

**Finding Fishboy:**  
**The Grotesque and Making Strange in**  
**Australian Fiction**

by

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# ABSTRACT

Stories matter, and so does the way we tell them. The exegetical component of this thesis explores the way the grotesque – as an aesthetic, as a tool of perceptual disruption, as a form of creative play – can change the way writers tell their stories, and the way readers see the world, both real and otherwise. The exegesis outlines the practice-led research methodology behind finding Jonah the Fishboy – the protagonist of my novel *Fish Head or Ways to be Human* – and how that allowed me to tell my story about Australia. I argue that the grotesque became, for me, a powerful form of making strange – what the Russian Formalist Viktor Shlovsky called *ostranenie*. Further, I suggest that the destruction of my work was a necessary path to creation. This moment of destruction allowed the grotesque to open a *Speilraum*, or “room to play” (Connelly), which created a new way to see my work. I refrain from giving a conclusive answer to what *is* and what is not the grotesque, arguing that the grotesque is a shapeshifter that undergoes constant revision across time and place, a protean form built on contradiction and undecidability. Instead, I identify the theoretical positions of the grotesque taken by Mikhail Bakhtin and Wolfgang Kayser as occupying opposing ends of a diverse spectrum. Further, I suggest that two recurrent aspects of all grotesques are first, play, and, second, a challenge to perceptual understanding. Acknowledging that the grotesque is, above all, relative, and that no work of the grotesque is experienced by any two people in precisely the same way, I approach each grotesque work from a personal perspective. Three case studies – Melissa Lucashenko’s “Country: Being and Belonging on Aboriginal Lands”, Peter Carey’s *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith*, and my own novel *Fish Head* – explore how the grotesque can interrogate issues pertinent to Australia, most especially, the ideas of land and identity. This practice-led research intends to demonstrate how the grotesque, as a form of making strange, can act as a powerful creative tool to play with, and challenge ways of seeing, not just for the reader, but importantly, for the writer as well. The conclusions, drawn from the creative process I undertook to produce my novel *Fish Head*, provide practitioners with novel methods of creative exploration through the intersecting ideas of destruction, the grotesque, making strange and play. Further, by examining two Australian fiction texts as works of the grotesque, this thesis broadens the field and contributes original knowledge beneficial to researchers exploring the relationship between the grotesque and Australian stories.

The creative component of this thesis is a novel called *Fish Head or Ways to be Human* that explores issues of faith, humanness, environmental destruction and land rights. The story's action takes place in the imagined coastal town of Fortune, an (un)real version of Australia. It follows Jonah, a half-boy, half-fish who is kidnapped by Donald Walker, and becomes the unwitting centrepiece for Donald's cult, The Church of the Holy Fish. With Jonah trapped in a giant glass tank, his mother, Charmaine, rushes to rescue him, but Charmaine must face her own demons and the fear that her son has been turned into a monster. As Donald's followers swell in numbers, Fortune is faced with an existential crisis of faith, as well as economy, with the nearby uranium mine grinding to a halt. Boris Barnaby, Fortune's mayor and chief demagogue, attempts to frame the narrative, but as an election approaches, he must reckon with a terrible deed committed ten years earlier. A dark comedy, *Fish Head* aims to show that we are all, in our own way, struggling with ways to be human. While there are many ways to explore these ideas, I believe the grotesque became a powerful way to encode and explore otherness and monstrosity in my story.

## DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and to the best of my knowledge and belief, does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signed

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Piri Eddy', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the left.

Piri Eddy

11/7/2019

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# **FISH HEAD**

**or Ways to be Human**



# 1.

Get this.

I was born in the passenger seat of a 1972 Toyota Hilux during a thunderstorm. My father was dead beside me. My mother was slumped across the musty leather seat and barely conscious. She held me – bundled as I was in a tatty cardigan – tightly to her chest. The windscreen was cracked in a million places, spattered with blood. The engine spewed black smoke. It had twisted itself around the tree – a lover's suicide-embrace – but the tree had barely budged.

After all that, the tree barely had a scratch.

My mother and I sat with the rain pounding on the roof, the smell of the old leather. At my mother's feet: a pool of excrement, blood, fluids – yes, the whole stinking lot – all smelling like an abattoir waiting to be hosed down. The fizz of the rain and the fizz of the radio fell in step.

My mother's entire body was consumed by pain. Her breath was sharp, so sharp it hurt. She sensed, but couldn't quite believe, that my father was a corpse beside her. And then, in her arms, the sticky little thing she'd just produced, that had fallen like a wrinkled prune from between her legs. She looked at her creation, and though her mind was foggy, smarting like hell, she saw something that made her shudder.

Okay. Let me pause for just a moment. There are some things you need to know about me before I continue.

What you need to know is this: I am not normal.

You might say, 'Oh, but Jonah, please, what *is* normal? Aren't we all a little different?'

And I would say: No, not like this.

I am not the kid at the back of the class that picks their nose and surreptitiously eats what is excavated. I am not the reclusive prodigy whose artistic talents people knowingly nod their heads to, thinking, 'Oh, yes, such a treat, such a divine creation.'

I am none of these. If your sense of normality and deviance extends this far then life for you is but a scotch finger dunked in milky tea. Maybe you won't understand what I'm about to tell you. You might not be able to believe it.

But here goes anyway.

I was born a fish.

Well, that's not *entirely* true. It's only half true, but these days half-truths are better than lies when lies seem to be just about good enough for everyone else. Really, if I'm being honest, I was born half-fish and half-human, which is a nicer way of saying: I was born a monster.

So, you see, when my mother saw me she saw something incredible, impossible, unbelievable. She saw a child, yes, with arms and legs and all the other things you'd expect when you were expecting. I was tiny, small enough to fit in a pair of cupped palms. I was early, you know. I hadn't been cooking for long enough. But it wasn't this that made her shudder. No. It was the scaly skin, shimmering phosphorescent. It was the deep black eyes, eyes that dominated much of my oblong head, like a balloon pinched at the bottom. It was the holes where ears should have been and the thick rubbery lips. It was the gills either side of my neck, fluttering with every gulp of air. It was the fact that, despite my hominoid shape, I looked like a fish.

My mother thought it wouldn't mean much. She figured I would die here, that this sticky little thing in her arms wouldn't survive. As for her? She felt a husk, utterly broken. This was it. This was the end.

But then, when all seemed lost, we were saved. In a manner of speaking.

Donald Walker saw the feeble headlights lighting up the tree ahead. He pulled his car over a hundred paces away and cut the engine. He sat without moving, watching the wreck, knowing he'd find something terrible. Of course, he didn't expect to find me. Who could possibly expect *that*?

Rain hammered the roof.

Donald gripped the steering wheel, and as he closed his eyes he had a flash of his wife, Jules, sitting breathless on the bed, tubes sticking out of her body like translucent worms, monitors beeping. Gaunt and waxy. So far from human. He rubbed his eyes. He was incredibly tired. Just drive away, he thought to himself, drive away and forget you ever saw this wreck. He swallowed, mouth dry, tasting of scotch.

He had to see. He had to get out and see if anyone was still alive.

My mother barely noticed when Donald stuck his face through the window, even when he called her name. He knew this woman. Not well, but he'd seen her around town, had even done some business with her father on occasion.

'Charmaine? Can you hear me?'

He spotted the bloodied bundle in her arms, smelt the accumulation of piss and shit and blood.

‘Oh, Jesus.’ He retched, threw up the whisky still hot in his belly. ‘Charmaine, dear? What have you got there?’

Slowly, she turned her head to face him. A deep gash dripped blood into her eyes.

‘James,’ she whispered.

Donald shook his head. ‘We’ll get you out of here, alright? Just hang on now.’

He leant in and fumbled with my mother’s seatbelt, trying desperately not to look across at the man with his neck twisted the wrong way. Behind him, the night lit up, red and blue, red and blue, and Donald pulled his head out into the rain as the police car approached.

‘Thank God.’

He scrambled up the embankment to the road, slipping in the wet and mud, and waved his arms.

‘Here. It’s down here.’

The lights of the police car blinded him. Donald covered his eyes. He heard the engine idling. Then, a door opening and swinging shut.

‘There’s been an accident.’ Donald’s voice was strangled in the wind and rain. He was ready to be sick again. ‘Down here.’

Sergeant Boris Barnaby materialised from behind the glaring light. He grabbed Donald by the shoulder. ‘Anyone alive?’

Donald nodded. The badge on Barnaby’s barrel chest glinted in the light as he turned back to the car and waved. He turned back to Donald.

‘Show me.’

Together, they slipped down the mud and came to the smoking car. Barnaby slicked his orange curls from his eyes as he surveyed the scene. He saw my mother slumped across the leather, saw the bloodied bundle. Across from her, my dead father with his neck all twisted wrong.

‘Oh, Jesus. Is he...?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Fuck. That’s Adam’s boy.’ He grabbed his walkie-talkie. ‘Temperence, you better get down here.’

‘Got it,’ the walkie-talkie crackled back.

‘Charmaine, love? Can you hear me? It’s Sergeant Barnaby.’

She mumbled something, pulled the bundle close to her chest.

‘Don’t worry, love. We’ll have you out of here in no time. Just sit tight now.’

‘I just found ‘em here like this,’ Donald yelled. ‘Barnaby, there’s something else.’

Barnaby leant into the car and he smelt it. He saw the stuff at my mother’s feet. And then he saw the bundle moving, like there was something alive in it, squirming around. He leant into the car, arms outstretched, hands shaking like crazy, rain and sweat dripping down his forehead.

My mother tried to keep the bundle away from Barnaby. He took hold of the cardigan and gave it a slight tug.

Barnaby gasped when he saw my slimy, scaled face looking blindly back at him. He almost fell back into the mud, but Donald stopped him. Donald peered past Barnaby into the car and saw me writhing in the cold air.

‘Barn?’

Barnaby looked up and saw his constable slipping in the mud towards them.

‘What have we got, Barn?’

‘It’s...bad.’

He glanced into the car and she followed his gaze. She stumbled back in shock.

‘My God.’

Barnaby yanked her from the car. They left Donald standing alone by the wreck.

‘What is that thing?’

‘I don’t bloody know.’ He was breathless, his face stark white. ‘It’s not right though.’

‘Did she give – you know? To that?’

Temperence shuddered.

They both stood in that fizzing, steaming rain, both feeling the thump of their hearts, the sickness gurgling up in their throats. A moment, and then:

‘I’ve got to get rid of it,’ Barnaby said.

She looked up at him in shock. ‘What?’

‘That thing,’ he muttered. ‘It’s not right. It should be put down.’

Temperence searched out his eyes, but he looked past her, biting his lip, breathing heavy.

‘Barn. You can’t. I mean, it’s a baby, isn’t it? You can’t just – ’

‘Listen,’ he hissed. He grabbed Temperence by the elbow. ‘What the hell do you think people are gonna say if they see it, huh? After all them blacks got sick.’

‘You can’t be serious.’

‘People will ask questions. About me. About the mine.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘It’s bad fucking news for all of us, Temperence. Bad for me, the town. Bad for you.’

He squeezed her elbow until she gave a little gasp of pain.

‘Barn, please.’

She frowned up at him. He shook his head, gave a half-hearted shrug.

‘I’ve got to do something.’

He turned back to the car. Donald was waiting in the rain.

‘What’s going on, Barnaby?’

He brushed past Donald and stuck his hands into the car.

‘Pass it over now,’ he said, without looking at my mother. ‘It needs helps. Dr Snivels is on his way.’

Barnaby took hold of the bundle, the tangled strands of his fringe dripping wet over his eyes. My mother, dazed as she was, held fast.

‘Come on. I’m here to help.’ His voice was cracked, tremulous.

‘No,’ she whispered. ‘No.’

Barnaby managed to pull me from her grasp. But something held the bundle back. He looked down and saw the fat red worm snaking from the material all the way down until it disappeared up my mother’s skirt. Barnaby fumbled in his pockets and pulled out his pocket knife. His breath heavy, his hands slipping on the metal. She watched him, lifted her arms to stop him, but he’d already taken the worm and cut it, cut it in two and there was a burst of blood. He winced at the sight of what he’d done, and then he pulled the bundle out into the rain.

‘There we go.’ Barnaby stepped back out into the rain. Donald kept watching him as he brushed past towards Temperence.

‘What are you doing with that thing, Barnaby? Barnaby. What the hell’s going on?’ he called out.

Barnaby tried not to look down. He folded the cardigan over to cover my face, to shroud this abject creature from view. But he couldn’t stop it squirming in his arms. He hurried away from the wreck.

‘Barn,’ Temperence said.

‘Listen. It’s going to be fine, okay. I’m doing the right thing. Just get rid of Donald and then call Lenard.’

‘Barn, what the hell will I say?’

‘Just do it. I’ll be back before he gets here.’

‘Barn, please.’

But he hurried off towards the squad car. She watched him fumbling with the boot before struggling off through the mud. The darkness swallowed him whole.

‘Fuck,’ she muttered. ‘This is all wrong.’

She massaged her elbow, waiting for Barnaby to reappear. But he wasn’t coming back. She already knew that.

‘Donald,’ she called and turned back to the car. ‘Oh, no.’

He’d gone.

‘Shit.’

She rushed over, slipping in the mud, the rain picking up. She gripped the open window.

‘Oh, fuck no. No, this is bad.’

My father was still slumped uselessly across the dash, but my mother, who only minutes before had been sitting dazed and bloodied, was gone.

\*

Barnaby took a rucksack from the boot of the car and grabbed the heaviest thing he could find – an old phone book, yellowed and torn – and stuffed it in the bottom of the bag. He stumbled through the darkness, rain driving hard, churning up the grass and dirt beneath his feet. He felt the weight of me in his arms – not a physical weight, mind you – but a psychological one, the weightiness of terrible wrongdoing. He glanced back but the red and blue of the police car was already lost in the rain. As he turned his foot caught on a stone and he fell and landed heavily on his shoulder. The bundle squirmed in his arms.

Barnaby panted heavily. Was he really doing this?

‘Get up, Barnaby, you prick. Get up,’ he growled.

He couldn’t go back. It was too late.

‘Pick your arse up and get on with it.’

If only he had.

He struggled up. The sky lit up, once, twice. A deep moan of thunder. Barnaby scrambled on through the dark until he reached the dam. They were everywhere around here,

and he knew this one belonged to a drunk who barely left his house anymore. This would be safe, he thought. No one would come looking.

He reached the bank and almost tumbled over the edge into that inky froth. His heart raced. He looked at the dark, bubbling water. He felt the heat of me through that cardigan, heard a noise that sounded more animal than human. He threw up violently, bent over double. When he stopped, he slipped the bag off his back and unzipped it. He held me in his arms and stood there for the longest time.

His legs felt so weak.

The bundle kicked and squirmed.

A crackle of lightning.

\*

It was Donald who dragged me out of the dam, just as the bag choked up with water, just before it sank to the bottom. Watching from afar, crouched low in the shrubs with my mother barely conscious next to him, he watched Barnaby pitch the bag into the water. When the shadow of Barnaby scurried off, Donald waded out into that freezing darkness, and rescued me from the hungry water before it closed its mouth around me.

Yes. Donald saved my life.

They couldn't return to the car, even though my mother begged Donald to take her back. Instead they cut through the property, away from the wreck, until they reached the old dirt road that led into Fortune.

By the road, my mother slipped from Donald's shoulder and collapsed in the mud, clutching me to her chest.

'We've gotta keep going,' Donald yelled.

'I need to go back,' she said. 'I need to see James.'

Donald shook his head. 'He's gone.'

In the distance: car lights. Donald looked up.

'Give me the baby.'

He reached down, but she pulled back.

'If it's Barnaby, you need to give me the baby.'

He made for the bundle and as she pulled away the cardigan fell. Donald saw me fully again, now illuminated in the approaching headlights. The sight of me, slimy with blood, scales shimmering, took his breath away. And something gripped Donald, something

unspeakable, something so powerful that he knew he couldn't lose this creature. It had to be his.

'Give it to me,' he yelled and lunged again.

She twisted on the ground and threw out an elbow. It caught him in the chin and he stumbled back. She scrambled to her feet, but Donald reached out and his fingers closed around her ankle, tight and painful. She tried to break his hold. His grip was too tight, too determined. With her free hand, my mother clawed at the ground until her fingers closed around the cold smooth of a rock. As Donald pulled her towards him she thrust her closed fist back at him and felt the rock connect, felt the reverberation of it in her palm as it burst the skin of Donald's skull. His grip slackened and she yanked her ankle clear. She scrambled up, ready, electrified by the sudden adrenaline. But Donald was spread-eagled on the ground, blood spilling from the gash in his forehead.

My mother left him there in the rain, possibly to die. She didn't care. She stumbled to the road and waved the car down. It slowed and then came to a stop, the engine idling. She covered me in the cardigan and stood on trembling legs.

She didn't have the strength to call out. She just waited, not knowing if it was Barnaby or someone else. From behind the headlights, she heard a car door open, and saw a large shadow emerge from the car.

Someone called out to her, a thick Germanic accent. 'You need help, ya?'

I would have died if Mendelssohn and Ludwig hadn't found us on that road. If they hadn't helped my mother into the backseat, wrapped her in their jackets, found fresh towels for me. When the bloodied cloth first fell away and they both got a sight of me, Mendelssohn's reaction was muted, as if he'd just seen a mildly interesting, but obvious, magic trick. He'd simply smiled and handed over a small towel to wrap me with. When Mendelssohn offered her some pills to ease the pain, she refused. Instead, she asked them, as calmly as possible – although she couldn't quite keep the quiver from her voice – to drive as far from Fortune as they possibly could. They didn't ask why she was out in the middle of nowhere in a thunderstorm. Mendelssohn said, 'Happy to be obliging,' and they pulled away into the night.

With her last ounce of strength, my mother glanced back at the shadowy road, looking for signs of Donald, or the police, or anything else, but all she should see was the driving rain.

Then she turned back, pulled me close, and closed her eyes.



They might have driven for hours, or possibly all night, the two men in the front seat sitting silently, Mendelssohn's gigantic form hunched in front of the wheel, Ludwig, his tiny companion, next to him. In fact, they drove until their car ran out of fuel, having wound their way through scrubby valleys and across dirt and gravel roads with the rain pounding the windshield. My mother was still in the backseat, breathing softly. Every so often, Ludwig checked on me.

But as the car slowed, wobbled, and then stopped with a shuddering sigh, Mendelssohn tugged at his moustache and frowned.

Then he saw the light.

No, not an ethereal, heavenly thing. Literally, a light. A feeble glimmer in the dark distance. Ludwig saw it too. They glanced back at my mother, her bloodied clothes, the bundle in her arms.

'We must try,' Mendelssohn said, and Ludwig nodded.

Together, they helped her from the car, still clutching me tightly to her chest. The four of us, although I had little to do with it, left the car where it had stopped and limped through the rain, parsing the trees and shrubs until we came to a clearing and saw the old hotel sitting there waiting for us. We didn't have time to consider whether it was safe. The rain had picked up and was now a deluge. All we had left was to knock.

So that's what we did.

Thankfully, for me, someone answered.

## 2.

Let's pause. Just for a moment. Take a collective breath – in, out – scratch of the behind. A pot of tea, perhaps? Go on, put the kettle on. I'll wait.

You're going to have some questions, like, for instance, how I could possibly know all the things that I am telling you. How could I possibly know all this when I was just a squirming bundle of goo? How could I know the fear and wonder that Donald Walker and Boris Barnaby felt when they saw me? The rush of terror that my mother had as she stumbled through the rain?

Well, I can't. Not for certain. But isn't it true that a historian is never present when the story unfolds? Instead, they piece together the scraps and snippets left to them long after the fact. They assemble the accumulation of chaos into something discernible. A story, with its beginning, its middle, its end. And we believe them. Or, at least, we try to.

I would ask of you the same. I have laboured for years to piece it all together. I have searched for the little slices of fact, I have peeled through the lies to find truth, searched high and wide for the stories that were written years later, the things people said or recalled of those most extraordinary of times. But there is much I couldn't find, no matter how hard I tried. So, in the end, I did only what I could.

So, yes, the truth is you'll get the story. My story. You'll get *my* truth. It's up to you whether you believe it or not.

Why this story when so many other versions have been told? Because this story shows the courageous strength and sacrifice of the people who loved me, who were my family. Who were there until the very end.

This story is for them.

So, then, let us return once more – your tea has surely brewed quite long enough – to my first glimmers of life. You see, after my first moment of becoming, I was afforded some years of relative peace. My mother and I had found our way to an old hotel nestled in a narrow valley, hidden from the world. This is where I spent my childhood. Really, to call it a hotel would be a stretch. It had been one, once, for old weary travellers on horseback, for those needing to slip away from knowing eyes. But that had been a long time ago. Now, it was just Francine and Harry's house.

My mother spent that first night by a roaring fire in a strange place, clutching me tightly to her chest, listening to the rain lash at the roof and thinking that I would surely be dead before sunrise. Long after Harry had brought them in from the rain, his eyes wide and disbelieving, and led them to the old front-par turned living room; long after Mendelssohn and Ludwig had said their goodbyes to the baby, and allowed Harry to take them to a spare bedroom upstairs; long after all of that, my mother sat exhausted, terrified, and waited for me to die.

But when she woke with a start as the first drips of morning light settled on the dusty floorboards, she found that, somehow, impossibly, I was still alive. I had survived the night, and from that moment she believed with an unquestionable certainty, that I would be okay.

When Francine shuffled down the stairs next morning she spotted me and my mother by the fireplace.

'Oh. Hello, dear. I hope I didn't wake you.'

My mother tried to cover me with the blanket. Francine smiled and lay her arm across the back of my mother's armchair.

‘It’s alright, dear. Let me see him.’

Slowly, my mother obliged, and she was surprised that this woman was neither horrified nor taken-aback. Francine peered down at this little sticky thing in the blanket and said, ‘My, he’s something. What’s his name?’

My mother looked at the baby and thought for a moment. ‘Jonah,’ she said.

‘Jonah. Beautiful. Fits him to a tee.’

Francine smiled wistfully, then went across to the old oak bar. ‘I’ll get you some water. And, dear,’ she said, turning back to my mother. ‘Make yourself comfortable. You can stay as long as you’d like.’

And just like that, we had found our new home.

Francine was the matriarch of that hidden little world, a wiry woman with a gleaming smile and bright, searching eyes, her bone-white hair falling across her bright, shimmering necklaces. Francine had inherited the hotel somehow, long after it had fallen into disrepair. To this day I’ve never known exactly how it fell into her possession, but Francine had always enjoyed her little secrets.

‘If I ever told you that, my boy, I’d have to gobble you up,’ she’d told me one night, as she tucked me into bed, a wicked grin stretching across her face.

She flattened the blanket around me with her palms. I looked up at her with a mixture of wonderment and terror. She winked at me and said, ‘Don’t worry. I’ll never tell.’ And she mime-zipped her lips shut.

She’d come from the city, that much I knew, years back when Harry had run into trouble with some unscrupulous business associates – thugs, I guess – and they’d been forced to flee town. The hotel was falling to pieces. Francine managed to patch it up a little, discovering an aptitude with hammer and nail hitherto unknown to her, and she and Harry had lived there ever since. Slowly they built up a collection of cows and sheep, and a greenhouse of vegetables that kept them living comfortably enough, alone, for more than ten years.

As for Harry? He was a genial man, always brushing over his last wisps of hair, leaving dirt across his scalp from fingers constantly caked in the mud of the greenhouse. He adored his mother and spent much of his time doing as she asked, then, increasingly, as she curled up with age, taking care of her.

After we arrived, a pair of loners became a crowded half-dozen, banded together through necessity, but most importantly, by love. There was Mendelssohn, a man of

gargantuan proportions, his rounded, buttery face framing a bushy moustache he kept rigid with wax, the same wax he applied liberally to his bald head. He'd been a dentist in a past life but hadn't practiced in many years. Instead, he spent his time eating, a pastime he found great pleasure in. With him was Ludwig, the man he loved and his one-time assistant, who, in comparison to Mendelssohn, was positively diminutive. A deep scar on his throat, like a frown, meant he couldn't talk, but when he laughed, you could hear his guttural chortle from across the house. Then, there was my mother, Charmaine, and myself. The six of us. Strange people in a strange place.

Because of my unique condition, you understand, we kept to ourselves, wary of outsiders. Besides the driver who dropped off and took away supplies each fortnight, no one visited. That's the way it had to be. I was kept in our second-floor bedroom whenever the delivery truck came. I hated being locked up like that, and that frustration turned often to destruction. I'll always remember the look my mother gave me when she found me panting and sweating in a midst of torn sheets and broken cups, her brow narrowed, mouth a thin crease.

My mother wanted to keep me safe. That's what she said.

'People won't understand, Jonah.'

Her chopping carrots at the kitchen counter, me standing on a rickety chair, my little head struggling to poke above the laminate, the sweet smell of garlic and onions simmering on the stovetop. I would have been four.

'People are afraid of what they don't know,' she said.

'What about the others?' I asked.

'Mendelssohn and the others are different. They are good people. People out there,' she said, waving the knife in the general direction of *out there*, 'are different. They aren't such good people. Not like us.'

I poked out my tongue and scurried from the kitchen. Later, I trashed the bedroom.

I often spent time staring at the mirror in the bathroom, balancing on a stool next to the sink, twisting my face this way and that. I'd seen pictures of people in magazines and newspapers, pictures of the people *out there* whose faces were made up the right way. People who didn't look like me. Sometimes, I'd shut my eyes tight as possible, and wish, silently, to be normal, to open my eyes and see the reflection of a normal human boy looking back at me.

My mother would always say, 'You're perfectly normal, Jonah. You're just a bit different, but there's nothing wrong with that.'

She insisted I was normal, just like everyone else, but even as a kid I knew it was a cheap lie. I *knew* I wasn't normal. As I stared into that fogged mirror, pulling at my face with sticky, webbed hands, I knew that normal wasn't gills. Normal wasn't scales and black eyes.

Normal wasn't me.

I was obsessed with knowing where I'd come from, and who my father had been. All I knew of him, though, was a single picture, faded and torn, he and my mother standing together with the ocean behind them, both smiling, cherishing each other's company. I loved the big, toothy grin spreading across his tanned face, his eyes alert and searching. My mother had fleeting memories of him as a kind man, a generous man who worked hard and always cared for her. But the crash had meant much was lost to her forever. Really, if it hadn't been for that crumpled photo she wouldn't have recognised him.

I spent hours and hours poring over that little fragment of my father. I could close my eyes and see every line and crease on his face, the way his nose had a little kink at the top, the mole he had above his top lip. But it was his frozen self, the self that didn't come with a voice or a smell, a self that was simply preserved in time with light and emulsion. It brought me a deep happiness looking at his face in that picture, but I also wondered what part of it could be found in mine.

Sitting on my belly in the bedroom with the photo clutched tightly in my hand, I asked my mother, 'Why don't I look like you or my dad?'

I would have been six or so, the room smelling of sandalwood, soft afternoon light spilling into the room. She looked up from the bed, put her pen down, folded her journal. She frowned. Had I asked the wrong thing? I turned away as she slipped from the bed and sat cross-legged next to me.

She put her finger under my chin, gently pulled my eyes up to hers. 'Jonah. You might not see me or your father on the outside, but there's so much of us in here.' She lay her hand gently across my chest. 'Everything that's in here came from your father and I.'

I didn't quite understand, but I felt better for what she'd said.

'So even though you haven't met your father before, he's always there with you. Isn't that nice?'

I nodded.

She tucked her hand under my armpit and tickled me until I screamed, in between breathless laughter, for her to stop.

What can I tell you of Charmaine, my mother? She was, to me, always heroic, scintillating and furious like the sun. And beautiful, of course, but not without flaws, those little marks of the flesh and mind we are all burdened with. These, such as her stubbornness, her sudden flashes of anger, I cannot fault her for, and in the end those idiosyncrasies were the ones that sustained her in life. In the face of all its adversities.

In another life, I believe, my mother would have achieved unheralded things, things that would have surprised even herself. Her mind was agile, lucid. She had a predilection for deep contemplation, a trait which led her sometimes down a painful and dark path. Her mind, attuned as it was to both abstract thought and more earthly, prosaic understanding, found restless peace in art, in her chaotic paintings, nebulous, and layered with forgotten but nascent memories. I remember watching her from the bed, while outside it rained, her sitting by the window, brow furrowed before her canvas. I was always rapt with wonder at her in these moments.

‘What is it, my love?’ she’d ask, turning to me.

I would say nothing. I didn’t have the words to express to her what I felt.

She spent many years after the crash locked away in the darkness of lost memories, half-formed ones that scurried away from her outstretched hands like shadows forever outpacing their caster. She managed, eventually, to piece fragments together, so that she remembered parts of her life in Fortune. At times, she would get hot flashes. At other times, her memories slipped uninvited into her paintings, pulled out from some hidden place. She knew, for instance, that she’d left her father behind in Fortune, and it pained her immensely never returning to him. She knew that to do so might put me in danger. It was a risk she couldn’t take.

My mother sacrificed so much for me. When she’d left Fortune that night, she was a seventeen-year-old girl who had lost everything. Because of me, she could never get it back.

I spent ten years in that hotel. The valley became as familiar to me as the scales on the back of my hands. In my mind, I could trace the rise and fall of those undulating hills around us. My invisible boundary ran from the rusty, dilapidated windmill at the back of the hotel, to the greenhouse Harry and Francine had erected in the husk of a crumbling shed. I knew where to find wombats burrowed in their little hides, which trees the birds chose to build their nests in. I could find, without difficulty, all the little caves dotted along the valley, little nooks for me to escape my mother’s fiery gaze. I knew this place so well that it no longer held surprises for me.

Sometimes, when my mother felt less restive, less paranoid of prying eyes, we'd go out on little bushwalks past the boundary, traipsing to the back of the valley and then clambering through dense foliage up the hill, my mother noting the wild flowers amongst the grass, the screeches of cockatoos and the warbles of magpies in the trees. But, really, beyond that perimeter I still knew nothing of the outside world as I approached my tenth birthday. I had seen pictures of dense cities and quaint towns, but they weren't enough to fulfil my growing curiosity.

My mother thought this could be tempered with lessons. It took Mendelssohn burning his moustache clean off his face for practical chemistry lessons to be banned. I'd silently hoped he might do likewise in an algebra lesson, but maths lacks anything approximating fireworks. My mother gave me books to read, fictional and historical, and she encouraged me to paint and draw with her, an art I never truly mastered.

Francine taught me how to plant the vegetable seeds, how to tend them, nurture them to life. We'd walk through the greenhouse at night with torches, Francine picking through the plants looking for caterpillars.

'See here, Jonah,' she'd say, and I'd hurry over. 'These blighters will munch through your whole crop overnight.'

A fat juicy caterpillar waving its furry head in the torchlight. I'd stare at it in wonder, a tiny boy of eight years, and then Francine would snatch it up and slice it in two.

Other times, I'd join Harry rounding up the sheep, me tearing after them like a terrier. Later I'd watch on in awe as Harry expertly squeezed milk from their teats into a bucket.

It was, I should say, a safe life. A comfortable one. And it is true that for a long time I was satisfied, content even, with my patch of the world. I grew from the little seed my mother had sprouted, but remained, as I would for life, much smaller than the average boy. By my tenth birthday I was scarcely a smidge above three feet. Still, I grew confident in myself, began to possess the self-assuredness of budding youth, and grew more interrogative of what lay beyond. I wanted to experience more, and before too long, I became desperate to see what life held outside the valley.

I should have known better. But I was ten and restless and sick of being coddled by my mother. I wanted to get out.

And then, a week before my tenth birthday, something happened that changed everything.

It happened on a Thursday, a miserable afternoon with clouds fat with rain. I helped Francine feed chickens in the yard, scattering pellets across the dirt, and knowing my freedom outside was fleeting. Francine straightened slowly. She looked down the valley towards darkening clouds.

‘It’ll be a big one, bubba. Come on.’ She dug her hand into her bucket and sent a golden shower of feed across the grass. The chickens scurried around us, pecking and scratching for seeds. ‘Let’s get this finished up with.’

Harry came around the side of the hotel with a crate of vegetables. ‘Herb will be here soon, Mum. Best get Jonah inside.’ With a groan, he dropped the box under the corrugated lean-to, wiped his brow, and disappeared back behind the hotel.

And sure enough, we heard the dull roar of an engine and spotted the truck coming up the winding road in the distance. The first spatters of rain peppered the grass.

‘Here he is.’ Harry reappeared with another box. He stacked it on top of the first. ‘Sorry, Jonah.’

‘I want to stay outside.’

Francine tutted. ‘You can’t dear. You know that.’

‘But I can stay hidden. I just want to stay out a little longer.’

She frowned, hands on hips, and glanced at Harry. He shrugged.

‘Jonah!’ My mother stood by the back doorway. ‘Let’s go, buster.’ She pointed inside. ‘Now.’

I threw her a mutinous look, pulled my beanie low over my head and slunk inside.

‘Sorry, bubba,’ Francine whispered to me.

By the time the truck pulled up to the hotel it was raining hard. I waited in the bedroom and watched the rain lashing the window. My mother’s new work sat under a paint-flecked sheet in the corner. Bored and restless, I went to it and pulled the sheet to the floor. I peered up at the painting sitting on its easel, a small landscape of tempestuous blacks and greys. It seemed, at first glance, meaningless. I balanced on webbed toes for a better look at it, and then I saw two pinpricks of reddish green sitting hidden in the middle of that anti-colour. The two dots, like two eyes really, seemed almost three-dimensional, and they captured me in their gaze. I couldn’t look away. I felt suddenly and strangely sick, fearful even. I scrambled up the sheet and tried to throw it back over, but as I did, I slipped and toppled into the easel. It tipped backwards, the canvas tumbling with it. I heard splintering wood as it hit the floor.



My breath caught in my throat.

I felt a fresh wave of nausea.

As if to signal my terrible transgression, a roll of thunder punctuated the driving rain. If my mother walked back in and found her painting destroyed I'd be locked away in the bedroom for weeks, possibly forever. I'd die in this room.

Without thinking, I rushed to the door and stretched for the handle.

I froze.

If I was caught out of my room while the delivery truck was outside, I'd be equally as dead. I'd be in so much trouble that my mother would kill me, then resuscitate me back to life, just so she could kill me twice.

I turned back to the broken canvas. Another booming bark of thunder drove home my heinous act.

I yanked open the door and crept out into the hallway. I had to hope that everyone was still outside, that the house was empty. I could find something, some tape or glue, and fix it before she found out.

I inched across the landing towards the top of the stairs, holding my breath as I did, and looked through the banisters to the living room below.

Herb the delivery driver saw me as he walked back from the bathroom, zipping up his fly with a grunt. When he looked up and spotted me peeking through the banisters, a flash of lightning lit up the room, a crash of thunder rang out above, and Herb, disorientated, saw me with his eyes half-closed. He blinked, and I was gone.

That was all it was. Just a momentary, half-seen vision. Maybe he'd think it was nothing, just a brain fart, nothing more. Maybe.

But Herb was pale as he hurried outside.

Harry gave him an odd look. 'You alright, mate?'

He wiped rain from his forehead. 'Uh, yep. Just, uh, you know, spice night last night.'

'Ah.' Harry nodded and tapped his nose knowingly. 'Say no more.'

My mother loaded the last box into the truck. She wiped dirt from her hands with a cloth and turned to Herb. 'All finished, Herb.'

He gave a curt nod and clambered in. 'I'll see you in two weeks.'

He slammed the door without another word and pulled away.

'Twitchy fella sometimes, isn't he?' my mother said, watching him go with a bemused look.

Harry came up beside her. 'Think he had the shifts.'

\*

My mother found me curled up in bed, shivering. She cooed at me, but then she saw her painting broken on the floor.

'Jonah. What have you done now?'

I peeked up above the blanket, but she shot me a look that sent me scurrying back under the covers. I heard her muttering under her breath. When I dared to look she'd already gone, slamming the door behind her.

I went without dinner that night and she was frosty with me the next day as well. I kept to the bedroom, but even if I'd wanted to venture outside, the weather stayed sour and it rained for days.

So, on the morning of my tenth birthday, before I'd even been corralled out of bed by the promise of pancakes and hot syrup, I was mutinous. My mother always made a real effort to celebrate. It was her way of showing that here, in this familiar place, we could still have fun. That this wasn't a prison for me.

The rain had finally eased when I woke up. I slouched down the stairs, blinking sleep from my eyes, to the living room. Streamers hung from the chandelier like colourful cobwebs amongst the real ones. My mother crouched on the bar, a half-inflated balloon in her mouth.

'Good morning, sweetheart. Happy birthday!'

I ignored her and shuffled to the table where Mendelssohn and Ludwig were playing cards. As I wriggled onto a chair, Mendelssohn turned to me.

'Hmm, is something different with the little man today?'

I shrugged, but a little smile crept across my face.

Mendelssohn ogled me.

'Is taller, no? Stronger, maybe?' Mendelssohn checked his cards and placed two on the table. Ludwig growled under his breath and frowned at his own hand.

'What you think, Ludwig?'

Ludwig furrowed his brow as he considered his cards.

Mendelssohn continued. 'Something is different. But why, I am not knowing. Has something happened this day, of all days, to make the little man different?'

Mendelssohn examined me closely, his big eyes widened theatrically. I giggled and tried to slip away, but Mendelssohn took hold of me and planted me on the table top.

‘On closer inspection there is no difference. Today is normal day like yesterday, and day before.’

Mendelssohn went back to his cards. He smiled triumphantly.

‘Aha! It is hand to celebrate. If only thing to celebrate today. I go all in, Ludwig.’ He collected me in his giant hands and pushed me towards a small scattering of gumnuts in the middle of the table. ‘The boy is worth something, ya?’

I laughed so hard my sides ached. ‘No, Mendelssohn. It’s my birthday today!’

Mendelssohn frowned. ‘Today? No. Balloons celebrate winner of great card game.’

I managed to stop laughing. ‘It is. I promise.’

Mendelssohn turned to my mother. ‘Is true?’

She grinned. ‘Not a word of truth, Mendelssohn. I think Jonah is lying again.’

‘No, it is!’ I shrieked.

Mendelssohn bundled me up in his arms and lifted me into the air. ‘Well, you know what we do with liars. You must pay. Now, what treasures you have?’

I giggled uncontrollably as Mendelssohn turned me upside down and held me by the ankles.

‘Careful, Mendelssohn. Careful, please,’ my mother called out from the bar.

‘Hmm. The little man has nothing of value. Maybe we roast him instead?’

‘Noooo!’ I squealed.

‘Ya, is what we do.’ And he rubbed his belly.

I managed to hook on to his arm.

Mendelssohn gave a strangled groan. ‘The little man has me. Mendelssohn surrenders. You are winner!’

He lowered me, and I scrambled up, laughing.

‘Happy birthday,’ he said, grinning.

‘Thanks,’ I said. ‘Now, because I won, you have to take me outside.’

Mendelssohn glanced up at my mother. She frowned.

‘Oh, I don’t know, Jonah. You’ll catch a cold out there.’

‘It’s not even raining,’ I protested. ‘And it’s my birthday. Please?’

‘Mendelssohn doesn’t want to go out into the cold,’ she said. ‘And I’ve got to finish with your cake, so – ’

‘I’ll take him.’ Francine appeared at the top of the stairs, wrapped in a thick, scratchy shawl, fluffy slippers on her feet. ‘Could do with some fresh air.’ She gripped the banister as she hobbled down.

I turned to my mother. ‘Well then? Please.’

She sighed. ‘Okay. But just for an hour, okay? And no further than the windmill.’

‘I know,’ I cried out, and raced back up the stairs.

She called up after me, ‘And wear your beanie!’

Francine gave my mother’s arm a gentle squeeze. ‘He’ll be right, luv.’

\*

My mother bustled absently around the kitchen. She checked the oven, moved a mixing bowl sticky with batter from one side of the counter to the other, checked the oven again. She tried not to imagine me climbing the windmill and dive-bombing off with glee while Francine chanted me on.

She shut the oven and took a deep breath. It was fine. The valley was hidden. They were safe. She stood up, brushed a dusting of flour from her pants, and went to the sink. She stuffed the rubbery plug into the sinkhole, squirted a measure of detergent and then turned the tap. The pipes shuddered and rattled as the tap gushed warm water. She looked up through the grimy, cobwebbed window.

She saw me looking tiny next to the windmill, Francine leaning back against the base, languorous, probably asleep. But who was that? Standing nearby, a bulky jacket, hunched shoulders, but faceless like a shadow.

‘Harry?’

‘You say my name? Something smells delicious.’

She turned, saw Harry at the door, sniffing the air and rubbing his belly. Her heart sank.

‘Charmaine? You alright?’

She raced from the room, leaving the tap to churn up hot, bubbly water in the sink.

By the windmill, I was inspecting the decaying carcass of a bird, all bone and hollowed out eyes-sockets. I brushed off ants with a stick, face scrunched in disgust, when my mother appeared, out of breath, her cheeks flushed red. She was still wearing her apron, dusted with flour and a smear of butter. Francine shook awake when she called, ‘Jonah?’

‘Just shoot the damn thing,’ Francine shot up. ‘Whashappened?’

‘Francine. You fell asleep.’

‘It’s fine,’ I said. ‘She wasn’t even sleeping.’

Francine nodded vigorously. My mother opened her mouth to chastise us, but instead she took a deep breath.

‘Never mind that.’ She crouched down next to me, took me sharply by the shoulders. ‘Jonah, dear. Was there someone else out here with you?’

Her grip on my shoulders tightened. Her breath was rapid, in and out, sweat on her forehead. ‘Jonah? You need to tell me the truth.’

I didn’t lie. I hadn’t seen anything. ‘It was just us,’ I said.

She looked me in the eyes, biting her lip. She scanned the silent hills, the swaying trees. The windmill creaked in the wind. Francine stood slowly, ambled over. She rested her varicosed hand in the small of my mother’s back.

‘Everything alright, luv?’

My mother’s eyes flicked to the sky, clouds gathering fat and grey above us.

‘Char?’

Her head flicked back to Francine. ‘It’s going to rain.’ Her voice was wooden. ‘Time to go inside.’

She grabbed my hand and turned to go. I dug my heels in the dirt.

‘But it’s not even been half-an-hour.’

When she rounded on me, nostrils flared, eyes glistening with tears, my will to fight was punctured. She gave my arm another tug, almost yanked it from the socket. I shrieked in pain.

‘Move it. Now, Jonah.’

I cried the whole way back to our room. She put me down gently in bed.

‘Everything’s fine, Jonah. Everything is going to be perfectly fine.’

My nose bubbled with snot. I continued to wail.

‘I’m sorry I hurt you. I’m so sorry.’

