebrows formed a question mark. How much was safe to tell her? How much could he trust her? How much choice did he have? That decided it. It was easy to carry on a conversation while they jumped side by side and he ended up telling her everything. About his mother’s death and his father being shot. About the chain around his neck being the only thing left of his family. He told her of his fears of being lonely and never being free again. His words got jumbled and he was sure that at least half the time she didn’t understand him. But she asked questions, touched his hand and encouraged him to jump faster every time he slowed down. She also told him about the man by the picnic tables who said he was looking for someone else. From her description Kasim thought it would have been Mehran and the thought warmed him up. “So he didn’t want the authorities to find him after all.”

When the heat claimed them and they ran out of breath, they stopped. After a little while she asked another question and made him jump again. They ran on the spot and mirrored each other’s movements. By the time he finally got to the events of the previous evening, the rain had stopped and daylight was breaking behind thick, white clouds.

She was a good listener. His experiences, told in broken English mixed with a language she obviously didn’t know, became an adventure story, and her eyes bulged so much Kasim worried they might pop out of her head. But somehow it all made him feel better. His stories had been challenged so many times; it was nice to have someone who just listened and believed.
“Oh man, you’re cool,” she announced once they sat down, puffing. “Nothing like that happened to me, only an old goat of a minister chasing trying to get.”

He couldn’t understand that she could wish for even a fraction of his past, and he wished he could oblige her and discard the load that he carried, like a donkey his grandfather sometimes used to carry stuff to the market.

When the wind stopped and the sun came out from behind the white clouds he knew that it was his mother who had looked after him through the rough night.

After the sunrise came the dog walkers. Jodie loved the dogs prancing about, but he wondered how come none of their owners questioned them sitting there with the outer layers of their clothes hanging on the low wall to dry.

“That couldn’t have happened in the village. Someone would always want to know what had happened to us and who we were,” he tried to explain to her but the words were not coming out the right way and he didn’t think she understood what he meant, but he was relaxing and didn’t really mind. The sun was getting warmer and he was finding it almost impossible to remember how desperately cold he had felt only a few hours earlier.

By ten o’clock, they were both stretched out on the pavement soaking up the sun. Kasim was the first one to fall asleep. Jodie was fascinated by the rotation of the park users. The dogs and their owners were suddenly gone as if by magic. Instead, the park seemed full of parents and their children heading for the playground. She
preferred the dogs, got bored and focused her attention on Kasim and what she had learned about him.

In the light of the day, the adventure she had heard about through the rain and darkness had lost its appeal. Watching him now, she experienced a curious sensation near the pit of her stomach. Like a tightening grip it moved upwards, and when her lungs started to gasp for air, she realised that she was experiencing the fear he talked about. “Get over it, girl.” She tried to calm herself. “Take one slow breath after another.” It seemed to work, her lungs responded and a moment later she was able to assess her situation.

“Talk of a messed up life,” she thought. “This is a dangerous business. Not something you want to get messed up with, girl. Grab your stuff and get out of here as soon as you can.” The self-talk struck a note. She silently got up, gathered Jack’s jersey, her shoes and her socks. She had to move on before he woke up. Of course she had heard about refugees. She’d seen the pictures of people jumping from sinking boats and women in scarves holding young children. She knew enough to realise that if Kasim was telling the truth, and she had no reason to believe otherwise, he was up to his ears in trouble. Big trouble. Bigger than a kid running away from home and she wasn’t sure that she wanted to be anywhere near him when he got caught.

Most of her knowledge came from newspaper she’d found in park bins or at bus stops. With nothing much to do she often read them from cover to cover. Reading a paper gave her credibility, no one hassled her while she read. The paper lent her an
aura of respectability and she liked that feeling. She also liked to think that although she was on the run she kept up with the events happening around her.

If he’d run away from one of the places he claimed he did, he was in more trouble than anyone else she knew and she didn’t want to have anything to do with it. “I’ve got enough problems of my own,” she concluded, pulling her wet socks on in a hurry.

By the time she had her shoes on, she had once more reaffirmed her decision to leave, and still she did not move. Was it the sun that was making her feel mellow and lazy, or was it the sneaking suspicion that he didn’t deserve to be thrown to the dogs. A moment earlier she recalled how excited he had been while waiting for his meal. “At any other time that would make him a complete dork,” she decided, and immediately felt sad because he never got to eat his meal. His incredulousness at her own story astonished her even more.

“Why did you run from your family?” he had asked and refused to listen when she told him that families might not always be good places for children to grow up in, but she didn’t know how to tell him about the bible classes or the Reverend.

“Show us how you dance in your country,” she had suggested, wanting to change the topic. He had suddenly seemed to grow taller as his feet performed a series of intricate steps. It seemed that he had entered another world, one where his body remembered the moves itself; his role was only to let it happen. Although he hummed a tune, she couldn’t quite imagine what the music accompanying the dance
would be, but she liked the rhythm and the dance steps and decided to join him. To her surprise, he pushed her away. “Only men dance together,” he said when she tried to link her arms with his.

“Hey, you didn’t say anything about that earlier, so what’s the big deal now?” she asked, feeling cranky. In the end she decided to leave him to it, feeling too exhausted to fight, and after a while he was back to the jumping and slapping dance next to her.

“Yeah, he’s who he says he is;” she concluded yet again, but the decision did not make her feel any better. What was she supposed to do? It wasn’t as if she was going to walk away now, was it? It was too late. She should have run away earlier, when the thought first struck. Now it was too late, she had to find a way of dealing with him, despite the fact that she thought him rather sexist. Oh yes, she knew only too well what the word meant, she heard plenty of discussions at the drop-in centre. The girls there were never shy about accusing the guys of not pulling their weight when they expected the girls to clean up or shied away from cooking. “I will have to talk to him about it, if I am going to hang about with him, otherwise he will drive me up the wall.”

She decided to talk to him first chance she got, just making sure he didn’t start being all macho. Of course there was the issue of finding food for both of them now, as if it wasn’t difficult enough to find enough just for one. If it wasn’t for the sun and the laughter of little kids coming from the playground, she could easily have got herself totally depressed. “Oh man,” she sighed, “why do I get stuck with someone like him? Why can’t I find someone who’d be happy to look after me for a change?” The
moment she uttered those words she remembered that she had already done that and felt annoyed by it.

Next to her, Kasim opened his eyes. She fancied that he almost looked surprised to see her still there. “You didn’t think I was going to run out on you, did you?” Even as she said it she realised that he wouldn’t have a clue what she was talking about. Instead of explaining, she just waved her hand, letting him speak.

“The man yesterday, he secret police, no? He shouted, ‘I’m police, I’m police.’ Why he do that?”

“Secret police? Oh no, not him, he was just a creep – sort of a bad man,” she added, and laughed. “I was stealing food and he caught me. Wanted a blow job from me in return for not calling the management.”

Kasim’s eyes grew saucer like, although she wasn’t sure he understood, but the red face gave him away. She realised how unworldly he was despite his own terrible experiences.

“Never mind” she said. “He was nobody. The secret police is invisible in this country. You don’t see them till they want them to see you,” she added, remembering what she had heard her father say.

After that, she stretched out next to him on the paving, determined to catch as much sun as possible before deciding what they would do next.
When Hope is Gone

It didn’t matter any more. Nothing really mattered. Blackness had invaded his heart and unfamiliar voices were telling his mind what to do.

In the past, the dark moods had persisted for a while and then gradually disappeared, leaving him exhausted and weak, but able to catch a glimmer of hope on the horizon. Once again he was able to smile at the worn out photo he always carried in the left breast pocket of his shirt with the images of his wife and the three daughters, as they had been four years earlier.

He talked to them each time he was alone. About his dreams for them and their lives together, once they were reunited. “You must be strong,” he kept telling them. “You mustn’t give up. It can’t go on like this forever. One of these days they’ll make the decision. This is a good country, a democratic country. They know what we’re escaping from; they’ll apply justice and compassion when making their decision. They realise what would await us if we go back.”

When he talked to them the girls’ smiles reflected the love he felt for them, the reasons for their decision to leave everything behind and look for a better future elsewhere. He wanted his girls to be educated, have professions and be independent, for his wife to continue the job for which she was qualified but was not allowed to practice.

Each time he conversed with them, he felt stronger, able to endure the existence behind the razor wire and the interviews with officials for whom he was just a
number. Some of his friends had been deported back and the endless periods of uncertainty claimed most of his time. He prayed to God but put his faith in truth and justice.

Even before the last official letter, deep blackness had entered his heart and his daughters’ smiles no longer provided an escape; the memory of his wife’s embrace did not shift the shadow from his heart.