My mother held me tight. Her hair scratched my face. I smelt the light spices of her shampoo. She didn’t let go until my breathing slowed, until the tears stopped rolling down my cheeks. She took a tissue from her pocket and dabbed at my nose. I looked up at her, wary and uncertain. She tried to smile.

‘You’re going to have to stay in our room for a while.’

She couldn’t be serious. Today, of all days.

‘But it’s my birthday,’ I said simply.

She frowned, her face close to mine. 'I know, and I'm sorry. But we've got to keep you safe.'

I screwed up my face. 'Safe from what? You always think there's someone out to get me. To steal me away, but there's not. There wasn't anyone out there. There never is. But you keep me locked up in here even when it's my birthday.'

'It doesn't matter what day it is. Not when there's danger out there.'

*Out there*, she said, as if I *knew* what out there was. I felt a bubble of anger in my throat.

I shouldn't have done it. It was a stupid thing to do, but I lashed out and caught her on the chin. She didn't yell at me. She sat silently, her face turned from mine. I mumbled sorry and pawed at her leg.

She wiped her cheeks with the back of her hand, dabbed at her nose, and stood up.

'Okay, Jonah,' she said without looking at me. 'I'm sorry. But this is how it has to be.'

It was far worse than if she'd shouted at me. I wish she'd done that at least.

She walked from the room and pulled the door closed behind her. The rain pushed against the bedroom window.

By midday, everything outside was grey muck and swirling winds. I watched rain roll down the window. The old rusty blades of the windmill bent and flexed in the storm. A burst of lightning. Growl of thunder.

Some birthday, huh?

### 3.

When the bedside clock ticked over to three in the afternoon I decided to escape. Moments before, my mother returned and brought me a plate of cold meat and cheese. I stared stubbornly at the window when she put the plate down, when she tried to say she was sorry, and she wished it didn't have to be this way. I didn't even look up when she told me she loved me.

Cruel of me, no? But I was sick of being treated like I was helpless, as if there was a terrifying bogeyman lurking around every corner. Besides, what could be more terrifying than me?

The last I saw of my mother was her face, taut and worried, and then the swoop of her dressing gown as she pulled the door shut.

In my bed, listening to the sounds of movement downstairs, I felt sick, the heaviness of my decision sitting in the pit of my stomach. I ignored it and slipped from the bed.

I grabbed my mother's rucksack from the desk and wrapped the meats and cheese in a handkerchief. It would be enough to get me through the night, the next day maybe. After that, I'd have to find my own food. Doubt crept in – but this was the only way. She shouldn't have kept me locked away like this. She should have trusted me.

I took some magazines and stuffed them in my rucksack, along with the scissors on the desk and my beanie. Last, I grabbed the photo of my father and carefully folded it into my jacket pocket. I slid the chair to the window as quietly as I could. I pressed my hands on the cool glass. The rain still fell in heavy sheets. I almost lost my nerve and hurried back to the safety of my bed, but then I imagined the others downstairs, probably drinking and laughing, without a care for little Jonah, left to perish in his prison. Mendelssohn and Ludwig would be playing cards, Harry tucking Francine in by the fire. And what was that? Charmaine, my dutiful mother, bringing in my birthday cake from the kitchen, slicing great chunks and passing it around without me.

To hell with them!

I stretched for the window latch and slid it open a crack. The sudden rush of wind was like a roar. I slipped one leg out so that I teetered on the edge of the window-sill and looked down towards my escape. A vertiginous terror gripped me. How could I be this high? I tried to scramble back in, but my foot slipped on the slick roof tiles, and suddenly I was rattling down the roof like a tumbling rock. My scream was whipped away by the wind, before I stopped, with a splash, in the gutter. It vibrated violently. Remarkably, it didn't break. I spent a moment gasping for breath.

I broke into a grin. I'd just dodged certain death, and at that, a real adventure had begun, like the ones from my books and magazines. Except this was little Jonah, hero of his own story, throwing shade at danger, thank you very much. I no longer felt a sickness in my stomach. Instead, the thrum of exhilaration.

I dangled over the gutter and latched on to the pipe running down to the wet earth below. Now my escape seemed a formality, and I barely felt giddy as I shimmied down into the mud. I'd done it, incredibly, and now I was free from the tyranny of my mother, free to explore the world however I pleased.

What an absolute rush!

I didn't look back until I reached the windmill. It rattled and whined above me, the wind threatening to tear it right out of the ground. Standing beneath it, I smelt the rust and dirt. I ran my hand across the scabbed metal.

I'd never been further than the windmill alone. And now I was passing into the extreme limits of my universe. My legs felt rubbery and weak. I had a taste in my mouth like vomit. The hotel seemed so far from here. In fact, it looked smaller than ever, like it was shrinking in the face of my abandonment. I wanted to say, 'I'll be back,' but then I thought, with a pang of anger, that no, I wouldn't.

Instead, I turned back towards *out there*. I thought I heard someone calling out from somewhere, but I ignored it. The sky crackled with lightning as I hurried deep into the valley.

I struggled across uneven, shrubby ground with gums arching above me. By the time I'd reached the end of the valley, I'd already managed to eat the meat and cheese. I was exhausted and hungry. I thought back to my birthday cake. Surely, they would have left me a slice? They weren't that wicked, were they?

Now my trajectory took me uphill, so up I struggled, scratching myself on prickly shrubs, slipping in the loose, wet earth. My legs were scratched and goosepimpled, and I wished I'd worn something more than shorts. I rested often on small boulders or fallen branches, catching my breath. I pulled on my beanie and zipped up my jacket, but I still shivered in the cold.

And, yes, I will admit, I wanted to be home. My daring escape had quickly become a tedious slog through rain and bitter wind. There were scratches and blisters on my feet, and the straps of the sodden rucksack cut deep into my shoulders. I stumbled and fell back into a prickly bastard of a bush that poked me right in the arse. I openly bawled, and just like that, courageous, heroic Jonah, conqueror of death and danger, became inert, bereft, so bloody helpless.

I knew then that this had been a fool's folly. I wasn't cut out for this. What I wanted was my mother, the warmth of a fire, and sure, if that's what it took, imprisonment. As if to mock me, the rain surged.

I extricated myself from the bush, and looked for my tracks, but they'd washed away. Down was safety, but down had many directions, and any of them could have led me into a ditch or off a ledge.



To my childish mind, this was the soggy, pitiful end to a story that hadn't been finished, and would never be published anyway, because who, I thought bitterly, would read about a pathetic little boy lost in the hills, mangled in a crevasse?

I collapsed to the ground. I cried. I screamed out and beat the earth with my little webbed hands. I promised myself that I would never do anything like this again. My mother could keep me locked away for as long as she liked. I just needed her now, more than ever, to come to my rescue.

And then I heard something. A muffled yell? An echoing cry? Yes. Someone calling out. Hello, they cried. Hellooooo. I sat up. Was that a shadow emerging in the rain? Hello! Again, and much closer now. They were looking for me. My mother! She'd come to save me from my pitiful predicament.

'I'm here,' I croaked. 'I'm here!'

'Hello!'

I didn't think. I rushed towards her with fresh tears in my eyes, tears of joy, tears of absolute relief because I would be home, and I'd never have prickles in my arse again, so help me. My mother drew nearer, her shadow taking shape, becoming clearer, more solid in the rain. I could almost smell her, the softness of her lavender perfume, the spice of her shampoo, which was impossible, wasn't it? In this driving rain, this howling wind. But like an idiot, I stumbled blindly on.

And I suddenly realised that, no, this wasn't her shadow approaching. And no, I couldn't smell her lavender, or the spice of her shampoo, because this was not my mother slinking crooked and quick towards me. I turned back, tried to slip into darkness and let this wraith pass me, but then a man's leering face materialised in the pounding rain before me, the flash of those green eyes, the broken dirty teeth set in that grinning mouth.

He towered above me, delight washing over his pockmarked face.

'Hello,' he said, his skeletal hands stretching towards me.

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I came to in suffocating darkness, my heart pounding. I wriggled and kicked as hard as I could. There was a grunt of pain as I connected with something fleshy, and then a blast of light interrupted the blackness. Fingers like pincers curled around my neck and pulled me into the open-air. Instinctively, I flung out a leg and heard a gasp of pain.

'Bloody hell,' came a voice like a shovel scraped across gravel.

The fingers wrapped themselves around my body and clamped my arms and legs together. Blinded, I wriggled like a pathetic worm dug fresh from the dirt.

Slowly, a man's grizzled face appeared before me, a small cut above his brow, the skin blossoming purple. His face pinched and he hissed through jagged teeth, 'Just stop moving like a mad thing, would you?'

His hands tightened around my body, the air pushed from my lungs. I choked, and his grip softened. He patted me on the back, the way you'd burp a baby.

'You're alright,' he muttered. 'No harm done, eh?'

He put me down gently. I scurried backwards across the damp earth until I felt the rough bark of a tree. Now, I looked around me. We were in a small clearing hemmed in by trees, the mottled skin of their branches reaching towards the sky, leaves still tipped with rain.

Standing before me was this man: this skeletal creature; skull like a shrivelled pumpkin, face speckled and pockmarked behind a scrub of grey, hair a tangled mess of wires sprouting from his head. His eyes were brilliantly green, deep set in that misshapen head. He wore a tattered canvas jacket and grubby, moth-eaten shorts. His feet were bare, the hairy toes wriggling. Watching me, he flashed a mouth of stubby, cracked teeth. He picked at his nails.

'My. Aren't you just' – he was almost breathless – 'perfect, eh? I couldn't have imagined. Just' – spreading his palms out to me – 'look at you.'

Those green eyes watching me. I shivered in the cold air.

Somewhere, a solitary magpie's liquid warble.

'What a sight.'

He licked his lips.

'Name's Donald,' he said. A little cough. 'Donald Walker.'

Yes, the very same Donald from the night I was born. But I didn't know it then. To me, he was just a stranger.

'What's your name?'

I glanced up at him, still trying to catch my breath.

'Go on then, no harm in telling me your name, is there?'

Would you have trusted this man, all crumbling teeth and hairy toes, with your name? Regular kids – those without gills and scales – are taught not to trust creeps with candy. My mother, paranoid as she was, had taught me not to trust anyone, never mind someone with a

lollypop. But what choice did I have? I swallowed, focusing again on my feet. 'Jonah,' I mumbled.

'Jonah? Lovely name. Jonah.' He sounded it out softly in his mouth.

The wind picked up and the eucalyptus leaves bristled above. An ant picked across the damp earth by my foot.

'Where's my mum?' I asked, eyes to the ground. 'I want to go home, please.'

Donald frowned. 'You're lucky I found you, you know? Way out there in the middle of nowhere, rain pissing down like that. Lucky I found you lying there. Passed out, you were. Or asleep. Real lucky, I reckon.'

A flash of a memory: the driving rain, that shadow stretching towards me. Or had I dreamt that?

'I want to go home,' I said.

That magpie's liquid warble, further away now. Donald glanced back over his shoulder, turned back to me. He nodded, slowly, as if coming to a realisation.

'See the thing is, Jonah. The thing is – I don't know where your home is. Do you?'

I looked around. Nothing – not the trees, nor the earth – was familiar. I felt the weight of that press down on me.

'Thought so.' His knees clicked as he squatted. 'See, now. It's a big world out there. Your home could be any which way. We could walk for days and never find it.' He scratched his beard. 'I tell you what. How about you tell me what your home looks like, and maybe that'll help.'

I frowned. 'It's – um – it's a big house. And there's a windmill, and some greenhouses. It's in a valley.'

Donald clucked his tongue. He tilted his head just a little, tapped at his bottom lip.

'Windmill, huh? Greenhouses? And in a valley, you say?'

I nodded.

'And a big house?'

Again, I nodded, more hopeful.

He took a deep breath, paused, raised his hand as if about to pluck an invisible something from the air. Then, he deflated and shook his head.

'Jeez, Jonah. I'm sorry. I never seen a place like that before.' He stood up. 'Wish I had. Could have got you home safe and sound.'

Desperation gripped me. I started to cry.

This place was so far from anything I'd ever known. And this man, with his cracked teeth, and his hungry eyes watching me. He didn't know either. He didn't know where home was, and neither did I, so where did that leave me?

'Come on, now. No need to cry,' Donald soothed. 'It'll be fine, okay?'

Donald leant forward, his fingers brushed my arm. I pulled away.

'Sorry.' He shuffled back. 'Look. I know it seems a bit desperate right now, boy. But, listen. How about this? I'll take you back with me and I'm sure your mum'll come looking. We can put your picture in the papers. She won't miss you then.'

At that, I glanced up. He twiddled his thumbs, looked down at me hopefully. He glanced across his shoulder, back again to me. Then, his face lit up suddenly.

'You know,' he said, slinging his bag off his back. 'I bet you're real hungry, aren't you? Bet you haven't eaten in ages.'

He nodded encouragingly. He was right. I hadn't eaten anything since my meagre meal of meat and cheese. He rummaged through the pockets of his bag.

'Aha!' He had something in his hand, a rectangular block in an alfoil wrap. With shaking hands, he unwrapped the thing. 'Chocolate. You like it?'

I nodded in reply, wiped my nose with the back of my hand. He snapped a piece off and held it out to me.

'There you go, young fellah. That'll make you feel better.'

He handed me the chocolate.

'Wonderful,' he whispered.

My eyes lit up as it touched my tongue, warm and sweet. Despite everything, I smiled. We stood in silence as I sucked slowly on the chocolate.

A twig snapped. Donald jerked around, muttered something. He squinted into the throng of gums and shrubs. He turned back to me.

'Time to go.'

I'd barely swallowed the chocolate as Donald lunged at me and I was stuffed into his stinking bag.

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I woke and Donald was cradling me gently. The fug of sleep kept me docile, and for a moment, I admit, I thought it was my mother taking me to bed. I caught a flash of moonlight, then darkness, and smelt dust and damp and heard footsteps creaking across floorboards. I pulled myself close to the hot body holding me until I felt the wiry hairs, coarse and

unfamiliar. By then it was too late because Donald's face appeared in a flash of light, all waxy, pockmarked flesh. I tried to wriggle free, but then he lowered me into a wooden cot. I scrambled into a corner.

‘Comfy?’ he asked.

When I didn't reply, he shuffled away to a splintery dresser at the other end of the room. The dresser was crowded with stuffed toys, everything sad with dust. I watched through the cot bars as he picked something up from the dresser and shuffled across to a small, grubby window, his back to me. His shoulders sagged as if he was crying.

I turned my attention to the rest of the room: small and square, the roof sagging. The walls were half-painted yellow, but that must have been an age ago. The paint was faded, covered in dust and damp. Apart from my cot and the drawers, the room was a minefield of magazine stacks and crumpled cardboard boxes towering towards the ceiling. A naked bulb hung from the ceiling like a single, jaundiced eye.

Plainly speaking, it was a real shit-shack. But beneath all that was a whiff of some lost domesticity, the shadow of familial love. At the time I didn't understand that. To me, Donald seemed skittish and strange, all sinew and scabby skin, his touch rough and uncomfortable. Yet, then there was the chocolate, and – unless I had imagined it – the gentle way he'd held me as he carried me into the room.

Except, here, in this strange place, I felt like his prisoner.

I took hold of the cot bars and bellowed with all my might. ‘I want to go home. Take me home.’

Donald jerked in alarm and dropped something with a crunch of glass. At once, he turned on me, his green eyes steeled, every inch of that skeletal frame rigid and shaking.

‘It's broken. You fucking broke it.’

I fell back into the cot and hit my head on the wall with a dull thud. I cowered, thinking this lunatic was going to attack me. But then I heard him muttering by the window, and when I peeked, he was hunched over the floor, picking up pieces of glass.

‘It's okay,’ he was whispering. ‘It's okay. Bit of tape, bit of glue. Good as gold.’

He straightened, and I screwed my eyes shut again. Then, his footsteps across the floorboards. I felt his eyes on me.

‘Sorry, boy. Didn't mean to frighten you. Got a little bang, did you?’

The smell of cigarettes and sweat as he leant close. He gave my skull a gentle rub. He must have felt me shivering.

‘Nothing serious,’ he soothed. ‘Just a little bump is all.’

I didn’t dare speak. The effort to hold back my tears was unbearable.

‘You’re tired. It’s been a long day.’ He pulled his hand back. ‘Tomorrow we can start looking for your mum. How’s that sound?’

I heard him retreat to the door. He lingered for a moment. Those eyes must have been on me, watching me, taking me in.

‘Just perfect,’ he said one last time.

And then he flicked off the lights and I heard the door shut behind him. A moment later and a key scraped the lock. I was trapped. As his footsteps retreated into whatever dusty, forlorn place we were in, I burst into tears. I cried out for my mother, said I was sorry I’d ever run away from home, that I would never do it again, that I just wanted her to come for me and hold me and love me forever. I grabbed the bars of the cot and shook them violently until my hands ached. I thought, if I wished hard enough, I’d be rescued. No one came.

I collapsed with exhaustion, and only then did I realise the cot was made with fresh sheets and blankets, the pillow scented with soap. I was too distraught to understand what that meant. Instead, I pulled out my father’s photo, that reassuring face looking back at me. I fell asleep tracing my fingers along the outline of his face.

#### 4.

My mother didn’t check up on me until dinnertime. We’d been here many times before, you see. Me, surly and unresponsive, stomping around the room until I’d made my disdain known. For her part, she would ignore me for an allotted time, refusing to concede defeat and knowing I’d tire out eventually.

From her armchair, Francine watched my mother’s own tempestuous path through the house.

‘He’s just feeling cooped up, dear. He needs to express himself.’

My mother snatched down streamers from the chandelier in the living room. ‘You know he can’t, Franny.’

Francine frowned. ‘Well, when Harry was just a little scrubber he wanted for all the world to have his own BB gun.’ Francine, myopic when it suited her, ignored Charmaine’s eye-roll. ‘I said no, but he wailed and threw a fit and kept asking me day in day out, so one morning I thought, right, Franny, the boy’s old enough to make decisions so you see how he goes getting on with them. Anyway, I buy him the BB gun and one day he comes home

bawling his eyes out, the poor little bugger. Says he's playing around with the thing and he's accidentally killed a little bird. Well, he was distraught, and I said, you see, a BB gun isn't all it's cracked up to be, is it? And you know what?

My mother, on the bar top, tensed, knowing Francine would wait.

'What, Franny?'

Francine gave a gummy, satisfied little smile. 'He never picks up another BB gun again. Problem solved. My point beeeeeing –'

'Yes, okay!' My mother rounded on her, and as she did she inadvertently popped a balloon. Francine twitched. 'I understand. You think if I let Jonah see the outside world he'll decide he's happy with what he's got. But I can't, Franny. Okay. It's not Harry with a BB gun, it's Jonah. Jonah who isn't like other people. Jonah who would terrify anyone who set eyes on him.' She tore down an errant dangle of streamer. 'It kills me that I can't, but that's just the way it is. My son will never have a normal life. I can't take him to the park, I can't take him to the movies or take him to his favourite restaurant. He doesn't get any of that.'

She was crying now. She felt responsible for everything, you know? As a kid, I didn't understand that.

'He gets the love of his mother. He gets safety. That'll just have to do.'

She grabbed a balloon and squeezed it in her hands until it burst. Francine scowled as my mother slipped from the bar and stormed upstairs.

Mendelssohn walked in from the kitchen with a slice of cake sticky in his fingers, ever the man for an inopportune moment. He spotted Francine, still grumbling in her armchair.

'What?' she sniped.

He took a bite of cake and retreated into the kitchen.

My mother went to the bedroom but didn't go in. She rested her head on the door. How could she properly explain the way of the world to a ten-year-old child? That the world would reject me simply because of the way I looked. You don't easily sit your boy down on the bed, give him a fleeting smile and say, 'Son, in the eyes of the world you are a freak. So, no, we won't be going to Disneyland this year. Or ever.'

For the record, I'd never go. It's tacky shit.

She palmed tears from her cheeks. 'I'm sorry, Jonah,' she whispered, and inched the door open.

The first thing she noticed was the cold breeze pushing through the open window, the floor underneath wet with rain. She hurried to the window and shut it. Her breath caught painfully in her throat as she looked out to the grey muck outside.

‘Jonah,’ she said, turning to the bed. ‘Did you open the window?’

She didn’t know why she asked, because even before she pulled back the bundled covers she knew, like a hot sting of bile in her throat, that it would be empty. But when she found the bed bare, she was struck, quite suddenly, by a rush of gravity that pulled her to the floor.

‘Jonah,’ she called, her voice cracked. ‘Jonah.’

She managed to stand and rush to the bathroom. Empty, of course. She went back to the window and wrenched it open.

‘Jonah!’

She stepped back into the room, and as she did, she cracked her head on the window. She howled in pain and stumbled back onto the bed. As she sat there, cradling her head, she had a flash of that morning, staring through the kitchen window, seeing that shadowy figure. She’d thought she’d imagined it – just a trick of the light – and after all, she’d rushed outside and found no one.

She flew downstairs. Francine, still in her armchair, looked up and said, ‘Ah, come to apologise?’ But then she saw the look on my mother’s face. ‘Blimey, dear. You look like you’ve seen a ghost!’

‘He’s not here.’

‘Who?’

‘Jonah. He’s gone.’

## 5.

The next morning, I woke at first light. As I lay in the cot I remembered, like a sharp knock to the head, everything that had happened since my birthday, and I burst into great shuddering tears. This lasted a good ten or fifteen minutes, when – after little Jonah had drained his ducts dry – I resolved to perform, once more, a daring escape, and break free from this place. I struggled out of the cot, landing with a sharp thud on the floor. I went to the window, and on tip-toes, peered through the grimy glass. All I could see was a grey sky and a rusty water-tank streaked with bird shit. Nothing that told me where Donald had brought me.



I knew the door was locked. I glanced up at the window latch. There it was, Jonah. No sweat.

When Donald came back into the room his eyes darted from the stuffed toys littering the floor to me teetering dangerously off the edge of the dresser, stretching for the window latch, just out of reach. He charged in and snatched me up by the legs before I could scarper. I thrashed and screeched as he lowered me into the cot.

‘You’re an adventurous little bugger, aren’t you?’ He wagged his finger at me. ‘You should stay put. Wouldn’t want to hurt yourself. Here.’ He held something out to me. ‘Bet you’re hungry. Made you this.’

It was a sandwich, the crusts cut roughly, two thumbprints indented into the sodden bread, hair in the mayonnaise. I was starving, though, so I snatched it and devoured it in seconds. Donald chuckled.

‘That a boy.’

His breath was rapid and shallow. I felt the burn of his eyes on me and scurried into the corner of the cot. And yet, his shadow was inescapable.

‘You can’t believe how long I’ve waited for you, Jonah,’ he said. ‘I’ve known ‘bout you since you was just a pup, did you know that?’ He chuckled. ‘Nah. Probably not. How could you? But now you’re here.’

‘I want to go home.’

Donald grunted. ‘Yeah, I know. I’m asking ‘round about your mum, okay? But for now, I’m taking care of you. I’ve got some plans for us both. They’re almost ready. Almost.’

He gripped the cot tightly, his breath hot and loud. ‘Just sit tight, okay?’

The door locked with a scraping click behind him.

Once more, I was alone.

I cast my eyes around the room. Soft light spilled through the grotty window and fell in dull splotches on the floor. The stacks of magazines and all other accumulated waste. Nothing I could use to break free. I could try to smash the window, but surely Donald would hear. And besides, if I managed to escape from the room, well, what then? I had no idea where I was, or how to get home.

But get this: Donald had brought me back to the town that I was born in. The town where my father had died and my mother’s life was torn apart. The town she’d had to escape from.

Yes. Of all the places in the world, Donald had brought me to Fortune.

## 6.

It had been ten years since that night, but Fortune had barely changed. It was still a tiny town lost on the coast, wedged between the roiling ocean and a ring of low, pimply hills. The uranium mine still kept money flowing through the council's coffers, but the flow was more of a trickle these days. The Wonky Fish remained Fortune's great mixing pot, but the pot had only one ingredient – draught, or a Bloody Mary if you really put the charm on the publican, Earl Mackenzie – and the pot was rarely stirred. And Boris Barnaby was still the biggest bully in town. Except now, he was mayor.

Impossible, no? This was the same man who had conspired to kill an innocent babe just to save his own bacon and the mine from uncomfortable questions. Surely someone had asked questions when, on the same night my father was found dead in a car crash, my mother had vanished into thin air? A few, including my mother's own father, had pushed for answers, but Barnaby was ostensibly a good and honest bloke. A protector of the community, not a liar or a murderer, God forbid. According to him, my mother had never been there. And constable Temperence, now Sargent, had corroborated Barnaby's account: they found the ute smashed to pieces with my father dead in the cab. When Barnaby became mayor a few months later, the rumours fell silent and no one asked any more questions. People just wanted to move on, you know? That was that. Case closed.

And so, ten years after I was born, Boris Barnaby – that doer of dastardly deeds, a provocateur par excellence whose years in office had fattened his wallet and widened his waistband – arrived at Fortune's ANZAC hall for the monthly council meeting as the most powerful man in town. See! There he is clambering out from his black sedan and hissing at his personal assistant, Susan Humphries, to lend a bloody hand, would she? Susan scurried around the car and gripped Barnaby by the arm. With a huff and a puff, he managed to exit the car – imagine an elephant backing out of a two-man tent. As he stood, he smoothed out the kinks in his suit jacket, the cream-suit stretching across his belly. Susan shut the door behind him and attempted to corral her beehive back into shape.

'We're late,' Susan said, with a last readjustment of her skirt.

Barnaby palmed back his orange curls, oiled flat to his scalp, and ran a tongue across cigarette stained teeth.

'Eurgh. I knew I should have stuck with yoghurt for lunch.' He cupped his belly with a grimace.

'No, no. I think you look...prominent,' Susan lied.

Barnaby slipped a hand in his breast pocket. He felt his fingers close around the familiar warmth of his cigarette packet.

‘Quitting remember,’ she sung.

He scowled. ‘This meeting’s going to be a drag,’ he said, and stalked through the double doors of the hall.

Inside, the room was packed. The crowd sat in long rows of plastic bucket chairs, their voices bouncing around the draughty, high-ceilinged room, with its polished floorboards and chandelier hovering above (plastic now, but it wasn’t admitted out loud). Portraits of old mayors and councillors lined the walls. Barnaby, the scoundrel, having won three successful terms, insisted his portrait feature anew each time, so that one whole section of the east wall supported a succession of his pictures, showing a man seemingly frozen in time. The real thing was going thin on top and sagging around the neck, but Barnaby insisted his portraits reflect how his constituents saw him: a handsome man of honour and good temperament.

Sure, pull the other one, Barnaby.

The records show that meetings usually took place with little fanfare, nothing more than a couple of crusty councillors discussing municipal issues in mumbled registers, before all slinking home to hot tea and bed. But three days before the meeting, *The Fortune Herald* had published an explosive front page claiming that the proposed mine expansion had hit a snag. This was a big deal for a town where everyone either worked for the mine or served coffee or beer to someone who did. And, so, the sleepy town by the ocean was suddenly alight with activity. Rumours and conjecture flew like sticky flu spores all week – from the queue in the post-office to the eight-ball table at the Wonky – until everyone shook with fever.

People started piling into the hall from five that afternoon. The council committee sat nervously in their bucket chairs, watching from behind a fold-out table on stage as people filtered in loud and boisterous. Sitting in the middle was Margaret Thompson, a woman with a shock of pink hair, foundation filling the rivulets of her wrinkled skin, a squiggle of lipstick matching her purple CWA badge. She leant across to Lenard Snivels, Fortune’s resident doctor; eyes like a frog, toothbrush moustache quivering as he breathed heavily through his deviated septum.

‘Where the hell is Barnaby?’ she hissed, checking her watch.

Lenard shrugged. ‘Late.’

Margaret tutted as she leant back in her chair. ‘As usual,’ she said, with a surly smile. ‘Doris passes on her apologies, by the way. Apparently, she’s up to her elbows delivering a calf.’

Lenard’s face went white, and he shuddered. Margaret chuckled. Then, she looked back to the crowd with a frown. It seemed like the whole town had crammed themselves indelicately into every available seat.

Richard Quinten, editor-in-chief of *The Fortune Herald*, sat in the front row, his own newspaper spread across his lap, talking to his new intern, a young chap with thick brown boots and even thicker acne.

‘So, Ricky,’ he was saying, leaning in so close that Ricky could smell Quinten’s lunch. ‘What was your favourite line from my editorial this morning, eh?’

Ricky swallowed hard. ‘Err...’

Settling down in the row behind them was Jack Murnane, his handsome face framed by a mane of grey hair. He was a broad-shouldered man in his mid-fifties, his dark skin stark alongside the pink and olive-skinned folk around him. Beside him was Elsie, older than Jack, her dark face a bundle of wrinkled skin, her cloudy eyes aware of the furtive looks cast in their direction. She pricked her ears to the whispers from those around them.

‘What’s them blacks doing here, Damo?’

‘Sabotage, no doubt, Laz. Don’t reckon they’ve never wanted that mine.’

‘They’ve always had it in for this town. Never wanted it to succeed.’

‘’cept they’re happy to use the infrastructure, aren’t they? Happy the town’s here when it suits.’

‘Why don’t they mind their own and go live out bush like they used to? Isn’t that they want?’

‘Too true, Laz. Too bloody true.’

Elsie bristled. She tugged at Jack’s sleeve and whispered, ‘Let’s go, eh. These gubbas ain’t listening if their lives depended on it.’

Jack squeezed Elsie’s shoulders gently. ‘It’s alright, Auntie. We got as much a say as anyone else in this room. Ignore ‘em. They’re just worried their lucky run is drying up. Besides’ – he dug out a crinkled letter from his pocket – ‘I got a formal invite from the fat man himself.’

‘Letter means nothing, Jack. You know that.’

Jack frowned. ‘If we do nothing then Barnaby rolls right over us.’

Richard Quinten twisted in his seat and flashed Jack a grin.

‘Fancy seeing you here, Jack.’

‘Surprise you, does it?’

Quinten shrugged. ‘Thought your lot might have taken the opportunity for a tippie down on the beach? Woulda been a beautiful sunset for it.’

‘You prick,’ Jack hissed. He made to rise from his seat, but Elsie grabbed his shirt.

‘Jack,’ she cautioned.

‘Watch that temper of yours,’ Quinten chuckled. ‘Wouldn’t want to cause a scene and end up in tomorrow’s paper, would you?’

‘I’m sure you’ll print some bullshit either way, Quinten.’

‘Sorry I’m late.’

The three of them looked up and there was Megan, looking tired, hair pulled back in a ponytail, a splotch of food caked on her faded bomber jacket, squeezing down the row. She slipped past Jack and sat in the empty seat next to him.

Quinten sneered at her. ‘They keep you waiting in the dole queue? How long has it been since they gave you the flick down at the council?’

‘I think you know exactly how long, Richard.’ She gave him a broad smile. ‘And I look forward to you joining me in that queue. The way that paper of yours is going.’

‘Yeah. Real funny stuff,’ Quinten sneered. His eyes flicked from Megan to Jack. ‘Better watch how chummy you get with this lot in public, Megan. You know how people like to talk. They got an understanding of what’s cricket and what’s not.’ He looked at the food on her jacket, then briefly at her stomach. ‘Isn’t it hard enough taking care of one kid without a job?’

Megan’s face went rigid. ‘Turn around you slimy git before I make you.’

He grinned, and then turned his back on the three of them.

Megan, red faced and shaking, whispered to Jack, ‘God. What a fucking asshole.’

At the back of the hall, Sargent Joanne Temperence rocked on the balls of her feet, watching the crowd with puffy, tired eyes. She glanced across the room and nodded at Constable Merrick standing on the other side of the hall. The moment she’d seen Jack Murnane striding in nice and early, with Elsie hobbling beside him, she’d told her constable to look lively. When the whole town had started filtering in, loud and agitated, some drunk, others dragging their broods of four or five in by the collars and then letting them loose to lay

sticky hands on all the walls and portraits, Temperance had acquired a painful stomach ache. She tried to tell herself it was just the steak and chips.

As far as Temperance was concerned the hall had never been busier, except there *had* been that one time when George Kwong, who'd owned the chip shop now sitting disused and dusty with its pirate fish laminate peeling off in the sun, had started serving his fish with noodles rather than chips. *The Fortune Herald* ran an editorial titled "Chip Chop Chong" (not the worst, or the most offensive, of their front-page puns, believe me), deriding George's apparent disdain for a good old-fashioned Aussie classic. They'd branded the recipe un-Australian (a similar sentiment they'd used for refugees sailing in from Vietnam, for people who argued you couldn't call refugees sailing in from Vietnam "thieves and rapists", and for vegetarians) and half the town boycotted the shop. When George applied for an extension to his shop, the hall was packed with protesters. The council caved, and George took his business elsewhere. It didn't take long before the town discovered no one did a quarter-chicken and gravy pack quite like George. By then it was too late.

But this time felt different to Temperance. She knew as well as anyone that if the mine shuttered then the town would go the same way as all the coastal birds and fish. Things were bad enough already. Half the shops on the main drag had FOR-SALE signs in the window. The mine was all Fortune had left.

Temperance stared at the back of Jack's grey mane. Her stomach tightened a notch.

Barnaby stalked in through the front doors with Susan at his heels. Temperance called out to him, 'Barn!' but he ignored her. Our portly mayor waved and smiled at no one in particular, tussled one of the Jenkin's boys on the head – receiving a sharp kick to the shin in return – and hobbled the last few paces to the stage. As he approached the lectern, the crowd started to bubble with anticipation.

'Come on, now,' he said. 'Let's have some quiet, can we?'

As if to mock the man, the microphone gave a porcine squeal.

Barnaby's spirit animal, didn't you know?

It had the effect of quietening the crowd. Barnaby wriggled a finger in his ear, readjusted his tie, and slicked back those oily orange curls. Briefly, he caught Jack Murnane's gaze and felt the squeeze of his collar, just a little. Jack tipped an imaginary hat to Barnaby.

Next, as was customary at all official events, Barnaby conducted the room in a rendition of the national anthem, accompanied by little Percy Mumford and his spit-filled

recorder. The crowd rose as one, hand over hearts, and began singing. Barnaby scowled when he noticed Jack, Elsie and Megan still seated in the second row.

There was a smattering of applause as Percy finished huffing out a shrill coda, and Barnaby shepherded the boy side stage and into the arms of his mother.

‘Thank you for that beautiful rendition, Percy.’ Barnaby bowed his head, an exaggerated solemnity he thought entirely appropriate, and paused for a moment of considered reflection. If it wasn’t Barnaby’s firm belief that ‘Only pooftas cry’ – something he was noted as declaring often in public – he might have added a tear into the mix as well.

Once the crowd had resumed their seats, Barnaby said, ‘I’d like to thank you all for coming. I understand there’s been a few rumours bandied about town this past week.’ His eyes flicked to Quinten gloating from the front row. ‘But I’d just like to remind you to keep things civil and ordered, and to save your opinions for the allotted Q and A at the tail-end of the meeting.’

Barnaby scanned the crowd, and everyone knew he was looking for Tony Derringer. It was only last Christmas that Tony had punched Harry Dalton square in the face for suggesting they not bother with the nativity scene that year because of the electricity it wasted. Tony accused Harry of being un-Australian (and yes, Quinten ran with that in his frontpage next morning), claiming the nativity scene was as Australian as Vegemite on toast. Temperence had to step in before the shirts flew off.

Tony, having been identified in the back row, shrugged and took a swig from a milk-carton that everyone knew contained straight Johnny.

‘So, the first item on the agenda is being brought forward by’ – Barnaby referred to the minutes and his face fell – ‘Reverend Nelson.’

The crowd heaved a sigh as the knobbly old priest, liver spotted scalp shining in the light, eyes magnified behind thick lenses, sat up from his place beside the other councillors and ambled towards the lectern.

Barnaby forced a smile as he ceded the microphone. ‘Go ahead, Barry.’

‘Thank you, Mayor.’

Reverend Nelson rifled inside his robes, pulled out a large sheaf of papers, lay the fat stack on the lectern, and smoothed out the pages. The crowd groaned again. Ignoring them, Nelson readjusted his glasses, and began to talk with his thin, cracked voice.

‘It has recently come to my attention that certain members of Fortune’s community are taking part in illicit games of two-up. I might remind all of you this action contravenes

Fortune's by-law 73b, which clearly states that gambling is prohibited outside officially sanctioned spaces.'

A handful of miners booed from the back row. Earl Mackenzie, publican at the Wonky, muttered audibly, and with a sly grin, that he reckoned he'd seen Reverend Nelson partake in a game or two.

Nelson frowned. 'I shouldn't have to remind you,' and at this he looked down his nose, 'that such clandestine gambling is a most corruptible, most sinful activity. God looks lowly on those who partake in such things, and –'

He took a deep inwards breath.

At this point, everyone breathed a sigh of relief as Geoffrey Clements, a lean man, all bone and muscle, his bald head gleaming in the lights, took it upon himself to spring up from his seat and interrupt Nelson's monologue. 'Forget bloody two-up, you wally! We wanna know what the hell's going on with the mine.'

The crowd chattered in agreement.

Nelson stood in stunned silence, so Barnaby cut across him. 'Geoffrey, mate. As I said. There's an allotted time for new agenda items.'

'We've had enough pussyfooting. Folks have already lost their jobs. We need to know if this expansion is fair dinkum or not.'

The crowd growled their approval.

Barnaby placed his hand over the microphone and gave Nelson a shrug. 'Excuse me, Barry. Might have to put a pin in this one.'

Nelson opened his mouth to argue, but Susan swooped in and led him back to his seat.

Barnaby turned back to the crowd. 'Look. I understand your concerns, but let's just wait until the end of the meeting, shall we?'

The crowd disagreed. Up sprang Janet Pembridge, Fortune's resident gossip and the owner of the hairdressers. She scowled from behind her peroxide blonde bangs. 'Well excuuuuuuse me, because I heard that all these well-to-do city folk have been pressuring them politicians into shutting the mine down altogether.' And now her gaze slid most obviously towards Jack and Elsie. 'They're more bloody interested in saving a rock carving that some black did a hundred years ago than they are helping good and honest folk now.'

There was a smattering of agreement.

Megan stood up so quick that she knocked Quinten roughly in the back of the head. 'Jesus, Janet. That's a load of racist bull and you know it.'



‘Is it? Is caring for my children’s future racist, is it?’

‘You’re talking about a culture that’s been here since the beginning. Their country isn’t just old rocks. It’s a part of who they are, for God’s sake.’

Janet scoffed. ‘You keep telling yourself that. You bleedin’ hearts are all the same. Always sorry for something you weren’t even born for.’

Herbert Funkhauser – who hadn’t left Fortune since he was fourteen years old, although privately he dreamed of seeing a musical in Sydney – struggled to his feet. ‘Yeah, too true,’ he said. ‘I seen it on “A Current Affair” with whatshisname? Martin someone? Yeah, with him, saying that first it’s us making concessions on land and whatnot, next it’s giving them money for the rest of their lives. Why the hell should I be paying for that?’

‘xactly,’ Janet said. ‘Calling them bigshot journos in the city liars, Megan? Course you don’t care about this town either, do you? Running around with *them* like it’s no bloody worries. We know what *you* get up to.’ She planted a hand on her hip and jabbed the other one at Megan. ‘God sure don’t approve of a woman running around like that, does He, Reverend?’

Janet made a big show of crossing her chest. The crowd growled in assent as the reverend thumbed through his pocket bible. Barnaby made a futile attempt at bringing things to order, but by then, the crowd were up on their feet and had started yelling over each other. Tony Derringer, sensing a fight, had his shirt halfway over his head.

Jack rose from his seat with fury written all over his face. He was ignored at first but Jack, you know, had a presence, the type of aura that seems bigger than the body it inhabits. It’s why our bothersome Barnaby had always been wary of the man.

‘You damn people have no bloody right,’ he boomed.

That pronouncement rang out across the hall and the whole room stopped yabbering and fell quiet. Tony’s shirt slipped back on.

‘This mine shoulda never gone ahead,’ he said. ‘Not where them whitefellas wanted it. Not anywhere near there. That’s our country. My people got sick. And if you keep building there that’s going to destroy our country for good. Ain’t there been enough buggery already? That not enough, eh? You got what you wanted up there. You got enough.’

Barnaby smiled smugly from behind the lectern. ‘Jack, mate. With all due respect. You can’t expect us to stop a multi-million-dollar expansion just for some rocks and trees, can you?’

‘You know it’s about more than that, you prick. You know this mine up here is bad for our country.’ He turned to the crowd. ‘And how about that uranium that’s bad for the world, too. Only gonna bring shit here. That’s all it’ll bring.’

‘Jack. Look. We sympathise, okay?’ Barnaby pressed a pudgy hand to his heart – faux-sincerity was his speciality – ‘We really do. But people’s jobs are on the line here. The future of the town’s at stake. You know that. You’ve got some of your own people up there, don’t you? You wouldn’t want them to lose what they got, would you?’

Jack glared at Barnaby with such hard fury that Barnaby almost faltered.

Yes. Brave Barnaby, he was not. But bellicose, he was.

So, a moment to recompose, and then: ‘Listen. How’s this, hey? Your views are being recorded here for the meeting’ – he nodded to the stenographer side-stage – ‘just like everyone else’s. And they’ll be right there when we fully consider all appropriate matters for the mine. How’s that sound?’ Barnaby didn’t bother to hide his smirk.

‘You can’t pull this shit. Bad things gonna happen to you, mate.’

Pugnacious as ever, Barnaby let forth a single, echoing laugh. ‘Sure, Jack. Like what?’

Right on cue, something happened.

The front doors flew open with an almighty bang and a gust of salty wind. Although he’d swear after that he barely budged, a strangled squeak escaped Barnaby’s lips. The crowd all turned, squinting and shielding their eyes from the dazzling sun, and gasped – in one collective expulsion of air – at the sight of Donald Walker, brilliantly backlit in the entrance to the hall, his long, jagged shadow a skeleton hand clawing at Barnaby. Behind Donald stood six other men and women, all with the same white robes, heads shaved close to the scalp, staring solemnly at their sandalled feet.

‘It’s them kooks from the hill,’ Janet Pembridge hissed to no one in particular. ‘The whatsayacallems. The Fish Huggers.’

She was almost correct. In town, people called them the Fish Kissers.

Barnaby’s eyes narrowed. ‘Jesus, what the hell do you want, man?’ he shouted across the hall. ‘Didn’t you get the message last time? You and your troop of fish kissing nut-jobs are banned.’

Donald started to laugh, a deep bubble that started in the pit of his stomach, and then burst out his mouth and echoed across the whole room. That really spooked people, hearing a man start cackling like that, apropos to nothing.