The voices in his head spoke for the first time: “You’ll never get out of here, only on your deportation. It’s your fault. There is nothing you can do to redeem yourself.” He wanted to shut them up, but he didn’t know how. No one seemed to know what to do, pills were no help either, and he started cutting as he saw others do. The physical pain stopped the pain inside, but after some time the voices came back: “It’s the only way out. You’ve nothing left. No one wants you here, no one cares. You might as well be dead.”

The first time the voices said it, he reacted with horror and denial. Later on he grew tired of fighting them. Between the heaviness in his heart and their persistence there wasn’t a place he could hide. Then, as the smiles of his girls were reduced to pulp, obliterated by the voracity of the washing machine, he was certain that the next news would be bad. When he heard about the sinking of the boat the blackness claimed his soul. Without his girls he was nothing. It was now only a matter of time. Even with the round-the-clock watch the guards imposed, there would be an opportunity, in a week or a month. No one could stop him now; he was dead already.
Ghosts

“Hello, Auntie Leigh, I’m off to play cricket. When I play for the All Blacks I’ll come to trash the Aussies. When are you coming over for a visit?”

The voice over the phone was exuberant and breathless, the way she’d expect her 10 year old nephew to be. Recalling his cheeky freckled face she wondered how much taller he’d grown since her last visit 14 months ago. “How tall are you Adam? Are you taller than your dad yet?”

“Nah, not yet, but soon I will be. Catch you later, I’ve got to go or I will be late.”

His voice vanished.

She wondered if anyone else was going to come to the phone or if she were left with the handset just dangling of the wall. She felt lucky the moment her brother’s deep voice came on.

“How you goin’, sis? Not ready to migrate yet? From where we see it, you might soon be saluting the Stars and Stripes. You might as well migrate now, before Uncle Sam gets you to join him in the war. With our PM you’ll never have to worry.” Leigh laughed. Advancing years did nothing to curb her brother’s political conscience and his sense of humour. “How’s Sammy? Is she getting hooked up yet? There’s plenty of warriors here who wouldn’t mind her stroppy ways and bad cooking. All she needs to do is ask.”
After getting the rundown on his family’s life and the dramas of the whole of the Tamati clan, she decided to get down to business. “Talking about families, I wanted to ask you about something I’ve found out about our father.” She paused, not knowing how to continue, but it became unnecessary.

“Ah, I take it you’ve just found out what our dear mother managed to conceal and deny his whole life. I wondered if it was ever going to happen.”

Leigh stared into the handset wishing this was a face-to-face conversation. “How come you know, and for how long have you known? How come I wasn’t told?”

“He left a letter for me to open on my 21st birthday. I suppose it was some sort of father and son thingy. I didn’t know if he’d done the same for either of you.”

“Yes, and it would have killed you to ask, wouldn’t it?” Leigh’s thoughts were much less controlled than her mouth was. She said nothing, but the feeling of betrayal increased. She remembered the ways each one of the children had been treated individually – privacy was everything. Any time any one of them got into trouble, the talking to or the punishment happened behind closed doors. No one else knew what it was and not a word was spoken afterwards. It was easy to see why her brother would feel no compulsion to discuss his letter with his sisters, assuming that they also would have been told. Privacy, secrets, discretion: how she hated those words. The emotion sweeping through her was definitely anger. It swept through her with a force of a hurricane, leaving her trembling so much she had to grab the edge of the kitchen bench against which she was leaning. Almost twenty-two years of
deception. Twenty-two years during which other family members could have been located. Her voice shook when she spoke. “Can I have the letter?” He promised to send it immediately but her anger grew. How could that be true? Wasn’t she the eldest? Didn’t she have the right to know?

They’d done it again. “Some sort of father and son thingy.” Like all those years ago when the two of them wouldn’t let her go to the footy with them because she was a girl. While they had the adventure, she had sat at home with her mother and sister and baked a cake as a treat. Some consolation! The same feeling of rage that had made her throw that cake tin against the wall (it was empty, she wasn’t that game), was now directing her to smash the handset against the desk top, to have the benefit of hearing the plastic crack. But now she was an adult, she ought to know better. With her free hand she pulled the chair out from the desk and her body sank in to it like a lump of lead.

“Hey, sis, hold your horse. I can hear your fuming all the way across the Tasman. The letter wasn’t anything spectacular. All it said was that as a kid he had a terrible time and that he wanted to protect us from the same shame he felt. He never got to see his family, didn’t know who he was. Abused and moved from one boy’s home to another, he was glad to leave it all behind once he got married. He thought the only reason he got through it relatively unscathed was due to mother and her love. They were his exact words, must have written the letter when he knew he was dying and at that time you and he were fighting like cats and dogs. You can’t hold it against him not telling you, the way you were then. It would have put anyone on guard.”
She listened to him and remembered those terrible times. She was wild, contrary and so defiant that she herself remembered wondering what that rage was all about, how come the others were not feeling it also. Only when Sammy came along Leigh had started to rethink her ways. By the time that happened he was dead.

The few controlled breaths let in and out dispelled some of the anger. What good was it anyhow? “So what else do you know?” Leigh asked but immediately continued. “I can’t believe that you were told and you weren’t even the dark one. Freckles, fair skin and almost blond hair. Yeah, it was always frizzy but how could you believe what was in that letter?”

“I know what you mean, when I read it I was kind of shocked, but by then I was living here and in love with Rama.”

Leigh’s thoughts performed a conceptual leap and came up with a totally unexpected conclusion. “Is that why you got married to Rama so early? Gone native, as our dear mother continues to call it? Did you too feel that you didn’t belong?”

The silence on the other end could have been the answer, but then his laughter broke the spell. “The surf was awesome, as you know. That was all I was into. Surf and sex. When I fell in love with Rama I thought I had everything I’d ever wanted. But you might be right about one thing. Later on, once I started to think past wondering where my next root would come from I realised that I wanted kids, and I wanted them to have an extended family, something that we never had. That’s all. By the way, how is Mother, God bless her heart?”
Leigh told him the latest gossip and after a while said her goodbyes and hung up. “I will find them,” she promised to herself, not quite knowing who she meant. She was convinced that somewhere in this country were others who shared her DNA, maybe even her looks. Under different circumstances she’d have called them her cousins, uncles and aunties and she wanted them to be a part of Sammy’s and her future.

She heard voices coming from the kitchen and she remembered that a young boy was missing and her house was full of fear for his safety as well as full of activity to find him. She’d had him for a brief moment in her care and had failed to keep him safe. Finding him was now her number one priority, her own family drama would have to wait.
Good Neighbours

The old man gently squeezed the red fruit, judging its softness. It wasn’t anything specific he could put into words, had anyone asked him, but from the touch he could tell the exact level of acidity of each piece. Too much resistance and the tomato would taste of badly fermented vinegar, like the tasteless mutations sold by supermarkets, good only for the TV ads for toothbrushes. Too little and the sweet pulp would spill out, making it suitable only for cooking or making a sauce. In a proper salad tomato the texture and sweetness were precisely balanced, giving it the heavenly taste for which home-grown, old world tomatoes were famous. When pressed lightly it would yield initially, but the pulp inside would immediately assert itself against the finger. When the push of the piece felt correct and if the colour was an even deep red, then and only then the tomato was good enough to pick.

The first fruit he tested today was not ready, the second and third were too far gone, the fourth was perfect. One by one, he checked each of the six-staked plants that had been supplying them with fruit for most of the summer, until the bowl was full. He finished his first job for the day just in time for a smoko with his wife Eleni, who arrived with coffee cups and with practised strokes wiped the water from the plastic tablecloth and chairs. The recent rains restored the green lustre to the parched and tired summer garden. Water droplets sparkled in the morning sunshine, transforming the inner-city backyard into a Mediterranean paradise.

The husband and wife sipped coffee and puffed on their cigarettes in silence. With their daughter and her children arriving soon, they were savouring forbidden pleasures. “I can’t believe you’re still doing it,” she’d exclaim each time she saw
them. “Contrary to all medical warnings, ignoring uncle Costa’s battle with cancer, you persist with this filthy habit.” She’d carried on in this vein for years. Con only waved his hand and ignored her but Eleni started to smoke only when her daughter wasn’t around. When the first grandchild was born, the conflict had escalated: “I can’t make you see the reason, but I don’t want you to smoke around the child.” They complied, and by the time the second baby came around, they were forbidden to smoke inside the house altogether. “If you want to see your grandkids, then quit smoking.” Their daughter’s uncompromising stand might have added days to their life span, but it had limited their favourite pastime to one cigarette in the morning and occasionally one at night during the days that they helped with the children after she returned to work.

“If she has another one, we’ll have to give it up completely,” Con joked to his friends. “It’s so un-Greek. Next she’ll stop us from drinking coffee as well. She’s turned out to be a real skippy.”

With the cigarette burnt down to the butt, he stubbed it out. “She is back. I saw her again today.”

Eleni’s response was measured, but he could see her interest growing. “Did you? Where?” Her eyes travelled over the wooden fence to the back of the garage.

“She’s back in there all right,” he nodded in the same direction. “She ain’t alone either. Got a boyfriend with her this time; another stray by the look of him. Similar age, same hung down look. Probably he is yet another druggie.” He knew she’d
worry about the grandchildren. “I won’t have a drug user living directly over the fence. You never know what that can lead up to.” She was likely to go on and on and the moment he said the words he wondered why he’d done it. They couldn’t even say for sure that the girl was a junkie. Still, Marjorie was a good neighbour but she must have lost her marbles taking in that girl.

His prediction was correct. Eleni ground out her cigarette, her determination made her usually soft face hard. “This can’t go on. We need to do something. If you won’t, I’ll do it. I’ll ring the police or the welfare. It’s not good for the grandchildren. Not safe, that’s what I mean. And God only knows what they do to that poor old soul. You should get on the phone and tell Garry. It’s his job to make sure his mother’s safe.”

Con reached for another cigarette, knowing there was more to come.

“I knew something was wrong when I saw her going out in the rain that night and then saw the kid following her home. I told you, ‘Go after her. See where she’s going in the middle of the night.’ I shook you in bed, but would you go? No, you couldn’t be bothered; too cold for you to get up. “Go back to sleep old woman you said and now we’ve got a problem. Drug addicts in the house of a senile woman.”

Con responded by taking another puff, knowing that there wasn’t much he could dispute, although in his mind Marjorie was far from senile. In fact he often thought she was the brightest of all of them in the street. She always finished the weekend crossword puzzle before anyone else, and lately she’d taken to that Jap number game
like a fish to water. He was still battling with understanding how it worked, and there she was buying the books from the newsagency, the papers weren’t hard enough. So he would dispute Eleni’s claim in that matter, but it was hardly the point, as far as he could see it. The night he refused to get up was going to haunt him forever.

Eleni took another sip of her coffee. “Taking drugs and living off welfare. She’s young enough to be at school. Millions would kill for such opportunity; free education and all. Spoilt rotten, that’s what they are.” She snorted. “All that effort and money that goes into keeping the refugees out, it’s a joke. The only people who work hard in this country are the migrants and their children. No holidays, no union hours, meal breaks and God only knows what else. Migrant children are taught to work hard. No money for nothing. The others, they think they own the land. Plain lazy and bored. That’s why they take drugs”

Con smiled under his breath. It was her feistiness that he’d fallen in love all those years ago. Seeing her in full flight still gave him a tickle, especially when someone else was in her cross hairs. On top of everything, he now could play his trump card: “The boy looked ethnic like. From his colouring, if you know what I mean. An Italian or Lebanese could even be Greek.”

Her mouth opened and shut without a sound, like a mullet out of the sea. “No, it can’t be true!” After a moment, she changed her mind. “Probably an Italian, lots of money among them. Or some of the new ones, come here with millions in their banks but showing nothing. Like the Asians taking all of the places in the good
schools, pushing the others out. But you didn’t say he looked like a Chinaman, did you?”

“No I didn’t. He definitely looked Mediterranean, not Asian.” He enjoyed the look on her flushed face. Her sacrosanct view of the world had been challenged. The flat earth had suddenly developed a curve on the horizon.

“If he’s dark he’s probably a native. They’re the worst. You’ve seen them around Central, haven’t you? Living in the park, no shame. That’s right, he’d be one of them.”

She wiped her hands on her apron. “Better get going, plenty to do before the young ones arrive. If I see them here tomorrow, I’ll ring the police.” She collected the small cups and the ashtray, making sure not a skerrick of their crime was left behind to implicate them. Con remain seated remembering his friend Jack and the times they had hidden in the garage drinking beer and ouzo and listening to the footy on the radio he installed there. He’d been a good neighbour and a friend, and Con still missed him.
The Race is On

Another day passed and brought no news of Kasim’s whereabouts. The plan of action that had sounded so promising the previous day had not yielded any results. Instead, Anna heard about Mehran’s close shave with the local police. Having left the late night meeting, he had apparently returned to the empty streets, cruising around with his windows down and Middle Eastern music blaring out.

Later on he explained that he hoped the boy would hear it and come out of hiding. It didn’t work. Before long the cops had arrived. They had checked his papers and his blood alcohol level and told him to turn the music down. Not able to charge him with any offence, they had issued him with a warning. He had no doubt that his registration number had instantly become a hot item on some “suspected of terrorism” file.

Anna’s own plan had met with a limited response. The drop-in guys seemed only interested in Anna’s keenness to find the boy, not so much in finding him. When she talked about him, Ricky smirked. “Ok, miss, you want this dude and he ain’t speaking English, is that right?” She nodded, wondering why some of the others seemed totally uninterested in the conversation. Usually, anything promising a bit of an action got their response. Ricky was the only one who graced her with a reply. His voice became louder and more challenging. “You wouldn’t by any chance be looking for one of them jail breakers they talked about on the box, would you? So you can dob him in and get the dough?”
Her face must have given her away because he smiled knowingly, and suddenly there were interested looks and bodies shuffling closer. “How much do we get for turning him in? Is he a terrorist?”

She realised that she didn’t have a hope in the world unless she told them the truth and turned their dislike of the police to her advantage. “All right, guys, he is one of the runaways. I want to help some friends of mine to find him before the cops do because he is so young. Make sure he has good legal representation and if possible stop him from going back into detention. It’s not fair that he, who’s already spent three years in detention just for coming here, should be locked up again or be returned back home, the country we’re just about to bomb the hell out of. All I know about him is his age and that he doesn’t speak much English. Oh, and there definitely is not a reward for this one.”

A deathly silence spread through the hall, even the CD player going mute, and then Ricky spoke again. “We don’t like being made fools of, that’s all. We’ll ask around even without the reward, the pedos would have a party with that one. I’ll call you if we hear something.”

After she left the hall she stood in the car park shaking with rage and fear at the brutal reality of these kids’ lives and the minute difference that her job made. Somewhere there was a boy in danger of colliding with this reality. Her need to talk with Tony was overwhelming, but she realised that despite their growing closeness this was her private quest. In a way she felt that she had to deal with the real situation
as well as the ghosts it awakened in order for her to embark on a new relationship. After a while when the shakes ceased, she got into her car and went back to work.

When she hadn’t heard from Ricky by the evening, she assumed that they were no more successful than the rest of the group. By the time she was going to bed she was ready to do something she had not done for a very long time. She was ready to pray to her God to keep the child safe, but even having done so, she was haunted by nightmares in which monsters stalked a young boy through the entire night.
Safe Haven

The train carriage was almost empty, and normally Marjorie would have been grateful for the presence of the young couple with a toddler’s stroller filled with beach necessities. They were obviously heading for the same destination, the beach at the end of the train track. Yes, without them she would have been fearful travelling such a long way alone. The cavernous carriage was far away from any help should she need it, and considering the daily media reports of assaults she felt that her caution was justified. She’d seen it often enough since Jack’s death, and these days she thought twice before undertaking the long journey. But this time she felt that she had to act because her oldest friend was lost in the quagmire of misplaced loyalties and complex emotions that everyone living into so called advanced age would have collected along the way. Dotty needed Marjorie to come and sort her out.

When Jack was alive they had often discussed the way their friends dealt with the issue and agreed that secrecy was not the way to go. “One day it’ll come back and bite them on the bum.” These were Jack’s exact words. Marjorie told him what she was planning to do and since he didn’t react in any way she could translate as a disagreement, she convinced herself that he would have whole-heartedly supported the trip she was now undertaking.

When she and Jack were first married they had lived in the Shire, and used to take the train to the city every morning and back every evening. It had never occurred to her to worry about safety. The only trouble she ever experienced were the guys who had shown interest in her personally, that is until they noticed the ring. If they persisted, she’d tell them firmly, “Not interested!” Being pretty, she took their
interest for flattery, but her eyes were only for Jack. She was always a one-man woman, and even these days she wouldn’t have anyone else. Pulling a clean hanky from her bag, she surreptitiously blew her nose, not wanting anyone to think she was upset. The trip brought back memories; that was all. The countryside passing by the window caught her interest and she couldn’t help but recall the places she connected with the trips of her youth. So much had changed along the track. Some sections were still recognisable, although new apartment blocks had reclaimed sites where factories or warehouses had stood; and where horses used to run in empty paddocks, warehouses now spread out their wares.