Donald wiped his eyes. 'Banned?' he said, finally. 'Like you could keep me out, Barnaby. Besides, you'll be wanting to hear what *I've* got to say.'

The interlopers started a slow march down the middle-aisle. Donald's green eyes were alight. Those glowing beacons took in every face, one by one, as they walked the full length of the room. Donald never stopped smiling at those stricken faces as he went, his bag slung across his shoulders.

No one in the crowd moved. No one spoke, not even Janet Pembridge. Everyone had experienced an uncomfortable taste of Donald's apocalyptic ravings in one way or another. They'd all had to hurry past him outside the supermarket, standing on his milk crate sermonising, white robed Fish Kissers standing before him, murmuring their strange songs. It spooked people seeing Donald with those wild, green eyes, ranting and raving, or sticking like a limpet to shopfronts, beckoning them to follow him up the hill, to see the light.

Barnaby drummed his fingers on the lectern as he watched that silent procession, jaw tight, a knot in his cheek. He'd claim, of course, that he most definitely wasn't afraid. And yet, Barnaby stayed silent until Donald stood before the stage.

'Well,' Barnaby said. 'What the hell do you want?'

The crowd looked from Barnaby to Donald and back again.

'To speak,' Donald said. 'Plain and simple. Thought these meeting were about having your voice heard?'

Barnaby rolled his eyes. 'Look. We've been through this before, mate. You're nothing but a rabble rouser, and I'll have none of it during my meetings.'

Donald's smile opened right up until Barnaby could practically see down his gullet.

'You deaf or something?' Barnaby said. 'We're up to here with your garbage ideas.'

Donald kept on smiling. 'Aye. You've told me plenty.'

'Yeah, well. Listen,' Barnaby spat. 'Last time you came in here you almost took someone's eye out with one of your bloody banners. No second chances, mate.' Barnaby motioned to the Temperance at the back of the room. 'Temperance! Get them out of here.'

Temperance and Merrick started for the stage, but as they did, the Fish Kissers knelt and formed a tight ring around Donald.

'Uh, uh, uh! You'll let me speak,' he said.

And Donald said this with such a hardness in his voice, a steeliness in those radiant green eyes, that Temperance stopped short. She glanced up at Barnaby and shrugged. The last thing she wanted was a fight. Quinten wouldn't let her hear the last of it.

Donald cleared his throat. The crowd twitched.

‘You think I’ve been talking crazy all these years. You’ve done what you can to muck my name and my beliefs through the mud. I know it. Us folk up on the hill scare you, don’t we? Talking about the end days. We get under your skin. It’s bad juju, isn’t it? Spooky stuff!’ He wriggled his fingers at the crowd, moaning like a ghost as he did.

The crowd grimaced. Donald chuckled.

‘I get it. Good and honest folk don’t like hearing a man talk the truth. Fair cop, I’ll say. But I’ve come here tonight because you can’t ignore any longer. The world is sick, and that great dirty mine is making it sicker. And it’s making Fortune sick. I come here to tell you that, and I come here to tell you of the fish.’

‘Oh, for God’s sake,’ Barnaby snorted. ‘The fish? The magical fish that’s been sent from Heaven? That gobbledegook you’ve been pedalling for years? That’s all you’ve got? There is *no* evidence – nada, zilch, nothing – to say that this thing exists or ever has ever existed. It’s a bloody lie, and you know it.’

Donald lay a hand across his breast. ‘It’s the God’s truth.’

Reverend Nelson clambered up from his seat. His cranium glistened sweat. ‘Donald, please. You’re walking a dark path, man, speaking the devil’s words like that. This is not the word of God.’

‘Maybe we just have different interpretations, Barry. Or, maybe’ – and Donald sneered – ‘you’re talking to the wrong God.’

‘Blasphemy!’ Nelson said. ‘Those are dark words you’re speaking. You need to come back to the light, Donald.’

‘You want to talk of darkness? Of walking a dark path? Why don’t we tell them about your darkness, eh? Or does God approve of your gambling and adultery now?’

Nelson spluttered with indignation. ‘I never – this man – a bloody rotten ferret, he is.’

‘That’s your man of the cloth, folks,’ Donald hissed. ‘Corruptible. Weak.’

Nelson slumped back into his chair with a quiver. The crowd all knocked heads in furious whispers.

Barnaby stepped out from behind the lectern. ‘Alright, now. This is gone on for quite long enough. You can’t just throw around accusations like that. We’re all through with your shit-stirring. Temperence, would you *please* throw this nutter out?’

The Sargent heaved a sigh and unhooked her handcuffs from her waist.

‘Come on, Donald. Why don’t we just take this outside?’

‘Fine,’ Donald said, frowning. ‘You don’t wanna hear it? Then I’ll go.’

He nodded at his followers, who parted to allow Temperence through.

‘Nice and easy, mate.’

Her and Constable Merrick edged closer, and then they both lunged. The crowd gasped as Donald took a deft step backwards and both Sargent and Constable tumbled to the floor in a heap.

Donald’s gaze shifted to Barnaby, whose face tightened, streaked with sweat. In one quick movement, Donald mounted the stage.

‘You think I’m talking crazy? You think I’m lying, eh?’ Donald swung his bag from his shoulder and reached for the straps.

‘Let’s not do anything drastic now,’ Barnaby whimpered, pushing back against the fold-out table as Donald advanced.

‘Today I have proof.’ His hand disappeared into the mouth of the bag. ‘Today I can show you the sign that proves my visions are true.’

Barnaby threw his hands before his face and let out an indistinguishable yelp, thinking Donald was about to draw a gun, or a knife, or god-knows-what from the bag. ‘Please, don’t!’

But it wasn’t a weapon that emerged from that bag. Donald didn’t need a weapon.

Not when he had me.

As Donald pulled me into the sudden glare, like a sticky baby pulled squirming from the womb, the crowd drew a sharp, collective breath and held it...held it...held it. They stared at my naked body. Silence settled like a damp blanket; legs went weak, bitter tears formed hot and sticky. The heads on people’s shoulders grew suddenly heavy, far too heavy to support, as if their brains had turned to mush and would drip right out their noses and splatter their shoes with useless gunk.

The first thing I felt was the searing heat of eyes, hundreds of eyes, looking, watching, bulging in their skulls. I tried to twist away from their gaze, but Donald’s thumbs dug roughly into my back. I couldn’t move. I was inert and helpless, breathless too. I coughed and spluttered, and this drew shrieks and gasps from the crowd. Donald held me high above his head.

And then the silence broke. The crowd began to babble with agonising fear. They turned to one another, disbelieving and horrified; they whispered and wrung their wrists, they chewed on their gums and sucked their teeth. Donald held that abomination aloft for a full minute, turning him this way and that to give everyone a full appreciation of his every

hideous perspective. The crowd saw the scaled skin, shimmering iridescently in the light. They saw the deep black eyes, impossibly black with depths that never ceased. They saw that my body did not conform to anything they knew or had ever seen. And yet – somehow, impossibly – they saw some human likeness in the beastly thing. They could see that I *was* human, at least a part of me. The curve of my head, the mouth that twisted with fear, just like their own. The hands and feet – webbed, yes – but small and fragile like their own children's. But they could not see where the human ended and the beast began.

And it terrified the hell out of them.

Everything changed from that moment. By the early hours of the next morning, the life I'd known would be lost forever. When Donald yanked me from his putrid bag, the innocent Jonah ceased to exist and he became, irrevocably, Fishboy. The weird wonder that was. The luminescent light. The monstrous messenger.

In the front row, Quinten groped blindly at his side. He hissed at his intern, frozen with shock next to him, 'Take a photo, kid. Take a fucking photo.' Ricky fumbled with his camera. His finger slipped as he advanced the film. He stood up, almost fell backwards as his legs threatened to give out, and then lifted the camera to his eye. He snapped a shot, blurred and poorly framed, and his camera's flash sizzled with light. It lit up the stage and threw white light across Donald and his hideous creature.

'Take another.' Quinten lunged for the camera. He knocked it and it fell with a crack under his chair.

Barnaby slumped back against the fold-out table, weak kneed, his mouth hanging open. He couldn't believe it. After ten years. After he'd thrown this creature in the dam. Watched it disappear into darkness. After all that, it was back. Back from the dead.

Barnaby tried to stand – his body heavy, shaking uncontrollably – but as got to his feet he felt every ounce of strength dribble away.

'You see!' Donald called. 'You see the truth, right here in my hands. The very thing I've been warning you all about, that you've all ignored. This creature is no trickery. No illusion. It is the truth. The truth that Fortune and the rest of the world is going to the dogs. That the mine we got here is destroying the land and making it sick, making us sick.

'And your exulted leader is the one who's letting it happen, letting poison spill out into the oceans, into the water supplies. Into each and every person's home. And now, this fat man wants to destroy this town for good. He wants to let in great dirty machinery to destroy what's left just so he can fill his pockets.'

‘Now hang on,’ Barnaby said, managing to pitch himself forwards. ‘Hang on just a minute there, because I have only ever put the interests of this town and its people – ’

Donald wheeled around and thrust me closer to Barnaby, close enough to touch, to see himself reflected in the blacks of my eyes. He felt his legs turn to rubber and he tumbled back onto the fold-out table. With a shudder, the whole thing collapsed under his weight, the councillors shrieking as they went under with Barnaby.

Donald burst out in laughter, a thin peel that sailed across the room. ‘All this idiot does is lie. He can’t help himself. But he doesn’t know a damned thing. I’m the only one who knows the truth, who can hear the message we’ve been sent. I’m the only one that can save you.’

Amongst the faces set in anguish, Janet Pembroke raised her hand uncertainly. ‘Save us from what?’

Donald grinned.

‘From the end.’

‘Oh,’ Janet put her hand down. She started to cry.

‘The end *is* coming. And make no mistake, there’s nowhere to run. Not unless you join the church. Not unless you listen to the word of the fish. The choice is yours, folks.’

And with that, Donald stuffed me back in the bag, jumped down from the stage, and rushed out of the hall, his robed followers at his heels. As the doors slammed shut behind them, the crowd burst once more into a babble of shrieks and squawks.

Megan turned to Jack and Elsie. ‘What the hell *was* that?’ But it was a question they had no answer for.

On stage, a prostrate Barnaby wiped hot tears from his face.

## 7.

Donald brought me back to that cramped room and lowered me into the cot. He took a blanket and covered my shivering, naked body. When I closed my eyes, all I saw were those faces staring back at me, all those hundreds of eyes.

I kept saying, ‘I want my Mum. I want to go home.’

‘I know, boy. I know.’

He cooed at me, stroked my head with his hands, whispered to me that I’d been perfect. I had no idea what he meant. He whispered good night and then retreated quietly from the room.

I wrapped myself in a tight ball and sucked my thumb.

No one had ever looked at me like that – not Mendelssohn or Ludwig, or Harry or Francine. To them I was Jonah. But all those eyes in the town hall. To them I was a monster.

I felt like my skin had been stripped.

As if their eyes had done that.

I threw up in the cot, a hot sticky bile that stained the sheets a radioactive green. I couldn't stop shivering.

I thought of my mother. Why hadn't she come for me yet? Where had she been when all those pulsing, petrified eyes burnt me with their gaze? She should have been there, like she'd always promised. Instead, I felt utterly abandoned.

I know that was unfair. In that moment, she still had no idea where to find me. But as a kid, filthy and starving in this strange room, surrounded by the detritus of Donald's life, I only felt betrayal. My mother had left me alone and hopeless. She had left me for dead.

When I'd managed to calm myself, I found my clothes crumpled in the corner of the cot. Still shivering, I slipped them back on. Then, I pulled out my father's photo and carefully flattened out the folded edges. He looked back at me, and for a flash of a moment, I saw in his eyes the same hunger as all those in the hall. I stuffed the photo back in my pocket and burrowed back under the covers.

It wasn't until light began to trickle in through the window that I finally drifted to sleep.

\*

Donald burst into the room just after first light. He crossed the room in one great leap and pushed his bearded face into the cot, his lips peeling back in a crooked smile.

'Sorry, boy. Didn't mean to scare you.'

He giggled. He was like a child bursting with a secret.

'I want to show you something.'

He balanced a small cage on the cot, the type you'd put your dog in before the poor bastard was neutered.

'We're going to do big things you and I. Big, big things.' He pulled back the covers and saw me back in my clothes. He frowned. 'I thought we were doing away with that? Hides what's special. Well, you won't be needing them anymore. You'll see.'

I cowered in my little corner as his skeleton hands reached for me.



Donald took me from that dingy room and carried me down a dark hallway. I caught glimpses of peeling wallpaper, naked lightbulbs and dusty photo-frames (was that Donald, looking thick and well-fed, with a beautiful woman at his side?), a living room cluttered with books and magazines. There was the strong scent of stale cigarette smoke, then detergent as we passed through the laundry, before Donald pushed through a flyscreen into the hot morning sun. We navigated past dismantled bikes and old tyres. Dry grass crunched underfoot. The sun burnt hot, the breeze bitter and salty.

Donald came to a stop before a thin, balding man crouching in the grass, knee resting on a thick piece of driftwood, a nail between his teeth and another under the head of a hammer.

‘Alright, Brother Dogfish?’

The man looked up. The veins in his neck fluttered when he spotted me in the cage. He groaned and whispered something under his breath.

‘Up you get, man. Don’t scare him.’

The man got gingerly to his feet, casting his eyes to the ground.

‘Forgive me, Master Marlin.’

Once upon a time, this thin jittery man was called Frank Humdinger, a truck driver at the mine and a father of two. But that had been his old life, before he’d lost his job. Before it all went sour. Now, Frank had been rechristened and reborn as Brother Dogfish.

Donald clucked his tongue. ‘It’s fine, brother.’

Dogfish snatched a glance at the cage. ‘It’s – I mean – it’s wonderful.’

‘Isn’t it just?’

They stood in silence. Donald cast his eyes to the Fish Kissers tilling the soil in the distance, all stooped under the heat of the sun. Dogfish followed his eyeline.

‘Toil keeps the heart pure, brother,’ Donald said.

‘So sayeth the fish,’ Dogfish whispered.

‘How’s the new sign coming along?’ Donald nodded to the piece of wood on the grass.

‘Almost there,’ Dogfish mumbled.

Donald looked across the yard. ‘Good. Let’s get this grass cleaned up, alright? We’ll need space to pitch tents for our new arrivals.’

He turned his attention back to the fields. A crow took flight from behind a rusty tractor. They both watched it as it swung a wide arc over the house. It's cawing rang out across the still air.

Donald's eyes flicked back to Dogfish. 'We'll be needing that sign done, brother. Get the others to help you if you need. And check the gas tanks.' He nodded to a row of tanks by the back of the house. 'My shower was cold this morning.'

At that, Donald strode towards the shed. I peered out from the cage and Dogfish was watching us go, hand clutching his chest.

We paused by the shed door. Donald cleared his throat. He reached for the bolt but hesitated and drew his hand back. I heard him muttering to himself, his body shaking, his free hand smoothing down his hair. He slid back the bolt on the shed door and pushed his way inside.

Honestly, Donald's church was nothing more than an old rusty shed. He'd kept his tractor here, years back when he'd lived his old life. Now, cobwebs hung in thick nets amongst the rafters, splintered shelves lined the walls, cluttered with rusty tools and opened cans of paint. Oil stains twisted like shimmering veins criss-crossing the cement floor. The air was damp, musty and thick in the lungs. A petrol smell left a sweet but nasty aftertaste. Errant nails glinted dangerously on the floor. Donald had, rather haphazardly mind, attempted to buttress the sagging roof with long bits of plywood jutting up from the floor, but really, the entire thing looked to be a big sneeze away from collapsing. It wasn't a church. Far from it. The place was a death-trap.

When Donald carried me inside, the sting of petrol hit me instantly. It made my tongue go fat in my mouth. It was cooler in here, dim, with columns of soft light dripping through cracks in the corrugated roof. Donald hefted my cage onto a small raised platform that ran the length of the back wall. In the middle of the platform stood some gigantic thing, hidden under a thick blanket.

'Now, boy. I'm going to unlock the cage, alright? But you got to promise you don't rush off. Be no good for either of us if you try.'

Donald fiddled with the lock. I heard the grate swing open. His knees clicked as he stood up and stepped back.

'It's alright, stretch your legs out, boy.'

I didn't move. Somewhere, hidden in the rafters, a pigeon cooed.

He tutted. 'Be that way then.' He walked away.

The roof creaked in the wind. I heard Donald humming softly.

‘You know,’ he said. ‘You and me are alike in a lot of ways. We’re different.’ He sniffed loudly. ‘People don’t understand difference. Scares ‘em.’ A pause. ‘Did I ever tell you that I couldn’t speak as a kid? True that. The words were there. Right there like little gobfuls of light in my mouth, but it was a right pain to spit ‘em out. Tried. Bloody tried, didn’t I? Words were sticky little things for me. People didn’t understand that. Thought I was dumb in the head. My Jules, though. She was my light. She wasn’t afraid. She only ever loved me. I get it, boy. Being different can hurt.’

He coughed sharply.

‘But it doesn’t have to be that way, you know? You can turn people’s fear into respect. You can make ‘em see they need you.’ He sighed and then fell silent.

I wriggled to the edge of the cage and looked around the dim room. Dust hung thick in the air, the wind whistled through unseen cracks, but Donald had vanished. I spotted the pigeon, wobbling across a roof beam. It ogled me with a curious tilt of the head and then dropped a spattering of shit. I crawled out of the cage and stood uneasily.

I thought of escaping. The door was shut, the bolt drawn. I could make a break for it, I thought, if I could just reach the bolt. A floorboard creaked. I turned sharply. No sign of Donald. Instead, my eyes were drawn to the giant thing sitting centre stage. It stretched towards the ceiling, and now I could hear something, a deep throb emanating from under the blanket. For a moment, I forgot about escaping, and crept across the stage. When I reached it, I peered up until I felt the blood pool at the base of my skull. From here, the throbbing sound pressed against my ears. Without knowing why, I grabbed a loose bunch of blanket.

My heart echoed in my head.

Petrol fumes twisted into my nostrils, my panting mouth.

I was terrified. I felt the urge to scurry back to the cage. But some unknown thing told me to stay put, to reveal the mystery beneath. That deep throbbing. I felt compelled.

I pulled, but the blanket held fast. I yanked it again, sharply, and it slipped, just a little. I grasped two little fistfuls, and then, teeth bared, pulled as hard as I possibly could. With a lurch, I fell backwards and disappeared under folds of musty, moth-eaten blanket. I scrambled fitfully until I emerged back into the dark room.

The tank took my breath away. It seemed, if possible, more gargantuan now that it stood in the open. It might have been tall enough for two men standing on each other’s

shoulders to fit comfortably inside, and wide enough for many more to stand shoulder to shoulder. The glass was cracked and grubby, but the edges were gilded in a smudged gold.

Most terrifying: it was filled to the brim with dark, churning water. This was the source of that deep throb whose frequency was almost indiscernible, yet it filled my head. Instantly, my legs went weak. I had never seen so much water in my life. A mother demanding normal, you understand, does not allow her amphibious son near vast bodies of water. Ridiculous, yes, but beyond my bath, I had barely swum.

It was with an almost perverse, disturbed anticipation that I stepped towards the tank, involuntarily, as if caught in its gravitational field. I pressed my webbed hand against the cool surface of the glass. The light dripping in through the top of the tank appeared like sun spots through a fogged canopy. But near the bottom, those same columns of light faded in the tank's penumbra. My heavy breath fogged the glass. The tank was, in all respects to my miniscule self, momentous.

I'd almost forgotten about Donald when his leering face reappeared suddenly on the other side of the tank, warped and refracted through the water, those green eyes catching me in their gaze. I tumbled back in fright. He scurried around and scooped me up.

'Got you,' he cried triumphantly, his hands snapping my arms to my side.

I tried to squirm, but his grip was too tight. 'Easy, boy. Easy.' He turned to the tank. 'It's real nice, isn't it? Coupla scratches, but they won't show up in the audience.' Donald licked his finger and rubbed at a smudge on the glass. 'Yep. She's a beauty.'

He pulled me to his chest and went around to the back of the tank. An old wooden ladder leant against the glass. Donald rested his foot on the bottom rung. My stomach dropped. He was going to put me in there. The maniac was going to drown me.

Donald began a slow ascent. I whimpered, eyes shut, the throb of the tank squeezing my skull. We neared the top and I could hear the water, intensely loud, a gurgling, sucking noise coming from the tank's gaping, hungry maw. The tank was baying for my blood.

'Come on, boy.'

Donald's spindly hand lifted me up and over the tank.

'See, no need for clothes. You'll feel better without them in there.'

I squirmed as he peeled off my clothes. He was too strong for me. I saw, with a thrum of panic, the jacket with my father's photo in it tossed aside.

‘No!’ I yelled, but it was useless. My bare arse caught the light as he held me over the gushing water. In a last moment of desperation, I twisted blindly and bit hard into the skin of his hand. He shrieked in pain.

‘Get off it.’

I bit down until I tasted blood. He tried to yank his hand from my mouth, but as he did, he slipped and jerked backwards. He dropped me, and with a strangled gasp, I was swallowed whole by the tank. The lid crashed shut above me.

I know, dear reader, that you are discerning and intelligent and must think it highly ridiculous that a boy with gills and webbed toes would fear something so benign as water. But as that cold liquid enveloped me, snatched and licked at my skin and sucked me down, down, down, I felt myself slipping into oblivion. I opened my mouth to scream and swallowed a dark mouthful of water. It poured through me, this cold shadow, rushing to fill the gaps in my body.

I was dead. I was sure of it.

I lashed out at the glass. I could barely summon the strength to move.

The shed appeared hazy through the smudged glass and I thought that this place, of all places, would be the last thing I ever saw. I closed my eyes and waited.

And I waited.

Except.

Something miraculous happened. But you already know that.

I didn’t die.

I felt the pressure on my lungs ease, the sensation of breathing returned. The gills on my neck fluttered as the water passed safely through them. I touched them lightly with my hands, as I’d done thousands of times before, but now they felt powerful in their utility, more than simple bodily affectations. I opened my eyes and Donald was picking himself gingerly off the floor, brushing dust from his pants, a trickle of blood staining his forehead. He pressed his splayed hand against the glass and watched me intently as I floated, now quite calmly, in the water.

It was impossible. I was alive, submerged entirely, but still breathing air into my lungs. More than that, though, the water felt reassuring. It wasn’t pushing down on me, and in fact, with a slight flick of my hands and feet I could propel myself as if I was weightless.

I kicked out and did a neat little somersault. On the other side of the glass, Donald clapped excitedly and whooped.

‘Bloody beautiful. Knew you’d like it.’

I was loath to agree, but I did. For the first time in my life I didn’t feel like an impossible creation. I didn’t feel out of place. In here I made sense. In here was calmness and quiet.

I felt Donald’s gaze on me and drifted to the bottom of the tank. I sat, huddled, hiding my private delight.

Donald grinned.

‘You see, boy. You *are* different. No one else can do what you can do. But that’s something to be proud of. It’s power, my boy. It’s spectacular. All you gotta do is make people understand.’ He tapped a finger to his head.

There was a manic glint in his eye. And then I saw something else, something soft, tender. He watched me almost like my mother did when we were together. Maybe I was imagining it.

‘You’re special, boy. Don’t you forget it. Now, I gotta do some things. You have a little play, okay? We’ll get started soon.’

He lingered a moment, a half-dazed look still on his face, and then he drew back.

I waited until I heard the shed door grate open and close. Then, alone, I tested my new-found agility, bouncing off the bottom with a tiny flick that shot me upwards. I moved faster than I’d expected, and as I rocketed towards the top of the tank I tried to spin sharply – but too late – and I crashed heavily into the glass. I sank back down, woozy, but still delighted. This would take some practice, I realised, but I was too delighted to care for the pain. Settling on the bottom, I repositioned, and then launched myself up. This time, I was prepared. I twisted my body, like a flash of silver, and deftly pushed off the glass. I shot to the other side of the tank, almost lost control, but managed to turn, amazed at how easily I could shift direction just by using my hands and feet. Why had I been kept away from this my whole life, when in here I was so powerful?

Let me ask you this: have you ever felt out of place for so long that it never crossed your mind that you were simply lost the whole time, without ever knowing it? And then, do you know what it’s like to find, suddenly and inexplicably, somewhere that feels like a pure expression of yourself, as if it had been created for you alone? A place that feels, more than anything, like home?

I ask you this, dear reader, because as I floated silently in my tank, I felt suddenly and powerfully that the world outside this tank didn't exist. I neither missed my old life, nor even my mother. My father's photo sat in a crumpled heap, and yet, I didn't even consider it.

In this tank, despite being Donald's prisoner, I felt free.

## 8.

As the first shards of light burst through his office blinds, Boris Barnaby shook awake to Susan knocking on his door with a coffee and the morning paper. He peeled his face from the sticky desk and wiped the sleep from his eyes. A pink post-it note sat squarely in the middle of his forehead.

'What time is it?'

Barnaby blindly searched for the coffee.

Susan forced it into his hand. 'Eight. Careful, it's hot.'

He gave a strangled yelp as he took a sip. 'Jesus, you brew this coffee in fucking Mount Vesuvius or something?'

'I did say.'

She leant forward and ripped the post-it note from his forehead.

'Fucking ouch.'

He rubbed his brow as Susan handed him the note. He squinted at it. *Kill Donald Walker*. Last night smacked him roughly in the back of the head. His eyes darted to the newspaper in Susan's other hand.

'What's it say?' he groaned.

'Nothing good,' she said as she lay the paper flat across his desk. 'And that...thing. It's unnatural.'

They were talking about me, of course, there on the front page of the *Herald*, captured in a blurry black and white image beneath 43pt Font that screamed MONSTER!!!!

Did they really need to use so many exclamation marks?

Susan folded the paper shut. 'It scares the hell out of me.'

Barnaby sank his head into his hands. 'God have mercy.' He came up for air. 'Just leave me alone, okay? No fucking meetings. No calls. Just – just get out.'

Barnaby slithered back into his chair as Susan hurried out. He opened his draw, pilfered around the papers, a rotten apple core, the gum filled wrappers, until he found a

cigarette. He jammed it between his lips, and then spotted the picture of his wife Franca and his daughter Beth. They both looked back at him with sweet, accusing eyes. He frowned.

‘Oh, sod off.’ He put the photo face down and grabbed his lighter from the top drawer. He clicked it, once, twice, and the flame sputtered on with a flicker.

Maybe, he thought, maybe he should just let it drop and light the carpet up, let it all just burn down. He’d dash out of the building, face streaked with soot and sweat, Susan bundled over his shoulder. He’d be a hero, and everyone would forget about any problems with the mine, or any other unsavoury things that Boris Barnaby would rather them not know. And they’d all forget about Donald and that monstrous aberration, and everything would go back to normal.

Believe me, these were the kinds of fantasies that Barnaby entertained.

As he watched the orange curl of the flame Barnaby cast his mind back to the night before. It made him sick just thinking about it. He replayed the whole sorry scene in vivid detail, again and again: the crowd of terrified faces, Donald’s crumbling, malevolent grin. And he saw himself, in slow, agonising motion, toppling over the fold-out table, like a limp – he shuddered at the thought – fish. It wouldn’t do. It just wasn’t cricket.

Not that he was any good at sports, by the way.

Barnaby knew he’d looked an absolute fool, and it was Donald who’d administered that humiliation. He kept thinking that, over and over. But most of all, he couldn’t forget the image of that *thing*. The thing that Donald had pulled out from his bag, as if Donald had, in fact, pulled all those repressed, dangerous thoughts from Barnaby’s own mind, and revealed them in the bare light for all to see.

The fish.

Barnaby couldn’t be sure – not when it had all happened in a flash – but something sickly at the back of his throat told him that it *was* the same thing from ten years ago. The very same thing he’d pitched into that dark, murky dam. But how? How was it still alive, and how had Donald pulled that phantom from his bag? It was –

‘Impossible,’ he’d hissed at Temperence, long after the crowd had hurried off into the night, back home to lock their doors, to draw their curtains and pray. ‘It’s just not fucking possible, is it?’

Temperence looked immensely tired, standing there playing absently with her truncheon. She couldn’t stop grinding her teeth. ‘Honestly? I don’t know. It could have been anything.’



But she could hear the lie in her own words.

Barnaby sat on the edge of the stage, his face in his hands. He took a long drag of his cigarette, lost in thought.

‘What do we do?’ Temperence asked.

Barnaby jerked up and stared at her. His words came out in a rush. ‘What do you mean what do we do? We don’t do anything. That...*thing* is just a trick. An illusion. And we didn’t do anything wrong anyway. No one can prove anything. Donald’s a maniac and no one’s going to believe him. Not against our word.’

‘Barn – ’

‘Just quit it, okay?’ he snapped. ‘Keep calm and don’t worry about it. I’ve got it under control.’

‘But, Barn – Barn – Baaaaaarnaby?’

In his office, Barnaby jerked back from his painful reverie and the flame sputtered out. Susan was poking her head through his office door.

‘Barnaby? You’ve got a call.’

He’s eyes narrowed. ‘I said no calls.’

‘It’s the mining director, sir. Mr Malus.’

Barnaby’s heart performed a feat of acrobatics.

‘Oh, Jesus,’ he groaned. ‘Alright. Yeah. Just, uh, patch him through.’

He spat the unlit cigarette to the floor and took a deep breath. Then, he cricked his neck and pressed the transfer button.

‘Gerald,’ he said, like it was an old friend he hadn’t seen in years. ‘What a pleasant surprise.’

The voice dripped down the line like acid. ‘There’s nothing pleasant about this call, Barnaby. It’s a fucking nuisance.’

‘Yes, yeah. Course it is. Totally understand. Look – ’

‘This thing. What is it?’

‘Uh, Gerald?’

‘What is it? Some kind of mutant fish? A disabled child?’

‘Uh – ’

‘Look,’ he snapped. ‘Is it going to be trouble?’

‘Well – ’

‘Are people going to look at – this thing – and ask themselves what in the world could produce something like – like – well, whatever the fuck it is?’

Barnaby felt like he was melting into his shoes.

‘I mean, I only saw it for a second, you know? I can’t say exactly what it was.’

‘So, find out,’ Gerald bellowed. ‘And do something before the whole country knows about it. If there’s one thing you can find some comfort in it’s that no one else gives a fuck about Fortune, and they especially don’t give a fuck about some piddly little newspaper I wouldn’t even use to wrap my fucking fish and chips with.’

Barnaby heard Gerald breathing on the other end.

‘Gerald?’

‘Look, Barnaby. You’ve been good to us. You’ve always done things in the best interest of the company, and we appreciate that. That’s why we helped you out so much getting into that position of yours, yeah? But here’s the rub. No one has friends in the mining business, okay? You just have acquaintances, and the thing with acquaintances is their easily expendable. This expansion *has* to go ahead. If it doesn’t then everyone will lose a lot of money. And I do mean everyone.’

‘I’m going to take care of it, Gerald. You have my word.’

‘Right. Good. Well, what about those blacks of yours, eh? Are they going to be trouble?’

‘No, no. It’ll be fine. I’ll get them into line.’

‘Just get things under control, Barnaby.’

‘Yep. Will do.’

Gerald clicked his tongue. ‘Well, alright then.’

Barnaby winced at the sound of the dial tone. His chest hurt. His head hurt. Our besieged Barnaby felt like a squeezed sponge left to dry and crack on the kitchen counter. He put the phone down. Slowly, he stooped and picked up his discarded cigarette. He clicked his lighter. The flame. *Yes, burn the whole place down*, he thought. *Do it, you miserable bastard.*

The phone rang again.

When he burst through the door Susan screamed and dropped the phone. His orange hair hung lank in front of his eyes, the cigarette dangling from his lips.

‘I think you might want to see this,’ she whispered, nodding at the window.

Barnaby palmed back his hair and stomped across the room.

‘This better be fucking worth it.’ He parted the blinds with his fingers and looked out onto the street. His face dropped.

‘No shitting way in hell.’

Could it be a mirage? Could he just be seeing things?

He should be so lucky.

What he was seeing was as real as his heart issues. Below in the street, twenty people shuffled together as one up the main street towards the denuded hills and Donald’s shack.

Barnaby gasped for air. ‘Get Temperence on the phone.’

## 9.

Donald waited by the fence, the warmth of his suit making his pits sweat, his cracked palms resting lightly on the wooden fence post. From the top of the hill he could see Fortune below, a tiny patchwork of houses and bitumen roads leading to the sparkling ocean.

While I was exploring my powerful new body in that giant tank, Donald shifted nervously in the heat of the sun.

What was he waiting for? His disciples, of course, those bedraggled folks he was certain would now come to his bosom and beg for forgiveness.

A slight breeze picked up. The clouds shifted, and the sun reappeared. It threw sharp light off the ocean’s skin and Donald squinted in the glare. He licked his lips, checked his watch. He pulled his cigarette pouch from his jacket pocket and rolled another cigarette.

‘They’ll come. They’ll be here,’ he muttered. ‘Let’s just be patient, eh?’

He turned his attention from the town, shifted his gaze to the east, along the snaking river, until the hills flattened out, and then there was the mine, a great big hole in the ground; an inverted mountain, each strata of the earth cold and naked in the wind. The refinery stood nearby, its smoke stacks pumping black smoke into the sky. It looked so tiny from up here, and he wondered how something so small and insignificant like that could have destroyed everything he loved.

Donald held his forefinger and thumb out in front of him, positioned them just so, with the mine between his fingers, right where he wanted it. He could hear the screams of terror, the clamour and commotion, as those tiny people down there saw gargantuan fingers hovering above. He could hear them uttering useless prayers, pleading for mercy. Donald let them cower, let them plead and scramble on their knees with hands clasped, or kissing the

dirt. He let them think that maybe, just maybe, this sudden monolithic pincer might spare their pitiful souls.

And then, with a scowl, Donald squished the mine and all those people into oblivion.

He chuckled and wiped the blood and debris across his pants.

‘One day.’

Donald checked his watch again and clicked his tongue. He turned back to the house. Three Fish Kissers yanked weeds in the front yard. A pair of freckly faced children scrubbed the deck with toothbrushes and a bucket of soapy water. Donald nodded approvingly.

Can you believe that? Donald had these people working like a ragtag cleaning crew. Yes, sir. Me, sir? Please, sir. But they weren’t such bad people, I guess. Just the first to be duped. And not the last, mind you.

Brother Dogfish appeared from behind the house, face streaked with sweat and dirt, his dull watery eyes half closed to the sun.

‘Alright, Brother Dogfish?’

Dogfish clenched his jaw tight as he nodded. ‘It’s – uh – looking ready.’

‘Good, good.’ Donald turned from Dogfish and watched the road coming up the hill. ‘Be needing more chairs.’

‘I’ll get some. Do you think – are they coming?’

Donald rolled his tongue around his mouth. ‘Course they are, brother. Just you wait.’

The sun disappeared behind the clouds. They waited. Donald smoked his cigarette with his hand resting on the fence post.

‘What should we do?’

‘Shh, Dogfish. They’re coming.’

Dogfish looked to the road running down the hill. He couldn’t see anything. He strained his eyes, but the land was still.

The breeze picked up again and the clouds shifted. A band of light lit up the dusty road. Dogfish made a veranda with his hand. He watched the spot where the road disappeared.

And then he saw it. Someone coming up the hill. He turned excitedly to Donald, but Donald ignored him. They watched the lone arrival puffing up the hill. It was a man, thin and hobbled, light glinting off his glasses. They knew this man, a sorry-sack of a man, Darren, who’d always avoided Donald in town, rolled his eyes like everyone else. He’d even spat on

the ground at Donald's feet once, and yet here he was coming to a stop before them, exhausted, glancing uncertainly between Donald and Dogfish.

A long, dusty silence.

And then: 'Last night,' Darren mumbled, eyes to the dirt. 'When I saw that – that thing. I saw myself, you know, kinda like from outside my head, looking down. And I was so tiny. Like a bug. And I thought: that's you, Darren. You're nothing, mate. Nothing but a bug.'

Slowly, Darren glanced up. Donald took a good look at him. He flicked his cigarette to the ground and stepped forward. Darren flinched, but Donald merely put his hand gently on the man's shoulder.

'Welcome, Darren. Forget all the acrimony. I'll turn my cheek to it. You're a brother now. You've made the good and honest choice. You coulda stuck around there until the bitter end, but you chose to follow the light. That's what you did. You're a good man.'

Donald grabbed Darren's shirt and pulled him close. He acquiesced silently as Donald leant forward and planted a kiss on his forehead. Donald pulled his lips back with a smacking sound and smiled. Darren shivered. The colour drained from his face, but he managed a lopsided grin. Donald took a good look at him.

'You shall be called – Brother Prawn.'

Donald stood aside and ushered him towards Dogfish.

'Feed him and dress him.'

Dogfish nodded and together the two men walked across the yard and into the house.

Donald turned his attention back to the road. He cricked his neck, lit another cigarette, smoked it, tossed it to the ground. Dogfish returned and sidled up beside him.

They waited.

'Look!'

Dogfish pointed to the road. Four people were moving slowly up the hill. And then four more. By the time they had made it to the fence, there were twenty of them, all told. They glanced nervously at each other.

These people were terrified, you know? They wondered whether they'd been bloody idiots for even coming. They'd left snags going funky in the fridge, soap suds still gleaming on the hills hoist, dogs unfed. They'd just upped and gone. And for what? For this man standing before them. The same man they'd thought was a maniac only yesterday afternoon.

Standing silently, they all thought: what the hell are we doing?

Donald surveyed that sorry assortment, looking hassled and harried. Some had dragged suitcases all the way up the hill, stuffed with shirts and clothes and all manner of things. Further down the path, an abandoned bag had spilt its guts over the hillside. Others, like Bertie Jansen, who'd lost his job at the mines only the week before, held his daughter close to his chest. Donald looked over the lot of them, smoking a cigarette to the nub as a sock tumbled past.

He flicked his cigarette to the ground and twisted his boot into it. 'Brothers,' he nodded. 'Sisters. I want to thank you. I know what brought you here. I know the urge you felt.' He took a step closer to the group. 'Let me tell you this. I know how you feel. I know that you feel lost, left behind, dispossessed of any purpose. Isn't that right?' He moved towards a young woman clutching the necklace around her neck. 'I know, for instance, the little ball that lives in your guts, the tight little ball' – he stopped in front of the woman, close enough to hear her shallow breath – 'squeezing harder and harder inside. I know it hurts.' He flicked out his index, pointed it right at the woman's navel. 'I know you want this ball gone.' He curled his finger like a hook. 'You need it gone before it rips' – he yanked his hooked finger back and the woman gave a little gasp – 'right outta your belly. Isn't that right?'

He chuckled.

Donald leant in to the woman's ear. She quivered with the heat of his breath on her earlobe. 'It's a sickness that lives inside.'

He pulled back. 'It's a damn dirty sickness you've got growing in your gut. What you saw last night – that creature – you saw it with your very own eyes. Do you doubt what you all saw? You saw the fleshy, scaled skin of it, and you knew – I know you knew – that it meant something. It spoke to you. The light of it filled you up and made you realise that something has to be done.'

'And I'm telling you folks, the world is sick. The world is sick and dying and it's all the greed and money grubbing that's doing it. It's the mine, it's the crooked mayor and his crooked council, and everything else that's sucking the world dry.'

Donald pulled his pouch out and rolled another cigarette, languorously, taking his time with it. He stuck the stick in his mouth, eyed the crowd, each and every one of them: the tall man at the back, a red cap sitting low on his head; the two women at the front, sisters probably, barely adults, but holding babies in their arms, tired and scared; the elderly couple supporting each other, breath haggard and prickly, with a single suitcase between them. Everyone stood looking terrified, tearful, good and ready to tear their hair out from their

heads and throw themselves into the unknown because the lives they were leading seemed so impossible and gruelling.

These people had nothing left.

‘I can help,’ he said finally. ‘But you’ve got to want it. You’ve got to want to be saved. No half-arsed jobs round here, folks. If you want it, I’ll open up my house, show you the light. Just like that, whambam thankyou mam. But you’ve got to want it.’

He scanned the crowd and locked eyes with a woman holding her kid’s sweaty hand. Donald stepped forward. The crowd split in two as he approached her, and he would have felt like Moses parting the red sea of suffering. She looked up at him with watery eyes. Her kid, a little girl still in her jammies, with her teddy dangling in the dirt, tugged on her mother’s sleeve.

‘Not now, dear,’ her mother whispered.

Donald smiled. ‘Do you want to be saved?’

She nodded.

‘Say it. Say it so everyone can hear. Do you want to be saved?’

‘Yes,’ she whispered.

‘Say it!’

The woman gave a strangled yelp. ‘Yes!’

Her face reddened. She dropped her head. Donald’s smile grew wider. The crowd watched him in silence.

He left her and walked back to the front of the crowd. He let the silence sit, with just the wind rustling quietly at their clothes, a baby clamouring for milk. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and when he opened them he looked straight at that sorry lot.

‘Now, who else wants to say yes?’

## **10.**

I woke suddenly. The blanket had been placed back over the tank, leaving me in darkness. My heart pounded. I couldn’t remember falling asleep. I rubbed my side and swam to the glass. I could hear shuffling feet, the murmur of voices coming from the other side. I found a pin-hole of light and peered through the blanket into the dim room.

People were gathering in Donald’s shed. They stood in uncertain clumps avoiding each other’s eyes, the children clinging to their parents. They all looked scared, fidgety, standing uncomfortably in white robes far too big for them, all smelling like they’d been left

too long in the washing-machine. They felt the sticky spot where Donald's wet lips had pressed against their foreheads. The petrol fumes made their heads swim. They took sips from the cups Brother Dogfish passed around, tasting something funky in that brown broth, but drinking it down because that's what everyone else was doing. They stuck to the walls and cast wary eyes towards the stage.

Standing among them were the Fish Kissers who had gate crashed the town hall meeting, the same ones who'd been called crazy or deluded. They'd disappeared from the town months, or even years ago. There one day, gone the next. Now they were all standing together, Fish Kissers and townsfolk, all dressed in the same white robes.

One and the same.

I saw Dogfish hurrying through the crowd, a battered boom-box held above his head. He reached the stage and rested it next to a dusty old lighting console. He turned to the new arrivals, all looking scared, scratching at the concrete, holding each other tight. Looking at them all, he couldn't help but feel a rush of certainty, knowing that he was doing something special. Dogfish felt, for the first time in a long time, powerful. A smile spread across his dry face.

Then he hit the play button.

Donald's voice came crackling from those scratchy speakers.

'Is it recording? Ma Moh Mee Ma Moh. Right. Action.'

There was a rustling noise, papers being shifted, and then the Donald in the boom-box cleared its throat.

'For too long the world has been spiralling. Spiralling towards darkness.'

The new arrivals shifted on the balls of their feet to find the source of the voice.

'For too long we have forsaken our bounties, the gifts that God has bestowed upon us.'

Dogfish flicked a switch on the lighting console and the room was bathed in a sudden flash of searing white light. In my tank, I reared back, feeling the surge of that light like a shock. And then, just as suddenly, the light was gone.

Cautiously, my head throbbing, I peered back through the blanket.

'For too long we have thought ourselves as gods on earth.'

Another flash of light.

'For too long our greed has left us sick. For too long we've allowed our bodies into temptation.'



Again, the light.

‘For too long we have run wild with wanton destruction, and for too long we have defiled ourselves, and God’s land.’

Again. And Again. And again. Flashes, hot and white. I couldn’t pull myself away, paralysed by that searing light. The crowd, too, were inert, absorbed by the sound of Donald’s booming, echoing voice.

‘And yet! There is hope. There is hope that you can right your wicked ways. That you might ascend to the promised place, take control of your destiny and see the light see the light see the light.’

Donald’s voice crackled and spat and folded over itself. The tape was jammed.

Talk about production values.

Dogfish fumbled with the eject button and Donald’s voice ended with a scratched blurp. He held up the cassette, its intestinal tract hanging loose. Donald poked his head through the side door.

‘Hit ‘em with the lights,’ Donald hissed.

Dogfish dropped the cassette and hit the lights again. For good measure, he flicked another switch and a puff of smoke filled the air.

Side-stage, Donald palmed his hair flat to his scalp, gave his tie a little wiggle (‘Here we go, Donald me old boy’), and then hobbled into view.

‘The question is,’ he said, and then sucked in a great gulp of air. ‘The question is do you want to cleanse yourself of your sins? Do you want to abandon your greed, fix the life you’ve squandered and embrace the light?’

Donald nodded at Dogfish and it was like a blitzkrieg in that tiny shed.

‘Because it is not easy,’ Donald boomed, enveloped in hazy smoke. ‘To follow the word of the fish is to toil. To follow the word of the fish is to give unto the fish. Only the pure of heart will reach the next realm, so sayeth the fish!’

The Fish Kissers echoed his words: ‘So sayeth the fish!’

Donald thrust his arms to the sky, his body appearing twice the size in the flashing lights, the plumes of smoke. Dogfish didn’t stop flicking switches, even with his fingers cramping. Lights. Smoke. Lights. Smoke. The crowd were enthralled by Donald’s every move.

‘We have been sent a sign! The fish is a sign. It is our gift from God, a sign that we must stop our wickedness. We must repent. We must stop the greed. The fish is the sign that we must break free into a new life. The fish. The fish. The fish!’

With this last barked pronouncement, Donald took a bundle of blanket in his balled fist and yanked it sharply from the tank. The crowd, wrenched suddenly from their stupor, gasped in astonishment when they saw me, my shape twisted beyond recognition, the blaze of light throwing my body into ghastly perspective. Each and every eye bulged, almost popped from their sockets at the sight of me. They didn’t see a terrified boy. With their minds filled with burning light, with their heads filled with the heaviness of Donald’s words, they saw a divine creature, a deliverance from a higher being.

I was exposed, frantic like a bug scurrying from under an upturned log. I tried to hide, tried to burrow into a ball but I couldn’t break their gaze, couldn’t escape those eyes, because they were everywhere, watching me, drinking me in, wanting to pull me closer, to take hold of me and crack me open. I lost control of my thoughts; I twisted and darted. Every move drew more gasps, made those eyes bulge more, made them multiply, until there were hundreds upon hundreds of eyes staring back at me, but giant, and throbbing with red, spidery veins. I needed to disappear. I needed to vanish into dust.

But those eyes wouldn’t let me go.

‘You cannot ignore it! It is there, as plain as day, a creature like no other, a sign that all is not right in the world. Look.’ Donald thrust a knobbly finger in my direction. ‘The sign is perfect. To ignore it is to close your eyes to salvation!’

Now Donald offered both his palms up to the crowd, beckoning them, inviting them to him, and he said, ‘Who will choose salvation? Who will accept the sign and free themselves from sins?’

Silence. No one wanted to be the first.

And then a woman, her face a bundle of wrinkles and sweat, her hair sitting in loose strands from her shivering head, stepped forward. Donald watched her come towards the stage, moving like her legs were wooden planks. He held his hand out to her. She looked up at him, her mouth quivering, eyes shimmering, barely in control of her own body. She took that weathered hand and Donald lifted her up.

He placed his hand on her shoulder, a paternal kind of touch, and he asked her for her name.

‘Wendy,’ she whispered.

‘Wendy. Do you want to free yourself?’

She nodded, barely, just a little twitch of the head, but Donald smiled and guided her to the tank. He had to drag her the last few steps as she dug in her heels. The crowd watched on.

‘Accept the fish into your life, Wendy.’ Donald leant against Wendy, pressed his body right against hers, his warmth against her back. He placed his mouth by her ear, until it was almost touching, so that she could feel the wet heat of him. ‘Accept the fish, Wendy. Accept it.’

And, yes, in that moment, I believe Wendy felt something inexplicable, something she had never felt before. She felt a compulsion, a sudden drive to do as Donald commanded. Maybe it was the lights still blinkering away in her vision, or maybe it was the weight of expectation she felt collecting as one in the crowd behind her. Maybe, just maybe, she was experiencing a moment of magic, something beyond the realm of possibility.

A little voice in her head whispered, ‘Do it, Wendy. Just do it,’ and a look of conviction washed across her face and she stood up against the glass and peered into the water. She put her lips to the glass, pushed her whole body against it so she was close to the little creature in that tank, still whirling and whirling around in frantic despair, and she kissed the glass, a deep nourishing kiss. She felt her body go weak, and Donald shrieked in her ear, ‘Salvation!’ She felt a rush of crippling pain and collapsed into Donald’s inviting arms. He lay her down and turned to the crowd.

‘She shall be known now as Sister Wahoo, she who chose salvation! Now, who’s next?’

There was no hesitation. People rushed forwards to mount the stage. They came to my tank, they peered right through the glass at me. And each time Donald whispered in their ears, and they kissed the glass and then collapsed as Donald bellowed, ‘Salvation!’

And all I could do was wait for it to end.

When it did, there was a pile of fleshy mess in front of the tank. Donald stepped over unconscious bodies and came up to the glass. I sat at the bottom of the tank, cradling myself, strength sapped, my body aching, my heart thumping.

Donald’s hot, rapid breath fogged the glass. He wiped it with his sleeve so just his broken teeth showed.

‘You see, boy. Didn’t I say? Me and you. We’re gonna do big things.’

## 11.

And so, man said unto the fish, let there be a church.

And Donald finally had it: The Church of the Holy Fish.

A week earlier, Donald could have counted his head shaved, robe wearing disciples on one hand. But after my great unveiling in the town hall everything changed. Now his shed was filled with those wanting his blessing, who waited with bated breath for his pronouncements. Those who came that first day had their head's shaved, one by one, by Dogfish, who slapped them across their pink heads and said, 'You are Brother Groper, you are Sister Hogfish,' and so on, and so on. They gave up all their possessions, all their accoutrements, for they believed that, to be truly free, one must be free of the materials that bind us, so sayeth the fish!

That's what they said. You couldn't even wear a headband or a necklace. It would have been worse than dropping your pants in a playground. So sayeth the fish, they said.

Donald's sermons ran twice a day, once in the early morning light, the other as the sun sunk below the horizon. As the sun rose each day, the followers all clambered from their tents and kissed the earth. They said, 'Kiss the earth as you would kiss the Fish!' and then they turned to their neighbours, and they kissed one another with dusty lips. Then, they filed off to the shed. As always, Dogfish handed them brown broth that made their heads swim while Donald bellowed the tenets of the fish.

'Give unto the Fish and the Fish will giveth glory!'

'The Fish is the Word, and the Word is Truth!'

'Toil is worship! May bubbles forever surround you!'

And every time I was exposed to those same burning eyes that sent me whirling and twisting as Donald strode across that sunken, dusty stage. The water of the tank shimmered, the fish boy whirled and twisted, twisted and whirled.

Listen to the fish, Donald would exclaim. Open your ears.

'But what's that, you ask?' Donald would holler, the crowd surging at his feet. 'The fish cannot speak? The fish expresses itself in cryptic ways.'

And Donald would wink and pull back those cracked lips.

'Never fear! Do not dismay, for I can unravel these mysterious signals. I can read the sign in the signifier and speak the truth of those invisible words. Just listen. Trust. Obey!'

And Donald would bellow, 'The Fish! The Fish! The Fish!' and the congregation would topple to their knees and shiver and shout prayers and beg for forgiveness. They would

weep at the sight of me, and Donald would fold his arms, and he would close his eyes and tilt his head in humble submission.

I saw with my own eyes how they fed on Donald's every word. How they swallowed it all. I saw how fervent they became; how eager they were to believe. They didn't care that this fishboy was just an innocent child. They never even knew. They just wanted a taste of the divine.

Should I hate these people for the way they looked at me? The way they devoured me with their piercing eyes?

Well. I have seen enough in my life to know that no one is immune to the confusion of fear. I know that humble, generous people, who love and are loved in return, can still, if the conditions are right, become irrational in the face of the unknowable.

FYI a short-list of things that might make people irrational (in no particular order):

1. Terrorism
2. Refugees
3. Cyclists
4. Fishboy

You see, Fishboy, this slimy incongruous creature, this jumbled mess of symbols without reference, was all the warped, terrifying unknowns come home to roost. When they saw me, it was as if reality was no longer a stable parameter, no longer something to be trusted. With reality dripping like snot from a snoot, all it took was for someone to whisper a wet incantation in their ears, to tell them that this divine object was real, was truth itself. And they believed it, you know, because they were lost in the dark, and someone, someone who spoke loudly and with authority, was offering to pull them back out into the light.

Let me say this: in the end, people are simple. Despite all the perfumes and sports cars and the fancy houses they surround themselves with, people are just animals wrapped in human skin. They hear thunder and their arseholes pucker up because, instinctively, they are animals who fear the awesome unknown.

So, no, I shouldn't hate these people. I would venture that there is enough hate in the world already.

Still, as a child in that tank, they terrified me.

Donald came often between sermons to rap on the glass and coo to me. He'd stagger up the ladder and pull open the lid, holding treats. At the sight of food, I'd kick up to the

surface. He'd toss me whatever he had, sometimes fruit or bread, sometimes sweets and candies, and then watch me silently as I ate, always with that soft look in his eyes.

'Keep up your strength, boy,' he'd say, clutching at the edge of the tank. 'You've got to stay healthy.'

And I'd always ask, 'Where's my mother?'

He'd just smile, a sad little smile and shake his head. And he'd say he was sorry I was frightened by all the people. Then, he'd reach for the lid and I'd be forced back under the water.

I lost track of time. I might have been in that tank for three days, or maybe it was three weeks. I had trouble sleeping. I would wake often from a dream: I would be looking at the photo of my father, but then his image would dissolve, like a polaroid in reverse. I'd try to call his name, but I couldn't because I didn't know it. Then my mother would take the photo and tear it in two, throw the pieces away. 'Jonah,' she'd say. 'You can't go out there. The people are afraid of you. You must stay here forever.'

When I'd wake up I would try to picture the way my father and mother looked. It became harder every time.

One afternoon, Donald rapped on the glass as he usually did. He frowned and pressed his face against the glass.

'Boy.'

I was sitting at the bottom of the tank. I turned my back to him.

'Come on. Don't be a soursob.'

Donald rested his palm on the glass.

'Look, I get it. You think I'm the bad guy, right? Keeping you in here. But didn't I save you when you was lost out there in the middle of nowhere? Didn't I do that?' He frowned. 'We're doing something special. Something no one else could do. I thought you liked all this?' He waved at the tank. 'Don't you like the freedom you get in here. You can express yourself in here. It's made just for you. I was thinking of you when I made it.'

He stood silently, hands on his hips. He scratched his beard.

'You miss your mum, yeah? I understand. But I reckon she was holding you back, boy. I reckon she didn't see how special you are.' He shook his head. 'I'm sorry to say, but she's probably not even looking for you. I wouldn't be surprised. Kid like you is tough work. Nah, she's probably thanking her lucky stars you're gone.'

I kicked off the floor and darted to the other side of the tank. Donald followed.

‘Look here. Let me make you a promise, alright? *If* your mum comes wanting you back, I’ll give you up. Hand against heart’ – he tapped his breast – ‘I’ll hand you over and this is all done.’

I twisted round and stared at him. He was lying, surely. Except. There was that same glint in his eye, the one I’d witnessed before. That softness. Was he telling the truth?

He shrugged. ‘But I’m sorry to say, boy, I don’t like your chances.’

We watched one another. I tried to ignore the little thought scratching around in my head that he was right. That she wasn’t coming. That losing me had been a blessing.

‘Alright, boy. I’ll see you real soon.’

A last flash of cracked teeth glinting through glass. And then he was gone.

## 12.

Richard Quinten must have imagined all his dreams had come true the night I appeared in the town hall. Here it was, the scoop of the century: a half boy, half fish, so impossible – so unimaginable, in fact – *it had* to be true. And in the clutches of a maniac who claimed to channel the words of God, no less. Quinten knew people would go bananas for it. And in the end, he was right. If people went crazy at the sight of Jesus burnt into a cheese-toastie, or the Holy Mother in a wall stain, well, a fishboy, then, with all due respect to Mama Teresa, was nothing short of a miracle.

I wasn’t, you know. Not a miracle. Not the word of God.

Like that was going to stop them, though, right?

Initially, as it turned out, a half-boy, half-fish *was* too impossible to be true. With only the one, blurred image Quinten couldn’t get a single city-side paper to syndicate the story. Even the *Herald Sun* wouldn’t take it. Editors thought Quinten was yanking their chains, even when he faxed a grainy photo to them. Sure thing, mate, they’d chortle. Pull the other one.

Remember: this was a time before Internet echo chambers and 24-hour news cycles. The Royal Australian Post was not yet a glorified delivery service for booze and shoes. Information was traded slowly through official channels, so a tiny town in the middle of nowhere could manage to keep its little secrets secret, at least for a while.

But Quinten couldn’t let the chance pass him by. *The Fortune Herald* was losing money faster than Quinten was losing hair, and he didn’t have much left of either. Something had to give.

After days of nothing, he drove up to the shack, his car rattling violently up the hillside, spitting smoke. Ricky – loitering by his BMX outside the property – watched Quinten emerge from a cloud of black smoke, coughing sharply, and holding a battered cardboard box under his arm.

‘Boss. Thank God you’re here. Is my shift over?’

‘Have you got me a story yet?’ Quinten growled.

‘No, but Mum’ll go boonta if I don’t come home for dinner.’

‘Forget it. Lesson number 34: no story no dinner with your mummy. Now,’ he said, pulling out a blue rainproof and a matching cap from the cardboard box. ‘Here’s lesson 57: How to get a story like a pro.’ He grinned as he slipped on the jacket.

The fence was just a perimeter of rotting wooden posts. Razor wire sat in bundled hoops in the grass, and there were Fish Kissers scurrying around with hammers and corrugated sheets. The entrance was guarded by a small man with a scar under his left eye – Brother Whiff – and a woman – Sister Saury – with a crew cut and thick eyebrows.

‘Welcome,’ Brother Whiff said as Quinten approached. ‘Have you come to kiss the fish?’

‘Er, nah. I’ve got a delivery here for’ – Quinten produced his note book from his pocket and flicked to a random page, ‘Donald Walker?’

Brother Whiff and Sister Saury glanced at one another.

‘Listen,’ Quinten barked. ‘I’ve got a hell of a lot of deliveries to make today and I just drove all the way up this damn hill. So how ‘bout stepping aside, alright?’

Sister Saury shook her head. ‘Sorry, sir. Only those who accept the light may enter The Church of the Holy Fish.’

‘Well, I guess your exalted messiah won’t be wanting his delivery of cigarettes then. Alright, thanks for wasting my time.’ Quinten readjusted the box and turned away.

‘Wait.’ Brother Whiff pulled him back. ‘I think he’ll be wanting those. Let me take the delivery for you.’ He reached for the box.

Quinten yanked it back. ‘Uh, uh, uh. Company policy, mate. Couriers must personally present all deliverables into the possession of the rightful owner. Just how it is, I’m afraid. So, either you let me through, or.’ He turned to go again.

‘No, alright.’ Brother Whiff frowned. ‘Just – in and out, okay?’

Quinten grinned. ‘Sure. That’s all I need.’



Brother Whiff led Quinten into the house and through the dark hallway. He stopped by a door and knocked, nervous and twitchy.

Donald's voice slipped under the doorway: 'What is it?'

Brother Whiff looked as if he might be sick. He turned to Quinten, white-faced and stricken. 'Just go through.' And then he scurried off.

Bemused, Quinten watched him go. 'Tetchy little fella,' he muttered. He slipped off the hat and opened the door.

When he entered, he spotted Donald sitting shirtless in an armchair by the window, bathing in afternoon light, drumming his fingers on the armrest, a cigarette hanging limp from his mouth. Dogfish stood beside him. Quinten smiled guiltily as the recognition dawned on both their faces.

'Richard bloody Quinten,' Donald hissed. 'How the hell did you get in here?'

'You've been ignoring me,' he said, throwing the empty box to the floor and shutting the door behind him. 'You don't answer the phone. Or my letters. Thought I should pay a visit instead.' He looked around the room at the cobwebs hanging in knotty bundles from the ceiling, the crusty rug balding on the floor, beer bottles stacked haphazardly. 'Jeez. Nice joint you've got here, Donald.'

'That'd be Master Marlin to you,' Donald growled.

'Marlin?' He raised his eyebrows. 'Right, right.'

'What do you want, Quinten? I ain't got time for your silly little newspaper.'

'Come on. Is that how you're going to treat your brother-in-law? Like I'm nothing?'

Donald took his cigarette from his mouth and ashed it across the floor. 'Don't give me that bollocks. Don't act like we're suddenly family again. You dropped me like a bag of shit after Jules passed.'

Quinten shrugged. 'Not like you tried to keep in contact or anything, mate. But I'm sorry. I shoulda reached out.'

Funny how these things work, isn't it? These two men were brothers, if only by marriage. In another life, they might have broken bread over a Christmas dinner. In another life, Quinten might have been the drunk uncle that made inappropriate remarks in front of Donald's kids. But this was this life, and in this life, they hated each other.

Donald chuckled, hoarse and grating. 'Right. I think you've been sniffing too much ink. I've never heard Richard Quinten apologise for anything.'

He rose from the chair and crossed the room. The gaunt outline of his ribs showed like humped ridges through his skin.

‘Why are you here wasting my time, you prick?’ He stopped just short of Quinten.

‘Look. We’ve had our differences. I know it. We both do. But lemme just say, I’m so sorry about Jules. I miss her terribly, you know? I don’t know if I ever got to say that.’

A lie, of course, but Richard Quinten had always treated the truth the way he treated his toilet.

Donald snatched at Quinten’s throat, his index and thumb pushing into the flabby underside of his neck. He stared at Quinten, nostrils flared.

‘Jesus,’ Quinten croaked.

Donald let Quinten slide to the floor, spluttering and choking.

‘I don’t care what you’ve got to say,’ Donald said, settling back into his chair. ‘I’m doing bigger things now.’

Quinten sat gasping for air. He rubbed his tender throat. ‘Fine, you miserable bastard.’ He picked himself up. ‘I’m here to cut a deal. Nothing more, nothing less.’

Donald sneered. ‘Cut a deal? This isn’t some used car dealership we’re running here. This is a church.’

Quinten gave a hoarse chuckle. ‘I know what you want, Donald. It’s the only thing you’ve ever wanted.’

‘Yeah, and what’s that?’

‘Revenge. Plain and simple.’

Donald snorted. ‘This is about giving people a chance for salvation.’

‘Bullshit. I know you. You blame this town for Jules. You blame Barnaby and the mine and all the rest of them. Much as you might not think it, I know what you’re up to.’

‘Shut up,’ Donald hissed. ‘I’m saving these people.’

‘Eh, whatever. Maybe you really believe that thing’s a sign from God, maybe you don’t. Either way, you want as many people to join your church. But as long as you and that thing stay hidden in your shack, no one else is coming.’

Donald cricked his neck.

‘So, what, Quinten? What the hell are *you* gonna do for *me*?’

Quinten smiled a crooked smile.

‘I’m gonna put you and that thing on primetime, mate. I’m gonna introduce you to the whole fucking country.’

### 13.

I thought my mother had abandoned me for good. I thought that when she'd discovered me disappeared on my birthday, she'd felt a deep relief. Her great burden was gone, once and for all. In my tank, under the influence of Donald's slippery words, I thought she wasn't coming for me. That I'd never see her again.

I was wrong.

In fact, she'd spent every waking minute since my disappearance searching frantically, criss-crossing the surrounding countryside, picking through the tangled undergrowth of those valleys, clambering up hillsides of loose stones and lopsided gums. Through the rain, the dark of night, the howling wind. She didn't dare call the police, not when she was convinced they'd only take me away if I was found. So instead, my whole family had searched desperately, without success. They were on their own: the five of them versus hundreds of kilometres of bushland and Francine's irritable bowels.

After four days, my mother was beyond exhausted, her body aching, head too heavy for her shoulders. She sat in her room listening to the sound of the rain on the roof, her own slow breathing, the soft movement downstairs. She had arrived back home with Harry late the afternoon before, after the pair had spent all day pushing deep into the hills south of the hotel, sloshing through the mud and rain, searching and hoping. When she'd walked into the kitchen, dripping wet and covered in mud, Mendelssohn and Ludwig were around the kitchen table, themselves soaking, drinking steaming cups of tea. It was then that they'd told her that one of the cars had broken down. It would take at least a week to fix.

At that, my mother had offered a wooden, unfeeling smile, said, 'Fine. That's fine. It's all fine,' before throwing the teapot at the wall and storming off into her bedroom. She hadn't come out since.

In her room, she slipped from her bed and stood, with difficulty, her feet uncertain on the hard ground. The blood drained from her head, her face flushed, darkness closing in around her. She staggered forward, blindly, and felt something snap under her weight.

'Shit.'

She sat back down, her head in her hands, and took a deep breath until she could make sense of the dark room. She hadn't meant to sleep so long, and now she'd let a whole night slip by without searching for her son. She reached for her bedside lamp and switched it on. She saw now, on the floor, the painting I had broken sticking out from under the bed. She pulled it free and held it to the light. The dark layers of paint were impenetrable; she was

unable to recall her original intention. To her they seemed to be just a chaos of colours. And then she saw the eyes, two reddish green pinpricks floating in the corner of the frame, watching her. She had a sudden flash of a memory, indistinct: a man, panting heavily, scrabbling at her skin, trying to grab her. A grunt of pain, flash of red. Then, nothing.

She shuddered.

Her stomach twisted painfully. She'd barely eaten since the day of my disappearance. How could she? Food seemed an indulgence she couldn't spare while I was still missing. Nourishment, she'd quietly resolved, was something she'd go without until her son was found.

From outside, she heard the rumble of a truck, a horn honking. She let the painting clatter to the floor as she went to the window and peeled back the curtain. She blinked away the late afternoon light, and then she saw Herb's delivery truck, but it wasn't Herb slipping from the driver's seat. Instead, an older man, thinning grey hair sticking up in the wind, clambered out. She watched Harry run out to greet him, saw their heads bowed in conversation, Harry beckoning the man in from the rain.

Where was Herb, she thought? No one else had ever come, and yet now, four days after my disappearance, here was a stranger in his place. And then she remembered, suddenly, that the last time she'd seen Herb he'd seemed skittish, on edge. She'd put it down to too much coffee and not enough cigarettes. He was always swigging dark, bitter coffee from his thermos, and he'd told her that day – hadn't he? – he'd said he was trying to quit smoking, that it was giving him gooseflesh trying to make it through the day without a cigarette.

Had he been inside without her knowing? Had he seen something he shouldn't have?

She yanked open the door and stepped into the hallway.

'Charmaine!'

Harry almost bundled into her. His face was chalk white, breath short from racing up the stairs. 'Char. This bloke downstairs, came instead of Herb and – well, I think you'll wanna hear this.'

The delivery driver stood in the centre of the living room, picking at his nails. He was a thin man, about sixty, with a grey scrub of stubble that matched the hair on his head. He kept glancing back at Francine, wrapped in a shawl in her armchair, muttering away at the television. He looked up as my mother came down the stairs.

'Name's Grant. A pleasure.' He held out his hand.

My mother looked from Grant to Harry.

‘Where’s Herb?’

Francine chuckled at something on the television.

Grant shrugged. ‘Haven’t seen him in a week. Reckon he went up the hill. Same as the rest of them.’

‘The hill?’

Harry nodded at Grant. ‘Tell her what you told me, mate.’

Grant looked around the room, at Francine in her chair by the fire, Mendelssohn and Ludwig standing together at the bar; back to Charmaine and Harry. An explosion of sound from the television sent Francine into raptures.

‘Francine,’ Charmaine said, ‘Can we turn that down, please?’

‘But my stories!’

‘Mum, please,’ Harry busied himself with the television dials. He called across his shoulder to Grant. ‘Go on, mate.’

Grant rubbed the back of his neck. ‘Well. I was just saying to – Harry, is it? – I was saying ‘bout all the weird stuff happening in Fortune.’

‘Fortune?’ my mother whispered.

‘Yep. Dead-set crazy I reckon. Really, I ain’t from Fortune. I live a ways further out, but I do a bit of driving there and especially since Herb disappeared I been there in the last coupla.’ He cleared his throat. ‘Anyway, I was saying to Harry here that things have been weird ever since this mad bloke gate crashed some meeting with a fishkid.’

‘A what?’

‘Yeah. Like a fish that’s sorta human. Or a human that’s sorta fish. I dunno which way. Anyway, I didn’t see it, but that’s what I been told.’

My mother felt the blood pulsing behind her eyes. Her mouth went dry.

Grant coughed quietly into his hand. ‘Sorry, did I say something wrong?’

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Once Grant had been ushered out, they gathered back in the living room.

‘Fortune,’ my mother said. ‘Jonah is in Fortune. Of all the places.’

‘How?’ Mendelssohn said.

‘I don’t know. Maybe Herb took him? How the hell would Herb have known about Jonah?’

Harry’s face fell. ‘Oh.’

‘What?’

‘I – well, it’s just that – the last time he was here. Herb, he – I mean. He needed to use the toilet.’

‘So? You sent him to the outhouse, didn’t you? Like always.’ My mother eyed Harry dangerously, hands balled into fists, nostrils flaring.

Harry rubbed the back of his neck. ‘Yeah, but it was coming down cats and dogs. I told him – in and out.’

For a moment, my mother looked like she might explode, but then she said, her voice shaking, ‘Jesus, Harry.’

‘He was so quick I didn’t think anything of it. I figured it was nothing to worry about.’

‘We have that rule for a reason, Harry. To keep Jonah safe.’

Harry stared at his slippered feet. ‘Char, I’m so terribly sorry.’

From her armchair, Francine whispered, ‘Jonah.’

‘Just forget it. He’s in Fortune. So that’s where I’m going.’

Again, Francine muttered, ‘Jonah,’ but everyone – absorbed as they were – continued to ignore her.

‘I’ll come with you,’ Harry said.

‘No. You stay here with Franny.’

‘Jonah,’ Francine croaked, louder now.

‘I can help, Char. Let me make up for this.’

She strode over to Harry and took him by the shoulders. ‘You need to stay here with Franny.’

Francine wrapped her armchair with a frail fist and shouted, ‘Jonah!’

‘For god’s sake, Franny,’ my mother shouted. ‘Yes. We know where Jonah is, okay?’

But Francine turned to them and gestured wildly at the television. ‘No,’ she said. ‘It’s Jonah.’

She was right, old Franny. As they all scrambled to get a view of the television, Francine kept chanting ‘Jonah, Jonah!’ And there I was, gleaming in the light of the cans, the camera shifting across my scaled form, shivering and terrified. Donald had pulled me dripping wet from the tank and sat me in front of hot cans and whirring cameras.

‘It’s so your mum knows where you are,’ he’d whispered, lifting me from the water. ‘Alright, Jonah?’

Of course, it was a lie. But I'd believed him.

In the living room, my mother gasped.

Donald's face appeared on screen, his green eyes flashing in the light, his crooked teeth glinting. To everyone but my mother, he was just a hollowed out, scraggly faced stranger. But for her – she had another sudden flash of that memory: heavy pulsing rain, streak of lightning, fingers scrabbling at her skin as she held her baby to her chest. And then, a face – crazed, desperate, clearer than she'd ever seen it before – illuminated in a flash of white-hot lightning. Donald Walker. The same man on the television.

Can you imagine that? Seeing the man who had tried to take your child from you, all those years ago, holding your son as if – well, to her it looked like Donald was holding his own child.

She felt her legs go weak and gripped the back of the chair. She shook her head, forced away the fog.

'Char?' Harry gripped her elbow.

'It's fine,' and she waved him away.

She pulled herself back to the television as Donald said, 'So that's why I've decided to run for mayor of Fortune, because these people need saving, Richard. These people need to be brought into my bosom, into the church. They need the word of the fish.' He smiled serenely. 'And let me say this: I make an offer to anyone out there who is lost. The Church of the Holy Fish beckons its brothers and sisters. Come, and be saved!'

The camera cut back to a TV studio, and the presenter was saying, 'That was part of an interview that aired last night. Startling revelations there in the town of Fortune, folks.'

My mother shivered, her skin crawling, her whole body weak. As she clutched the back of Franny's seat she said, 'Fucking hell,' because what else could you say in a moment like that?

\*

My mother, bless her, wasted no time. She ignored the exhaustion that wracked her body and was ready to leave in minutes. As she packed a small duffel bag, she tried to ignore the image of her son shivering in the lights, of Donald's filthy fingers holding me, of the lopsided grin on his face as he claimed that little innocent Jonah, terrified Jonah, was a sign from God.

Her hands shook violently.

But she was driven by a rush of adrenaline and she had only one thing in her mind: get Jonah back.

Actually, make that two things: get Jonah back, and kill Donald Walker.

She went to the room next door and knocked.

Ludwig stood looking out the window, his shoulders hunched. Mendelssohn sat by a jumble of clothes and one packed bag.

‘Ready to go?’ she asked.

Mendelssohn wouldn’t meet her eye.

‘Mendelssohn?’

‘I regret,’ he said simply. ‘I cannot.’

She frowned. ‘Mendelssohn, please. Jonah needs us.’

Ludwig turned to his companion. ‘Don’t do this,’ he signed. ‘You can’t.’

Mendelssohn didn’t meet his gaze. Instead, he stared at his feet, twiddling his thumbs.

Ludwig stomped over and prodded him. Mendelssohn slapped his hand.

‘I say no!’

Mendelssohn slipped off the bed and went to the bathroom. He paused in the doorway, his back to them, shoulders sagging. ‘I wish much luck. I pray for success in finding the little man.’

He gave the doorframe a lingering squeeze. ‘I am sorry,’ he whispered.

Ludwig seized up a shoe from the bed and thrust it at Mendelssohn. It ricocheted off his fleshy backside and clattered to the floor. Mendelssohn stepped into the bathroom and closed the door behind him.

Ludwig waited, his eyes brimming with tears, expecting Mendelssohn to reappear. When he didn’t, my mother said, ‘I’m sorry, Ludwig. But we can’t wait.’

Ludwig wiped his eyes with his sleeve. He gave an almost imperceptible nod.

‘Okay?’ she said. ‘Let’s get Jonah back.’

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It had stopped raining. My mother sloshed through the mud and loaded the bags into the boot. She looked up at the top floor and spotted Mendelssohn watching them from behind the dusty bedroom window. He caught her eye and disappeared behind the curtains. She sighed.

‘Alright, Ludwig?’

He stuck a thumb out the window.

‘Okay,’ she said to herself. ‘Back to Fortune then.’

Harry handed them a brown paper bag full of sandwiches. ‘Something to eat,’ he said. ‘And Charmaine. You get our boy back, alright? He’ll be pleased as punch to see you.’



She took the bag and passed it to Ludwig. She gave Harry's hand a gentle squeeze.

'It's okay, Harry. I don't blame you.'

He brushed back tears as she shifted the car into gear and pulled away. She watched Harry and Francine become tiny in the rearview, waving by the front door. Ludwig sat ashen faced beside her, looking back at the hotel through the sidemirror.

'Thank you, Ludwig.'

His hand twitched slightly but he kept watching the sidemirror until they rounded a bend and the hotel disappeared.

They drove and drove and drove. The winding valley took them past dense scrub, my mother's knuckles were white navigating the gravel road at a clip. They lost the light, but she pushed on, the headlights chasing shadows as the road veered and dipped, as they climbed hills and skirted escarpments, the valley below appearing as a dark mouth open and hungry for them. Bends materialised in the darkness, and more than once, my brave (and yet to be perturbed) mumma rode the edge with a wheel hanging over the precipice into empty space, Ludwig holding the dash and leaning into her lap with sheer terror written all over his face. And although the road was graded, the wheels slipped and skated across loose stones that cracked the windscreen. In the rush, they narrowly avoided the carcass of a heifer with its gut like a burst balloon.

All the while, my mother, exhausted, bereft, running on fumes, kept telling herself:  
*He'll be okay. He'll be okay.*

In the dead of night, they hit a rock that blew a tyre and the car almost swerved into a eucalyptus. My courageous mother rolled up her sleeves to change the tyre and they were off within ten minutes.

They pushed through the last of the hills and then they were driving across flat, scrubby plains with the moon fat and juicy above them. They ate Harry's sandwiches to the sound of pebbles pinging off the underside of the car.

Ludwig was asleep when they hit the highway. My mother's eyelids were like cement blocks, her hands giant weights, but she didn't stop. She tugged at her face, slapped her cheeks. She fiddled with the radio. It hissed back at her.

The moon fell behind clouds and the world became a darker place.

They passed the glowing red eyes of kangaroos, erect like statues grown fleshy on the side of the road. The sight of them made my mother nervous, her foot hovering over the brakes, but they didn't trouble her, as if they knew she needed safe passage.

She thanked the kangaroos for their blessing and Ludwig farted in his sleep.

At four in the morning my mother allowed herself a snatched moment of sleep by the side of the road, although even that tiny concession left her feeling guilty. When she slept, she dreamt terrible dreams in which she never saw me again. She woke in a cold sweat and the sky was a pale grey. She cursed herself for oversleeping and kicked up gravel and dust as she floored the car off the verge and onto the highway.

The sun had well and truly risen by the time they reached the Fortune welcome sign.

She eased the car onto the gravel verge.

‘Welcome to Fortune,’ she read. ‘Where everyone’s a winner.’

The sight of it filled her with dread.

Ahead of them, the road sloped gradually through the centre of town and along the main street until it met the ocean. From up here she could see the patchwork of houses and rundown shops, the double-storied Wonky, the jetty sinking into the salt spray.

She gripped the steering wheel. Looking at the town below, she barely recognised any of it, as if in the crash she had split apart from her old self and her new self was seeing Fortune for the first time. In a way, she was. She’d forgotten so much from that past life. But she had never forgotten that my father had died here ten years ago. Ten years ago, her baby boy had been born and her life had changed forever. And, now, here she was, ten years later, about to return.

She looked across at Ludwig, bundled up in his seat and snoring. She nodded silently.

‘Okay, Charmaine. Time to go home.’

She pulled out on to the road and started the descent into town.

#### **14.**

My mother crawled along the main drag with her heart beating furiously, her hands sweaty on the wheel. She glanced at the old dusty shops, the cracked pavement riddled with daisy weeds and dry grass. In the conifers lining the median strip, soft lilting musak played from hidden speakers. There was an uncanniness to it all. Like home, but not.

The café was packed with people, which seemed strange to her. She waited in line, head down to the salmon tiles. When she reached the counter, she asked where she could find Donald’s shack without meeting the cashier’s eyes. The cashier shook her head and muttered something under her breath. When my mother pressed her, the cashier, busy squirting sauce

on several pasties at once, scowled at her and said, ‘You want to throw your life away? Be my guest. Follow the crowds.’

So that’s what they did.

They took the winding, muddy ascent to Sheep Shack Road and when they finally crested the rise and Donald’s shack appeared in the distance, my mother could hardly believe what she was seeing. The place was a hive of activity. People hovered around camera crews, or swarmed around the perimeter of the corrugated fence, now several metres tall and tipped with barbed wire. Reporters in suits rushed around with napkins tucked into their shirt-fronts, yelling into satellite phones or sipping hot coffee from Styrofoam cups. Tarpaulin tents, many standing askew and flapping dangerously in the breeze, had been hastily erected, selling a dizzying array of exotic foods, incense and soaps, and all manner of chakra harnessing paraphernalia. As she rolled down her window, Charmaine could hear a rough approximation of *Kumbaya*, *My Lord* clashing gratingly with an earnest but off-key *No Woman no Cry*. The air was a mixture of burning sausages and dhal.

Madness, I know. They were all there for me.

Ludwig signed, ‘What is all this?’

My mother didn’t answer. Her throat was dry. There was an ache in her side. They sat watching the chaos before them. Sunlight glanced off the corrugated roof of the shack in the distance. My mother drummed her fingers nervously on the steering wheel.

‘What now?’ Ludwig signed.

My mother took a deep breath.

‘We knock?’

They walked the rest of the way to the shack, stall-holders calling out as they passed.

‘Bongos on special, two for one. Skins made with only the best yak testicle!’

‘Hey, pretty lady. Why the frown? How ‘bout a piping hot sausage to brighten your day?’

Ludwig set off to wallop the sausage sizzle man with the dirty mouth. My mother yanked him back. ‘Forget it,’ she whispered.

They passed a Bob Marely tribute act, now performing an energetic, but scattershot rendition of *Buffalo Soldier* on what looked like authentic yak testicle bongos. They both smelt marijuana.

As they drew near the front gate a cheer went up. Donald Walker stood on a raised platform before the gathered crowd.

‘It’s him.’

And before Ludwig could stop her, my mother rushed towards the stage and disappeared headlong into the throng of sticky bodies. She pushed her way towards the front, ignoring shouted protests, the looks of annoyance. She saw Donald, a tattered notebook held aloft, beckoning to the crowd.

‘Brothers. Sisters,’ he was saying. ‘I welcome you all. All who have come for salvation, for the light. For the word of the fish.’

A pit of reporters in the front row practically scrambled over each other as they assailed Donald with questions.

‘Would you consider yourself a messiah?’

‘Can you tell us more about the fishboy?’

‘Socks with birkenstocks? Hot or not?’

My mother pushed past the last line of people and saw Donald holding up a palm for silence. She felt her pulse quicken, the animus bubbling up in her stomach, but now that she was here, she found herself suddenly unable to move.

‘Your questions will get you nowhere. The words of the fish’ – he clapped his notebook in both hands – ‘contains all the answers you need. The word of the fish is truth. The word of the fish is light!’

Someone in the crowd yelled, ‘I love you, Donald.’

Donald let slip a smile. ‘Aye, and I have nothing but love for those willing to give themselves to the word of the fish. Because the world is sick, friends. The world is crumbling to pieces. With the oceans choking up and dying. With great big dirty mines like the one we got here in Fortune spewing poison into the air, into our soil, our rivers. The word of the – the, uh – ’

In the sea of faces, he spotted my mother. His brow furrowed, and for a moment he looked perplexed. But then he hissed side stage, and the Fish Kissers pushed through the crowd towards my mother.

With the crowd pressing up against her, the only way was up. She scrambled on to the stage, and then she was before Donald, for the first time in ten years.

She didn’t know what to do. Really, my mother hadn’t thought that far ahead, because from the moment she’d seen Donald up on stage, she’d felt only a blind fury, an anger that propelled her across the lawns and sent her barrelling into the crowd. But now that she was

here, heart thumping, all those eyes on her, she felt only indecision, dread, a sense she'd made a terrible mistake. Donald smiled at her, a grim sort of smile. 'Welcome back,' he said.

She saw his head flick ever so slightly, and Dogfish closed in behind her. His fingers pressed deeply into her skin. He pushed her towards Donald.

Donald leant in close and whispered, 'Play nice if you want your boy to stay safe.'

My mother felt that like a knife in her gut.

He pressed a skeletal finger to his lips and winked at her. He turned to the crowd.

'People. This woman has thrust herself upon me, because she can't wait to hear the words of the fish. She is compelled, my friends. Compelled to see the light.'

Donald pressed his body against her, his rank breath hot on her neck.

'This woman wants to say yes.'

The crowd cheered, oblivious to the way my mother's legs trembled, or the tears that welled in her eyes. The reporters in the front row screamed questions, their cameras flashing, their recorders like weapons thrust towards her.

She felt Donald's hand on her back, felt the nails pinch her skin.

'Now,' he whispered, 'your time to shine.'

He took a step back, that smile creeping back across his face.

'Do you want to say yes? Is that what compelled you to this stage?'

She quivered.

Donald cupped a hand to his ear, leant in like a pantomime actor hamming it up.

'We-eeeeell?'

The crowd chortled.

My mother, exposed, terrified, holding herself as the cameras flashed again and again and again, was mute, motionless. She tried to catch an eye in the crowd, tried to transmit silently the danger she was in, but she found no sympathy.

Donald came closer.

'I bet your boy would love to see you,' he whispered. 'So, what do you say, huh?'

She had no choice.

'Yes,' she said.

'Louder.'

'Yes.'

'Louder.'

A horrified, strangled 'Yes!' and the crowd burst with applause.

And then, before she could move, before she could scream out for help, Dogfish was dragging her from the stage, not towards the crowd and the cameras, but towards the shack. She looked frantically for Ludwig, called out his name. But there was too much noise, the crowd cheering as Donald thrust his tattered notebook above his head.

‘The fish hath spoken. And it can speak for you, too. It can save you. Just say yes!’

\*

Dogfish dragged my mother into that cold shack. He led her down the dark hallway. She was hit with the musky odour of mothballs and dust and old cigarette smoke. They stopped by a door. Dogfish grunted and she could do nothing other than open it and step through.

Sun glowed softly through the curtained windows. The air in here was hot and stale. Dogfish closed the door behind them. He nodded towards a wooden chair sat in the centre of the room.

‘Sit.’

‘What the hell do you think – ’

Dogfish seized her arm and forced her into the chair.

‘Jesus. Alright, you bastard.’

She wriggled free of his grasp and he stepped back by the door. As she sat facing the window, she suddenly realised how much she was shaking. She turned in her seat, tried to take in Dogfish’s eyes.

‘Where’s my son?’

He said nothing.

She turned back to the glow of the window, her breath heavy. She had to get out of here. Her eyes darted around the room, looking for an escape, a weapon. Anything.