“Look what’s happened to the chocolate factory where I used to go every Christmas looking for specials,” she was about to call out, seeing yet another complex of residential apartments, shops and offices, but seeing her young companions sound asleep on the seat opposite her, she stopped herself. They had fallen asleep within ten minutes of their departure from Central Station and Marjorie felt lucky to have a chance to observe them and contemplate her next action.

She had been shocked when she found Jodie on her doorstep only a short while before the taxi was due. “Hi Mrs Williams. I am truly sorry for running out on you but I needed to go away and sort myself out.” The girl had looked tired despite her effort to smile, and Marjorie would bet her last dollar on her being hungry as well.

“And did you sort yourself out dearie?” she asked, for want of anything better to say. Unable to resist, she added, “It didn’t seem to take very long. So either there wasn’t much to sort out in the first place or you didn’t do a very good job.”
The child’s face turned the colour of Con’s tomatoes and she mumbled something that Marjorie didn’t catch. She noticed the girl’s furtive glances back towards the front gate. “Are the police at your heels or is someone else chasing you? Why don’t you come inside so you don’t get crick in your neck,” Marjorie suggested, knowing she still wasn’t ready for the taxi. “I’m going to visit my friend Dotty. You can keep me company and tell me about this sorting out business.” It was then, while Marjorie was getting her hair in order, that Jodie mentioned the boy still being outside.

About two seconds into the convoluted explanation, Marjorie’s head started to spin and all she could think of were the neighbours and the fact that Jodie had collected a stray who had escaped from one of the new jails. “A real jailbird, Jack!” she said to the photo on the mantelpiece while Jodie went out to fetch the boy. A moment later, when she saw the skinny boy with ashen face and sad eyes, she got a real shock. He wasn’t the jailbird she imagined. Before the taxi arrived she fed them a piece of fruitcake each that waited in a big tin for any unexpected visitors, and a nice hot cup of tea with plenty of sugar and milk.

But now, watching the two of them asleep side by side, one fair and one dark, despite the bodgy hair-colour job, she couldn’t make up her mind what to do next. As far as she could see, events had taken a much more serious turn. The boy wasn’t just a kid on the street, not like Jodie. She had on her hands someone who had broken the law and she was now aiding and abetting a crime, as all the TV crime shows called it. All her life Marjorie had been on the right side of the law, could not really imagine ever being otherwise and had no intention of changing at her age. “No matter which way I look at it, this child has broken a law, which makes him a criminal.” The thought
stayed in her mind as she observed his almost translucent skin and the way his cheek
dbones almost poked through it. “Awfully skinny he is. How could he get that way?
He must have been on the run for a long time. But then he really is only a young
child, he should still be full of puppy fat instead of looking like a white taper candle
ready to be snuffed out. And what kind of a crime would someone like him have to
commit to make it right to put him behind bars?” From what Jodie told her, he had
lost his family and come here to go to school so he could become a doctor. Whenever
was that a crime?

It was then that a butterfly kind of a thought fluttered somewhere deep inside her
mind. There is no law that could make it right to jail kids like him, no matter if the
law book says so. And if the law is not right then no crime has been committed, and
abetting that act would not be a crime. The butterfly thought landed firmly, and
within a moment Marjorie’s mind was made up. “Why not help him?” she asked
herself. “If no crime has been committed, then ‘aiding and abetting’ made no sense
either. If the truth be told, by the time Marjorie’s mind figured out that she should in
fact, with clear conscience, help the boy, she felt excited by the fact that while she
was officially aiding and abetting a crime she knew that Jack would approve of her
breaking the law this time.

Of course Jodie wasn’t much help. Both of them had apparently spent the last two
nights in wet and cold, until they reached the garage that morning. “Why didn’t you
come earlier?” Marjorie asked while ushering them inside.
“Kasim wanted to find the people he stayed with before he got lost. He thought he could find their place coming off the Anzac Bridge. We headed there and walked around the streets for the rest of the day. He didn’t recognise the house. When the rain started again we hid in some giant concrete pipes left nearby from the freeway construction. It was dry but droughty and it got too cold at night, so when the rain stopped we walked straight here.” She looked right into Marjorie’s eyes and Marjorie knew that what she said next was purely for her benefit, but liked to hear it anyhow. “I truly didn’t know of any other safe place to take him. You are the only person I know I can trust, I knew you’d help us.”

It all made perfect sense to Marjorie. The child wasn’t to know if the garage was still open. After having run away like she did, Marjorie could have held it against her, not that she would, but the child was not to know, was she? It was a risk she took to bring the boy back The only thing Marjorie had to do was to figure out how she could keep the boy safe and who she’d need to talk to. The only advantage of being her age was that no one would expect her to break the law or hide fugitives. Boy, she did like the sound of that word. Old women are mostly invisible to others in society, so any child walking next to her would also become invisible. And they are also thought of as feeble-minded and faint-hearted, never participating in any activity perceived as dangerous, so as far as she was concerned, as long as she had the children by her side, they would both be safe and accounted for by the public, although she’d need to come up with a good story for Con and Eleni or else Garry would find out.
Having worked out that part of the problem she felt relieved, and she let the regular
clickety-clack of the train work its magic on her. She found herself slipping into that
frame of mind that falls between full awareness and the beginning of sleep, the stage
when one’s facial muscles cease movement and, although the eyes still register the
scenery, the connection between vision and its interpretation in the brain is lost. But
she fought the urge to doze off because she needed to be on guard, never knowing
who might walk into the carriage at any moment and ask questions that the children
could not answer. No, she wasn’t going to give in to sleep, no matter how inviting
the rocking rhythm of the train.

The boy’s face was so pale she found it hard to believe he’d spent a whole summer in
the heat of the desert. Either he must have kept inside all the time or his health was
giving up on him. “What can I do for his longer term health and survival?” she kept
asking herself while. “Can’t even call on you, Jack, not in here. They’d think I’d lost
my marbles, and these children have enough on their plates and it ain’t food.”

With each passing suburb the unanswered question pressed upon her with increasing
intensity, but she realised that first of all she needed to have a strategy to deal with
Dotty. What on earth was she going to tell her and how could she stop the boy from
speaking? Then she thought of a simple way of dealing with the problem. Because
she couldn’t claim that Jodie was her niece or granddaughter, as Dotty and Marjorie
had kept in touch regularly enough to register all additions to their families over the
years, and because Dotty’s brain still functioned “like a steel trap that nothing
escaped”, as Jack used to say, Marjorie decided that she would have to talk and talk
about Dotty’s own family without giving her an opportunity to ask any questions. When she finally exhausted herself, she would just have to leave immediately.

By the time she was shaking the sleeping bodies at Cronulla station, she felt confident about her plan. She thought she’d need Jack’s approval, but then lately, he wasn’t always around when she needed him to make a decision so maybe she didn’t need his approval after all.
Where is My Home

It had been four days since Kasim’s disappearance and they had all withdrawn into private cocoons spun out of fine threads of pain, guilt, anger and frustration. For Leigh, the sudden realisation that she might never find out his fate had affected her beyond her wildest imagination. She suddenly could draw a parallel between Kasim’s disappearance and the way her father’s family and his mother in particular must have searched for him and the pain they felt at his removal. He too was someone’s son, brother, grandson and cousin, for whom many others had cherished dreams and hopes.

Her fear for Kasim was magnified by sadness at the treatment her father had received from the institutions he was placed in as a child, and she found herself helpless at the stark reality that in our world some children are loved and cherished beyond their needs, while others are abused, demonised, exploited or at best discarded and left to fend for themselves.

Having returned from a totally unsatisfactory trip to a public legal centre, she felt depressed and angry.

“Aren’t we ever going to learn anything from the history of massacres, gulags, gas chambers, labour or re-education camps, forced child removals and child soldiers? Each conflict has only provided fodder for the next generation of hate and retributions.” She wanted to run into streets and shake the complacent department store sales hunters, the smug cappuccino, macchiato and soy latte executives and the self-satisfied office crowds that filled the midday streets and shout so loud they could
not avoid hearing her: “Wake up and look around you! It’s not only those unfortunates living in distant lands, whose lives make good TV viewing while we give ourselves yet another serving of our dinner and afterwards we quell our conscience by signing a cheque while homeless kids huddle in our doorways. Our hearts are hardening not only from the accumulated fat in our arteries (a privilege that only the minute percentage of the world’s population can afford) but from our fear to share what we have with those who have much less.”