Then, the sound of the door. A muffled exchange. The click of a lock.

‘So,’ Donald said. ‘Finally. The mother has graced us with her presence.’

She didn’t dare turn around. She heard the sag of the floorboards. Donald brushed past her and went to the window. He sat on the dusty windowsill.

‘I was starting to think you wouldn’t show.’

The click click of a lighter, a small fluttering flame. He brought it to his face and sparked up his cigarette. He held it out to her. ‘Smoke?’

She sat silently.

He shrugged. ‘Suit yourself.’

Donald drew a long drag and the little eye of his cigarette glowed red. For a moment, his green eyes were illuminated. My mother felt a sudden pain in her head, and once more she saw the rain surging, the hands scrabbling at her skin.

It took everything for my mother not to burst into tears. Her hands shook so violently she had to grip the splintery wood of the chair.

‘Everything alright?’

She forced herself to steady. ‘Where’s my son?’

Donald sighed. He walked to a chest of drawers on the other side of the room, rested his hand on the cracked wood.

‘I had a girl, you know? Well, I should have. She would have been the same age as – well, she woulda been about ten now. There’s not a day goes by I don’t think about her. And Jules, too. My wife.’ He stepped back into the light of the window. ‘You ever lost someone special?’

‘Where is my son?’ she repeated.

Donald ignored her. ‘I had to watch Jules fall apart, you know? Every day she became a little less like her old self. A little less human. I loved her, mind. Right up until the end. But I had to watch her fall into tiny little pieces until there wasn’t anything left but dust.’ His face twisted, his lips trembling. ‘She got sick because of this town. Did you know that? This town let her die like an old mutt.’ He looked up and caught my mother’s eyes, that piercing green gaze. ‘Hurts losing someone you love, doesn’t it?’

He let that question sit. Outside, they heard a crow’s caw.

‘You know, for a long time I’d forgotten all about you and that night. I had me visions, of course.’ He took another long drag from his cigarette. ‘Couldn’t make much sense of them at first. Just hazy apparitions come to me in my sleep. Shook me awake, though, them visions. So real I could almost feel the closeness of them.’ He shuffled back to the window, ground his cigarette out on the windowsill. ‘I knew it meant something, but what? It was important. I knew that much. And I knew that others needed to see it, too.’

His monologue was broken by a series of grating coughs. When the coughs subsided, Donald rolled another cigarette and lit it. He took a deep lungful, as if it was nourishing, soothing for his throat.

He continued: ‘Brother Dogfish here was one of the first to listen. Weren’t you, brother?’ He juttied his cigarette towards Dogfish and showered ash across the floor. ‘More followed. Eventually. More heard the call. But as for you.’ At this he turned from the

window, and looked straight at her, his head backlit, so his face was obscured in his own shadow, and only the green eyes flashed in the darkness of his face. ‘Well, I’d completely forgotten about you. And then I heard some slobbering drunk, some useless delivery driver in the pub muttering about something he’d seen in an old hotel in the middle of nowhere. And I remembered. It all came back like a hot flash, and I remembered that night I found you halfdead by the side of the road. This little thing bundled up in your arms as if it were your own kin.’ Donald chuckled to himself, a grating, pebbly laugh. ‘But, of course, it wasn’t. What you held in your arms was something fallen through the cracks of another world.’

He took another step closer, leant forward so she could see the blackheads on his knobbly nose. My mother felt like those eyes were piercing right through her. She couldn’t look away.

‘You tried to take my boy away from me.’

The skin on Donald’s face collected in bundles as his lips spread back. ‘Yeah, but you showed guts back then, didn’t you?’ He rapped his head with a knuckle. ‘Gave me a fair wallop on the noggin. Got the scar to prove it, see?’

He peeled apart his filthy hair to show a hideous stitched sneer across his scalp.

‘You knocked me clean out and when I came round I couldn’t remember a thing.’

‘What do you want with him?’

Donald’s smile fell. ‘Nothing. I’m only doing what I’m told.’

‘Bullshit,’ she spat. ‘My son isn’t a message from God. He’s a boy. He’s my fucking son.’

And then my mother leapt up, too quick for Dogfish, and she barrelled into Donald. They went down together, her fingers clawing at any part of him she could touch, rolling on the dirty floor as he screeched with shock. Dogfish pushed past the chair and seized her roughly by the arms, yanking her back.

‘Let me go, you bastard.’ She struggled furiously, but Dogfish held firm. He yanked her back into the chair. This time, his cold fingers dug firmly into the skin of her neck.

Donald picked himself from the floor with a little giggle. He pushed back against the window and watched my mother with wary curiosity.

‘I’m going to go to the police. Do you understand me? I’m going straight to the police and they’re going to come up here and you’re going to be arrested, and this whole fucking place is going to get shut down.’

Donald remained by the window, his naked chest rising and falling.



‘Do you hear me?’

He cricked his neck and gave another nervous giggle. He looked down at his feet, saying nothing, twiddling his fingers. When he spoke, his voice was thin, tremulous. ‘I know you miss him. But I have to do this. I can’t have you stopping what I’ve started. I can’t. Nothing can be done.’ He shook his head. ‘Nothing can be done.’

She felt Dogfish grip her tighter, and she understood, suddenly, the meaning behind Donald’s words.

‘Please,’ she said. ‘Please don’t do this.’

Donald wouldn’t look up. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘Don’t do this. They’ll wonder where I’ve gone. There are people who know I’m here. They’ll go to the police.’

‘And yet, what will they say? There’s more than a hundred people out there that’ll be sure as hell they heard you saying you wanted this.’

‘No, please. You’re making a mistake.’

‘I’m sorry.’

Then, he straightened and turned to Dogfish. His voice was full-bodied again, assured. ‘That’ll be it, Brother Dogfish.’

She felt Dogfish pull at her skin. She thrashed against him, but he held firm.

‘Give me my boy back,’ she screamed, but Donald’s gaze had returned to the window. ‘Please. Give him back to me.’

Dogfish dragged her from the room. Others helped bundle her across the yard, their sweaty hands pressed across her mouth, avoiding her eyes. They took her to the barn, way out back near a copse of straggly trees and rusting machinery. She struggled and squirmed, but they ignored her.

In the barn, they lay her down in one of the old horse pens. Then they scurried back and swung shut the stable door fitted with heavy metal bars. She scrambled to her feet.

‘Please don’t do this. My son needs me.’

They hurried away.

‘Hello! Somebody. Please.’ She pulled at the bars. ‘Can anybody hear me?’

Somewhere outside, the sound of a baby bawling.

15.

When my mother was dragged from the stage, Ludwig knew something was terribly wrong. As Donald called out, 'Just say yes!' Ludwig had barrelled headlong through the crowd, ignoring the cries of alarm. But when he'd reached the platform, Donald had disappeared, and Brother Whiff and Sister Saury were attempting to organise people into an orderly queue.

'One at a time thanks, folks.'

Brother Whiff stopped Ludwig as he attempted to push past.

'Sir, please. There is a line.'

Ludwig sized Brother Whiff up. Sensing trouble, more Fish Kissers hurried over.

'Sir, I need you to take a step back.'

Ludwig punched him in the stomach instead.

A short fracas ensued. Ludwig laid a couple of excellent punches, momentarily had one person in a headlock, another under his boot, but there were too many of them, and he was bundled away from the crowd and deposited, roughly, mind you, behind the bongo stand. He landed with a percussive crash headfirst into a pile of bongos.

Ludwig sat up. He'd been biffed and now he'd been bonged. His left eye was puffy and sore.

'Need a hand?'

He looked up and saw Megan – you'll remember her as Jack Murnane's friend from the town hall meeting – offering her hand to him. She was wearing faded jeans, her sneakers caked with mud, a garish purple bomber jacket worn thin at the elbows. In a lot of ways, she looked as worn-out as Ludwig did. She smiled at him, and he decided then and there to trust her.

He took her hand and she pulled him up.

'Name's Megan,' she said.

'Ludwig,' he signed.

'Oh. I'm sorry,' she said. 'I can't – well, you know. Uh, hang on.' She rummaged around in her shoulder bag. 'Here.'

She passed him a pen and pad of paper. He scribbled on the pad.

She read aloud: 'Ludwig.' She smiled. 'Nice to meet you, Ludwig. Are you okay?'

He scribbled away again.

'I landed a few good hits,' she repeated, and grinned.

Ludwig gave a guttural sort of laugh.

‘Was that your friend on stage?’ she asked.

He nodded.

‘She looked terrified.’

On the pad, Ludwig wrote: I think they took her inside. I need to get her back.

Megan frowned. ‘I don’t think they’re going to just let you walk in there. But I saw Constable Merrick around before. He should be able to help us.’

They found the constable by the dhal stand with dhal dribbling down his chin.

‘What is it?’ he said, wiping his mouth.

‘Constable Merrick. This man’s friend was just abducted by Donald Walker.’

Merrick peered down at a puffy-eyed Ludwig. ‘You alright there, squirt?’ He chuckled. ‘Looks like you’ve had a little run in.’

‘He’s fine,’ Megan said. ‘It’s his friend you need to worry about.’

Merrick looked at Ludwig for a moment, then back again to Megan. ‘Right, then. When did this supposed event happen?’

‘Just now. His friend was up on stage and that’s when she was taken.’

‘Oh, yeah. I saw her. Cute girl with brown hair? About yay high? Mmm. Reckon she wanted to go in.’

‘No, she was abducted,’ Megan insisted.

‘Not the ways I seen it. I heard her say yes a bunch of times. Donald said’ – and here Merrick affected a rendition of Donald’s hoarse voice – ‘do you want to go in? And she said yes. Wouldn’t call that an abduction, would you?’

‘She was taken against her will,’ Megan said, exasperated. ‘Look, Merrick. You wouldn’t want me to lodge an official complaint down the council offices, would you? So how about you help us out, hey?’

Merrick’s beady little eyes blinked once, twice, a third time.

‘Is that a threat?’ And then he smiled smugly. ‘I know you’ve been fired, Megan. You can’t do shit.’

Megan tried to argue but Merrick cut her off.

‘Ah, here comes Sarge. She’ll sort all this out.’

Sargent Temperence hurried over with Brother Whiff jabbering in her ear, gesticulating aggressively in their direction.

‘Shit.’ Megan grabbed Ludwig. ‘Come on. Time to move.’

They hurried away past the tarpaulin tents. Megan glanced back and Temperence, Brother Whiff and Constable Merrick were deep in conversation.

‘Think we better make ourselves scarce.’

Ludwig angled back towards the shack.

‘Wait. Please. You’re never going to just walk in. And you’ve got that lot interested now, too,’ she said, nodding back at Temperence. ‘Listen, I live in town. I know people. Maybe I can help.’

Ludwig resisted her pull, eyes cast to the shack.

‘We’ll get your friend back, I promise. But we’ve got to go.’

He hesitated, swallowing bitterly. There was nothing poor Ludwig could do.

So instead, he turned and hurried after Megan.

## 16.

Ludwig sat in Megan’s kitchen, hands tight little balls on his knees, feet scratching absently at the lino. Megan trailed the phone cord from the wall to the sink as she made tea. When she’d put the phone down the last time, she said something like, ‘I’ll go to the police office first thing,’ and Ludwig had nodded, his tea waiting cold and untouched. He refused dinner, let Megan show him to the couch, and nodded when she said goodnight. Then he sat on the couch and cried until he fell asleep.

Megan went to the police station first thing the next day.

‘I’ve got to pick up my daughter from her dad’s, and then I’ll head straight over, okay? Can you wait for me here?’

He nodded.

‘I’m sure they’ll see some sense.’

She downed the last cold dregs of her coffee. As she pulled on her jacket she said, ‘Look, Ludwig. I’m not quite sure what’s going on with your friend. And I can’t really explain what’s happening up on the hill either. But it scares the hell out of me. It’s scaring the hell out of this whole town. Things will work out though. We’ll get your friend back. And this town will go back to normal. If it ever was.’

She pressed down a kink in her jacket.

‘Just – sit tight, okay?’

He smiled, just a brief one that couldn’t hide his worry, or the fact he’d barely slept at all through the night. She gave a quick nod as she closed the door behind her.

The old wooden clock in the living room chimed seven times. The idea of waiting in that house while my mother and I were both trapped in Donald's shack was too much for Ludwig. He lasted a cup of bitter coffee, a few slices of stale bread he'd found in the cupboard, and ten minutes pacing the kitchen dropping crumbs everywhere before he decided he couldn't simply sit and wait.

Without knowing what he would do, he walked out the front door and into the soft light of morning. The street was quiet, the air already warm and close. A few old houses, weather-worn and crumbling, sat silently as if waiting in acceptance of their slow death. A seagull squawked as it picked its way through dead grass in someone's front yard, another ogled Ludwig from its perch on a worn tyre swinging limply from a dying tree. The scent of seaweed was heavy in the air.

As he stood on the cracked pavement, Ludwig thought he saw a curtain flutter in a window. He heard the faint tumble and hiss of waves breaking.

He thrust his hands in his pockets and set off down the street.

Ludwig hit the main drag at the end of Megan's street. To his left, at the bottom of the hill, the jetty stuck out from the grassy esplanade like a broken finger, the bubbling ocean licking it into oblivion. A lone scruffy dog picked its way through the spilled contents of a bin. To his right, the street was slowly waking up, crusty-eyed reporters spilling out of the double-storied Wonky Fish and piling into vans to head up the hill.

Without knowing why, Ludwig crossed the street to the Wonky. On tip-toe, he peered through the window into the shadowy front bar. He saw Earl, the publican, running to the restaurant room in a flowery apron with a frying pan full of sausages. Ludwig felt his heart pick up pace.

You know, this is where Ludwig and Mendelssohn were before they had to flee. It was here, trying to enjoy a quiet steak, heads down, keeping to themselves, that they were set upon by thugs. Fly-ins, most likely, hardened blokes from the mine who didn't like the way the two of them sat so close, or that Ludwig had his hand on Mendelssohn's leg. They knew, then, that their ill-fated stay in Fortune had to end.

That was the night of the accident. The night my father died.

In a way, their dreadful misfortune was my good luck.

Ludwig stepped back. He wiped his wet mouth with the back of his hand and, without knowing why, continued past the Wonky Fish.

That's when he found Mendelssohn.

‘Ludwig?’

Imagine that: he’d walked right past the alley where Mendelssohn had spent the night curled up behind a dumpster trying to keep warm.

That great lovable lump had followed my mother and Ludwig, he’d dug out Harry’s old motorbike from the shed, dusted off the cobwebs and the thing had miraculously started. He’d navigated the same twisting, winding death-trap as they had, and he hadn’t stopped until he pulled into Fortune late in the evening. But without anywhere to go, he’d found himself here, in the alleyway, alone.

Now, Mendelssohn looked at his friend uncertainly, his breath heavy, tears already brimming in his eyes. They both stood in silence. Ludwig couldn’t bring himself to catch Mendelssohn’s gaze. He, too, was crying; crying because he’d lost me, because he’d lost my mother, and because now that he’d found Mendelssohn, he wasn’t so sure it was what he wanted. He wasn’t sure he could forgive him.

Except that, when he looked up and caught Mendelssohn’s buttery face wet with tears, he felt the sudden urge to lunge forwards and embrace his dearest friend. The two of them stood together, without saying a word, in the pale morning light of that alleyway.

\*

If Megan was shocked to find her living room populated by not one, but two men, she didn’t show it. She looked up from her handbag, her daughter by her side, and spotted Mendelssohn in a white fluffy bathrobe, applying liberal amounts of moisturiser to his cheeks while doing a sort of solo cha-cha, and said, ‘Oh.’

Mendelssohn turned, with the moisturiser on his buttery face a lurid green, a steaming towel covering much of his head, and cucumber slices over his eyes making him look extra-terrestrial.

‘Who is this?’

This did spook Megan, and she dropped her handbag with a gasp.

Ludwig slipped off the armchair and hurried over, grunting his apologies and picking up her things. He frowned at Mendelssohn, who had plucked the cucumber slices from his face and was eating them.

‘What?’

‘Hello,’ Megan said.

‘Hello, I am Mendelssohn.’ He took her hand in his. ‘A pleasure.’

She glanced at Ludwig, then back to Mendelssohn. ‘Megan. And, sorry. Where exactly did you come from?’

‘From same place as Ludwig, just a little slower. I am friend of Charmaine and friend of Jonah. And you are friend, too?’

‘Well, yeah, I mean – ’

‘And the little one?’ He peered down at Megan’s daughter, hiding behind her legs.

‘This is my daughter Sarah.’

Sarah peered up at Mendelssohn and Ludwig smiling at her. She dodged back behind Megan’s leg.

‘Sarah’s a bit shy.’

‘Is okay. Ludwig can be intimidating for some.’ Mendelssohn chuckled. ‘Now, Ludwig say you get friends back?’

‘Hang on. I’m a little lost. How many people are we talking about here, Ludwig?’

Mendelssohn glanced at Ludwig. ‘You have said nothing of little Jonah?’

Ludwig shrugged.

‘Wait,’ Megan said. ‘Who is Jonah?’

## 17.

On the night of the interview, Donald took me feverish and distraught from a room filled with strange men and blinding lights. I’d been held up, like a specimen, turned this way and that, with that blinking whirring camera watching my every move. It terrified me.

After, Donald held me softly and cooed in my ear. I never stopped shivering, not until he dropped me back into the water. Immediately, I kicked my way into the dark, penumbral space of my tank and curled into a little ball. I wished I could have seen my father’s face. I didn’t move all night.

The next morning, when I woke up, I had calmed enough to feel a glimmer of hope. Hope that my mother would finally come.

Donald reappeared later that morning and said as much as he smoked a cigarette.

‘Bet your mum will be here by afternoon, boy.’ He sighed. ‘It’ll be a shame to lose you, but I’ll keep my word.’

I spent all day rigid with anticipation. But the afternoon came and went, and she didn’t come. By nightfall I was too exhausted to cry. I simply stared into the dark until sleep eventually came.

Another day passed. And another. Donald came up to the tank after an evening sermon. He shrugged.

‘Sorry, boy. Guess she ain’t coming.’

I turned my back on him.

Of course, by now, he knew precisely where she was, locked up in that barn smelling of fowl and horses.

The next day, he came in again before sunrise, whistling a little tune. He pressed his hands to the glass, peered in, rapped lightly on the tank with his knuckles. I sat disconsolate on the floor of the tank, curled up and pouting.

‘Boy,’ he said, knocking on the glass.

I ignored him.

Again. ‘Boy.’

Then, quiet. After a minute, I peered over my shoulder. Donald was gone. I kicked up gently and looked around the dim room. A sudden metallic scraping made me twitch in fright and Donald was at the top of the tank, standing on the ladder, opening the hatch up. He dipped a hand into the water and beckoned me to the surface. I refused, kicking back down to the bottom, but his hand returned, this time with a caramel toffee. I relented and drifted slowly to the surface. When I emerged, Donald grinned.

‘There you go.’ He flicked the treat to me and I gobbled it up. ‘Plenty more where that came from.’

I swallowed and waited, expectantly, for more. But none came. Instead, Donald kept watching me.

Finally, he said, ‘Sorry about your mum, boy. We did all we could.’ He picked at something in his teeth. ‘Not so bad, is it though? You got this big tank to play around in. And don’t I give you all the treats you want?’ He nodded sagely. ‘Yeah, it’s not such a bad life.’

He dug around in his pocket and threw me another toffee. I swallowed it quickly, watched him carefully in case he had more.

God, the indignity of it all. I was like a mangy mutt waiting for its meat.

‘I’m glad I found you out there in the forest. You was lost way out there. You mighta died if it weren’t for me.’ He clucked his tongue. ‘It’s a good thing I found you.’

He fell silent for a moment, staring at the rippling water.

‘Listen, boy. I just want you to know, I’m happy we’ve had the chance to meet, you and me. I spent a long time hoping we’d meet. Wasn’t sure I’d get the chance, the honour



even. But here we are, eh? Almost think it's fate, don't you? Isn't it fate that you and me might meet like this? Yeah, I reckon so. We were meant to meet like we did. We're meant to be doing what we're doing.'

I had no idea what it was that Donald and I were supposedly doing. I sensed something authentic in his voice, but I remained wary. After all, this was the same man who had invited so many burning eyes to gaze upon me, to pick me apart piece by piece. And yet, that softness in his own eyes that felt almost comforting to me. There was something about Donald I didn't understand, not then, anyway.

'I've got a girl, you know? About your age. Beautiful thing, she is. I've not seen her for a while, though.' He sighed. 'It can get difficult not seeing the people you love. It can get to be the toughest thing there is, I reckon. I know you miss your mum. But you've got me now.' He smiled, the skin of his lips cracking as he did. 'And I've got you.'

He held his hand out and beamed as I allowed him to stroke my head gently. 'That a boy.'

He threw me one last treat and then closed the hatch. I followed him down as he descended the ladder, never taking his eyes off me. On the bottom rung, he smiled one last time and then he stepped back and disappeared.

I huddled on the floor of the tank, turning over the things Donald had said. He was right, I thought. My mother had no intention of finding me. There was no one coming to my rescue. This life, in this tank, was all that was left to me. And Donald? He really was all I had left.

## 18.

My mother lay in that old barn, the stale smell of horse shit heavy in the air, the floor hard beneath her, alone and exhausted. She kept thinking about the night I was born.

She recalled, again and again, Mendelssohn and Ludwig finding her by the side of the road, barely able to stand, waving their car down, the rain washing streaks of blood from her forehead. She remembered sitting by the fire in the hotel, wrapped in a blanket, the heat of the fire warming her aching body, the rain thundering overhead. Harry, having only met us minutes before, teetering nervously nearby, staring disbelieving at little Jonah: sticky, miniscule, wrapped in a bloodied bundle.

'Erm, excuse me? It's just that – well – can someone tell me what's going on, please?' Harry, whispering, scared of his own voice.

Mendelssohn laying his hand gently on Harry's shoulders but still making him twitch. 'Is okay. Is just little baby. Come.' Beckoning Harry to follow.

And then, with the rain still lashing the windows, the three of them all watching tiny Jonah, all scales and gills and demonic black eyes, chest rising and sinking with every miniscule breath.

Truthfully? They all expected I would be dead before morning. They all assumed they were watching my final gasps of life. Though I seemed not in pain, it was obvious that something terrible had happened to me. Before long, they all assumed, I would slip away. They all thought that as they stood together watching my mother and I in the glow of the fire.

Hours later, when Harry had shown Mendelssohn and Ludwig to a room, my mother sat alone by the fire as the flames died and the embers glowed like eyes watching her and her son.

And then, my mother crying as she held me in her arms, this little creature that seemed unearthed from the undergrowth, a thing you'd pull out from a deep, forgotten cave. The thought that this poor thing would live a terribly wounded life, right from his very first breath. Without a father. Without a real chance at a life.

And then, finally, her hands shaking violently, taking a bundle of the blanket and pushing it across my face, holding it there as I wriggled in her arms, holding it there while she sobbed, thinking this was for the best, it was the only way, before wrenching the blanket back, just in time, and holding me close as I shed my own blubbery tears. Soothing me with soft coos as the rain pushed harder against the roof. Holding her son close to her and kissing his skin gently, chiding herself for her stupidity. For her weakness.

Had she gone through with it all those years ago, then perhaps I would have been spared the pain of a life marked by difference. But she would have been a killer. She would have been denying me the chance to be more than just my twisted shape, my monstrous form. And what right did she have to do that?

Locked in that old barn, my mother couldn't stop thinking about that night. It consumed her.

And there was the other thought, too, the one that needled away at her, that kept pushing and probing no matter how hard she tried to ignore it.

It was the feeling that had gripped her when she saw me on that television, lit garishly by the hot heat of the cans, my features stark under the scrutinizing gaze of the camera. What

she'd seen on that television wasn't her son at all. What she'd seen wasn't the child she'd reared delicately, dutifully, for ten years.

No, I'm afraid to report, with a deep heaviness in my heart, that what she saw in that tank was a monster.

Admitting that was enough to make her retch violently until there was nothing but hot bile burning her throat, twisting her gut. In the barn, she curled in a ball and wept.

On that first day of her imprisonment, my mother was brought dinner by Edith, a thin woman whose face exploded with freckles, and her child, clinging tightly to her mother's legs. My mother had leapt up at the sight of them. She called out, 'Hello!' but Edith wouldn't look at her. The little girl stared, mouth agape, peering up through the gap in her mother's legs.

'Don't stare, Sam.'

Edith slid a tray of food under the stable door. Without looking at my mother she said, 'You should eat.'

'My son. Please. Help me.'

'Can't.' Edith took her daughter's hands. 'Come now, Sam.'

My mother scrambled up.

'Wait, please!'

But they had gone.

Her stomach ached. She looked down at the tray: a small block of cheese, half a sausage, and a shrivelled apple. She scooped up the tray and began to eat, quickly, methodically, without thought. She felt better for it. When she'd finished, she left the tray by the door and wrapped herself up in the blanket, listening to the wind.

Days passed in a similar fashion. Edith came, sometimes with her daughter, sometimes without, bringing food and then hurrying away. Edith never looked my mother in the eye, even when my mother pleaded for help.

In the intervening hours, my mother searched for an escape. She tested the strength of the walls, pressing her weight against the wood. She scratched at the dirt floor by the base of the wall until her nails broke and her knuckles bled. She pressed her wet mouth to tiny gaps in the wall and called out to the white shapes toiling by the fields in the distance. She did this over and over, the same process, again and again, as if doing so would somehow free her, as if she could conjure her escape through sheer force of repetition.

It was the only thing she could do. The only thing that kept her sane. And all the while those twin thoughts crashed around her skull, threatening always to overflow. The memory of the night I was born, and my monstrous shape on that television.

On the fourth day, Edith brought breakfast as usual, her daughter close behind. My mother lay in a crumpled heap under her blanket.

‘Is she okay, Mumma?’

‘Shh, Sam. She’s just sleeping.’

‘Does she need help, Mumma?’

Edith shook her head. ‘There’s nothing we can do,’ she said, sliding the tray under the stable door.

‘But she looks sick.’

Edith looked down at her daughter, at her rounded cheeks, her missing baby teeth, the watery eyes. She was forbidden to enter the cell. But Edith was not an evil person, that much I know. She had come to this place seeking an answer to the world’s ills, not to create more. And my mother *did* look terribly sick.

Edith pressed her lips together. ‘Okay,’ she said. ‘Stay right here, Sam. Don’t move. Understand?’

She took a key from the pocket of her robes and unlocked the stable door. She shuffled in, glanced across her shoulder at her daughter, and then back to my mother. Edith could hear my mother’s breath, soft and shallow, saw the glaze of sweat shining in the dull light. She lay her hand on my mother’s forehead.

‘Mumma?’

Edith looked up and her daughter was standing beside her. ‘Sam, I told you to wait.’

With surprising speed, my mother sprung up and clattered into Edith. They both toppled to the floor. In another instant, my mother had scrambled up and, instinctively, snatched Sam by the wrist and dragged her from the stable. To their left, light spilled through the open barndoor, but before my mother had gone far, the shadow of a man appeared in the light. My mother ignored the man’s shouts and veered right, hurrying past empty stalls, broken machinery and hay bales, Sam struggling at her side. They took a flight of creaking stairs to the loft, two at a time, and then my mother came to a shuddering stop at the edge of a large opening with a cantilever looking out towards the fields. My mother peered down at the ground below. The fall would probably have broken her legs.

And just like that, her desperate flight to freedom was bust. She was trapped.

My mother heard a growl of a voice behind her. She yanked Sam close and turned to see Dogfish coming up the stairs. Edith scrambled up behind him.

‘Sam,’ she screamed, eyes filled with fear.

Dogfish held her back. A moment later, two more Fish Kissers clambered up the stairs.

My mother felt the warm wind whipping at her back.

‘Stay away. Don’t come any closer.’

She curled her fingers around Sam’s throat. She felt the girl’s soft skin, the little bony ridges of her larynx. My mother read the terror in Edith’s eyes, but she held firm, ignoring the child’s whimpers.

Listen. My mother was desperate. With those people closing in. With empty space behind her, that drop to the hard earth below. She was desperate enough to hurt this innocent girl. Desperate enough to do something wild. But it was not in my mother’s nature, believe me. She would do whatever it took, but it was not a part of who she was to hurt a child. You should know that about her. My mother is not perfect. Far from it. But, please, do not judge her too harshly. Not in this moment.

Edith pleaded with her. ‘Please, not my dear Sam.’

‘What about my boy?’ my mother cried back. ‘What about him? You let me have him and you can have your girl back.’

‘Give us the girl,’ Dogfish ordered.

‘You have my boy in there. Like he’s some kind of animal.’

Dogfish edged closer.

‘Stay where you are.’ She yanked Sam back and then the terrified girl was half teetering over the edge. ‘Bring me my boy, or I let her drop.’

The child burst into tears. My mother felt her frail body shivering against hers.

‘Stop lying,’ Dogfish said. ‘There is no child of yours here.’

‘Please. I just want my boy back.’ She was sobbing now, too, my mother, her and the girl, both crying out for the things they most desperately wanted.

Dogfish shook his head.

‘This will get you nowhere.’

My mother looked out towards the fields in the distance, to a world that was going on without her, that knew nothing of her predicament. She heard Sam’s sobbing. The terrified

tears of a child, just like her own boy. She felt the warmth of the girl, the way the girl shuddered in her arms, like her own boy would do when he was scared.

She couldn't do it, not this – she couldn't hurt this child. Like I said, it wasn't in her nature.

Instead, the adrenaline left her body, and all she felt was exhaustion. The sound of that space, of Edith screaming, of Sam crying, of the wind whistling, fell mute, and my dear mother felt dispossessed. She felt her grip slacken, enough for Sam to wriggle free, to lunge for Edith, who cried out and scooped her up. Dogfish descended upon my mother and she felt his rough hands wrap around her arm. He dragged her past Edith and Sam, down the stairs, one at a time, and back into her cell.

Dogfish threw her to the cold floor.

'You'll rot unless you see the true path,' he hissed, as he drew the bolt on the door shut.

My mother lay there listening to Edith and Sam sobbing in the loft above, the sounds of a mother and her child reunited, safe in each other's arms.

## 19.

Ludwig stood by the sink in Megan's kitchen, plate and washcloth in hand, staring out at the tangled weeds in the backyard. The scar on his neck tickled uncomfortably, but he just kept rubbing the same spot on the same plate he'd been cleaning for five minutes. Behind him, Megan's daughter Sarah giggled as Mendelssohn made faces over his bowl of porridge. The radio murmured distantly. Outside, the sky was an endless blue.

In those first days of my mother's imprisonment, Ludwig and Mendelssohn could do nothing but wait. Megan, true to her word, visited the police station every morning, but she returned crestfallen each time. Temperence kept waving her away, insisting, with increasing agitation, that they were looking into it.

Instead, Ludwig suggested punching his way into the shack again, but Mendelssohn begged him not to. Megan told them she'd asked Jack Murnane to look into it.

'He knows Donald a little. He might be able to help.'

Ludwig, sitting glum on the couch, could only offer a weak smile. That had been two days ago.

Now, in the kitchen, Ludwig put the plate down and turned to Mendelssohn.

'We have to do something,' Ludwig signed.

Mendelssohn frowned. 'You will be arrested. Then, no good to anyone. Besides, Sarah wants you around. She will be sad without her Ludwig.' He winked at Sarah, who giggled.

Ludwig grunted. He fiddled with the volume dial on the radio and the voice of our very own Boris Barnaby suddenly filled the room.

'Which is why, Steve,' Barnaby was saying, 'I'm calling for an investigation into what is – quite frankly – a sinister operation up there on Sheep Shack Road. It is incumbent on me to ensure that what is going on in Mr Walker's property is fair, lawful, and, above all else, moral.'

'Do you know exactly what's happening up there, Mayor? Because I've heard all sorts of things, you know? Experiments. Orgies. And this really tickles the spine: Socialism.'

The Barnaby in the radio chuckled. 'Probably all true, Steve. Wouldn't put it past them. Let's me just say this. You wouldn't invite your grandmother into that place. Not unless you wanted to give the old gal a heart attack, that's for sure.'

Steve gave a little titter.

'No, listen,' said Barnaby. 'These people up there do not share our values. They think they are outside the law, and they think their depravities will go unnoticed. And, personally, it makes me sick to my stomach to think that someone as morally and criminally corrupt – and I don't use those words lightly, mind – could be allowed to run for mayor. Fortune is better than that!'

'And, Mayor, if you will, what's the current situation with the mine?'

I'd like to imagine – squeezed into a chair in some musty, cigarette filled recording studio – that Barnaby's ticker (that poor, abused thing) did a little hop skip.

Except when he answered, after a slight pause, Barnaby sounded cocksure and confident.

'Absolutely nothing to report there, Steve. The mine is in tip top shape. There's nothing wrong with it, and nothing is going to happen to it. It remains the bedrock of Fortune's prosperity. Long may that continue!'

'And what about – and my listeners will know how much these people tick me off – what about the environmental and anti-nuclear protestors that are currently gathering outside the mine? Will they pose a threat to operations as usual?'

‘Professional protestors. The lot of them. You think any of them care about the good people of Fortune? Not one iota! They do this for a living, and they don’t care how many communities they destroy in the pursuit of their ratbag greeny, leftist agenda!’

‘Quite right. Quite right. Well, Donald Walker is against the mine. He’s gone on record as saying that if he’s elected he’ll close it down.’

‘Oh goodie. And then Fortune can survive how exactly? Will it be some crackpot healing-stone and acupuncture economy? Give me a break. This is just another example of why Donald Walker isn’t fit to even be in this election race.’

‘So, you think Mr Walker should stand down as a candidate?’

‘If the grub has any honour in him – which I highly doubt, Steve – then, yes, I think he should stand down immediately and leave the experts to run this town.’

‘Okay, then. Well, folks. You heard it here first on KB771 Fortune rural radio. My thanks to Mayor Boris Barnaby for coming in today. We’ll have more updates on the way, but for now, settle back and enjoy this Peter Gabriel classic “Here comes the Flood”. You’re listening to Sunrises with Steve on KB771. Gooood morning!’

Megan came in from the bathroom, her head wrapped in a towel. Ludwig flicked off the radio.

‘God, that wasn’t Barnaby on the radio was it?’

Ludwig nodded.

‘Whatever he said was a lie. He’s never given two-shits about this town.’

‘What he do?’ Mendelssohn asked.

‘Where do I start?’ she scoffed. ‘He’s been taking kickbacks from the mine for years. He pushed Jack and his family off their land, and when they all got sick Barnaby just swept it under the rug. Jack thinks there was a leak at the mine and they covered it up. I used to work for the council, you know? I heard things, little whispered things in those corridors. I asked around, but I wasn’t careful enough, and the pricks fired me. Officially speaking, they called it budget cuts. Anyway. Jack can’t prove it without evidence. And I – well, I mean.’

She hesitated. Ludwig sensed she wanted to say more.

Instead, she shook her head and said, ‘Barnaby’s got more than dirt under his fingers. That much I know.’ She looked at Sarah as if she’d only just noticed her daughter at the table. ‘Sarah. Why aren’t you dressed for school yet?’

‘School’s off! School’s off!’ Sarah chanted.

‘What?’



‘The man on the radio say school closed,’ Mendelssohn said.

Megan unwrapped the towel. Her wet hair fell past her shoulders. ‘You’ve got to be kidding me.’ She went to the phone on the wall and dialled. After a moment, she frowned and hung up. ‘No answer.’

‘They say teacher disappear last morning.’

‘No school, no school!’ Sarah rapped the table with her spoon.

Megan, standing cross-armed by the fridge, said, ‘Well, *if* it’s true, don’t expect a holiday. Go and get dressed and then you can do your homework. And don’t think I won’t be telling your dad the exact same thing when he picks you up tonight.’

‘Mum!’

‘I mean it.’ She glared at Sarah. ‘Now!’

Sarah slipped from the table, grumbling, and dragged her feet out of the room.

Megan called after her. ‘I’ll be checking on you in five minutes!’

She went to the table, hung her towel across Sarah’s chair. Pinched the bridge of her nose.

‘This is bad, no?’ Mendelssohn said.

‘It sure isn’t good.’

She looked across to Ludwig frowning by the sink.

‘I know Sarah’s teacher. She’s a smart woman. I just can’t believe she’d go up there.’ She shook her head. ‘These are good, honest people.’ She sat down at the table. Stared at the cold porridge. ‘People are scared. They’ve been scared for a long time. This town’s done it tough for years and some of them have nothing left, you know?’

She scratched at a knot in the table, and said, absently, ‘It’s just too weird.’

The three of them stood silently, Ludwig by the sink, Mendelssohn eyeing off Sarah’s bowl of porridge. Then, Megan slapped her forehead.

‘Shit. I’m meant to meet Jack for a coffee this morning. He said he had some news about Charmaine. I’ll have to call Sarah’s dad.’ She picked at her teeth. ‘God. He’s going to be pissed.’

‘We take care of Sarah,’ Mendelssohn said. ‘If you like. We stay in house. We play card.’

Megan smiled. ‘I’m sure Sarah would love that. Thank you, Mendelssohn. I can be back in an hour or two.’

By the sink, Ludwig signed: ‘I want to come, too.’

‘We stay here, Ludwig. I let you win.’

Ludwig shook his head.

Mendelssohn made to argue, but Ludwig flashed him a look, one that said, *Mendelssohn, my dearest, you are on thin ice.* Mendelssohn kept quiet. His eyes slid back to the cold porridge.

Megan looked from Mendelssohn to Ludwig. ‘You want to come?’ she said.

Ludwig nodded.

‘Okay, we can walk. Let’s go.’

\*

It was early, but the main drag was already crowded. Fish Kissers stood in small clumps, their white robes billowing in the morning breeze, holding signs and banners that read ‘*Give unto the Fish and the Fish giveth glory,*’ or ‘*I kissed the Fish.*’ Others offered coloured leaflets to passers-by.

‘It’s weird suddenly having them in town,’ Megan said to Ludwig as they crossed the street. ‘They seem harmless, but I have to admit – they’re kind of creepy.’

Townfolk clustered in agitated murmurings nearby, some throwing dark looks at the Fish Kissers, while some of the more brazen folk were shouting insults, or brushing up close as they passed by, sending leaflets fluttering into the wind like spooked birds. Adding to the melee were the camera crews and reporters buzzing around for the best shot.

‘The café’s just up past the Wonky,’ Megan said.

Ludwig noticed signs sitting in some of the shop windows: *No Fish Kissers Allowed.* *No White-Robes. Townsfolk only.*

As they approached the Wonky Fish they spotted Sargent Temperence. She looked exhausted, her hair an explosive fuzz, shirt untucked, arguing with a handful of wobbly looking blokes who were pointing threateningly at Donald’s lot nearby. They heard Temperence shout, ‘I don’t care about your religious views on underwear, Robert. Unless they exposed themselves to you on purpose, there’s nothing I can do about a strong breeze.’

‘Come on,’ Megan said, and they hurried past.

For a moment, Temperence glanced at Ludwig and cocked an eyebrow as if in recognition, but then Robert spied a nearby Fish Kisser’s hairy thighs and made for a fight.

‘Get back here, Robert,’ Temperence screeched as she tore after him.

Megan led Ludwig through a rainbow of plastic fly strips and then they were standing on the salmon tiles of the airconditioned café. A door buzzer went *bzzt*, and the shouts of the

outside melee were replaced by the clinking of cutlery and the scrape of forks. A TV in the corner blared infomercials.

Megan and Ludwig sat at a corner table. A few beady eyes slid up from behind newspapers to assess the new arrivals.

‘Jack shouldn’t be too long,’ Megan said. ‘Can I get you something to eat?’

Ludwig shook his head. They sat quietly.

‘Are you and Mendelssohn okay?’

Ludwig shrugged.

Truthfully, they weren’t. They had barely spoken in days. Mendelssohn slept squished up on the armchair in the lounge, Ludwig took the couch. During the long days in Megan’s house, they kept to themselves, or when Sarah was home, Mendelssohn entertained her with cards and silly little games while Ludwig paced restlessly.

It was hard for them both.

Really, I think they were terrified that they would never see us again. Instead, their feud meant that they didn’t have to contemplate the most incomprehensible thing. That the people they loved more than anything were lost to them.

‘I’m sorry,’ Megan said. ‘I understand how hard it gets sometimes. With the people you love.’

Ludwig nodded but didn’t look up. He played with a tattered table menu.

‘Oh, here’s Jack.’

Ludwig turned in his seat and there was Jack Murnane picking his way through the multicoloured fly strips. Ludwig couldn’t help but notice every eye in the café shift suddenly to Jack when the door buzzer went *bzzt*, the way everyone watched him warily, or with outright hostility etched across their crusty faces, as he limped over to Megan and Ludwig. Jack, for his part, ignored the stares.

Megan embraced him. ‘You alright, Jack?’

‘Yeah, alright, alright. You?’

‘Alright, I guess. Considering everything.’ They both sat. ‘You hear school’s shut now?’

Just then, the fly strips burst apart, and two kids – brother and sister – came rushing into the café, giggling and shouting. Jack twisted in his seat. ‘Oi, you lot. I thought I asked you to wait in the car?’

The kids froze, their beaming faces framed by long golden hair. The brother was slight, with a ruddy look about him, and one of his arms ended at the elbow.

‘Lilla farted in the car,’ said the boy.

Lilla shoved him back. ‘Nah uh, he’s lying, Unc’. Danny done the fart.’

Danny poked his tongue at her. Lilla kicked him in the shin.

‘Alright, you lot,’ Jack growled. ‘Quit it. Uncle Jack’s gotta have a yarn with Megan, orrite? So keep quiet and don’t touch nothing.’

Megan waved at Lilla and Danny. ‘Alright, you two?’

‘Good, miss. Haven’t seen you in a long time. Where you been?’

‘Been around,’ Megan said, grinning.

Danny ogled Ludwig. ‘Who’s this, miss? This your boyfriend?’

‘No, just a friend, Danny.’

‘He’s a bit small, miss,’ chirruped Lilla.

‘I said go and mind your own for a bit,’ Jack said.

The kids giggled and hurried away to muck around with the gumball dispenser. Jack frowned.

‘I know all about the school closing. I reckon I got half the classroom back at my house. Elsie’s looking after ‘em while I’m here.’

‘This is Ludwig, by the way. He’s the one I was telling you about.’

Jack nodded. ‘Nice to meet you, Ludwig.’

‘You want a drink?’ Megan said.

‘I’d kill for a coffee.’

Megan craned her neck and looked around the room. A few sets of wandering eyes snapped back to their newspapers.

‘I swear Julia does whatever she can not to serve me.’

‘Ah, forget it then,’ Jack said.

‘No, hang on. There she is.’

Julia was hovering behind the pie oven, eyeing Danny and Lilla by the gumball machine.