As usual she didn’t shake anyone, make a scene or shout. Instead she decided to compose a letter to the daily paper, pouring her heart out. After a couple of hours of numerous starts and massive deletes, her computer developed a problem and when she was about to give up, she realised she didn’t even have a wastepaper basket full of crumpled up pages to look at some time later. Full of self doubt and despair, she emptied the computer’s recycling basket, and turned it off. What could she say that had not been said before? What words would magically dispel prejudice and turn ice into warmth, fear into joy? She was no New Age rainbow child, had no simple solutions that would spread compassion and humanity through the world, and she had long ago stopped believing that gods of any kind might be the world’s salvation. She didn’t even know how to find Kasim, one homeless child lost in her own backyard.

Despite the deadlines that had passed two days before, she could not even contemplate working on her current projects. Uncharacteristically, she let the deadlines go without even contacting her clients. Her answering machine was on, but for two days now she hadn’t bothered to check it, so she shut the door to her office
and settled herself in the kitchen. By the afternoon she’d spent a fortune on her mobile calling anyone who could come up with suggestions of how to find out if Kasim had been recaptured. When her desperation reached a peak, she crossed the backyard and squeezed her body through the hole in the fence, hoping for some of Alice’s ‘wonderland’ magic to restore her.

She couldn’t have been further from the truth. In the ‘wonderland’ chaos reigned seemingly uncontrolled. With only a week before their departure, the living room was a maze of waist-high piles of safety equipment, tools, books, cooking utensils, fuel containers, bedding and other unidentifiables that waited to be taken to the boat, but in the meantime needed to be navigated with utmost care because, according to Alice, they had toppled and got mixed up many times already. Seeing the misery in Leigh’s face, she pushed a pile of books off the couch, sat her down between cartons of canned tomatoes and bales of toilet paper, and rushed off to the kitchen to make the tea. When she returned, Leigh was in tears and the story that she told was very different from the one Alice expected. Luckily, she was easily diverted from the flotsam of sailing life into the depth of Leigh’s despair. Her arms cradled Leigh’s unhappiness and her voice was calming and comforting.

“No one else but your own people can help you. Don’t rely on the institutions that took your father away. There are many in your situation, and these days you can get help from Aboriginal run organisations. You must start with them. Don’t be afraid. Finding your father’s background isn’t going to change who you are, it’s going to add to it.” After a moment she added: “The most painful experiences always do.”
Through the curtain of tears, Leigh noticed Alice’s eyes locating the silver frame and the green jar, and she knew why her friend immediately found the right words to lead her through the pain. She returned the embrace and for a moment the nest made out of toilet rolls and tomato cans provided all the tenderness and comfort that both of them needed and were able to share. After a while Alice’s hand ripped open one of the packages and unravelled copious lengths of the white tissue, while Leigh pondered how she was going to manage without both of them for the next four months. “Here, the country’s softest ever.” Through the snaffles, Alice’s mouth pouted and Leigh couldn’t but giggle at the perfect rendition of a TV ad. The tea was almost cold but neither of them minded and the biscuits tasted better than ever.

“So are you getting excited?” Leigh asked, ready to change subject.

Alice just waved a hand. “If it wasn’t for Ken, I’d happily stay at home. The sea lost its hold on me years ago.”

“Make sure you visit my brother and his family. They’re expecting you. His wife’s family is up and down the coast, so he said you can always count on a good feed.”

They laughed and Alice took down the names of all the towns and villages where they could expect a warm welcome.

“ Heard anything about the boy yet?” Alice asked when refilling their cups. “I had an idea the other day that might have been useful, but it seems irrelevant now.”
She never had the chance to elaborate; Leigh’s mobile rang that very moment. She grabbed it greedily, hoping for news about Kasim. Her mother’s voice came on and Leigh rolled her eyes hoping to cut the conversation short. “I was wondering when you’re planning to come to visit me. I’ve found the box you’ve been looking for.” The pause was long and telling.

“The old wooden box? Where did you find it?”

“Well, my friend Marj, you remember her, don’t you? You used to call her unty Em and her husband was uncle J – passed away, God bless his soul. They stood by me when your father passed away. Well, she came over the other day, we had a talk and one thing led to another … Anyhow, it wasn’t really very satisfactory, she brought with her these two kids, you see. Said I should think of them as her great grandchildren. But that’s odd because I know all of her real grandchildren. We’ve kept in touch, if you know what I mean. She ignored my questions as if she was deaf or something, and she definitely is not that. There’s something shady about an old woman doing things like that, don’t you think? One of them didn’t say even a word. He did mumble something, these days kids are not brought up properly, the way you were. The girl was polite enough, but still I don’t understand. She used to be the salt of the earth, Marj did. God only knows what’s happened to her reasoning. Old age is a curse; don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.”

Leigh jumped in. “Did you open it? What’s inside it?”
“As I said, we looked for it. Marjorie went through the whole house. These so-called relations of her helped too, but I didn’t feel good about it. Them, snooping through our past, especially the dark one, the boy.”

“So what’s inside?” Leigh’s voice shook with trepidation. She glanced at her watch, wondering if it was too late for the drive south.

“I didn’t look, dear. You don’t seem to realise, but all of this is rather painful for me. Your father was a wonderful man and—”

Leigh interrupted without even an apology: “That’s why I want to find the truth. He’d deserve to know where he came from. Times have changed, Mum, it’s not a shame to be an Aboriginal anymore.”

The silence on the other end continued for a while. “Well, I wouldn’t know about that, dear. I do see their flag on the Town Hall occasionally, so you might have something there. And that girl runner, she’s something else altogether, she made them proud, she made all of us proud, I must admit that. You know, Marj was telling me the same thing. Still I wonder why she lied to me all the same. About those kids, you see?”

Leigh didn’t even feel guilty about cutting her off. “Thanks, Mum. I must run now, already running late for a meeting. I’ll drop by in the next couple of days, will ring you to check.”

When she hung up, Alice’s arms were there waiting.
Almost There

Kasim was watching the streets go by, too tired to listen to the old lady’s conversation with the taxi driver, and Jodie was already dozing off. The golden lights jumped out of the streetscape when he expected them the least. He immediately recognised the arches and then the diner. Without any doubt it was the one he had left in such a hurry only a few days ago. One moment the street looked no different from all the others they had passed through since they got the taxi at the train station, next moment the car park and even the outdoor tables were clearly visible, when the taxi stopped directly opposite at the traffic lights.

His first reaction was to wake Jodie up, but instead he decided to concentrate on memorising his way back. When the taxi took a left turn at the next traffic lights, he was positive that on the rainy night Leigh’s car had come from the opposite direction. When the taxi stopped in front of Marjorie’s house moments later, he was certain he had kept in his mind a map that would take him back to the intersection in front of the diner.

“Yeah, can we go tomorrow?” Jodie said when he excitedly explained his plan. Surprisingly, she did not sound anywhere near as excited as he was. He had to admit that she had reason, having already spent an entire day walking with him around streets. But that was different. This time he was convinced he would be able to find Leigh’s house because it was perched high above the street on top of a hill. He also recalled a very tall tree growing in the corner of the garden next door where he went to watch the big telly and was given a plate of biscuits all to himself. He was convinced that he would find the house this time. Becky’s house was like many
others, he couldn’t even describe it properly. A white house with a low fence and a
Gate leading up on to the street. He thought he would get some feel if he got close,
maybe he’d be given a sign, but nothing like that happened. But with Leigh’s house
the story would be different; he just needed to convince Jodie.

Kasim wasn’t really surprised that she didn’t believe him; but on the other hand he
had started to think that Jodie didn’t believe in anything or anybody. She openly said
so: “You can’t trust anyone. That’s the main rule of surviving on the streets.”

He didn’t really understand what she meant. She had said it, they were still in the
park waiting for the rain to stop and he didn’t know her well enough then to ask her
what she meant. “Why do you live like this? Why not with your family?” he asked
later, wondering why anyone in their right mind would choose to live on the streets
when they had a home to go to. Not in this country. Here was no war, no secret
police roaming the streets and kicking the doors down. As far as he could see, this
was a rich country with people well fed. “Did they beat you at home?” he enquired
again, thinking of the one possible reason for her wanting to flee.

“No, not really,” was all she said, and by the way her mouth turned down at the
corners, he understood that she wanted him to stop asking her.

Since then he had met Mrs Williams, who also lived alone. He saw pictures of her
son and his family and couldn’t believe that they would not take her to live with
them. It was a son’s duty to look after his mother. All women needed looking after,
by their fathers, husbands, sons, brothers or whoever their nearest male relative
happened to be. He was glad that his grandfather was there to look after his little sister. She would never need to live on the street.

“Ouch!” The sharp sting came from the bite on his lip which happened the moment he realised he had a big problem, much bigger than having to keep hidden from the Australian police. No one in his family had talked to him before they left, probably because no one expected his father to die. But since he had died, Kasim would be responsible for his sister should his grandfather pass away also. That was the big problem. What would happen if his grandfather suddenly died? Which of his uncles would take over the care of his grandmother as well as his little sister? It was so long since he had heard from his family, anything could have happened in the meantime. What if the police came back and took his grandfather with them, or even worse … They were his responsibility; he was the next in line. He had to make sure his sister married well and his grandmother had someone to feed her and help her. The burden of it all descended on top of him like the bags filled with olives he used to carry slung over his shoulders, the weight pushing his feet to the sandy ground, each step becoming a huge effort.

The chair he was sitting on suddenly developed hard edges, his eyes started to smart once more. He closed them, trying to conjure up his grandfather’s parting words: “No matter where you find yourself, the same God will be watching over you as will be watching over us.”

He needed to talk about these worries with Becky. She had helped him to resolve others in the past and he needed her again. Jodie knew about life on the street, about
survival. She had brought him to a safe place, and he was grateful for that, but he
couldn’t talk to her because she too was lost. Lost in her own country. He didn’t
know how he could explain or how he knew what Jodie needed, but her situation
appeared to Kasim scarier and more helpless than his own. If all else failed and they
sent him home, God willing he would have his grandparents to go to. They loved
him, of that he was sure, but Jodie didn’t seem to have anyone; nowhere she’d want
to return to.

He became aware of a conversation going on in the kitchen. When he tried hard, he
could understand most of what was being said, through the open door.

“What time is he going to pray, dearie? Don’t they do it all the time?” he heard
Marjorie asking.

“Don’t know, haven’t seen him doing it yet,” Jodie replied, and Kasim realised that
everyone he had met so far had expected him to pray the way his religious teachers
prescribed. But not everyone did it. In the detention centre some detainees followed
the strict rules but others didn’t. Every now and then when he thought of God, his
heart grew heavy and he tried to push these thoughts away. What he had been taught
back at home didn’t seem to give him any comfort or provide answers he needed
now.

“Why have you made me to deal with so many terrible things happening to my
family?” he wanted to shout. “Why? First my mother’s death, then the escape and
my father’s death, followed by the terrible boat trip and being locked in jail.” He
wondered why God hadn’t spread the terrible events more evenly among some of his other relatives. Sometimes it felt too much for one person to deal with all alone, and still God made it all happen.

So why was he made to suffer? No matter how hard he tried to hide it, he did suffer. He missed his previous life with his family around him, his school and his friends and the occasional trips to the city to visit his relatives. He was happy then. Even now, when all these people were trying to help him, he still didn’t know where he was going to be during the next Ramadan. With all these questions on his mind, he felt it was better that he didn’t let God into his thoughts at all.

None of these thoughts were something he could explain to those who expected him to be devoted and pure. Jodie couldn’t help him with any of this. He felt at times that she was younger than him and that she really needed him to look after her, but then again she had brought him to Mrs Williams to keep him safe.

Later, at the dinner table, Jodie made faces that made him laugh when Marjorie kept talking about Jack. Her sentences never seemed to end, and although Kasim tried to follow them he would get lost long before she stopped to catch her breath. He still couldn’t understand if Jack was alive or dead, and he needed Jodie to help him.

Half way through the dinner Mrs Williams got Jodie terribly frightened. “You have to be very careful about your coming in and out of the house. The neighbours are just waiting to report you to someone, that I’m sure of,” she said, while chewing on a lamb chop.
“How do you know?” Jodie’s fork stopped half way between her mouth and the plate.

“Oh, Eleni from next door stopped me shortly after you left. She told me I shouldn’t have a street kid living here. Apparently she saw you the night you arrived. She is convinced that you are a drug addict.” The clank of the fork hitting the plate must have been heard for miles and Kasim saw fear in Jodie’s eyes for the first time since he had met her. He could see she was ready to jump up from the table and run.

He understood fear when he came across it; his own gave him the strength to speak.

“What, what you say to her?”

Her face was reassuring and calm. “Eleni, dear,” I said to her, “I appreciate your concern, but I’m not feeble minded. The only thing wrong with me is my legs. I can still make my decisions and you’ll just have to live with them.” She grinned at him, and her face took on the look of his grandmother.

“I know they’ll tell someone, maybe the cops, and maybe welfare. They’re nice people, just a wee bit conservative, if you get my drift. Most new Australians are. Keen to fit in, obey the rules. I suppose they’re too scared in case someone sends them back.”

Kasim wasn’t sure he understood all that was said, but the look on Jodie’s face filled the gaps. “So what will happen now?” He looked directly at the old woman and
when she met his eyes, he remembered that he’d been chastised for being too impertinent back home. He immediately lowered his gaze.

“I don’t really know, pet. I wish Jack was here to tell me. If I can’t come up with something soon, the police will land on my doorstep. Not because of you, but because of the miss here.” She pointed at Jodie who flashed a big smile in his direction. “Surely she can’t be glad that the police are after her.”

Kasim felt positively confused by her behaviour. The longer he stayed with her, the more he didn’t understand.

Mrs Williams continued, “Yes, they’ll come for her, but if they see you, or if they were told that you were here also, they’d want to know all about you.”

Kasim could not but feel fascinated watching her unsteady fork waging a battle with the peas on her plate. Each time the green balls finally landed on her fork she paused in her speech, concentrating on getting some into her mouth. Only when chewing the peas she was free to continue. “Without Jack, dearie, I need to talk to someone who knows about kids. The law and the like; like the lawyer on the telly. Someone who can help both of you, not send you back.”

There was another pause, as new forkful of peas made it safely into her mouth. Jodie’s response was fast: “You mean a social worker, don’t you?”
He saw it again. The look that told him she was ready to flee. “Social worker?” he repeated the two words, noting how much fear they produced.

Jodie’s voice this time was strong and angry: “They come and tell you they’re on your side, and they want to help you. You get to trust them, but before you know it you’re on the way back to where you are running from. Some help!” Her eyes sparked with anger “Ricky told me. They got him every time he took off, ignoring the fact that his mother’s boyfriend was doing him. ‘Such a nice man.’ they said. ‘A public official. He can be trusted. It must be the kid’s imagination, his need to fight with the mother’s new lover.’ And all this time he was after Ricky, not after his mother at all.” Seeing the shocked expression on Mrs Williams’s face, Jodie blushed and murmured something, which Kasim interpreted as “Sorry,” but the old lady ignored it.

She collected Jodie’s plate and then walked to Kasim’s side. Instead of just collecting his plate, she placed her free hand on the side of his head, leaving it there for a moment. He could feel the dry skin scratching slightly against his cheek, but the hand felt soft and light.

“Oh pet, look what you’ve done! Made him see ghosts. He’s as white as a sheet.” She stroked his cheek. “There there, dearie. They work for the government, not all of them are bad. They’re supposed to help those who’ve fallen on hard times. Believe me, only over my dead body would anyone take you away. And no one wants to fight an old woman, especially not this one.” With that she picked up his plate and slowly walked back into the kitchen.
After a moment, Kasim asked. “So what’ll happen next? If the police come, you go home, but what about me? I’m not going back.” He waited for a moment and then added. “I’ll kill myself if I have to. I’ve seen others do it, I know how.”

Surprised at his own outburst, he sat there stunned, his blood pulsing in his ears. He had actually said it! These thoughts had been growing in his mind for some time now and he had tried his best to push them back. But the longer he stayed out of the jail the more impossible it was for him to accept going back. The alternative seemed easier each time he thought about it.

Jodie didn’t react. “Gee, Kasim, don’t be so dramatic. As if anyone is going to send you back. We all know how bad things are back there, so you don’t need to worry. And Marjorie will find a way. I’ll be the bunny going back home. Everyone thinks my family is just fine. Bit of weird religion, but basically all right. Home sweet home! Mummy and Daddy just dying to have me back. They might even volunteer to come and pick me up in the family station wagon to save the cops the expense of sending me back by plane. So which one of us do you think is going to be made to go home? I’m the one who’ll have to split soon.”

Her tone changed and she looked serious. “Truly, Mrs Williams will come up with something. She is old and behaves bit odd, but Jack helps her to make the right decisions. You have nothing to worry about here, and without me you will be safe for a while.”
At that moment Marjorie appeared at the kitchen door, carrying ice cream. She didn’t need to call twice, Kasim understood perfectly.

With a bowl full of ice cream and cake, he almost forgot the previous conversation; the cool sweetness inside his mouth was all he cared about. Half way through the cake, Marjorie resumed the subject.