Megan smiled as widely as she could. ‘Oh, Julia?’ she cooed.

Julia ducked down behind the pie oven.

‘Julia? We’re after some coffees,’ Megan said, loud enough for the whole café to hear.

An irritable looking woman with a flour-stained apron, and more flour on her face, appeared from behind the counter and came across to their table. 'Sorry, didn't hear you come in,' she lied. 'What'll it be?'

'Black coffee for me,' said Jack.

'Same,' Megan said.

Ludwig shook his head. Julia lingered for a moment, then backed away and hurried towards the counter. As she passed Lilla and Daniel, she called to Jack, 'Those kids of yours better not steal nothing,' and then she'd disappeared out back.

'Oh, the fucking nerve,' Megan hissed.

Jack frowned. 'Leave it be.'

'The way some of these people talk to you. How ignorant can you get?'

'Plenty, I reckon. But I got bigger fish frying.'

Megan threw another mutinous look towards the counter, then turned back to Jack.

'Sorry. So, what's the latest?'

'Them protestors up the mine come down and ask me to say a few words.'

'Really? What'd you say?'

Jack shrugged. 'I'll see. They just want a photo-op though, them up there, you know? Looks better for them if there's a blackfella saying this is his land and everything. Second that's all done they'll piss off quick enough.'

'But there's cameras now, Jack. Half the world suddenly knows Fortune exists. This is the opportunity you've been waiting for. You've got their ears. Make them listen.'

'Yeah, well. I still need some proof, you know?'

Ludwig thought he saw something uncomfortable flicker across Megan's face. But then, in an instant it was gone.

Jack nodded slowly. 'God. Been thinking about this for years, you know? The sight of Barnaby getting his pig arse hauled off.' He gave a grating chuckle until he winced and held his side.

Megan rested her hand on his. 'You keeping healthy, Jack? Doctor told you to quit, didn't he?'

'I bloody did,' he said, but he'd forgotten the cigarette tucked behind his ear.

'Jack, seriously?' Megan flicked at the cigarette and it tumbled to the floor.

'Oi! Cheeky.'

Jack bent to scoop it up, but Daniel had picked it up quicker. The little terrier jammed it in his mouth. 'Look at me, aye. I'm Unc!'

Lilla sidled up alongside him. Daniel turned to her, furrowed his brow and scowled. Lilla giggled.

'Don't be playing with that,' Jack growled, and he plucked the cigarette from Daniel's grinning mouth. 'That's no good for you, alright? Now scram.'

Daniel and Lilla both giggled and sprinted back to the gumball machine. Over their chattering, Ludwig heard someone whisper from behind their newspaper something that sounded distinctively like, 'Parent of the bloody year.'

'My mob got sick, Megan,' Jack growled. 'Because of Barnaby. Because of that mine. Our waterhole. That's our place. The bastards poisoned it and what did we get, eh?' He watched Daniel and Lilla making faces and he broke into a sad smile. 'At least they're happy.'

'They'll get what's coming to them. But you' – she picked a bundle of lint from his shirt sleeve – 'need to stay healthy, alright?'

Jack nodded. 'Anyway. Enough about me. You doing okay?'

'As well as you can when the world's kicking the bucket,' she said, leaning back into her seat.

Jack gave a sort of half grin, the type a man gives when he knows what it means for the world to be ending.

'Sarah's always welcome, you know that.'

Megan smiled. 'Yeah, I know. She's got her dad.'

'What? Your fella lost his job, too?'

'Ex-fella, Jack.'

Jack threw Ludwig a furtive grin.

'Ex-fella. Right.'

Megan hid a smile behind her hands. 'Yes, Jack. Ex. Anyway, Matthew might as well have lost his job. Everyone's been on notice for weeks. With all those protestors blocking machinery from getting on site there's not much work going.' She heaved a sigh, but then her face brightened. 'Ah, here's those coffees.'

Julie dropped the coffees down hard on the table.

'That'll be four dollars if you please,' she said, the irritation thick in her voice.

'Since when do we pay now?' Megan scoffed.

‘Since I said you do.’

Jack dug around in his pockets. ‘It’s alright, Megan.’

‘No, it’s bloody well not,’ Megan snapped. ‘You make Harold over there pay already for his pasty?’

‘Harold’s a regular.’ And then, looking at Jack, she said, ‘I know he’s good for it.’

‘Jesus, Julia. You are such a damn – ’

But Jack slapped the money down on the table so hard that Megan fell quiet.

‘It’s fine, Megan. Saves a trip to the counter.’ He scooped up the change and held it out to Julia with a decidedly ironic smile. ‘Here you go, luv. Good for every last cent.’

Julia’s top lip trembled. She eyed the money briefly, then held her hand out for Jack to tip the change in. They watched her go to the counter, deposit the money in the cash register, and then, with obvious theatrics, wipe her hands on her apron.

‘Don’t forget to scrub them with soap,’ Megan yelled sarcastically.

Julia frowned and then disappeared out back.

‘God. That woman,’ Megan muttered.

Jack took a sip off his coffee and frowned. ‘And her coffee is shit, too.’ He caught Megan’s eye and they both grinned. Jack wiped his mouth, and then he looked at Ludwig sitting quietly. ‘So, Ludwig. You’re the bloke whose got a mate up there on Sheep Shack Road?’

Ludwig nodded.

‘You don’t say much, do you?’

Ludwig shrugged. He pulled out his pad: Sometimes better to just listen.

Jack laughed at that. ‘Don’t reckon anyone in Fortune lives by that set of principles.’

‘Have you heard any news?’ Megan asked.

Ludwig looked up at Jack expectantly.

Jack leaned forward, hands clasped. ‘She’s alive, that much I know.’

At this, Ludwig’s eyes lit up.

‘Now, hold up. I ain’t seen her. They got her locked up in the barn out back. That’s all I know.’

‘Jesus.’ Megan gripped Ludwig’s shoulder. ‘Ludwig, I’m so sorry.’ Then, to Jack. ‘Is there anything you can do?’

He shifted uncomfortably. ‘Listen. Me and Donald get on alright. We been wanting the same things, that’s all. But ever since – well – you know? The bloke’s real unhinged.’

Ludwig scribbled on his pad: Can you get her a message?

Jack clucked his tongue. 'I dunno.'

'Please, Jack.'

He sat back in his chair, ran a leathery hand through his beard, scratched his chin.

Finally, he said, 'I'll do what I can.'

That was like music to Ludwig's ears, even if he knew it might lead to nothing. He broke into a grin, fat tears collecting in the corners of his eyes.

'I can't promise anything, though,' Jack said, holding his calloused palms up.

They both nodded.

'And there's one other thing. I didn't know how to say this over the phone.'

Jack cocked an eyebrow. 'What is it?'

Megan leaned across the table. 'What Donald has – in the tank.'

'The, uh – what you call it? The fish thing.'

Ludwig cleared his throat uncomfortably.

'Yeah,' Megan said, offering Ludwig an apologetic smile. 'Well, only it's that – the woman. Ludwig's friend. That's her son.'

Jack grinned, but his smile faltered at the looks on their faces. 'Shit. You're for real?'

'She was from Fortune, Jack. The woman – Charmaine. She gave birth to the boy – his name is Jonah. She gave birth to Jonah ten years ago.'

Jack's eyes widened. 'Ten years, you reckon?'

Ludwig nodded.

'And you think?' Jack glanced at Daniel, the boy's half-formed left arm.

'I'm not saying that exactly. It could just be a coincidence. But I can sure as hell believe that Barnaby would be shitting himself because of it. But, look, the important thing is Donald took that child. The police aren't going to do anything, but maybe you can. Maybe you could get them both out of there.'

Jack ran his hand through his hair, let out a slow sigh. 'I dunno. That's Donald's pride and joy. I seen the way Donald talks about it – sorry – the boy.' His face creased with remorse as he looked at Ludwig. 'Look, mate. I understand it hurts. And I'm sorry. But I just don't know what I can do.'

Ludwig hung his head. There in the café, with folk eating beans and bacon, with the fuzzy scratching of the eight o'clock news on the radio, poor Ludwig shook with sadness like my mother and I were dead, not just prisoners of Donald. Jack watched him, tapping his teeth



with his finger nails, uncomfortable in the presence of Ludwig's grief. He caught Megan's gaze. She gave him a *c'mon* kind of look. He heaved a sigh.

'Ah shit. Alright. Fuck it. I'll see what I can do.'

Ludwig looked up, eyes shimmering with tears. Then, without warning, he launched across the table and embraced Jack.

'Alright, mate. It's alright.' Jack gave Ludwig's head an uncomfortable pat. 'Just don't expect too much, okay?'

Ludwig sat back, a wonky sort of grin on his face.

'Thank you, Jack. We really appreciate it,' Megan said.

Jack frowned into his coffee. 'Shit. Strange times these. Real strange.'

## 20.

Barnaby stood on the curb outside the council building, eyes squinting in the late afternoon heat, feeling the stickiness of his pits through his shirt, the salty air stinging his face. He sucked his cigarette like a man desperate for air. A tick beat a kneejerk rhythm under his left eye. His hair looked thin and greasy, his clothes crumpled. By all measures, our Barnaby looked positively shot.

What a delight!

You see, Barnaby had barely slept since that night in the town hall. How could he, when every time he shut his eyes, he saw my face emerging from the hazy shadows, like a spectre come to haunt him. And if, at first, Barnaby had conned himself into thinking that this thing – yours truly – was not the same sticky creature he'd pitched into that dam so many years ago, in the days since, Barnaby could no longer hide the truth: somehow, impossibly, the creature that Donald had produced from his bag *was* the creature Barnaby had killed.

And yet – I wasn't dead. Even though he'd seen me sucked down into the inky black water. Even though he'd watched me drown. By his own hands.

Because here I was, alive as ever. Resurrected, like the Christ of his childhood stories. Like a manifestation of God come forth to punish the wicked for all their misdeeds. Just like Donald had said.

Barnaby felt that like a giddy knock to his testicles.

Sleep was almost impossible, especially after Donald's televised interview – after his political punt for the mayorship – had brought the media swamping in from every corner of

the country, not to mention the droves of wannabe spirit-seekers and loonies. And then there was the mining director, Gerald Malus.

Yes. Delightfully, delectably, deliciously – savour the thought now – Barnaby’s wits were fraying like a poorly made sweater.

‘Brother?’

Barnaby wrenched back from his rumination. He jerked up and there was a Fish Kisser, benign smile, freshly shaved head speckled with bloodied toilet paper scraps. He held a leaflet out to Barnaby, nodding encouragingly.

‘You look like you need some light in your life.’

Barnaby twisted with rage. He snatched the leaflet out of the man’s hand and tore it in two. ‘You ruddy little – ’

‘Barn?’ Temperance was puffing up the street from the direction of the Wonky.

‘You’re late,’ he hissed, throwing the two halves of the leaflet back in the Fish Kisser’s face. He turned to Temperance. ‘Where the hell have you been?’

‘About ten places at once.’ She looked almost as tired as Barnaby. There appeared to be a porridge stain above her badge. ‘Sorry. Where are they?’

‘Boardroom,’ Barnaby grunted as he twisted his cigarette into the pavement and led her inside.

In the second-floor corridor, Barnaby grabbed Temperance by the elbow until she winced.

‘You’re still with me, right, Temp?’

‘Yeah – yeah...Barn. ‘Course. But we need to talk about – well, you know?’

‘Didn’t I say it’s nothing?’ he snapped. ‘Just a cheap trick.’ He lowered his voice, glanced nervously at the door. ‘I don’t want you bringing it up again, okay? I *need* you to keep it together.’

Barnaby’s eyes were practically protruding from his skull. Temperance swallowed hard. ‘Fine, Barn.’

He eyed her warily. ‘We’re in this together, remember. Always have been.’

She nodded slowly. Barnaby gripped the doorhandle into the boardroom.

‘Alright then.’

The councillors were already seated when Barnaby bustled in. Susan, busy depositing Monte Carlos on the tea cart in the corner of the room, looked up and hurried over.

‘Sir, I need to – ’

But Barnaby waved her away. He took his customary seat at the head of a table with a heaved sigh. Temperence closed the door behind him and stood with her back pressed against the wall. Susan, looking thoroughly put out, returned to the tea cart.

‘Barnaby, you look terrible.’ Reverend Nelson put his tea down with a clink of china. ‘What’s got into you, man?’

Barnaby took in the faces assembled around the table. Next to the reverend sat Doris Maclean, playing with the leather on her worn Akubra, her arms brown and sun scorched, her flannelette caked in dry mud. Glancing disapprovingly at the dirt Doris had crumbled on the table was pink-haired Margaret Thompson. To Margaret’s right was Dr Lenard Snivels. The councillors all stared at Barnaby expectantly.

None of them, it was widely said, liked Boris Barnaby much at all. Then again, who really did?

‘I’m fine, Barry,’ he said, his eyes narrowing. ‘My kid just had a nightmare last night, that’s all. Kept me up.’

‘You look like you haven’t slept in days,’ said Lenard, rubbing his pink Adam’s apple.

‘We need you well slept, Barnaby,’ said Margaret.

Barnaby waved them away. ‘I said I’m fine, okay?’ He paused. ‘Hang on. Where the hell is Harold?’

The councillors exchanged pained expressions. Reverend Nelson took a loud sip of his tea.

‘Don’t bloody tell me,’ Barnaby croaked.

‘Went up yesterday evening,’ Lenard sighed. ‘Charlene said he barely said a word over his pork chops. Then, he gave her a kiss on the cheek, pulled a packed suitcase from under the bed, and left.’

‘Unbelievable,’ Barnaby said, shaking his head.

‘If I’m honest, he’s been acting a little queer for months,’ said Lenard. ‘Charlene found letters from the bank stuffed into some socks under his bed. It’s getting scary now, all this nonsense.’ Lenard cleared his throat uncomfortably. ‘Which brings us to...’

‘Barnaby.’ Doris placed her Akubra down on the table. ‘We need to know you’ve got all this under control. We need to know Donald’s not going to actually put the mine in danger.’

Barnaby looked around the room. They were all watching him intently.

‘Jesus titty fucking Christ –’

‘Barnaby!’ Nelson whined.

‘You think I’m going to let that lunatic compromise the mine? You think I’m just going to roll right over like a limp – like a – you know, something that’s limp!’

‘We need to be sure your head’s still in the right place,’ Lenard said. ‘Have you seen what they’re calling you in the *Herald*?’ He picked up a stack of newspapers and thumbed through them. ‘Big fat phoney. Useless lump.’ He hesitated. ‘Animated dumpster fire.’

‘Alright, alright,’ Barnaby snarled. ‘I get the picture. You’re telling me you actually read that drivel?’

‘It doesn’t matter if I’m reading it, Barnaby, and you bloody well know it. It’s the people out there that matter. Feels like half the town’s already gone up the hill. We need *numbers*, or Donald could actually win this thing.’

‘You don’t think I’m not doing everything I can?’ Barnaby hissed. ‘You think I’m out drinking pints in the Wonky with a bunch of troglodytes for shits and giggles? You think I’m kissing babies’ foreheads for the cameras because I get off on that? Eh? Everything I do is for this town and so you lot can keep your perks and benefits.’

‘What these people need is the love of God in them!’ Nelson wrapped the table with his fist.

‘Oh, come off it, Barry, you old prick. You think God is going to help us? Not bloody likely.’

‘God has a plan, Barnaby.’

‘Yeah, well, if His plan is to sit around on his arse while shit goes to shit then He’s doing a shitting good job of it. Maybe if you spent more time cooking up compelling sermons and less time gambling out the back of the Wonky then we wouldn’t be in this mess.’

‘I never!’ Nelson spluttered. ‘I am a man of the cloth, Barnaby. I won’t stand for it.’

‘Gentlemen,’ Margaret snapped. She glared at them both. ‘Please. Let’s have some decorum, shall we? What’s happening with the mine? Temperence?’

Temperence shifted uncomfortably by the door. ‘There’s too many protestors crowding the gates for any of the heavy machinery to get in and out. Canberra’s sent some federal officers down, but it’s hardly enough. I’m stretched as it is trying to keep things civil in town.’

‘Jesus,’ muttered Lenard.

‘And there’s another thing.’

Barnaby twisted in his seat, all bug eyes and flared nostrils. 'What?'

'Jack Murnane, Barn. He was up there with the protestors today. Media loved it. He was saying, well, he was accusing you – the Fortune council, that is – of covering up what the mine's done. What he *says* the mine's done. To his family and everything.'

'That dirty rotten scoundrel,' Barnaby hissed.

Doris settled her Akubra back on her head. 'Barnaby. Look. We can't let this go on. I've already lost all my farmhands to that freakshow. I've got a family to support.'

'We all do,' said Lenard.

'I know,' Barnaby whispered.

'And that's why we need assurances that you're going to take care of this, Barnaby,' said Lenard. 'The whole town's future is riding on that mine. We need to fix this fast, or – Well.' Lenard glanced around the room. 'Something will have to be done.'

Barnaby looked up, eyes narrowed to slits. 'What in the hell are you getting at?'

'What we're getting at,' said Margaret, her purple lips pursed tight, 'is that you darn well better get a hold of things sharpish. Because if you don't, then sorry, but you'll be out on your arse.'

Barnaby stared at the councillors assembled around the table with barely contained rage. Reverend Nelson took another long sip of tea.

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'Those pricks,' Barnaby spat when he and Temperence had gone downstairs to her car. 'They can't do this, can they? Threatening me like that?' He slouched in the passenger seat, fingers pinching the bridge of his nose.

Temperence gripped the steering wheel. 'If the vote's unanimous.'

'After everything I've done for them,' he moaned.

Temperence glanced across at Barnaby. 'Maybe you should just head home for the rest of the afternoon. Get some rest.'

'After everything I've done for this bloody town.'

'You need to take it easy, Barn. When was the last time you had a proper night's sleep?'

But the wally wasn't listening. Instead, his eyes were closed, his fists balled, his bottom lip quivering. He had the distinct air of a man imagining what it might look like to feed someone to a large carnivore.

‘I need to do something,’ he muttered. ‘I need to turn this around. I need to do...something.’

And then he fell silent. His hands loosened and his head dropped.

‘Barn?’

Temperence shook his shoulders. He’d fallen asleep.

‘Jesus, Barn.’ She shifted the car into gear. ‘Let’s get you home.’

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Barnaby shook awake with Temperence leaning across the gearstick. He reared back like a spooked rat.

‘Wasshappened?’

‘I brought you home, Barn. You need to get some sleep.’

Barnaby squinted in the glare of the twilight. All around them was a chorus of cicadas.

‘I can’t sleep. Not now.’

‘Look, Barn. There’s no shame in recharging your batteries. Just for an evening, okay? You need to keep your sense, you silly goose.’ Without thinking, she lay her hand on Barnaby’s knee and gave it a quick squeeze. Despite herself, she found her hand remaining there, gently rubbing his pant suit.

Barnaby looked up, and through those sleep deprived eyes of his, he saw Temperence looking at him, a wonky sort of smile on her face. His throat pinched, and he grunted. Immediately, Temperence yanked her hand back and stared straight ahead.

‘Right,’ he mumbled. ‘Yeah, maybe you’re right. Just one evening off won’t hurt, will it?’

Temperence gripped the steering wheel, still not daring to catch Barnaby’s eyes. ‘Yep, alright then, Barn. See you tomorrow.’

Our broken, busted Barnaby scurried across the street and slipped into his house. He heard Franca bustling around in the kitchen, heard the cries of his daughter, but instead of kissing his wife on the cheek, or tussling his little girl’s hair until she squirmed with laughter, Barnaby treaded carefully across the floorboards to his study. He shut out the lingering light, kicked off his shoes and shuffled to the liquor cabinet. He poured himself a very long scotch and slumped into the sticky leather of his armchair. He rubbed his temples and sunk his drink in one go. It burnt going down, and he grimaced. He’d never liked the stuff, but his father had always insisted. Whenever thirteen-year-old Barnaby came home with a bruised eye, his

father would make him drink a scotch, to make a man of him, he'd say. Then he'd say, 'Next time. Hit 'em before they hit you, Boris!' And then he'd beat Barnaby's arse.

Sitting in his study, Barnaby's eyes felt like the heaviest of things. He tried to keep them open, but he found himself, slowly, surely, letting them shut.

The study door flung open. He jerked awake. He glanced at the clock, and with bleary eyes he thought it might have said 3PM, but he couldn't be sure. He'd slept a whole night and a day.

'Barn?'

Franca stalked into the room.

'How long have you been in here?'

'Just got in.'

'Don't you lie to me, Boris Barnaby,' she snapped, almost spearing him with a glossy red fingernail. 'I haven't seen you in days. Where in the hell have you been?'

'Work, dear. At bloody work.' He sighed. 'Sorry.'

'Your daughter wants to see you.'

'Later,' he mumbled.

Franca advanced on him.

'Alright, alright.' Barnaby heaved himself up, his back peeling uncomfortably from the leather.

Franca watched him wobble to his feet. 'You're a father first, Barn.'

He nodded obediently as he passed her.

Outside, the heat hit Barnaby like a sweaty sock to the face. His daughter Beth was playing in the sandpit at the back of the garden under the shade of a banksia, squishing sand in her hands. Barnaby squatted awkwardly by the edge of the sandpit, hands in his pockets, eyes squinted to the glare. Franca came up behind him. He glanced back at her, and she nudged him on.

'Uh. You alright then?' he mumbled to his daughter. 'What you got there? Bit of – uh – sand, is it?'

Beth held out a handful of the stuff to Barnaby.

'Oh. For me, is it? No. It's fine. Daddy doesn't want to get his pants dirty.'

Franca tutted audibly from behind him.

Barnaby eyed the sand warily. Then, a weak smile. 'Yeah, alright then. Give us a bit of the stuff.'

Beth dumped the sand into his outstretched hand. It was cool and damp. He made a face and Beth giggled.

‘Want to build some castles with me?’ she said.

Barnaby looked back at Franca, who ushered him on with an exasperated look. He turned back to his daughter.

‘Yeah, honey. Yep. Sure.’

He kicked his shoes off, almost losing his balance. Beth giggled. Tentatively, Barnaby dipped a toe in the sand, then, he stepped into the sandbox. He looked down at his toes wriggling in the sand and, for the first time in weeks, our bushy Barnaby felt something like – well, I believe he may have just about felt happy. He broke into an embarrassed grin as he squatted down next to Beth.

‘So, what you got here?’ he asked, pointing to a clump of sand with twigs and grass sticking out of it.

‘This is our house.’

‘Yeah, right.’ He surveyed the handiwork – the slanted roof, the hole in one side of the structure. ‘Needs some work.’

‘Barn,’ Franca hissed.

‘But – uh – I mean, it’s beautiful anyway. I’d love to live in that.’

Beth beamed up at him. He grinned back.

‘Want to build another one?’ she asked.

‘Yeah,’ he said with a smile. ‘Yeah, I’d love that.’

And I’d like to say, dear reader, that this little girl with her chubby cheeks, her mop of red hair, those watery eyes, would spend the rest of the afternoon finally connecting with her absent father, and she’d remember this day with fondness in her heart.

No such luck, folks.

As Barnaby scooped up a handful of cold sand his pager vibrated.

‘Shit,’ he muttered. He fumbled with his jacket and checked his hip. His face fell.

‘Oh, Jesus. Not now.’

He turned to Franca who was already shaking her head in disbelief. ‘Barnaby, you can’t be serious?’

‘This can’t wait.’

‘Barn, your daughter – ’

‘Will thank me when she’s older because I gave her a good life.’



He brushed sand from his sweaty palms and ruffled Beth's hair.

'Sorry, love.' He pecked Franca on the cheek. 'I'll see you for dinner,' he said, knowing full well he wouldn't.

His daughter waved at him from the sandpit. 'Bye, Daddy.'

'Yep, seeya then.'

He hurried across the garden. At the back door he turned and smiled weakly at Franca. Perhaps, in another life, our Barnaby might have tossed the pager in the bin, loosened his tie and spent the afternoon excavating sand with his daughter. Maybe, he thought, and the idea stuck in his throat uncomfortably, maybe he'd get to know Beth, push the thin strands of red hair past her ear and they would talk about kindergarten, and who her favourite muppet was.

Except this was not that life. It might never be. Our Barnaby had contrived to push that life far from his reach and now his daughter was nothing more than a stranger who looked like him.

He shrugged, half-heartedly, at Franca and then ducked inside.

Was it all worth it, Barnaby?

## 21.

Temperance was still thinking about that knee squeeze when she woke the next morning. She couldn't get it out of her head. She'd tossed and turned all night, replaying it over and over. *Dumb, stupid, idiot move, Joanne*, she thought, as she drove into work, recalling the warmth of Barnaby's thigh, the uncertain look on his face. She felt sick to her stomach.

It's probably why our dear distracted Temperance barely noticed the rising heat, the heat that left her dash hot to touch by eight in the morning, or the fact that the streets were unusually quiet. When she slipped from her patrol car, she didn't notice her walkie-talkie on the passenger seat. Instead, she shut herself in her office, blasted the air-conditioning, and sat turning that knee-squeeze over and over in her head.

Temperance jerked awake at three in the afternoon, the room warm and suffocating. She blinked back the light and regained her bearings. For a moment, a tingling sense of dread settled in her stomach, a sense that something wasn't quite right. But then, the fug of sleep returned, and she closed her eyes.

Silently, she prayed for peace and quiet.

Lord, she thought, just give me that, please.

But the Lord works in mysterious ways, which is to say, He doesn't give two hoots about what you want.

And, so, the phone rang.

Temperence sat up, slowly, with a heavy sigh, grabbed the edge of her desk and wheeled her seat in. When she pressed the receiver to her ears she said, 'Fortune police force. How may I be of service?' She let her fattened tongue trace the roof of her mouth as she listened to Constable Merrick's frothy, stuttering exposition coming down the phoneline.

'Jeez, Sarge. I been trying to get you on the radio. It's kicking off on the beach! You gotta get down here.'

Normally, on a Tuesday afternoon Discovery Point beach would have been empty. Sure, you might find a couple of dogs sniffing each other's bums or picking through the trash and seaweed, maybe a beachcomber searching for useless trinkets, or a man in gumboots half sunk in the sludge, dangling a rod hopelessly into the ocean in search of a fish that would never bite. That would be a busy day. Mostly, though, Discovery Point was regarded by townsfolk like an increasingly racist grandparent: never talked about and rarely visited.

But that day, with the temperature gauge painful just to look at, the beach was practically bursting. Protestors, miners, townsfolk, a handful of Fish Kissers, the press; all occupying every slice of sand. Towels overlapped, sunscreen flew like shrapnel from bottles squeezed with too much gusto. The seagulls gathered in an apparent homage to Hitchcock.

For a time, at least, things remained civil. Everyone was far too busy just trying to stay cool. But as the day wore on, simmering tempers threatened to burst into a full-blown conflagration.

The trouble started with Geoffrey Clements.

When Geoffrey first got wind of a naked Fish Kisser on the beach, he was already six beers deep. Well, you know, good and honest Christian that he was (or so he claimed), Geoffrey wobbled over to the scene of the crime, sloshing beer and kicking up sand in people's faces as he went.

'Oi,' he sniped, when he reached the Fish Kissers. 'Who said you could get your willy out on my beach?'

The offending party was one Brother Catfish, formally Brent McMahon, one-time shelf-stocker at the Fortune supermarket. He lay on the sand, stark white in the sizzling heat, propped up on his elbows. He looked up at Geoffrey looming over him. 'What seems to be the problem, brother?'

Geoffrey's face screwed up. 'I ain't your brother, and your dingle that's dangling out is the issue! This ain't no freaking nudist beach.'

'Brother, there's no signs prohibiting it. The word of the Fish decrees that the body is love, and the body should not be covered save for our robes. But it's too hot for the robes, you see.'

'I don't care what your stupid fish says!' And at this he hocked up some phlegm and spat it on the hot sand. 'Only thing a fish is good for is deep frying.'

Brother Catfish and his fellow Fish Kissers exchanged anguished murmurs. Geoffrey cracked into a lopsided grin. By now, a crowd of onlookers had gathered. Geoffrey turned to them.

'Can you believe these freaks? They reckon some deformed fish is talking to 'em! That's a bloody laugh.'

'Please,' Brother Catfish said, picking himself up. 'Brother. Your words are blasphemy.' He held his hands out, palms up, to Geoffrey. 'I, however, forgive your sin.'

Geoffrey, eyes unfocused, disorientated, slapped Brother Catfish's hands away sharply. 'Get back, you cretin! You see that,' he implored the crowd. 'He tried to attack me! You all saw that!'

A few fly-in miners chortled.

'You mistook my advance, brother.'

'I said I ain't your brother.' Geoffrey turned to the miners. 'Get a load of this fag, eh? Probably a kiddie fiddler waving his wang about like that.'

The miners shuffled in behind Geoffrey. They leered menacingly at the Fish Kissers. 'The whole lot of 'em probably are,' one of the miners jeered. 'Bunch of nutjobs.' And he kicked a spray of sand at them.

'Please, brothers.'

'How many times do I have to say it? You're no brother of mine. If you were in my family, I'd have slapped the silly out of you long ago.'

The veins on Geoffrey's neck were pulsing now, sweat dribbling down his brows and into his eyes.

'I'm sick of the whole lot of yous mucking up my town. Putting us fair dinkum folk out of work. You're nothing but lunatics cooking up a whole load of drivell.'

The miners clapped and guffawed, but Brother Catfish seemed unperturbed.

‘We only teach the word of the fish, brother. Nothing else. If you were to just open your eyes to the light.’

Geoffrey, never one to be told whether he should do this or do that, positively ballooned at this presumption. ‘You saying I’m blind, boy? You saying I ain’t got my head screwed right. That’s a bloody laugh.’ And now Geoffrey, with the sun beating down on his bald head, and the booze in his gut sloshing around like the salty ocean, thrust a single, erect finger into Brother Catfish’s chest. ‘That a lunatic like you’ – and another prod – ‘would tell someone like me’ – and another – ‘to open *my* eyes!’

Finally, spurred on by his own vitriol the sweaty fool lunged with all the force he could muster. Except Brother Catfish, for all his sanguine docility, had rightly had enough of being prodded in the chest. This time, he pivoted, ever so slightly to the left, and Geoffrey, face locked in a snarl, found himself suddenly pitching forward through empty space. His snarl twisted into a bemused frown, before it disappeared into the hot sand.

A few onlookers tittered behind their hands. Even the miners chuckled at the sight of old Geoffrey Clements peeling his head from the sand, face looking like salt damp.

‘You little prick,’ he croaked, standing up blindly and twisting like an old mutt chasing its tail.

With Geoffrey spinning himself into a mess, the crowd only laughed louder. Even the Fish Kissers giggled as the man spun wildly, cursing and spitting. For a second, their divisions dribbled away, their animosity melted, and they were united in the lampooning of a jack arse making an absolute fool of himself.

From all accounts, Jack Murnane came over then, heaving himself up from his towel and padding over with his cousins to get a good look at the commotion. As Jack reached the scene, Geoffrey had finally tuckered himself out, and was now gasping for air, a hand clutching his chest. He stumbled towards one of the miners.

‘Oi, give us some water, will ya?’ he hissed.

The miner, still laughing, acquiesced, passing Geoffrey his half-drunk tin of beer with a sideways grin to his mates. But Geoffrey, blind as he was, took the thing and tipped it over his face, yelping in pain as he poured fizzing beer into his eyes.

‘Jesus!’ he screeched, dropping the can and rubbing his blood shot eyes with his palms.

The crowd burst into laughter once more. Geoffrey looked up, scanning the crowd menacingly until his gaze rested on Jack, standing there, innocently enough with his arms crossed, a slight smile spread across his dark face.

‘You!’ Geoffrey spat. ‘You think this is funny?’

Jack did, of course. Who wouldn’t? But he had the decorum to shake his head. Geoffrey wouldn’t be assuaged though. He lurched towards Jack.

‘You’ve been laughing at this whole town, haven’t ya? Doing whatever you can to ruin things. Tryna shut down the mine with all your pinko and greenie mates.’ Geoffrey stopped short of Jack and turned to the miners. ‘‘ere, boys. You know this bloke, don’t ya? Jack Handouts Murnane.’ And he spat at Jack’s feet. ‘This bastard’s the reason we’re all in this mess.’

Jack’s smile fell.

‘We’re in this mess cause blokes like you keep wanting more. Cause blokes like you don’t care whose shit they steal so long as they’re making money.’

‘Don’t gimme that bollocks,’ Geoffrey hissed. ‘We built this town. Us productive folks.’ He prodded his own chest. ‘This place was nothing but dirt before we came ‘ere. And you’ – he thrust his face right up against Jack’s, except his diminutive size left him staring up at Jack’s bushy chin – ‘were nothing but black savages!’

Jack, for all he’d suffered at the hands of people like Geoffrey Clements, might have let that awful line go. He might have laughed it off and turned away, because he’d seen enough in all his years to know there was nothing good in taking the bait.

Except as he made to turn away, to just leave it be, Geoffrey hocked a wad of spit and sprayed it in Jack’s face.

The assembled crowd gasped.

Jack wiped his face clean and looked down at Geoffrey.

The hot wind kicked sand off the beach.

A seagull, sensing a window, stole a golden piece of butterfish.

And then, Jack punched Geoffrey in the face.

When Temperence mounted the curb in her government-issue, screeched to a halt, and squeezed out onto the grassy foreshore, she was faced, inexplicably, with a Bruegel painting made flesh; a dizzying display of violence playing out across the sand: punches were being thrown with haphazard abandon, beach balls shot like wobbly cannon-balls through the air, towels whipped at pink hides and white bottoms. Constable Merrick shouted uselessly in the

middle of that swirling maelstrom, attempting to wrench Geoffrey off a man whose dreads he had grasped in his hands. Temperance watched the scene in mute astonishment, before barrelling into the crowd and shouting, 'Break it up, you idiots! Break it up!'

It took half an hour before that mad scene was contained. By the time Temperance had looped her belt around the last set of wrists (they had run out of handcuffs), the scratchy grass on the foreshore was littered with scraped knees, puffy eyes and punctured beach balls. Merrick filled the paddy wagon to capacity, and then all that Temperance could do was frogmarch the rest of that rowdy lot down the main drag.

At the station, Temperance worked out the logistics of fifteen meals, checked the police pantry, and ordered Chinese take-out instead. Finally, exhausted, close to tears, poor, tatty Temperance sat down outside cells A and B while everyone slurped noodles. She heaved a gravelly sigh and pulled her beltless pants up.

'Who's got my belt?'

Someone slipped their hand through the bars and handed Temperance back her belt. She looped it round her waist.

Geoffrey piped up from behind a box of kung-pow. 'Ya got a fork in there, Temperance? Can't use bloody chopsticks for my life!'

'Shut up, Geoffrey!'

As Temperance heaved herself to her feet, Barnaby stumbled in, his trousers covered in dirt and sand, a tear in his jacket. He took one look around the room, his nostrils flared, neck veins popping.

'Jesus, Joanne. There's press swamping the front entrance. I had to sneak in through the bloody toilet window. What in the hell happened?'

\*

In Temperance's office, Barnaby slumped into the desk chair with a groan. He cupped his head in his hands.

'Barn?'

Barnaby sat motionless.

'We've got to do something,' she said.

He unstuck his face from his hands. He had a faraway look on his grubby face. 'Maybe you were right, Temperance. Maybe that thing Donald's got *is* the same one?' He shuddered. 'I'm being punished. That's what this is. Punishment for what I did.'

Temperence stood with her back to the door. Barnaby looked up at her, a film of sweat across his quivering lip, eyes popping. She felt her hands trembling, so she shoved them in her pockets and swallowed hard. For a moment, she saw Barnaby standing in the rain, eyes bulging just like they were now, the creature in his hands. Telling her he had to do it, that nothing else could be done.

Back in her office, she said, 'No, Barn. No. You said it yourself. It's just a trick. Donald's just playing tricks up there. You did right that night. That thing was sick. Whatever it was. It was in pain. We have to forget all that.'

Barnaby shook his head. 'It's useless. It's complete lawlessness. It's anarchy. Those ruddy councillors are going to blame me for this. They'll say I've lost control. What the hell am I supposed to do?'

Temperence managed to peel herself from the door and wobble across the room. She reached the desk chair and grasped Barnaby by the shoulders. 'You fight, Barn. You go out there swinging and you fight like only you know how.'

They locked eyes.

'You've got to forget about Donald and that thing. Push it aside, alright? Push it aside and go out there and be the boss. Okay? Just. Be. The. Boss!'

Slowly, Barnaby nodded. 'Yeah. Okay. Yeah. Just fight, eh? Be the boss.' He stood up, wavered a little, and steadied himself on the desk. 'Piece of piss,' he said, looking like he might be sick.

Temperence watched him limp from the room, her own heart thudding in her chest.

\*

The second Barnaby stepped outside, the journalists swarmed in with their cameras flashing and clicking and whirring so fast and furiously that Barnaby almost fell backwards.

'Is the town at breaking point, Barnaby?'

'Can you comment on the fishboy?'

'Do you think you still have a chance to defeat Mr Walker?'

'What's the latest on the mine? Is it on its last legs?'

Barnaby saw nothing but a white blur. He stepped forwards, and almost collided with a journalist. Temperence grabbed Barnaby by the elbow and yanked him back. She waved for space.

'Give the man some room to breathe, will you?'

Barnaby blinked back stars. He looked up and tried to make sense of the chaos. To his right, he saw a tree open its mouth to speak. 'A response to Mr Walker's prospects in the election?'

'I think the people of Fortune will quickly realise just what that man offers, which is zilch,' he remonstrated with the tree.

Temperence twisted him round to face the crowd.

He continued. 'And they'll also remember just how good it's been under Boris Barnaby.'

'What about the mine? Jack Murnane certainly doesn't seem happy about news it might be expanding. How do you plan to deal with the protestors and get production back on track?'

Barnaby took a deep breath. As the crowd stared back at him, waiting for an answer, he wiped a dribble of sweat from his brow.

'Look,' he said, finally. 'I'll consider all options. That's what elected officials do, they take heed of what their constituents say. But, listen.' He paused for effect, scanning the crowd as he did so. 'I'm not going to cave to the demands of anarchists and rabble rousers. I won't let this town be held to ransom. Not today, not ever.'

And although our jaded Barnaby was exhausted and frazzled, he felt the energy coursing through him with each word.

'I don't think I need to tell you how dangerous Donald Walker and his rag tag troop of deplorables are for this town and for the whole country. People who believe that a fish is the sign of the end of the world are, honestly folks, a little, you know?' He gave a kooky whistle.

The crowd laughed. For Barnaby, it was pure nourishment.

'Mark my words, Donald Walker will be nothing but trouble for Fortune. Here's a man that's spent years raving like a lunatic about the end days. You think he's going to make things better? Folks. Things have never been better. And people like Donald don't like that, so they do whatever they can to disrupt. Which is why I'll be personally ringing Canberra and the Federal Police Force and asking them to consider Donald Walker's Church of the Holy Fish a terrorist organisation. Because that's what they are, ladies and gentlemen. Ideological zealots who will stop at nothing to get to their agenda! You think that thing up on the hill is really a message from God? It's a bloody trick. Or it's some weird experiment that Donald has perpetrated and, personally, the whole thing makes me sick to the stomach



‘Now, you’ve gotta ask yourself this: can I accept a man who lies and cheats – or worse – does disgusting experiments on children and animals? Can I allow someone like that to be mayor of my town? I don’t bloody well think so, and I don’t intend to let it happen!’

He thumped his fist into his hand, winced slightly, and then pointed out a random journalist in the crowd. ‘Next question please!’

## 22.

With less than a week until the election, it felt as if Barnaby had managed, impossibly, to claw back some momentum from Donald. But the beachside brawlers eating Chinese takeout in the gaol posed a stickier problem than the honey ginger sauce on the gaol cell bed sheets.

‘I can’t keep them all here,’ Temperence was quick to remind Barnaby once they’d returned inside.

In her office, that wiped the smile clean off Barnaby’s face.

‘Come on, Temperence. We only need a week. Just until the elections.’

‘I’m stretched thin enough already, Barn. It’s not possible.’

He tugged at his cheeks and groaned. ‘Shitting hell. Alright. But we wait a couple of hours. Let them out slowly and quietly. And I need you to do me one last thing.’

\*

Later that night, with the town still like a furnace, Temperence showed everyone out the back door, instructing them all to head home sharpish. No pints at the Wonky, no nothing. Just back to bed and a hot cocoa if they were that way inclined.

Everyone except Jack.

He sat on a bunk in cell B, back to the wall, watching as everyone filed out one by one, and knowing, even then, that he was about to be screwed. Sure enough, when Geoffrey Clement had finally been led out (‘Lucky you, Jack. This place must be the Ritz compared to your shit hole’), Barnaby emerged from the shadows. A few moments later, Temperence slipped back into the room. The door closed behind her like a coffin lid.

‘My, my. Causing trouble again, Jack?’

Jack gave a knowing smirk. ‘Boris Barnaby. What a surprise.’

‘What have you done this time, mate? Trespassing? Disorderly conduct?’ He grasped the cool metal of the cell bars. ‘Something heinous, no doubt.’

‘I’ve done nothing, and you know it.’

Barnaby raised his eyebrows in mock disbelief. 'Nothing? Oh, well. Golly.' He pulled a set of jangling keys from his pockets, felt the weight of them in his hand. 'I'm so sorry for the misunderstanding, Jack. Here, lemme just' – he put the keys in the lock – 'get this door open for you, shall I?'

Barnaby grinned.

'Or, maybe you're lying?' He slipped the keys back into his pocket. 'Wouldn't exactly call you trustworthy, would I? Nah. I reckon you've been a real fucking nuisance.'

'You don't scare me, Barnaby. You think you're big, mate.' He slipped off the bunk with a little groan, steadied himself. 'But I know. You're just shit scared the net's closing in.' He limped across to Barnaby. 'Terrified that any minute someone's gonna know what you done. What you done to me and my people. What you done to this town. After all these years. You're scared this is the end.'

'Listen you fucking dog,' Barnaby hissed, 'You think you can threaten me with that bullshit? You think you scare me, huh? I'm your boss, mate.' He jabbed his chest with his thumb. 'Me. You think anyone out there gives a shit about you and your family? You're the fucking lost boys, mate. No one cares. No one.'

Barnaby stood there, breathing heavily. Jack dropped his head and muttered under his breath.

'What's that, boy? You got something to say?'

'How are we still here, mate?' Jack said. 'After all this time.'

Barnaby gave a tense laugh. 'Dunno what you're talking about.'

'Give it up, Barnaby. Everyone in this room knows what you done.' Jack nodded to Temperence, who shifted uncomfortably by the door.