“I’ve talked with the young lassie that runs the kid’s business at the local council.” She turned directly to Jodie. “You know the place, dearie, sort of day care for youth, don’t you?”

Jodie nodded in agreement. “Do you mean the drop-in centre? Yeah, they’re cool there. Who do you know? Alex?” For Kasim’s benefit she added. “I told you she’s ok. They’ll take care of you, won’t let anything bad happen to you. Trust me!”

That was the end of the conversation. The news came on and everyone settled around the TV. Neither Jodie nor Marjorie seemed concerned at Kasim watching the world’s most powerful army rallying to attack his homeland. He was convinced that they didn’t even make the connection and most likely just thought about him as being from elsewhere but not particularly knowing where from. When he thought about the impending war he felt confused. He was born long after the end of a war against their neighbour, during which two of his uncles had died. He was told that his father was saved only because of his bad lungs at the time.
What he did remember was the war waged against their other neighbour and when the whole world seemed to fight against his government. When that finished, the police raids became more frequent and people in his village got killed. Ever since then Kasim kept on hearing the government’s statements through which all shortages were explained. Lack of medicines, food, building materials, spare parts for farm machines, phones and even the potholes in the main road leading to the capital were all blamed on the “blockade”. Other countries were accused not only of blocking shipments of everything that was imported but also of blocking the sale of their oil. Kasim’s father did not believe the explanations for a long time, but became openly hostile to the government only after his wife died. “How come that all of his supporters have the medicines they need, their sons drive luxurious cars and eat food which the rest of the population can’t get hold of and many die from the lack of basic medicines. It’s all lies!”

That was his father all right. Never forgave the long war in which his two brothers had been killed, a war which neither of the two countries won but in which millions of martyrs were buried on both sides.

Kasim hoped that his grandfather’s farm would be all right when the bombs started falling. The old man talking to the newsman looked so much like his grandfather it could have been him, talking about fears for his family, his farm and his orchard.
Treasure Found

“In the end it was I who found him and brought him back.” Anna repeated it once more, still unable to believe the satisfaction this sentence gave her.

The house was empty now, but she was expecting Becky and Peter home any moment to join her for the “emptying the freezer and the pantry” dinner which was how Alice described the final get-together. “Nothing flash, we’re just using up everything we won’t be taking with us, so be ready for an amazing combination of dishes.” The proper farewell for the sailors was going to happen the following day on the marina prior to the boat’s actual sail off. The dinner was only a family affair, for Leigh and close friends.

A couple of days had passed since she found Kasim on a routine house call. When he’d been missing for almost a week and they’d heard no news from anywhere, she had resigned herself to catching up with her work. No more endless drives around the streets, searching the parks or hospitals for a mere suggestion that a runaway might be there.

“My work has suffered more than enough,” she decided, sorting through the piles of paperwork, missed phone calls, unanswered e-mails, house calls waiting to be dealt with, senior citizens day care to be visited and reports written. One of the missed calls was from a widow Tony had mentioned. Having taken in a street kid, she’d become distraught when the girl disappeared some days later. A common enough experience for professionals working in the field but very upsetting to the widow, who wanted to keep up some communication with the kid. When Anna finally
returned her call, Marjorie, as she asked to be called, definitely sounded her age with long convoluted explanations and digressions, but she also demonstrated some unorthodox views for someone her age, and Anna decided that a house call to her was a priority. With so many street kids out there and so few support services available, any potential alternative to the already overcrowded refuge was worth a house call. The girl was bound to reappear sooner or later, and Anna’s only hope was that when that happened she was still going to be in what Marjorie described as a robust state of mind and good health. “A bit too skinny, for my liking,” she had said, “but nothing a few regular meals won’t fix.”

Having found herself in a nearby street after a meeting at the Administration Centre, Anna decided to make the house call on the off chance that Marjorie would be at home. She easily located the solid red brick across from a car park, where she left her car and noticed the two big Good Samaritan bins that had played a part in the story. “She’s a plucky one, ok,” Anna thought, imagining a woman in her 80s crossing the road in the middle of the night in a raging storm.

Next to the garden gate the garage wall bore the street number she was looking for. A sizable lawn separated the house atop a gentle sloping hill from the creaking front gate. As she knocked at the front door she noticed the neighbours who were doing nothing to hide their curiosity.

“Marjorie mightn’t be in, usually out on Wednesdays,” they chorused in voices that brought to her mind memories of olives, feta cheese and holidays on the Aegean
coast. “If you want to leave a message, we’ll give it to her,” they offered, watching her pulling out a card.

She thanked them and continued to scribble on the card. Having slipped the card under the door, she waved to the two greying heads still hovering above the veggie garden beds and stepped onto the footpath that led back on to the street. What happened next was to stay in her memory as the closest she ever got to a miracle. The garden gate protested rustily as it was pushed open with force, and a girl and a boy engaged in a loud argument walked through, letting it bang behind them. Anna stood spellbound.

“Been telling you all this time it was the wrong decision. Instead of looking for the stupid house I should’ve split, before we get sprung by the neighbours. We’ve got no hope of finding it.” The girl sounded fed up, angry and probably just defeated.

“But Jodie, I can …” The voice was pleading, loud and verging on hysterical.

The boy was Kasim. When he lifted his hands in a gesture of despair, his focus shifted. Anna appeared in his field of vision and their eyes met.

“Kasim!” Without a second thought she rushed towards him, conscious of the fact that while he was in her house, she had not acknowledged him by his name. It had a sweet rhythm, the two syllables rolling of her lips easily now. “Kasim, oh baby, I’m sorry.” A second later she was only aware of the child’s body pressing against her
and her arms holding him as tight as when she held Becky after each one of her disappearances.

At the moment of the physical contact, something let go in Anna’s mind. She no longer distinguished between the love for her children and for this boy, whose bony shoulders shook while his head rested against her chest. Her previous doubts resolved instantly, the child in her arms was her lost child.

The embrace lasted only a couple of moments; then his hands quickly obliterated the evidence of his weakness and he stepped away from her, but his eyes were alight. “Is Becky here? How did you find me?”

The girl next to them looked older and bemused. “And who are you?” she asked in tone befitting a mother interrogating her son’s girlfriend.

Kasim jumped in. “She’s Becky’s mother.”

The girl flashed Anna an uncomfortably hard look. “If she’s the one who didn’t like you and wanted you to go then I hate to think what people do when they like you.” Again, the bemused smile played on her lips.

Anna felt heat rushing into her face but before she could react, she noticed Kasim’s face colour also changing. She waved her hand. “It doesn’t matter now. I surely am glad we’ve found you. We’ve all been looking for you for days.” When she looked
into his eyes, she saw innocence and vulnerability so intense she questioned how she’d been so blind to it before.

“I came to see Mrs Williams,” she managed to say, remembering the two spectators behind the fence. “I’ve talked with her over the phone, told her I’d drop in at the first opportunity. She is one of my clients, I work for the council.”

“Oh, she’s probably taking a nap. She does that often in the afternoon. Her leg’s playing up.” The girl pulled out a key and headed for the door. At the doorstep she paused and surprisingly her voice dropped to almost a whisper. “You can have him, but if you came to send me home, you can just bugger off. I’m not going!” She challenged Anna with a piercing gaze, not realising that Anna had plenty of experience with looks that could easily damage one’s ego.

Anna shook her head. “Don’t worry. I’m not interested in sending you home if you don’t want to go. I just think Mrs Williams could do with some help around the house and maybe in return you could stay here, go back to school, finish your education. A sort of business arrangement. Take your time to think about it.” To Anna’s delight Jodie did not respond. “Considering it,” she thought, feeling hopeful. “I was told that you’d run away from here. What made you come back?”

Jodie smiled. “Some of my friends find money or jewellery when hanging around the streets. I found him, and I couldn’t just leave him there. I had to bring him here where he would be safe. He’s a danger to himself on the streets, keeps getting lost.”
To see Kasim’s face break into a cheeky grin was priceless. Even now Anna found herself smiling at the memory of it.

The slam of the front door announced the arrival of her kids. She pulled a bowl of green salad from the fridge and made her way into the living room. Shopping bags littered the lounge and the floor. While collecting the T-shirts, underwear, shorts and other essentials Becky rushed inside. “Sorry I’m late. Pete’s going straight there, we needn’t wait.” Her hands gripped a bag filled with books. “Something for him to remember me by,” she said, pulling out one school textbook after another. “I must tell you I think he is the only kid I know who’ll get a real kick out of this. At least it will give him something to do with his time when indoors,” she said, already rushing through the hall towards the front door. “Come on, Mum, we’re late already.”