'I didn't *do* anything.'

Jack clucked his tongue.

'Some of my people died because of what that mine done to our spot. They got so sick they died. My sister's kid was born with one arm. That's on you, Barnaby.'

He pushed his face right against the bars and Barnaby twitched back in alarm.

'That's on you.'

Barnaby swallowed hard. He ducked his eyes to avoid Jack's burning gaze. 'It's just how it had to go,' he whispered. 'You know that. Couldn't be helped.'

'Alright, Barnaby. Alright.' Jack stepped back. 'If you're so certain no one will listen to me, why you got me here, then?'

‘Because I’m the mayor and I said so.’ The bite had left his voice now.

‘Only for another week.’

Barnaby attempted a sneer. He looked rather ill. ‘You get cold just call out, okay? Maybe someone will come. Maybe they won’t.’

Barnaby motioned to Temperence, who yanked open the door.

Jack called out after him. ‘Good luck with them elections, Barnaby. You’ve always got my vote. Not that it’ll help this year.’

## 23.

You know, I used to be so afraid of the dark. Back in the hotel, I was terrified of the shadowy spaces of my room: the creaking cupboards, the sagging floorboards under the bed, the moan and whistle of the breeze through tiny cracks. To me, that was the chattering of unseen terrors and murderous monsters. I was so certain that the only thing keeping me safe was the warmth of my mother beside me.

So, yes, I used to be afraid of the dark.

But then.

Well, in that tank, alone, *I* was the monster in the dark. I was the unseen terror. So, what did I have to be afraid of but myself?

Besides, in the darkness, I finally disappeared. In the darkness, the eyes that ogled me were elsewhere, conjuring up different monsters.

In the darkness, I was safe.

How things change?

I rarely slept during the night. Instead, I found solace in the dark. I could think with more clarity.

I’d given up hope on my mother’s rescue. She wasn’t coming. I felt, with the firm conviction of a long gestating resolution, that Donald was right. The burden my mother had shouldered trying to keep me safe had been too much. Once I had disappeared, she’d decided that the best thing for all of us was to just let it be. And as for my father whose photo I’d lost? Well, I realised that doting on a photo of a man I’d never met was useless. He’d never even seen me, my father. If he had, he would have looked at me the way they all did. It was best to forget him for good.

It hurt like hell thinking those things. It was a queasy, all-consuming hurt that left my body wracked.

And then, slowly, it became less painful. I still held onto those thoughts, still stronger than ever, but they became a facet of me, rather than something parallel and grating. My mother may have loved me, but she did not want me. My father was nothing more than a memory that didn't even belong to me.

Strangely, that realisation was liberating.

But if my parents were lost to me, then I soon realised Donald was not the alternative. In all those days that he came to my tank, fed me treats, stroked my head – looking at me with that weird, unfocused gaze, the half-smile, the little giggles – I felt something for him. He showed me, in his own twisted way, paternal love. Yet the life he had chosen for me could not be my only life. I could not simply be his divine spectacle.

And, so, within days I'd gone from realising that my mother who'd once loved me no longer wanted me, to knowing that Donald could not replace the father I'd never had. At that time, as a child in that tank, I felt I'd lost three parents in my young life.

I decided that escape was my only option. If you've thought, for a time, that young Jonah had lost the daring, adventurous spirit that put him in this whole mess in the first place, well, then, you are correct. I was far from the boy who'd slipped from that second-floor window all those weeks ago. That boy was a brash idiot. But he'd had conviction – I'll give him that – the brave stupidity of youth. But here, in my tank, my spirit was sapped. I had transformed from young Jonah into monstrous Fishboy, nothing more than a vessel for Donald's slippery words.

It was the last sliver of that old Jonah who decided that escape was the only option.

I wasn't to return to my family though. Instead, I would start anew. I would become the characters from my stories, the heroes and heroines who struck out for the wild unknown, who only needed their own guts and instincts to get by. That would be the life of Jonah, escaped, of Jonah, free.

If not, I'd die Fishboy, alone. Fishboy, monster.

I made the decision one night in my tank, moonlight dripping through the roof, without having a plan. My heart thrummed.

The next morning, with the sky a pale pink, Donald slid back the shed door and padded across to the tank. I closed my eyes.

'Mornin', boy,' he called.

I waited for him to knock. Sure enough, three little raps.

'Wakey, wakey.' He smiled.

I opened my eyes as if woken from a deep sleep.

‘Sleeping then, boy? That’s good,’ he said. ‘Keep up your strength.’

Normally, Donald would have to corral me to the top of the tank. This time I pushed off eagerly and drifted to the top. I saw the delight in his eyes.

He heaved open the lid. His face appeared twisted and warped through the water. I crested the tank’s skin and the water rolled in little drops from my shimmering scales. Donald’s breath caught in his chest.

‘My dear boy,’ he said. ‘My dear, dear boy.’

I pushed towards him, and he gasped. No treats, no coaxing – here was his golden fishboy coming to him. He smiled, stretched his quivering arm out and cradled my head. I closed my eyes.

‘You’re incredibly important to me, boy. Your mumma never showed you how important you are. But you and me, boy. We’re doing great things. And I want you to know – ‘cause I never said this. But I love you. My Jules woulda loved you, too. And my daughter. We’re family.’

I pushed in closer. We sat there for some time, Donald whispering quietly to me.

He pulled back. ‘This is good,’ he chuckled nervously. ‘We’re a team. A family.’

Donald was still smiling when he slid back the shed door. When he’d gone, I spat out one of his old silver cufflinks. It was small, even in my tiny hand, but the metal felt strong. It would have to do.

When the room had cleared after the morning sermon, I took the cufflink and held it firmly between my index and my middle finger, just above the knuckles. Then, I swam to the back of the tank, my fist raised to strike. A flurry of bubbles burst from my mouth as I attacked the glass.

Exhausted, I looked at the glass and my heart sank. I’d barely left a scratch. I needed more speed, more power.

I swam to the other side of the tank. I held the cufflink tightly between my knuckles. I took a deep breath and placed my feet on the glass. Then, with all I could muster, I propelled myself across the tank in a blur of bubbles. I crashed into the side of the glass and felt a searing pain as the cufflink bruised my palm. I sank, woozy, to the bottom of the tank. I looked at the point of impact and my heart lifted. It was nothing but a tiny scratch, impossible to really see, but it was something. I’d left a mark on the glass. There was hope.

I kicked to the other side of the tank, gripped the cufflink once more between my knuckles, and placed my feet on the glass.

Okay, Jonah, I thought. Time to break free.

## 24.

My mother woke with the moon light spilling in through the roof so that her face was ghostly. Her tongue was sticky in her mouth. She was aware of her heart, like it was a separate thing living inside of her, trying to break out.

It was the dream that had woken her.

The booming voice of Donald.

*Give him to me.*

The pounding rain. Streak of lightning. Flash of hot blood.

My mother sat up with immense effort and held her head in her hand. The floor was cold and hard beneath her, but the air was hot, too close. She massaged her neck, kneaded the tight knots, the taut muscles. Her lower back pinched with pain.

She only caught sleep in brief snippets. If she did fall asleep, the dream always woke her. The fitful vision of the crash. The night I was born. Donald's voice yelling at her, screaming at her to give him the baby. And jumbled with that was another voice. Deeper, paternal. A man she couldn't remember, a man who asked her for her baby. They all wanted her child. When she was so weak. They wanted to take her dear, dear child away from her.

And in her dream, she always saw the shape of the man in the car next to her. She saw James – my father – the blank, unmoving gaze. The blood winding down his forehead like a spool of red string unravelling.

These were memories that she had tried so hard to forget. Except seeing Donald again had opened a valve she couldn't close. The pain of it, you understand, of reliving it over and over, was too much. The pain of it was killing her.

In the half-light of the barn, she reached for a pail of water, a damp flannel. She wiped the slick sweat from her hot skin, let the water run down her forearm and drip to the cold floor. She draped the flannel across her neck and stood up. She walked to the far wall and pressed her eye to it, so she could spy a thin slice of the outside world. She listened to the hum of cicadas all around her. In the distance, the faint flicker of a campfire, the sea of tents. Shadows elongated by the firelight danced across the corrugated roof of Donald's shack.

What was Donald going to do with her? Would he let her rot in that stinking cell forever? After her attempted escape she hadn't seen anyone for two days, just a Fish Kisser who brought her dinner. Other than that, my mother had been totally alone.

But then, on the third night, as she lay with only the blanket for comfort, the wind wheezing, Edith had appeared, standing motionless behind the bars of the stable door. My mother sat up on her elbows. Edith flinched.

'Hello?' my mother called out.

At that, Edith turned and fled.

The encounter was so brief that by the next morning my mother convinced herself it was a dream. But the next night, as my mother lay staring up at the shadowy rafters of the barn, Edith reappeared.

My mother sat up. 'Please,' she said. 'Don't go.'

Edith stepped back. She hesitated, caught in two minds. She must have known how dangerous it was to be there. She would be thrashed if she was caught. But here she was, again, looking into that pitiful existence my mother had been consigned to.

'Won't you stay?' my mother asked.

Edith peered into the dark space.

'I'm sorry for what I did,' my mother said. 'To your daughter. I'm sorry.'

Edith shook her head and then took something from her pocket. She dropped it through the bars and hurried away.

It was a small bar of chocolate – effectively contraband in that place, you understand? Edith risked her own safety for a block of chocolate. My mother didn't understand.

Edith returned the next night.

This time, my mother said nothing. She sat quietly on the floor, knees tucked under her chin, and waited. Edith looked in, made to leave, but thought better of it. She cleared her throat.

'Hello,' she said, finally, after the two of them had watched one another for some time. She pressed her hand to her chest. 'My name is Edith. But in here people call me Sister Smelt. You can call me Edith, if you'd like.'

'I'm Charmaine,' she said softly. 'It's nice to meet you.'

A long beat of silence.

At last: 'Thank you for the chocolate.'

'You're welcome. Charmaine.'

‘I’m going to stand up now,’ my mother said, and she rose to her feet, slowly, her legs weak. With some discomfort, my mother approached the stable door.

Edith stood nervously.

‘I’m not going to hurt you,’ my mother said. ‘I didn’t want to hurt your daughter. I’m sorry.’

‘Sam,’ Edith said, suddenly. ‘My daughter’s name is Sam.’

My mother smiled. ‘Yes. Sam. What a lovely name. I didn’t want to hurt her. I was desperate, you understand?’

Edith pursed her lips. ‘I brought you this,’ she said, and stuck her hand into the pockets of her robe. She pulled out another bar of chocolate. ‘You don’t eat what they bring you.’

My mother smiled weakly. ‘No appetite.’

Edith nodded slowly.

‘Why are you here?’

‘Because Donald is afraid of me,’ my mother said.

‘Why?’

‘Because he has my son.’

Edith’s eyes constricted. My mother watched the bone under her throat shift uncomfortably.

‘I should go.’

Edith turned to leave, but my mother shot out her hand and caught a handful of her robe. Edith reared around, face like a horse in terror. Immediately, my mother let go.

‘Please, just wait.’

Edith backed away.

‘I’m sorry. I can’t stay.’

‘Wait.’ My mother called after her. ‘Please.’

Three nights passed. As the town sweltered, the heat in the barn became unbearable. The smell of old animal shit grew so strong that it was all she could taste in her mouth. At breakfast, they brought my mother a bucket of tepid water and a flannel. A moment of rare mercy.

On the fourth night, my mother slipped into a fitful sleep, and when she woke, heart pounding, with Donald’s voice echoing in her head, she saw Edith watching her from the other side of the stable door.



‘Are you okay?’

My mother pulled herself up, cupped her forehead in her hands, head swimming. ‘Just a bad dream.’ She looked up and smiled. ‘You’ve come back?’

Edith shrugged. ‘I shouldn’t have.’

‘Why do you keep coming here? Won’t you get in trouble?’

Edith bit her lip. My mother noticed how, really, despite the deep creases in her face, the greys in her hair, Edith looked young, maybe her own age. My mother thought back to Sam – for a moment she felt the heat of the girl’s neck, the softness of her skin – and her stomach turned. She realised, too, that Sam must have been the same age as I was. Just a child.

‘How is your girl? Sam?’

Edith glanced nervously at the entrance to the barn. ‘She’s well, thank you. She says her prayers. She follows the word of the fish.’

My mother gave her a sad smile. ‘That’s good. She seems like a bright girl.’

‘She is,’ Edith said. ‘She loves to learn, and she is always laughing.’ Edith caught herself smiling. Her face fell quickly.

They watched each other in silence.

Then: ‘You don’t remember me, do you?’

My mother frowned. ‘Excuse me?’

‘No, you wouldn’t remember me. Course not. It was years ago,’ Edith mumbled.

‘I don’t understand.’

Edith shook her head. ‘Sorry, it was silly,’ and she turned to go.

My mother scrambled up. ‘No wait. Please don’t go.’ As she stood, she felt a surge of blood rush to her head, and for a moment she saw black. She steadied herself and when she opened her eyes Edith was back by the door.

‘Are you okay?’

My mother nodded. ‘Just got up too quick. This heat.’ She waved at the air. ‘It makes me sick.’

A pause.

‘The reason I come here,’ Edith said.

‘Sorry?’

‘You asked me why. It’s because I know you, Charmaine. You don’t remember.’ She hesitated. ‘But I remember you from school.’

‘School?’

‘We were in school together. Before you disappeared.’

It struck my mother as an impossible notion that anyone could still exist from before the time of the crash. All that remained of that life were hauntings, whispers of things, fragments. And yet – Donald had re-emerged, hadn’t he? And now, here was another fragment made solid, standing on the other side of her prison.

‘After James – that was his name, wasn’t it? – after he was found in that crash. We all wondered where you’d gone. It was all we talked about. Your dad came to the school and asked anyone if they’d heard from you.’

My mother’s breath pinched painfully in her throat. Her father appeared in her mind’s eye, his lined face, dusty brow. The incisors ground right down to stumps. Smiling, or frowning, she could never tell.

‘You spoke to my dad?’

‘He spoke to everyone. At school. Asking if we’d seen you. Heard from you. He wanted to know where you might have gone, and why. We didn’t know. But we all knew you were pregnant.’ Edith’s eyes lingered on my mother’s belly. Was there a hint of disapproval in the gaze? ‘We thought you’d run away because of that.’

‘Did he say anything else? My dad. To you or anyone?’

Edith thought back. ‘He asked us – just asked that we tell you, if we ever saw you, that he wasn’t angry and that he loved you more than anything. He said he just wanted you to come home.’

My mother felt her throat constrict, felt the tightness on her chest. She had worked so hard to keep the splintered remains of that other life buried – the one she’d had before the crash, before I was born. It was all she could ever do to survive, to simply live and take care of her son. Now she felt it bubbling up in her chest like the tangy heat of vomit. It rushed through her and she could hardly breathe. She felt her legs give out from under her, and she slumped to the ground.

Her father. Who she’d never seen again after the crash. Who she’d left behind when she was seventeen, without explanation. Not a letter, or a phone call. No brief encounter. She couldn’t, you understand? To explain what had happened that night – to drench up what little she could remember – would have led to more questions. She might have lost me. So instead she lost everything else.

After a while, Edith asked, ‘Have you spoken to your dad?’

‘No,’ she said. ‘I tried once. A few years ago. I wanted to tell him I was sorry. That I wished I could have said goodbye.’ She hung her head. ‘But he’d died a year or so before.’

My mother never told me that. Not until years later. She never let me or anyone else to see her pain. That was just her way.

‘I’m sorry.’

My mother shrugged. ‘These things happen.’

Neither of them spoke. The wind picked up and rattled the roof. When my mother looked up, Edith was still watching her.

‘Why did you come here?’ my mother asked. ‘To Donald’s shack?’

‘Because the word of the fish is true and will lead me to salvation.’ Edith said that without a flicker of emotion in her voice.

My mother frowned. ‘No, Edith. What brought you here? What made you throw everything else away and come here?’

Edith opened her mouth to speak. Instead, she laughed, uncomfortable and strained.

‘It’s okay. You can tell me.’ My mother nodded encouragingly.

Edith cleared her throat, stood there for the longest time, and then started talking rapidly, as if she was scared that if she stopped she would never speak again. ‘I got pregnant not long after you disappeared. It was an accident. Danny O’Brien. You probably don’t remember him. He was a few years ahead. Anyway, we had to make it official. My parents would have killed me otherwise. I dropped out of school, we got married and I had Sam. And she was beautiful. She was everything to me.’ She paused, and my mother thought Edith had lost her nerve.

But then: ‘Sam and I didn’t mean anything to Danny. To him, we were just roadblocks to some imagined life. He treated us both like shit. Like we were a nuisance. You know the way you treat something after six months, once it loses its sheen. That’s how Danny treated us.’

‘I tried to tell my parents. I showed them the bruises. But they didn’t believe me, or maybe they figured I’d done something to deserve it. Besides – life is tough in the country, they said. The heat gets to everyone, they said. I was terrified every night for Sam. That Danny would do something awful to her, and to me.’

‘I lasted five years of that man. Until one night things got out of hand and I had to make it stop,’ she whispered, crying silently. ‘Wouldn’t you defend your child with

everything it took? I didn't mean to hurt him. Not really. Or maybe I did?' Her voice was vacant, her eyes vague. 'Anyway, I did, and Sam and I had to go away very quickly.'

She took a deep breath, and when she spoke her voice was steady, resolute. 'Master Marlin found us stranded on the side of the road that night. I couldn't find the car keys. Danny hid them. We had to walk instead. We were going to hitch somewhere – anywhere that wasn't Fortune, and never come back. Master Marlin picked us up on the side of the road. Me and Sam. He saw we were in trouble. He saw the blood on my hands, and he didn't ask what had happened. He just looked at me – with the most intense look – and he said he would pass no judgement. He could give me a life that meant something. For both me and Sam. Where we were cared for. Where we meant something. I had nothing else left. Nothing else left but this.'

Edith smiled. 'I said yes. Why not, you know? And I've been here ever since.'

My mother stood up slowly. 'That must have been very hard for you. I can't imagine the pain you would have felt.' She limped towards Edith. 'But you must listen to me. Donald is no prophet. He's no saviour. He stole my boy from me and he put him on display like an animal.'

Edith stared at my mother, eyes pulsing. She giggled nervously.

'No, no,' Edith whispered.

'Whatever you think my son is. Whatever lie that man has cooked up, it's bullshit. That is my son in there, Edith,' she said, her voice shaking. 'He is a child. Just like your Sam. And he is terrified.'

Edith shook her head. 'Can't be,' she muttered.

'Edith, listen to me.' And my mother stood against the stable door, her face close to Edith's. 'My son is not a sign. He is not a gift of God. He is just a boy. His name is Jonah.'

Edith frowned. Her head jerked to one side. She muttered to herself.

'His name is Jonah,' my mother repeated. 'And I need you to help me get him out.'

'No, no, no. I can't,' Edith whispered. She pulled back. 'The fish is the word.'

'Edith, please.'

'The fish is the light.'

'He's my son. His name is Jonah.'

Edith turned and fled. My mother called after her, a useless plea. Edith was already gone.

I do not blame Edith. Maybe I should – and there was a time in my life that I was angry at her, furious even, just as I was angry at Donald, or Barnaby, or those ordinary townsfolk for everything they did. Edith ignored what was right there in front of her, the truth, the pain of my mother, Donald's lies. But holding onto that resentment is pointless. I have learnt that. I know that Edith had invested too much already in Donald's deceit. To believe my mother was to admit that the last five years of her life had been a lie. Edith cannot be blamed for that. It's just human nature.

But she was my mother's last chance to escape.

Instead, my mother thought that hope had abandoned her.

But then, two days later, as she watched the fields and the firelight of the tents, the sweat dripping down her back, the cicadas humming in atonal concert, my mother heard a voice.

'Charmaine?'

She turned, half expecting to see Edith staring back at her. But it wasn't Edith. It was another woman, wearing a flowing white robe, her head shaved close to her skull, eyes pricked with fear.

Megan grabbed the bars of the stable door and spoke breathlessly. 'You're Charmaine, right?'

## 25.

Okay. We need to jump back a bit. A week or so ago, in fact, to the morning after the beach brawl, where we'll find Megan sitting alone at her kitchen table at six thirty in the morning. The light outside is still soft, the kitchen full of shadows, but the heat is already rising. Megan is picking absently at a splinter in the table, a stained yellow manila folder bearing the imprint CONFIDENTIAL sitting beside a cup of coffee. The refrigerator is playing a throbbing bass.

Alone in that kitchen, Megan is thinking about Jack.

She was there when that sudden burst of violence took place on the beach; she and Sarah had been building sand castles nearby. She saw Jack arrested along with the rest. Later, she'd gone to the station, but Temperence simply shook her head. 'No,' she'd said, 'there's no one of that description here.'

Megan knew it was a lie.

And then she'd heard that everyone was released, quietly, without fanfare, later that night.

But no Jack.

She knew without knowing that something was wrong. Barnaby, the crooked ferret, was going to keep hold of Jack for as long as possible. There was too much at stake. And she knew exactly what Barnaby was capable of.

Megan reached for the manila folder, but hesitated. She was still shocked by its contents, even now, having read it months before in wide-eyed disbelief. The information inside seemed unreal, far-fetched even, the stuff of cinema, not a sleepy town by the coast. She hadn't wanted to look at it since that first day, when she'd slipped quietly, unseen, into Barnaby's office, used the key for the safe inside his cabinet that she'd stolen from Susan one drunken night in the pub, stuffed the stained yellow manila folder bearing the imprint CONFIDENTIAL under her shirt, and scampered before anyone was the wiser. And when she'd rushed home and peeled open the stiff card, what she found confirmed all the whispers she'd heard in the council halls. It filled in the blanks of the redacted files it had been her job to archive. The mine had poisoned the waterhole and the river. Jack's family were "exposed". Barnaby knew. The mine company knew. They all knew everything, and they hadn't done a single thing.

She'd read that with her breath caught in her throat, a giddiness spreading through her. And then she'd rushed home and stuffed it under a loose floorboard in her bedroom and not looked at it since. It was the only evidence there was, it was more than enough to vindicate everything Jack had accused the mine and Barnaby of, and Megan had been too afraid to do anything about it.

And she'd hated herself for it all those months, that she'd had the answer yet had still done nothing. Even while Jack's family suffered. She'd done nothing because she knew what it would mean to be the one who let those secrets free; what it meant to have the world, but especially the mining company, know your name, your family. Megan knew what happened to whistle-blowers, more or less. The messenger, sooner or later, was always shot.

But now the folder was here, sitting on her kitchen table, still with a film of dust on the cover, still burning hot with salacious secrets. Megan swallowed hard and pulled it open and re-read the files from front to back, feeling sick the whole time. When she'd finished, she closed it and pushed it across the table as if to indicate that, no, it was all too much. But then she leant forward and picked the folder up. It felt heavy in her hands.

She decided then and there that now, finally, she was going to do something.

In fact, thankfully for me, she decided to do two things.

When Ludwig and Mendelssohn shuffled into the kitchen half an hour later, she told them she was going to go up the hill.

‘I have to,’ she insisted when Mendelssohn protested. ‘Jack can’t help us now. It’s the last chance your friends have.’

‘But what about little Sarah?’

Megan shook her head softly. ‘Her dad will be okay to take care of her. Just for a day or two.’

‘Is not necessary, Megan,’ Mendelssohn pleaded.

Ludwig scribbled on his notepad. ‘I will go.’

‘You know you can’t, Ludwig,’ she said. ‘They know you. You damn near gave them all black eyes.’

Ludwig chortled, but then the laughter caught in his throat and he looked down at his slippers.

Megan tugged at her earlobe. She avoided Mendelssohn and Ludwig’s eyes.

‘Listen,’ she said. ‘I’ve watched a lot of things fall apart and not done anything. I watched my marriage disintegrate. I watched on as this town destroyed a community of people. I watched our mayor do nothing.’ She sighed. ‘And now I’m watching this town tear itself apart. My town. And maybe I can’t do anything about it. But I can try and help you and your friends. I can do that. It’s the hard thing to do, but it’s the right thing.’ She sat up straight, fists clenched on the tabletop. ‘So that’s what I’m going to do.’

She cooked them all a giant breakfast of pancakes, bacon, and eggs. She woke Sarah, cradled her down the stairs like she used to do years ago – and how much heavier her daughter had become! – and they all ate happily together around that table. Mendelssohn made silly faces, pretended to sneeze bacon, and Sarah was in hysterics.

It was a nice time for them.

‘I’ll get your friends back,’ she said to Ludwig and Mendelssohn, as she ushered Sarah out to the car. ‘I know it’s difficult but sit tight. Please.’

No one said how terrified they were. Instead, they simply nodded.

Megan gave a grim smile.

‘See you on the other side.’

As she turned to go, Ludwig lunged forward and hugged her tightly. They stood there for a moment, with Mendelssohn watching on, and then Megan pulled away and she went to the car without looking back.

\*

Sarah's dad was waiting outside in his pyjamas. They pulled up outside his old caravan, the one sitting on bricks overlooking the surf. Matthew half-waved at Megan. She gave an uncertain nod in return.

‘Bye, Mum,’ Sarah chirped as she reached for the door.

Megan laid her hands on her daughter's arm.

‘I just wanted to say – well, you know how much I love you, don't you?’

Sarah looked up at her mum, and the serious look on Megan's face made her giggle.

‘I know, Mum.’

‘And I'm sorry about me and your father. It's tough, and it's not ideal. And I'm sorry for that. I could have done better. We both could have. For you.’

Sarah stopped giggling. It seemed like a strange thing to say at a time like that. But then Megan leant forward and kissed Sarah deeply on the forehead and when she pulled back she was smiling.

‘Now, have a great time with Dad and I'll see you in a bit. I love you.’

‘Love you, too, Mum.’

Megan watched her daughter skip across to her father. He picked her up in one go. She smiled at Matthew through the glare of the windscreen, but she wasn't sure if he saw it.

In the rear view, she watched them standing amongst the spinifex before disappearing back into the caravan. She drove back to the main street and stopped by the post office box, its red paint streaked with salt marks. She tried not to think about her daughter, because doing so made her feel sick. She slipped the manila folder in an envelope, sealed it, and scratched an address. Her stomach dropped with the letter as it fell down the chute.

She drove the winding, rocking road up to Donald's shack. At the top, she parked by the stalls and tents and walked to the front entrance. She noted, absently, that the TV crews seemed less numerous, and some of the stalls had packed away and gone.

As she joined the motley queue that had already formed by the gate, she fought back the urge to be sick. A woman, her baby cradled in her arms, nodded at Megan as she approached.

‘Morning,’ Megan said, trying to hide the quiver in her voice.



Another woman, older, wearing a brightly knitted beanie, passed Megan a chipped enamel cup.

‘Cold mint tea?’

Megan smiled as she took the mug and pressed it to her lips. ‘Thanks.’

‘It’ll be another scorcher today.’ The older woman held out her hand. ‘Name’s Pat.’

‘Oh,’ Megan shook her hand. ‘Uh, I’m Trudy.’

‘Trudy. A pleasure.’ Pat nodded to the mother and her baby. ‘This is Gabrielle, and that’s Billy.’

‘Nice to meet you both. Been here long?’

Pat took a sip of her tea. ‘Got in not long before you. Met Gabby on the bus in. We’ve been waiting together, haven’t we, Gabby?’

The young mother smiled uncertainly and then nuzzled the baby. Megan sipped her tea. Up ahead, Brother Whiff stood in his flowing robes.

‘So, what brings you here, luv?’ Pat unscrewed her thermos. She offered it to Megan.

‘No, I’m fine, thanks,’ she said. ‘Well, I’m – you know – here for the fish.’

Pat beamed. ‘Yes, the fish. Quite a thing, isn’t it?’

‘Sure is. And you?’

‘Well, the fish, of course. But really, I think the church offers what we all need right now.’

‘What’s that?’

‘A little bit of hope.’

‘Oh, right. Of course. Because at the moment we’re – uh...’

‘Travelling a dangerous path towards the end of humanity.’

Pat grew grave and silent. She stared into her cup.

‘Well,’ Megan said, ‘Perhaps if enough of us follow the message of the, uh, fish then, uh, we might still be able to save humanity?’

Pat shrugged. She screwed the lid of the thermos back on. ‘All I know is I’ve never had much to hope for. But this place.’ She pointed at the shack. ‘This place might just offer it. That’s what Gabby is here for, aren’t you dear? For a chance at life.’

Megan caught Gabrielle’s eyes. Gabrielle looked away quickly and pulled her baby close.

Up ahead, Brother Whiff stepped forward. 'Alright, folks. We'll be administering you two at a time. Please be ready to come forward in an orderly fashion. Remember, when you enter here you give unto the fish and ye shall be blessed.'

Pat broke into a wide grin. 'This is it!'

Slowly, the line began to move. Gabrielle went through with another young man, pimples showing through his scratchy beard.

Pat gave her a little squeeze on the shoulder. 'I'll see you in there!' she chirruped.

'Next!'

As Megan walked around to the side of the house she took one last look back at the temporary camp outside the fence, and further on to the ocean. She had the first rumblings of dread, but then Pat beamed at her.

'Oooh. Feel my skin,' she said, thrusting out her exposed arm. 'I've got goosepimples.'

\*

And just like that, Megan stepped into another world.

She was taken first to the back of the shack where they were hustled into a queue of new arrivals. As those around her murmured with excitement, Megan surveyed the tangle of brown canvas tents that had sprung up like ant mounds in the grass. In the distance, hundreds of people worked with their backs stooped to the soil, tilling the earth. Behind the shed stood half-built buildings, their skeletons on show, tarpaulin sheets flapping in the breeze.

She glanced at the barn near the back of the property, at least a hundred metres from the last tent. She noted, with a flutter of hope, that it looked unguarded.

'Next.'

Pat pushed Megan forward. A man with a pinched face instructed her to sit on a milk crate and hold her head back.

'Sit still now,' he said.

Megan closed her eyes and heard the buzz of an electric razor.

Ten minutes later, Megan and Pat were taken to their tent. Megan frowned as she felt the coolness of her scalp.

'Cool cut, Trudes,' Pat giggled, rubbing her own head before ducking into the tent. 'Oooh,' she heard Pat say. 'Sleeping bags.'

There were robes in the tent waiting for them, too long at the feet and too short in the sleeves, smelling faintly like moth balls, heavy and scratchy. Before Megan had even changed, a woman with a head like an orange pulled back the tent flaps.

‘Bubbles, bubbles, scales and light, true believers,’ she said, beaming. ‘It’s time for us to replenish the land.’

And so, Megan and Pat had barely unrolled their sleeping bags before they were hurrying across the knobbly ground towards the fields. Here, under the heat of the morning sun, Megan and Pat joined the other Fish Kissers, both young and old, to water plants, turn the soil, and pick aphids and other bugs from the leaves. No-one spoke as they worked, so the only sound was the pull of the breeze, an odd sneeze here or there, and the sound of many hands at work. Megan snatched glances at the others, bewildered by their silent work, the looks of contentment on their sweaty faces. At one point, Pat, working exuberantly, tumbled into a cucumber patch with a sudden screech that sent birds scattering into the sky. A pair of Fish Kissers helped Pat up, silently, with impassive smiles, and then returned to their lettuce. Megan looked around and realised that no one else had even flinched, as if Pat’s screech had never been uttered. It was, despite the bright sunshine, the cheery looks on people’s faces, an eerie, weird sort of place.

They must have been at it for hours in that field before a bell rang out through the still air. As one, those robed folks lay down their tools and walked to the shed. Now, they seemed at leisure to talk, and the air was filled with a chatter that felt explosive after the prolonged silence. Megan helped Pat to her feet and followed the crowd. As they walked, a woman with black rimmed spectacles smiled at them.

‘May the light of the fish shine on you,’ the woman said.

Megan looked at her and gasped. It was Sarah’s teacher, Leanne, the same woman who had deserted her post a week ago. Megan cast her eyes to the ground, but Leanne, head shaved like the rest of them, didn’t seem to recognise her. Instead, she gazed at Megan with the serene look of an old dog sitting in the sun.

‘First time,’ Megan mumbled.

‘Welcome, sister. You’re in for a treat. There’s nothing quite like that first kiss. It’s electrifying.’ Her whole body wriggled with excitement. ‘May bubbles forever surround you!’ She gave a little curtsy, then hurried off to the front of the pack.

As they reached the shed the crowd formed into two lines and began slowly filtering inside. Dogfish and another Fish Kisser handed out steaming Styrofoam cups of soup. Most

people threw it back like a shot of medicine. Pat took a cup and swallowed it without question.

‘Icky,’ she said with a giddy smile.

When Dogfish shoved a cup into Megan’s hands, she looked down at it and sniffed.

‘What is it?’ she asked.

‘To achieve true connection with the fish one must imbibe his holy fluid.’

She took a tiny sip. It tasted bitter on the tongue. She pretended to drink. When Dogfish turned away, she slipped the cup into the folds of her robe.

That first sermon left Megan uneasy. She’d watched as Donald strutted the stage, as he barked and bellowed the decrees and tenets of the fish.

‘The fish giveth life! The fish giveth salvation! May you kiss the fish, and may the bubbles forever surround you!’

Then, that rush towards the stage. Megan grabbed a dazed Pat roughly by the wrist to stop her from being trampled as they both stepped towards my tank. She watched as, one-by-one, the new arrivals approached the tank, were christened by Donald with their new aquatic namesake, and then ushered across to press their sticky, wet lips to the tank. She watched all this and felt the terrifying power of that place, the hold it had on those people. And yes, although I don’t recall her face in the rush, Megan kissed the fish.

Leaving that shed, the first gulp of fresh air was like the first she had ever taken. She stumbled out into the afternoon light with Pat hanging from her arm, both with new names – Megan was Sister Trout; Pat, Sister Chub. Pat looked at Megan like a child waking from a strange dream.

Megan took her back to their tent and helped her lay down with a glass of water.

‘Did I kiss the fish?’ Pat whispered.

Megan nodded.

‘Oh, blessed day, blessed fish. I’ll be saved in no time!’ Lying down on her sleeping bag, she stuck out her arm to Megan and croaked, ‘Feel my skin, Sister Trout. I’ve got goosepimples!’

Megan spent a week in that place, but to her it could have been months. There were no clocks or watches on the property, no diaries or calendars; not so much as an egg-timer. Time, as Megan had known it in town, didn’t exist on this side of the razor wire fence. It was, to her, incredibly strange to witness these people who had shaken off the shackles of time. But then, without the tick tick of a clock, the tyranny of days and dates, Megan felt a peculiar

freedom she'd never experienced, or even knew she'd desired. For a few days, she became simply Present Tense Megan, living in the moment, her only markers of time the sermons that happened each morning and each night before bed. For Megan, it was like tasting another way of being, as if she was Loren McIntyre confronting Incas in the Brazilian jungle.

Always, she looked for an opportunity to get to the barn, but a clear chance never presented itself. Each morning, the Fish Kissers clambered from their tents, kissed the dirt, and then turned to their neighbours and locked dusty lips. They worked in the fields before the morning sermon, followed by more work, and reciting the tenets of the fish. Finally, after dinner, the evening sermon, and then the morning ritual in reverse. Kiss your neighbour, kiss the dirt, clamber into bed, aching and dusty, and sleep. Goodnight, and may bubbles forever surround you.

It went like this, each day the same, and before Megan knew it, she'd lost track of time entirely. It wasn't until one evening, when Megan had struggled to tell Pat what her daughter's name was, that she realised the church was working its strange magic on her. She couldn't wait any longer. It was now or never.

That night in their tent Pat and Megan both lay awake, listening to the cicadas, the wind pushing at their tent.

Megan rolled on her side to face Pat. 'What really brought you here, Pat? Sorry – Sister Chub.'

'I already told you that. Hope.'

'Yeah, I know. But – why? Why'd you *need* that hope?'

Pat was staring up at the low, canvas ceiling, fingers a little net across her belly.

'Chub?'

'Well, when you've lost everything, hope is the last thing you've got, isn't it?' She let out a shivering breath. 'My Harold and I lost our girl in a car crash about five years ago. My beautiful little Julia. Her husband Mo. Both killed by some maniac on meth or heroine, or God knows what. They left two kids. Two darling little things. Well – course we took care of them and all. But, you know, Harold, bless his heart, passed away, and then it was just me and them. I did my best. I didn't have much and we lived hard, by the skin of our teeth, mostly. But I did what I could. I had a job, working behind the bar at the local. It got us by. Except, I lost that. As easy as you like, just lost my job because the owner wanted a younger girl with a bigger pair of tits.'

Pat laughed, a glum sort of laugh.

‘Couldn’t take care of the kids after that. I didn’t have the money for food, for new clothes. When I couldn’t pay their school fees, well, that’s when they were taken away. I got to see them a little, bless their little hearts, but once they were adopted their family didn’t think it was... appropriate for me to keep seeing them.’ Pat was crying softly now, her face quivering as she spoke. ‘Then I really didn’t have anything left.’

‘I’m so sorry.’

Pat turned to Megan. She wiped her cheeks. ‘I know you’re not here because you believe. I can’t say why you’re here exactly. But I know you’re not here for the fish.’

At the look on Megan’s face, Pat said, ‘It’s fine. I won’t tell. You’ve got a kind heart. I know that much. But let me say this. The rest of us, in here, we’re not weirdos or lunatics or any of the things people out there say we are. We’re just people who have nothing left. Folks out there don’t care about people like us when it comes down to it. They call us idiots for wanting something more. But this place. Well, in here we’re a part of something, you know? And that means a whole lot.’

Megan smiled and nodded. ‘I know, Chub. I know.’

In the half-darkness, Pat watched Megan for a while until she rolled on to her other side.

‘Night, Chub.’

‘Night, Trout.’

Megan waited until Pat started snoring quietly before she slipped from her sleeping bag and crawled out into the warm night. The campsite glowed in the light of the fire, but otherwise it was quiet. Swallowing hard, she crouched low and weaved her way through the tents towards the barn, stepping over guy ropes strung out like tripwires. She saw shadows moving inside tents, whispered voices of children, solemn and murmured chants (‘The fish, the fish, we kiss the fish’). But whether it was luck or something else, Megan didn’t come across anyone. She stopped by the last line of tents, the barn in the distance. The entrance appeared unguarded. Her heart thrummed uncomfortably.

She made a break for it, tearing low across the grass without once looking back. At the entrance, she slid back the heavy latch with two hands and stepped inside. When she closed the barn door behind her, Megan stood trying to catch her breath. She listened for sound. Nothing but the drone of crickets. She smelt the hot air, that mixture of dried horse shit, old earth, and hay. The moon spilled across the floor like fat drippings.

She took the first tentative steps, peering into the stalls, half hoping they'd all be empty, that my mother wouldn't be in here after all, that she could say she tried and then that would be that. But she *was* in there. Halfway along, on the right.

When Megan looked in, she spotted my mother looking thin and gaunt, her face pressed against the barn wall, staring out into the dark night. Megan's breath caught in her throat.

'Charmaine?' she managed to whisper.

My mother turned around the two of them looked into one another's eyes.

## 26.

'My name is Megan. I know your friends – Ludwig and Mendelssohn.'

My mother looked at Megan – this stranger – as if she'd spoken a foreign tongue.

'You *are* Charmaine, aren't you?'

Slowly, my mother nodded. Rather than step forward, she pushed back until she felt the splintery wall behind her. Megan glanced nervously towards the entrance.

'Listen, I don't know how long I have. Your friends are staying with me in town. They had nowhere else to go so I helped them. And now I'm here to help you.'

'Ludwig,' Charmaine whispered. 'And Mendelssohn?'

'Yes,' Megan nodded. 'Your friends. They've been so worried about you, Charmaine.'

My mother's head swam. She tried to grasp hold of the things that Megan was saying, tried to make sense of them. Finally, she said, 'My friends. Yes. Are they okay?'

'They tried to get a message to you.'

My mother shook her head. 'No message. It's just been me. And Edith.'

'Edith?'

'No, I ruined that,' my mother said, burying her head in her hands. 'I scared her away. I've had no one. I've been alone.'

'I'm here now, okay? I'm here to help you. You and your son. Jonah, isn't it?'

At the sound of my name, my mother strode to the stable door with such sudden conviction that Megan took a frightened step back. My mother rattled the bars to her cell, her eyes alight with a pulsing, manic energy.

'You've seen him? Is he okay? What have they done with him?'

She was shouting now, each word coming out in a tremulous burst.

‘Please,’ Megan, pleaded, glancing again at the entrance. ‘You have to be quiet. They’ll hear us.’

My mother wasn’t listening. There was a dull drone in her ears. Her body felt heavy and light at the same time. Her hands shook. ‘Where is he? Is he near? Is he okay? Where is he?’ she asked over and over, and Megan was sure they’d be heard any second. Then, for lack of a better option, she reached out and wrapped her hands around my mother’s own.

‘It’s okay. Just take a breath. It’s all okay.’

That touch – the warmth of it, the tenderness – however slight it was, pulled my mother back. Her eyes focused, the drone receded, and now she saw Megan’s kind face, felt the softness of her fingers.

‘Okay,’ my mother finally said. ‘Okay.’ She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, willed her pulse to slow. ‘Jonah,’ she said. ‘Is he okay?’

‘I haven’t spoken with him.’

My mother’s eyes narrowed, another sharp intake of breath. Megan squeezed her hands.

‘But I’ve seen him. I know where he is. He’s safe.’

‘Where?’

Megan hesitated. My mother read it in her face.

‘Just tell me. Please.’

‘In the shed. They’ve got him in a tank. I think that’s where they keep him.’

It was my mother’s worst fears confirmed. That Donald had me locked up like an animal.

‘He’s my boy,’ she whispered. ‘He’s not a monster. They can’t do this.’ Thick tears rolling down her cheeks, a bead of snot bubbling in her nose.

‘I know,’ Megan said. ‘I know. I saw your son, Charmaine. I saw him. He’s still there. Your son is still in there.’

‘I miss him so much. I want my son back.’

‘It’s okay, Charmaine. I’m going to help you.’

And those two women, who were strangers, really – who knew nothing of each other, who couldn’t truly know to trust one another – both stood there holding hands, tears staining the dirt at their feet, and knowing – without knowing, you understand? – that they could trust each other totally.



It means so much to me knowing my mother had someone in that desperate time. That she wasn't alone. She had that, at least.

Outside, they heard voices.

'I can't stay,' Megan whispered.

She tried to pull away, but my mother grabbed her wrists. Her eyes were wide and terrified.

'Please don't leave me.'

'I'm going to get your son out, okay? But I can't stay here. They can't find me here. I'll come back for you. I will. I promise.'

The voices drew nearer. Megan yanked her hands back. She lingered for a moment.