Anna took a deep breath. Walking past the small table with photos on it, she found herself blowing a kiss in the direction of her mother’s photo, feeling strangely contented. “You’d like what we’re doing,” she thought, closing the door behind her.
The Boat is Sailing

The morning of their farewell did not proceed as smoothly as they had expected. Although the weather was on their side, the captain and the skipper were not in a mood to appreciate it. A case of bad aftermath following the previous night’s celebrations had left them with sore heads, bloodshot eyes and queasy stomachs. Neither was ready to get up at the pre-arranged time. Alice felt no compulsion to pity either of them and was not prepared to accept excuses when the last of their provisions were to be loaded.

All of their precious possessions were either stored in Leigh’s spare room or already on the boat. She felt as ready for the trip as she was ever going to be, and having slept on the boat the previous night, she felt ready for the journey to begin. Viewing the marina’s comings and goings since early morning had proved interesting. The weekend sailors had brought their families and provisions at sunrise and one boat after another had sailed off for a day of adventures and picnics.

With a cup of coffee in hand Alice sat on the deck crossing off the last jobs on her list. One of the most important decisions, the one concerning the green glazed ceramic jar, was yet to be made. Somehow she had always imagined that it would accompany them on this trip, and she had even ensured that one of the cabinets in the living area had a safe shelf for it. Indeed the jar had arrived with all other provisions and currently sat on the shelf, next to the silver frame. But now she envisaged that during high seas the jar might dislodge and she dreamt of seeing it sinking into the ocean’s depths. That image stayed inside her head and she was unable to dislodge it and had kept changing her mind ever since.
She wished Ken wasn’t in such a fragile state. Any serious discussion was out of the question at this point and there wasn’t much time left. She was waiting for Ralph, who had spent his last night on shore, having slept all of the previous week on the boat.

Unfortunately, the peaceful morning was about to be shattered. Their sailing friends were about to descend on the marina with champagne breakfasts and farewell wishes. Yes, she felt ready. She realised that the journey suddenly had a purpose beyond that which they had planned. It had always been Ken’s trip. He had promised it to Jamie only days before the accident. He had never told her about the promise, but Jamie had, in the evening when she was kissing him goodnight. A week later, the car accident had claimed him forever, leaving a gap that the passing of the years had not filled.

When the memories came up these days, the pain, so all-consuming in the first few years, felt like a chronic ache that one learns to live with, but of which one is never truly free.

“I wish we were finished with the send-offs. I’m dying to be on the way.” Ken’s voice sounded hoarse as he pulled up a deckchair next to hers. His eyes were hidden behind sunglasses, but she could feel him wincing despite the dark lenses. “I knew it wasn’t a good idea to go out with Ralph and the boys, but it’ll be a while before I see them again.” He paused and then continued, “So, are we ready for it?” His smile told her he read her mind. “It feels right now, like we’ve been preparing for exactly this. My only concern is the urn.”
Before he could finish, a car screeched to the edge of the marina, brakes squealing and horn tooting. A second car, approaching from the road above the marina came into sight. They got up and strolled to the gangway, ready for their final goodbyes.

A few hours later with the anchors up, the *Blue Bird* steered into the strong current underneath the Anzac Bridge. Those left on the marina had sailed this way often enough to know which route the boat would take. Underneath the Harbour Bridge, out towards the Heads and across the Tasman Sea. It would be a full four months before it returned. What the well-wishers did not know was that before the boat reached the Heads it was going to make a one last stop in a secluded beach on the eastern shore.
Last Stop

Mehran checked his watch, wondering if the big hand had developed a defect. If it wasn’t for the second hand’s happily completing one circuit after another, he would swear that the watch was broken.

“You looked only three minutes ago,” Leigh reminded him from where she was sitting on the picnic rug. In her hand was the real estate section of the weekend paper. The remains of their grilled chicken and salad lunch were scattered about the picnic rug. Half-empty glasses of soft drink were proving an instant attraction to bees and other insects, and Mehran wondered how long it would take for the wasps to appear.

“Wasps, European wasps – the chance of getting stung, the possibility of an allergic reaction!”

His mind sprang alert, and his hands were already emptying the glasses. Nothing must go wrong at the last minute. His eyes continuously searched the nearby car park, looking for suspicious vehicles or uncalled for visitors. Nothing. His gaze fell on a small backpack filled to bursting. Despite its fullness it triggered inside him a wave of panic.

“Not much to take, especially if it’s all you have to start a new life with.” He said those words aloud without realising it.
“You must have come here with even less than this,” Leigh responded over the paper. He sat next to her, wrapping his arms around her shoulders. She felt warm and soft, and he inhaled the now familiar scent. “I was a grown man. One learns to live with little. He’s too little to have to do all this.”

Panic seized him once more. He got up and looked out to sea. The miniscule figure on the secluded beach already stood at the edge of the water, pulling on the new surf shirt and getting ready for a dip.

“Can he swim?” Not waiting for Leigh’s answer he started down the slope towards the beach. “In danger of drowning, being stung by blue bottles – is the water free of them?” He started to sprint, his feet ignoring the rough rocky track. By the time he reached him, the boy was already submerged in the water up to his neck. No blue bottles were anywhere in sight.

Seeing Mehran, he waved. “Come in, it’s sick.”

Mehran smiled at how quickly he was picking up teenagers’ language. “He wants to learn so much and is doing it so fast, so why can’t he be given the opportunity he craves?” The question screamed inside Mehran’s mind unanswered. Instead, seeing the boy up to his neck in water already, he pulled off his shirt and waded in, still wearing his shorts. “Can you swim?”

Instead of replying Kasim jumped up, the water barely reaching his waist. “Not really, but I don’t sink.” He threw himself back into the water. “I’ll show you.”
He stretched his body on top of the water, spread his arms into a crucifix position and, with his cheeks pumping in and out, offered himself to the mercy of the water. Mehran couldn’t exactly call it “not sinking”, but Kasim was elated: “Becky showed me to how … how to …” the correct word seemed to escape him no matter how much he scrunched up his face to remember. Mehran finished his sentence: “… to float.”

“Yes, that’s it.” He now moved into much deeper water, once again ready to offer himself to the gentle waves of the bay.

Mehran followed, stretching his arms underneath the boy’s back. “Just relax; I’ll catch you if you start sinking. Just breathe slowly and relax. The water and my arms will hold you up.”

This time Kasim floated effortlessly, reassured by the strong arms prepared to catch him. In the freshly sparkling late summer morning, Mehran’s first swimming efforts came back to his mind. Upon his arrival in Brisbane, he noticed that just about every man, woman and child could swim and not just any old style, but freestyle. He felt ashamed and scared of the sea but, wanting to be like everyone else, he used some of his first savings to get a couple of swimming lessons at the local pool. Then he practised and practised. He did not venture into the waves until his style was perfect.

“Now turn around on your stomach, hold on to my hands, lift your feet off and kick for your life,” he told Kasim while manoeuvring him into deeper water.
When Kasim kicked with a force that surprised both of them, the small hands slipped out Mehran’s grip and he sank under the water. Automatically Mehran’s hand reached under, grabbed the surf shirt and pulled him out. Holding the coughing and spluttering boy above the water, he noticed the metal chain with a small piece of metal hanging of it, resting against the bird like collarbone. He squinted and focused his eyes on the silvery grey colour and its irregular shape, so much like his own war souvenir, which he had worn almost constantly for the first 15 years of his life in Australia. As his life moved on it had ended up somewhere in one of the drawers of his dresser.

“This chain, what’s that? Where did you get it?” He asked pointing to the adornment on the boy’s chest.

Kasim’s hands instinctively flew to his neck and a moment later the chain disappeared under the surf shirt. “It’s my father’s. He always wore it, even when we were escaping.”

Before Mehran could ask more, Leigh’s shout reached them from where she stood at the edge of the water, waving and pointing out to the sea. A blue and white sail hovered only a short distance from the shallows, and three figures stood on the deck waving in response. Kasim immediately slipped from his arms and was already heading for a small dinghy tied to a nearby rock. Mehran followed, feeling surprisingly out of breath and his heart racing. Leigh called again and he started to run towards the picnic rug, collecting their clothes along the way.
Some minutes later the dinghy pulled up to the boat’s ladder. Leigh climbed up first, carrying Kasim’s only luggage. With the waves swaying, Kasim balanced precariously for a moment and then he too hauled himself up the steel ladder and into the waiting arms above him.

Mehran carefully secured the rope and stepped onto the ladder only to turn back towards the horizon. For ever after he’d swear, that in that very moment, just above the blue sparkling water, he glimpsed a dreamlike image of a young man bending over another, dripping cool water into his parched throat one drop at a time.