'I'll get Jonah, okay? I won't let Donald hurt him.'

Megan turned and hurried away. My mother heard the barn door ease open, then the metal latch shuddering back into place. It felt as if she'd had the air pushed from her body. Having come so close to someone who knew her son was in danger, she was alone again. Hopeless. She felt that as a real, searing pain and she burst into tears.

Except –

A second thought occurred to her: this woman had seen her son. And she hadn't seen a monster in the murkiness of the tank. She'd seen a boy. She'd seen Jonah.

My mother felt a glimmer of hope. Hope that she would see me again, that I would be the same. The pain subsided. She brushed away the tears.

Please, she thought. Let my son be the same. Let him be okay.

## 27.

Megan raced back to the tents. She heard Pat snoring quietly, but otherwise the campsite was deserted. Fighting back the urge to throw up, she crept to the fire. A hundred smouldering red eyes watched her silently, reproachfully, as she took some kindling and shoved it into the heart of the fire. She hurried towards the shack.

\*

When I heard the first shouts outside, I knew something was different. True, I often heard noise and activity at night, but the sounds were normally measured and assured. Now they came as frantic bursts, strained and fearful.

I had been throwing myself against the glass, as I had every night, ceaselessly, that cufflink worn down almost to nothing, my knuckles and fingers crippled with thick callouses.

It seemed a fruitless task, for even though there was a thin, spidery crack around the point of impact, the glass was so thick it was meaningless. It would take something truly explosive to shatter it.

I drifted across to the other side of the tank and pressed against it, straining to hear. Were people screaming? Yes, I could definitely hear shouts of alarm. Someone calling out for help.

I prickled with an unknowable dread. Compared to those usually quiet nights, this was positively a ruckus.

Something was wrong.

The shouting grew louder, more urgent. I saw flickering light through the cracks in the shed, like firelight, but red hot and blazing. Shadows darted past the shed towards the light. More shouting. I spun nervously in my tank.

Then I saw Megan. She was standing on the stage and looking into my tank. Of course, then, I had no idea who she was, and I remember thinking it was strange that she was there because no one else had ever come to the tank at night, no one besides Donald.

Forgetting the shouting outside, that flickering light, I glided across the tank towards her. She smiled at me, a queasy, uncertain smile, and I could see that she was shaking. In my child's mind, I thought she was cold.

'Hello,' she said. 'Can you hear me?'

I nodded. I immediately liked the sound of her voice, bright and soft like early morning light.

'Listen,' she said. 'I probably don't have much time. My name's Megan and I'm going to try and get you out of here. Jonah,' she said, and that name sounded so strange in her mouth. I hadn't heard it in such a long time.

'Your mother sent me.'

My body became suddenly tense. I spun around in great agitation, once, twice, and then pushed up close to the glass.

'She's near, but she can't come and get you.'

My mother!

My child's heart fluttered. I felt elated, light, joyous. I was going to see her, after all this time. But why couldn't she come herself? Why couldn't she just walk through the gates and ask Donald to let me leave?

Almost as fast, my happiness was punctured. My mother wasn't here.

‘Do you know how I can get you out of this tank?’

I wasn’t sure that I could trust her, but then she said, ‘Jonah,’ with such urgency, and a fear in her eyes that I could read so plainly, that I knew – or at least I felt – that I had to trust her.

‘Please. How can I get you out?’

I thought for a moment, and then shot across to the other side of the tank. She followed me around, and then she spotted the old ladder propped against the wall.

‘Good work, Jonah.’ She rested it against the tank. She gave a bottom rung a fair test with her foot before scaling it to the top. I heard her fumble with the latch. She peered into the tank.

‘It’s locked. Do you know where the key is, Jonah?’

I didn’t. I’d never seen where Donald kept it. I could only frown and shake my head.

‘It’s okay. Give me a moment.’

She smiled to reassure me, but then her face twisted with alarm. The side door burst open and Donald, his wiry frame larger than life in the doorway, strode into the shed, flanked by two others. Megan, wild eyed, turned back to the tank.

‘Your mother loves you, Jonah. He’s got her and she can’t get to you. But she loves you.’

She pressed her hand to the glass, eyes full of desperation, bursting with fear. I reached out for it, but then she was yanked back, Donald’s men seizing her by the ankles and pulling her down. She screamed as she fell, and then they were upon her, bundling her out of the shed. I watched on, horrified.

Donald waited until they were gone. He turned to me, his brow creased, a look of disappointment on his face. He came to the tank.

‘I’m sorry you had to witness that, boy. You try to help these people, you know? This is how they repay you.’ He shook his head. ‘I guess you can’t fix everyone. Some are just too far gone. Listen. Whatever she might have told you, whatever nonsense she tried to fill your head with – it was all lies. You understand, boy? Your mumma ain’t here. She never has been. And she’s never come here asking for you back. You know that, because if she had, I woulda told you. And I’m never gonna lie to you, boy. Never.’

He pressed his own calloused hand to the glass. I watched him, but in that moment, I couldn’t know who, or what, to believe.

‘You mean too much to me.’ He pulled away, headed for the door. ‘Goodnight, boy.’

I didn't sleep that night. I couldn't. I swam in circles around my tank, round and round. This woman had said my mother was here. *He* has her, she'd said. What did she mean by that? Did she mean Donald? Surely not, because wouldn't he have said something? Wouldn't he have told me my mother was here? Why did he need to have her anywhere?

Yes. I asked myself these questions that night, like a royal galah, unable to see the truth of Donald's duplicity, of the truth that was right in front of me like bared buttocks, plain to see.

Judge me if you will, but I was a child, remember. Even if I had decided to escape, I had still come, in a strange, unseemly way to rely on Donald, to feel as if life without him was perilous. Like a wild animal that falls in step with its keeper, it had come to pass that I, his putrid little beast, had been tamed. And you don't bite the hand that feeds. Not unless you want to eat the whole thing.

But then, despite all that, I felt the gnawing tug of uncertainty. What had this woman to gain by telling me such lies? I had seen the fear in her eyes, and I had believed it.

And yet Donald had said the opposite. Who was I to believe? The man who had become, almost, like a surrogate father to me? Or the strange woman who claimed the mother that had abandoned me had come back?

## 28.

Ludwig and Mendelssohn waited for Megan in that lonely house for a week because what else could they do?

Ludwig rose early every morning, padded softly down the carpeted hallway, creaked open the front door and stared out into the street. He'd wait there, our dear Ludwig, hoping that Megan would miraculously reappear, but of course she never did. Each morning, Ludwig would give a little nod of conviction, before hurrying back to the living room. He would slip on his shirt and start pulling on his boots.

On the couch, Mendelssohn would roll over, the corners of his eyes crusty with sleep, his moustache flat to his lip, and say, frowning, 'Allow for time, Ludwig. She will come.'

Ludwig would stare at his unlaced boots, the scuffs on the leather. Then, he would sigh, slip off the boots, and let them clatter to the ground. The two of them would pass the day as they always did, burrowed inside the house, trying to pretend they weren't helpless.

But three days before the election, Ludwig tied up his laces, a loop, a swoop, a pull, and stood up. Mendelssohn tried to hide the alarm in his face.

‘Ludwig. Come. We stay. Is better to stay.’

Ludwig shook his head. ‘I cannot wait any longer,’ he signed.

‘What will you do? Walk in as guest?’ Mendelssohn laughed, but of course, nothing was funny.

‘I will go to the police.’

Mendelssohn bowed his head, shook it sadly. ‘Ludwig. Police do nothing. You know. We stay put. Is best.’

Ludwig gesticulated firmly, frustration in every movement. ‘No. Our friend’s lives are in danger. I will go. Even if you won’t.’

‘Please, Ludwig. You know what they do. What they have done before.’

‘I can’t wait here. I am going now. If you can’t stand up for your friends, if you are too weak to care for them, then stay here. It’s what you’ve always done.’

Ludwig’s words hung heavy in the air. Mendelssohn was stunned. He pressed a hand to his wet mouth, and began to cry silently, his gigantic frame shuddering.

But Ludwig did not comfort him. He frowned, his own chest rising and falling, his fists clenched. He was too angry to do anything other than stand there – too angry with Mendelssohn’s resistance, but, more so, he was angry with his own inaction. He needed Mendelssohn by his side, the man he loved, because he was terrified.

Ludwig couldn’t say this, you understand, he couldn’t admit it to Mendelssohn. To do so would be too much.

Instead, he felt a sudden animus towards his dearest friend, something that compelled his hands to sign, firmly, and resolutely, as if they were separate and beyond his control.

‘You have always been too weak, Mendelssohn. You have always put yourself before your friends. Stay here if you must. Stay where it is safe. But I will not.’

And then he turned and left Mendelssohn alone to cry softly in that room.

Ludwig knew Mendelssohn was right. The police would do nothing. But that only made his anger grow. He lingered by the front gate, willing himself to turn back, to tell Mendelssohn he needed him, that he was sorry, but then he pushed the gate near enough off its hinges and strode down the street.

So, yes, he knew he was on a fool’s errand. In the end, Ludwig didn’t go to the police station because he thought they would help him. He went there because there was nothing left to do. His body was rigid with furious, hot energy.

When he burst through the front doors of the police station he saw Constable Merrick sitting languorously, feet propped up on the desk, a magazine in one hand, his other scratching the dimple on his chin. And Ludwig, whose blood still buzzed with a violent energy from his fight with Mendelssohn, felt a sudden surge of rage. For now, with all the madness of the town happening around them, and after Megan had pleaded, day after day, for the police to inquire about my mother, here was the dopiest, dimmest of the lot perched lazily on his seat, as if nothing, and no one, had a care in the world. With tears stinging the corners of his eyes, Ludwig approached the desk, abandoning his decision to seek, humbly, and courteously, assistance. Merrick, having been roused by the ding of the front door, looked up with a glib smile before a moment of recognition dawned across his pinched face. He scrambled up from his chair.

‘Oi! You’re that nutter from the hill.’

But Ludwig ignored him. He snatched the magazine straight from the officer’s hands.

‘Hey. My funnies!’ Merrick lurched forward, but Ludwig yanked it from his reach. Ludwig grasped it with both hands.

‘Don’t you dare,’ Merrick shouted, but then the magazine was in two pieces and he watched them spiral to the floor. ‘You’re gonna pay for that, you little runt.’

He scrambled for his handcuffs as he rounded the desk. ‘Don’t move, mate,’ he warned.

Ludwig had never been one to indulge in the whims of authority. It was one of his most endearing quirks. So, as Merrick made to grab him, cuffs held aloft, Ludwig sidestepped and stuck a leg out, cool as you like, and caught Merrick around the ankles, sending him tumbling to the floor. He dived on Merrick, who scrambled desperately underneath him, and managed to handcuff Merrick’s wrist to his ankle. Perched atop of the squirming, moaning constable, Ludwig gave a guttural laugh and felt, at least briefly, a modicum of satisfaction.

When Temperence walked in off the street, she saw Ludwig chortling like a maniac on top of the writhing Merrick. It took a moment to comprehend the strange scene before her.

‘Jesus, Merrick. What the hell is going on?’

Temperence marched Ludwig down the corridor to the cells, Merrick rubbing the welts on his wrist behind them.

‘In,’ Temperence ordered, and Ludwig slouched into the cell. She rolled the cell door shut with a clang.

‘Serves you right, you little maniac,’ Merrick hissed.

‘Shut up, Merrick,’ Temperence snapped, and the pair of them left Ludwig to nurse a bruised eye.

‘It’s Ludwig, isn’t it?’

Ludwig looked up. Jack slid out from the bottom bunk and smiled grimly.

‘Looks like we’re bunking together, mate.’

## 29.

On the morning before the election, Barnaby stood on bowed legs at the edge of the jetty, eyes unfocused, staring out at the roiling ocean as the first fingers of muddy light crested the horizon. The sky was a smear of grey clouds, fat and juicy with rain, the wind whipped hot and salty. Barnaby fumbled in his jacket pocket and pressed a flask to his dry lips. The squirt of scotch burnt as it hit the back of his throat, but he glugged it down like it was water. He tried to pocket the flask, but it slipped from his hand and landed with a thunk at his feet.

‘Fuck.’

He bent down to pick it up, one arm wrapped around the jetty railing, but the flask appeared to be in two places at once, and Barnaby gave up with a heaved sigh. A seagull, perched on a rusty flagpole, watched him try to stand. It laughed at Barnaby.

‘You little shit,’ he hissed, and waved his arms at it. It didn’t move. ‘I said piss off.’

The seagull, unperturbed, lifted from its perch and settled on the railing, just out of reach. Barnaby eyed it dangerously.

‘You’re picking a fight with the wrong bird, man.’

If, by chance, you were out early that morning, you would have seen a grown man diving at a seagull. You would have also seen the seagull easily dodge the attack, and the man crash headlong into the railings. If you’d decided to investigate, you would have found a very drunk Barnaby on his back, moaning in the hot morning breeze. Like the seagull, you probably would have laughed.

As Barnaby lay there, heading spinning, shoulders aching, trying to catch his breath, he cast his mind back to three days ago. There he was, sitting in his office chair, allowing himself a flicker of a smile. He twirled the phone cord in his fingers.

‘Yes, Gerald. I’m as relieved as you are. Just sorry I couldn’t be there to help clear out those ruddy protestors myself. But I heard the federal police took care of things quickly and with as much force as possible.’

‘About bloody time,’ Gerald hissed on the other end of the line. ‘Mind, I had to twist a few arms in Canberra to get that piece of legislation passed. Production should be in full swing by tomorrow. Now, what about – what’s his name? John?’

Despite himself, Barnaby squirmed uncomfortably in his chair. ‘Ah, it’s Jack. And nothing to worry about there. I’ve taken care of it.’

‘Good. Very good. Let’s keep it that way, alright? I presume you’ve seen yesterday’s papers?’

Barnaby picked up his copy of the *Herald Sun*. It was almost too good to be true. Staring back at him, surrounded by a swarming crowd, all wide-eyed with disbelief, was a young Indian girl, hardly older than ten, with tentacles for arms. Yes, dear reader, the suckering, slippery type favoured by the octopus. Incredible, really, and if I wasn’t a man with gills, I wouldn’t have believed it myself. Yet there she was –

‘Squid girl. What are the odds, eh?’ Barnaby grinned. ‘Personally, I would have gone for something like The Tentacled Terror, or Octo – ’

‘Yes,’ Gerald cut him short. ‘Seems like you’ve found yourself in a spot of luck. It’ll help. Maybe we can finally all move on from this fishboy thing.’ Now, his voice turned ice cold. ‘But don’t get cocky, Barnaby. You fuck this up and let Donald win then we’re all cooked. Understood?’

‘Yep. Course, Gerald. Understood.’ He swallowed hard.

‘Well, alright then.’

Barnaby put the phone down carefully, as if worried it might explode in his face. He rubbed the back of his neck as he tried to catch his breath.

But the truth was, Barnaby *had* landed unwittingly in a spot of good fortune. With the protestors cleared away, the mine went back into full swing. And with Squidgirl suddenly the monster of the moment, the media, who by now had stretched the fishboy story so far it wouldn’t cover a slice of toast, packed their bags and got the hell out of town.

So when Richard Quinten paid Barnaby a visit two days later, Barnaby felt very nearly jaunty. He looked up with a sneer from behind his desk as Quinten slithered like a sea slug into his office.

‘Ah, Richard Quinten,’ he said, linking his hands behind his head. ‘From what rock did you crawl out from?’

‘Barnaby, mate,’ Quinten said as he closed the door behind him. He cast an eye around Barnaby’s cluttered office. ‘You look...well.’



‘Yeah, and you look like shit. What of it?’

‘Jeez,’ Quinten said with mock offence. ‘What’s with the antagonism?’

Barnaby’s eyes became little slits. He leant forwards and jabbed his finger at Quinten. ‘Don’t start with me, you prick. You don’t think I haven’t been reading the drivel you’re printing?’

‘I feel blessed,’ Quinten said, smiling smugly. ‘The most important man in Fortune reads my paper – oops. Sorry, second most important.’ Quinten winked.

‘Real funny stuff. Now piss off.’

Quinten held up a conciliatory palm. ‘Alright, alright. I’ll be nice. I didn’t come here for a pissing contest, anyway. I came here for business.’

‘Business?’

‘Yeah.’

‘What sort of business could you possibly offer me?’

Quinten stroked his moustache. ‘The type that’s good for both of us.’

A pause as Barnaby sized up that offering. Then, ‘Go on.’

‘A debate. You and Donald, night before the election.’

Barnaby snorted. ‘A debate? With that nutter?’

‘That’s what I said.’

‘And how exactly is that good for both of us?’

Quinten rested his manicured hands on Barnaby’s desk and leant forward. ‘Simple. A last chance for you to show you’re the man for the job. Between you and me, Donald has become – how can I say – increasingly delusional. Most of the time I don’t think he even knows where he is or who he’s talking to. You get him talking on actual issues and I guarantee you can show him up and bring the town to their senses.’

Barnaby eyed Quinten carefully. ‘And what’s in it for you? I thought you were some sort of convert yourself. Now you’re throwing your messiah under the bus? For what?’

‘Mate,’ Quinten sneered. ‘You think I give two shits about all that garbled nonsense Donald spouts? No, here’s the deal. I’ll get Donald down there on Saturday night, and when you win you use council money to buy my newspaper.’

‘Excuse me? Why the hell would I do that?’

‘Because the thing is thousands of dollars in debt and I want to be rid of it, and this town, for good. So, your council is going to take it off my hands and I’ll be out of here.’

Quinten folded his arms and smirked. ‘Or you can miss the opportunity to show Donald for

what he really is. A nut job without a plan.’ He stepped back from the desk with a shrug. ‘Choice is yours, mate.’

Barnaby rolled Quinten’s offer around in his mouth. A chance to show up Donald, on his terms, from a position of strength, did seem too good an opportunity to pass up. Plus, he thought with a thrum of pleasure, he could always screw Quinten later. Nothing, in fact, would please our perfidious, backstabbing Barnaby more.

He held out his hand and smiled. ‘Deal. Saturday night before the election. Wonky, yeah?’

Quinten grinned and took up Barnaby’s hand. ‘I’ll shout you a pint.’

The two men shook hands both knowing it was worth nothing. When Richard stepped back, Barnaby leant back in his seat.

‘Notice you still haven’t printed anything about Squidgirl yet,’ he said, nodding to the *Herald Sun* spread across his desk. ‘Strange, considering. Worried that Donald and his fishboy aren’t so crash hot anymore?’

Quinten’s lip curled. ‘People get bored quickly. They want their freaks fresh. It’s always been that way.’ He shrugged. ‘So Fishboy’s had its time in the sun. Whatever.’

Barnaby shrugged with a smile sly. ‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘Whatever. See you Saturday, Dicky.’

Quinten scowled. ‘Yeah. Best of luck. Not that you need it.’

As Quinten shut the door behind him, Barnaby felt more energetic than he had in weeks. The election was on Sunday, and finally, after every foul move that had befallen him, Barnaby felt like he might actually prevail. He’d spent the rest of the day writing his victory speech.

Then, he’d received the letter.

Franca gave it to him in the kitchen, casual as you like, when he’d come home Friday afternoon. Just by the look of it, Barnaby knew it was bad news. The hurried scrawl on the envelope, the Sydney return address. The weight of it in his hand.

‘Dinner’s ready in ten, dear.’

He didn’t listen. He rushed to this study and closed the doors behind him. With feverish fingers, he peeled open the envelope and watched the letter slip out like a death notice.

*This came across my desk. You know I have to run it but wanted to give you the heads up. Someone will contact you for comment. Hope you've got a damn good lawyer. Yours, Geoff.*

And there, in the envelope, a photocopy of a document bearing Barnaby's signature. A document that just so happened to implicate the sad sap in a very sticky situation concerning Jack's family, the mine, and a very toxic leak.

Barnaby ignored Franca's shouts as he rushed back to the office. He tore the office inside out, searching for the manila folder, the same one Megan had taken long ago. When Barnaby collapsed, finally, in the middle of his rubble strewn office, the only thing left to do was drink. So that's what he did. And he hadn't stopped.

On the jetty, Barnaby tried to sit up, made it half way, and then tipped backwards. Instead, he rolled on to his side. The seagull watched him as he stuffed a hand into his pocket and retrieved the crinkled envelope. The very sight of it made his heart race.

'Barn?'

The seagull took flight as Temperence thudded along the jetty towards Barnaby. He stuffed the letter back in his pocket.

'Whozat?' he mumbled.

'Bloody Christ. I thought that was you.'

Temperence stepped into view. She peered down at Barnaby.

'What are you doing?'

'Juss having a lay down. Could you...' He stretched again for the flask. 'Could you give ush a hand with the scosh?'

Temperence picked up the flask. She looked down at Barnaby, a wobbly grin on his face, and then pitched it over the edge.

'Heeeeeey,' he whined. 'Thass my flask.'

She frowned at him as he tried to wriggle up.

'Barnaby. You've got a bloody debate on tonight and you're pissed as anything.'

'I'm calling the debate off. Ish pointlesh. Donald's won.'

Temperence helped Barnaby up into a sitting position. He rested on the railing and stared out at the ocean, little tears forming in the corners of his eyes.

'I'm a goner, Temp. Finished.'

'What are you talking about?' She gripped his shoulder. 'You can still win this.'

Barnaby turned to her with unfocused eyes. He gave a crinkled smile.

‘You’re a good egg, Temp. Heartsh is in the right place. Maybe you and me coulda – ’  
His head began to nod forwards. ‘You and me coulda.’ But then his head dropped on to his chest. The drunk bugger had passed out.

Temperence sighed.

‘You’re going to kill yourself one day if you’re not careful, Barn.’ She fiddled with her walkie-talkie. ‘Merrick. Get down to the jetty sharpish, will you? And bring a towel.’

\*

Barnaby woke up on the floor of Temperence’s office. His head felt as if it had been kicked down a narrow flight of stairs. His body ached. Had he eaten a mouthful of dirt? It certainly felt that way.

‘Barn?’

A splash of hot sun burst through the open blinds.

‘Jesus. Light. Light!’ he muttered, clawing at the air.

‘Sorry,’ Temperence said, drawing the blinds half shut.

Barnaby, with immense effort, hauled himself up.

‘Here.’ Temperence held a steaming cup of coffee out to Barnaby. He sniffed it, then took the cup gingerly from her. The afternoon light appeared like a cloudy eye in the black of the coffee.

‘Where the bloody hell am I?’

‘My office. I found you on the jetty.’

‘The jetty?’

It all came flooding back. The letter. The end of his career. The seagull.

‘That fucking bird,’ he hissed.

‘What?’

Barnaby, hair blasted back like an exclamation mark, peered up at Temperence.

‘Nothing. What time is it?’

‘Four-thirty. You’ve got the debate in an hour.’

Barnaby’s face dropped a shade of green. He put the coffee aside. ‘No. No, no, no. Can’t. Pointless. Gotta leave. Gotta get out.’

Temperence squatted next to him. ‘What are you saying, Barn? You’ve got to.’

‘It’s useless, Temp. I’m cooked. Donald’s going to win this and I’m going to...’ He could hardly bring himself to say it. ‘I’m going to prison.’

‘Prison? Barnaby, you’re not a crook, you’re the bloody mayor.’

At this, Barnaby chuckled sadly. 'Not for long.' He fell quiet, his breath heavy, staring at a stain on the carpet. 'Listen, Temp.' His arm shot out and he grabbed her roughly by the wrist. 'That night. I did what I did because I wanted to save this town. You understand?' He stared at Temperance with bulging eyes, his grip tightening. 'I did what I thought was best. But I did a bad thing, didn't I? It was just a...a child. It was harmless. And I did a terrible, terrible thing.'

Temperance winced. She tried to prise her arm free, but Barnaby held fast.

'Barn. You had to do something. I know that. You do too. We did what we thought we had to do.'

Barnaby nodded slowly. 'We? Yes. We did, didn't we?'

'No one but us knows. Okay? And no one needs to know. You know, Barn. You know I wouldn't. I wouldn't ever do anything to put you in harm's way.' And then, suddenly, Temperance stooped and kissed Barnaby, deeply, on the lips. When she pulled back she smiled, even though the inside of his mouth tasted like hot cement. She cast her eyes to the ground. 'Sorry.'

Barnaby's grip slackened. He pulled his hand to his lips and felt her saliva there, sticky and warm.

'I shouldn't have done that,' she muttered, staring at the carpet. 'That was dumb. I'm so sorry, Barn.'

He looked up at her and a giddy look passed across his face. And then he pitched forwards and kissed her so deeply and so strongly that they fell backwards onto that crusty, filthy carpet.

\*

They drove together to the Wonky twenty minutes later, neither speaking, both staring straight ahead. When they pulled up outside, Temperance glanced at Barnaby.

'Barn. I don't know what to – I mean, I can't believe we just...'

He nodded roughly. 'Yep. Okay then.'

As Barnaby opened his door Temperance grabbed his arm. 'Good luck, Barn. Give 'em hell.'

'Yeah – uh – thanks.' He couldn't meet her eye.

Barnaby stepped heavily on to the pavement as Quinten bustled out from the pub. His eyes slid straight from a dishevelled Barnaby to Temperance sitting in her car. A sly smile crept across his face.

‘Was wondering when you’d show, Barnaby. Something hold you up?’

‘Yeah, I was paying your mother a visit,’ he growled. ‘Is Donald here yet?’

Quinten’s smile faltered. ‘He’s running late.’ He couldn’t help glance at his watch. ‘He’ll be here.’

‘Yeah, well. If he doesn’t show, then you can kiss our deal goodbye.’

Barnaby clamped a hand on Quinten’s shoulder. Internally, our bilious Barnaby willed himself not to spew on Quinten’s lapel. Steadying himself, he gave a crooked smile.

‘See you in there, Dicky ol’ boy.’

Barnaby left Quinten to scowl as he stepped into that dark musty pub, his heart hammering in his chest. He cast his gaze around the room. Earl had slid back the fogged glass divider between the front bar and the restaurant and arranged a row or two of old leather chairs. Most of the seats were occupied already, folk sitting with frosty pints and glasses of chardonnay, tight-lipped and nervous, hardly speaking. Earl’s wife, Janette, weaved through the crowd with a plate of sausage rolls. The floor was a mess of pastry flakes and blood red tomato sauce drippings. Someone had thrown a few coins into the jukebox and Morrissey’s *Everyday is like Sunday* was playing softly in the background.

‘Ah, Barnaby. Good of you to grace us with your presence.’ Margaret shuffled over with Lenard and Reverend Nelson in tow.

Barnaby gave her a distracted smile. ‘Margey. You look an absolute picture.’

‘No sign of Donald yet,’ said Lenard, nervously. ‘You’ve got everything prepared?’

Barnaby’s gaze had returned to the room. ‘Hey?’ He turned back to Lenard. ‘Yeah, sure. You know me,’ he grinned. ‘This is my bread and butter.’

Nelson grasped him by the hands. ‘Just let the word of the lord speak through you.’

‘Yeah, because that’s got us so far already,’ he smirked, wriggling free of Nelson’s grip.

‘Don’t fuck this up, Barnaby,’ Margaret hissed, frowning, before breaking into a broad smile as Janette approached with her sausage rolls. ‘No, thank you, Janette. And you’re an absolute darling for hosting us.’ When Janette passed, she whipped back around and thrust a bejewelled finger at Barnaby. ‘Just get this thing over the line and everything will be a-okay. Okay?’

Barnaby swallowed back a retort. Instead, he smiled, and said, loudly enough for the room to hear, ‘Lovely, Margaret. Thanks for your support.’

Before she could respond, he bustled off to the bar.

‘Beer thanks, Earl.’

Earl slapped down a beer and Barnaby sent it down his gullet in one go. He brought his lips together with a great smacking noise, as if to say, yes, there is nothing like a cold, crisp brew for a strong, capable man.

‘Another, thanks. And a scotch, if you please, man. That’s the ticket.’

He turned back to the crowd and his stomach dropped: Franca was leading Beth back from the toilets. For a second, his eyes locked with Franca’s, and Barnaby was certain that somehow, impossibly, she knew exactly what he and Temperence had just done. He tried to smile but found himself forgetting how to do it. Beth waved at her father and Franca, taking one look at Barnaby’s sallow skin and crinkled clothes, shook her head in a sad kind of way. Barnaby waved feebly and then turned back to the bar.

Absently, he pawed at his pants leg and felt the bulge of the letter burning in his pocket. He glanced back at Franca who was eyeing him dangerously, arms crossed, mouth a thin line. On the other side of the room, Margaret, Lenard and Reverend Nelson stood with their heads bowed in whispered discussion. Temperence shuffled in through the emergency exit, shirt half-way tucked into her trousers. Before she could catch his eyes, Barnaby snapped back to the bar, glugged down the pint of beer, and took the scotch in a hit. Stifling a burp, Barnaby gripped the edge of the bar.

What did it matter if he won the election or not, he thought? In a day or two, the red and blue of the federal police would throw shards of colour across the main street and he’d would be hauled off in disgrace. Like a common criminal. What would Franca say? How would his daughter remember her father? With a pang, he wondered if she’d even remember his name. His head swayed. Little black dots, like flies, buzzed around his vision. He shut his eyes and buried his head in his hands.

Yes, it seemed like our busted Barnaby was dust, and history – though it normally makes a fudge of these sorts of things – would record him as just another clueless and corrupt official.

Except –

As the scotch dripped into his belly, Barnaby felt something else, a tingling through his arms and legs, a lightness coming over him. Alongside his despair was another feeling now – something wild and messy – and when he opened his eyes the flies had disappeared, and instead the world seemed brighter, more vivid.

He swallowed hard. Balled his fists. Cricked his neck.

No, he thought. If he was going down, then, hell, he'd go down swinging. He'd do this his way: Not pussyfooting it but barrelling into the pack screaming bloody murder. All he had to do was be the biggest bloke in the room. And he'd done that a thousand times before. Standing there, he heard the words of his father after a beating: *Hit them before they hit you, Boris.*

Yes, he thought. That's what he'd do. Too bloody easy.

He looked at his watch: 6.10. Donald had kept them all waiting too long. He motioned to Earl. 'One more, thanks. There's a good man,' and once he'd tossed back another scotch, he turned to the crowd. This is it, Barnaby. Your time to shine.

And then the front door burst open and Janet Pembridge stood panting in the doorway.

'I think you're all gonna wanna see this!'

Everyone piled out onto the street.

Janet's breathless voice tumbled past her flushed lips. 'I was having a smoke when I saw lights coming down the hill! I swear it!'

They all rushed out into the fading light and looked towards the hills in the distance. No one moved, not for the mozzies buzzing around their necks, not for the beers going flat in their hands. The salty air whipped hot at their backs. Across the ocean, fat clouds closed in behind them.

Everyone waited. Barnaby squinted in the dusk but all he could see was the green glow of the BP sign at the end of the street.

He turned to Janet and whispered, 'I don't see anything.'

'It was right there up on the hill,' she said.

'What are we looking for?' someone mumbled.

'Shh! Can't you hear that?'

They listened. For a second, Barnaby thought he could hear the therump therump of his own heart. He glanced around nervously – could everyone else hear that? – until he realised it wasn't him. The sound was coming from the end of the street, something like the steady one-two of a drum beat.

'What is it, Barn?' someone asked.

'The hell if I know.'

He could hear something else now. It sounded like – yes, it sounded like singing. A doleful chanting, funereal and slow, caught on the breeze.



Someone gasped and pointed to the end of the street. 'There!'

Barnaby's eyes strained in the light, and then he saw it, first as rippled disturbances in the air, then as sticky shapes twisting into something solid. A crowd of people marching purposefully up the street towards them.

'What is that?' someone whispered.

'It's *them*.'

In the distance, the procession took shape. The flock of white robes shifted like a heavy cloud across the bitumen. They held flambeaus above their heads that cast an eerie glow about their faces. Barnaby could see Donald, bare chested, leading the charge. At the rear, pushed along on wheels and covered in a golden blanket; my tank.

'Jesus,' Barnaby murmured. He beckoned Temperence and constable Merrick over. Temperence brushed up against him and he felt a little flutter. They locked eyes briefly and Temperence attempted a smile.

'Be ready for anything,' he said. 'I mean it. Whatever you've got to do.'

Temperence drew a shaking hand to her holster.

As the procession marched on, the breeze coming off the ocean eased. They began to hear the Fish Kissers' song:

*The Fish, the Fish.*

*We kiss the Fish.*

*Free us from sins,*

*Most gracious gift!*

Barnaby wiped the sweat from his brow. The drunk confidence he'd felt so strongly before was beginning to dribble away. Behind him, everyone was silent. The procession drew close, close enough for the townsfolk to see the hair on Donald's chest, the green of his eyes. Close enough to hear the thump of those drums reverberating in their ears, as if the sound was coming from inside their heads. Close enough to make them all very afraid.

The procession halted. Donald stepped forward and spread those cracked lips of his. His crumbling teeth glinted in the last gasps of light.

'Fancy seeing you all here, Barnaby.'

'The debate was at six, mate,' he retorted. 'You and you're freakshow are too late.'

Donald frowned. 'Now, come on. No need for hurtful diatribes, mate. Me and my friends here are good, honest people. Regular folk, just like yourself.'

The sight of all those people in white robes, of Donald standing there half-naked, all glowing in the light of their flambeaus, gave Barnaby shivers all the way down to his arse. He might have weed himself – and yes, that would have been utterly perfect – but to his credit he didn't. Instead, he loosened his tie, took a deep breath and said, 'The day your lot decided to abandon this town was the day you all stopped being regular folk.'

That felt good. Filling his chest with air and then spitting it back out with force. He managed a lopsided smile. 'So kindly piss off back the way you came, would you?'

'Ooh. You're a nasty little fella, aren't you? Won't you let me speak, huh?'

'Don't waste our time. You've been causing enough trouble as it is. I *said* fuck off back up the hill or we'll arrest the lot of you.'

Donald smirked. 'What? Every single one of us?'

And suddenly, the size of Donald's gathering seemed to dawn on Barnaby. There were hundreds of them. He looked back at the smattering of townsfolk behind him, barely fifty in number, all looking terrified. Beside him, Temperence quivered.

'So, then, won't you let me speak?'

Barnaby opened his mouth to offer some rebuke, to stamp his authority on the situation, but the wind, as if in cahoots with Donald, whipped Barnaby's words right from his mouth. He shivered as Donald stepped forward, demure in the fading light.

'My friends. My dear companions.' Donald clasped his hands before him and then pulled them apart, offering them up to the townsfolk. 'My children. I stand before you now, here, in gentle submission. I stand here as nothing more than a simple man who wishes to warn you – nay' – Donald lifted a single finger in correction – 'implore you to listen. I come here as a caring friend, a concerned citizen, who sees a town that is sick. A town whose people – kind, generous people, mind – are staring down the barrel, practically sticking their noses right up the ruddy thing, but who don't know that their faces are about to be blown clean off.'

'Come off it. You're just trying to scare these people,' Barnaby managed to say. 'You get off on it.'

Donald chuckled. 'The truth is always scary, Barnaby. Like the truth of you running people off their land. The truth of you taking kickbacks from the mine all these years. The truth' – and now Donald's brow darkened – 'of you letting that great, dirty mine poison this town. The truth of my wife, my beautiful Jules, getting sick because of your greed.'

‘Poison?’ Barnaby spluttered. ‘You’re talking out your arse, man. That mine is the one thing keeping this town together.’

‘That mine killed my Jules,’ Donald barked. ‘That mine destroyed my life.’

His voice rang out across the still air. He stood with his chest heaving, up and down, up and down.

‘Is that what this is all about? Is this just revenge for some lie you’ve cooked up in your own head?’ Now Barnaby managed a quivering laugh of his own. ‘You’ll destroy this whole town just to see some twisted justice done?’

‘This town,’ Donald hissed, trying to calm himself, ‘has been destroying itself all on its own. You and that disgusting mine are just the final nail in the coffin. You think you can escape what you’ve done, Barnaby? Not bloody likely. And tomorrow, when I win that election, you’ll be the first to answer for your sins.’

‘Win?’ Barnaby spat. ‘You think you’ll actually win? You think all these people standing behind me are going to let you ruin this town?’

Donald smirked. He looked back at the mass of followers behind him. ‘You haven’t been doing your reading, Barnaby? Bylaw 73: anyone with a valid residence in the Fortune district area can register to vote. It’s a bit cramped up on the farm, but we’re all living there, didn’t you know? It’s a simple process, really. Just the one form. All you do is mail it in.’

Barnaby was utterly punctured. He looked at Temperence for answers, back to Margaret and Lenard standing white-faced not far behind. They offered him no looks of assurance, no words to counter Donald’s claim. So, it was all Barnaby could do to mutter, sotto voce, ‘Bullshit.’

Donald cupped a hand to his ear, theatrically, gleefully. ‘Pardon?’

Barnaby drew sharp breaths. He said again, louder, with incredible effort, ‘Bullshit. It’ll never stand up in court. They’ll never let a madman run this town.’

‘I think you know they will. They’ve been doing it for ten years now. You’re toast Barnaby,’ he hissed. ‘Finished.’

Now, Donald addressed the crowd behind Barnaby: the townsfolk with their faces set in anguish, lips pursed, hands trembling. Old Geoffrey Clements with his crooked leg and his bald head reflecting the light of the flambeaus; Janet Pembridge clutching her brood of five tightly, eyes shimmering, peroxide blonde hair scrunched in a loose fuzz; Megan’s husband Matthew, holding Sarah in his arms, whispering softly in her ear that everything would be alright.

‘As for the rest of you,’ Donald said. ‘I’m giving you one last chance. Tonight, you must choose. Any man, woman or child that accepts themselves into the light, that seeks the righteous path of the fish, shall be forever rewarded. And those that don’t – those who choose to ignore the signs, to ignore the true way, they will answer for their sins, just like this fat man here.’ He pointed a jagged finger at Barnaby. ‘Ignore the light and all the misdeeds of your past will come back to haunt you. And I can tell you, folks, they’re bloody terrifying.’

Barnaby felt his stomach sink, felt his guts drop so quickly they must have been spilling out through a split in his skin. Because wasn’t he already haunted? Wasn’t that letter burning a hole in his pocket like a haunting come to ruin him? And hadn’t his terrible misdeed, this fishboy he thought he’d killed all those years ago; hadn’t I come back?

Donald raised his hand above his head and motioned to the back of the procession. The container shifted forwards. The Fish Kissers parted as it passed to the front.

‘The fish is a sign. The fish has foretold this doom. The disbelievers will soon burn in agony, so sayeth the fish.’

The congregation echoed Donald’s words, *so sayeth the fish*, as one, so that their voices filled the air completely. Donald smirked.

Barnaby clutched at Temperence’s elbow. ‘Temp, come on,’ he pleaded. ‘Stop him.’ But she was frozen with fear, just like the rest of them.

Donald stepped aside as the container came to a halt at the front of the procession. ‘I know you all felt it that first night in the town hall. Some of you saw the light, but others – well – it can be hard to give up the only thing you know.’ Donald shrugged. ‘Maybe you can’t be blamed.’

Donald gripped the golden blanket covering the container. The pulsing one-two of the drums began in earnest.

‘But you can’t ignore the signs. Not any longer. Do, and – well – that’ll be all, folks.’

Donald grinned and tore back the blanket with a flourish. And there I was, exactly where I was expected to be – Fishboy – spinning with terror in the dark blue of that tank. But this was no longer the slimy little thing that Donald had pulled from his rucksack all those weeks ago in the town hall. This was Fishboy transformed, caught in the firelight of all those flickering flambeaus so my shape was twisted, made larger than life, an immense shadow flashing through the water. And with the adrenaline of fear coursing through the townsfolk’s veins, with those pulsing drums squeezing their hearts with ever thump, Fishboy seemed positively prophetic.

In that moment I was so caught up with rabid fear that I was beyond control. I could only spin helplessly, like a wild beast in a frenzy.

Of course, knowing what I now know, I might have willed myself to calm my nerves, to attempt to tell them, in simple terms, that they were all about to make a terrible mistake. But I did not, and besides, who would have listened?

While I spun furiously in that tank, the Fish Kissers began to hum. And Donald stepped forward and began to speak, and his voice melded with the thump thump of the drums and the purr of the procession, and the townsfolk heard his words like they were coming from inside their own heads.

‘The world is sick, my friends. The world is crumbling into nothing and the fish is the sign. A sign that all your greed and all your sins have become too much. The fish heralds the end, and only those who listen will be saved.’

He held his arms out to the townsfolk. ‘I offer you this last chance. Tomorrow, when the ballots are cast and counted you will have a new mayor. A mayor who will love all and treat people equally and magnanimously. But I will not, in good conscience, be able to ignore those who have refused to accept the light of the fish. Those who wish to hold on to the old ways *must* be cast off. I say to you now, join us, your brethren, join us tonight and allow yourself to be purified. Allow yourself to join the Fortune of the future.’

As Donald stood there, arms aloft, with the Fish Kissers humming, the one-two of the drums pulsing, some of the townsfolk stepped forward. Yes, those same ones that had so steadfastly held firm – people like Geoffrey Clements and Janet Pembridge with her brood of five – they were now crossing over to the other side as if it was the only choice left to them. They allowed Donald to pull them close, kiss them on the forehead and then send them into the fold.

Barnaby screamed after them. ‘Don’t think you can come back, you bastards! You’re siding with a bloody lunatic.’ He turned desperately to those who remained. ‘They’re dangerous. Can’t you see? They want to hurt us. They want to destroy our community!’

Donald raised his hand and the humming stopped, the drums fell silent. He stood for a moment, regarding the scattered audience – barely thirty of them – left before him.

‘Very well,’ he said. ‘Your moment has passed. The fish hath spoken.’

The Fish Kissers echoed as one: ‘The fish hath spoken.’

He signalled with his hand. The blanket was thrown once more over the tank, and I was returned to darkness. Then, Donald turned, and the procession, slowly, as one, followed. As they marched away, they repeated the refrain:

*The Fish, the Fish,*

*We kiss the Fish.*

*Give unto us,*

*Most gracious gift!*

The townsfolk watched them go. No one dared speak until the sound of that funereal chant had subsided, until the last of the firelight disappeared and all they could see was the glow of the petrol station ahead. The hiss of the ocean returned. Above them, a streetlamp sputtered to life. In the distance, the rumble of thunder.

Margaret strode over to Barnaby with purpose, but she was visibly shaken. Lenard and Nelson hurried along behind her. ‘Barnaby,’ she said. ‘What the hell are you going to do, man?’

But her words reached Barnaby as if through a long tunnel. He wavered on the spot, his eyes trained desperately on the hill.

Earl Mackenzie was next to step forward. ‘We’ve got to do something.’

A few murmurs in the crowd. ‘Yeah, Barn, what do we do now?’

‘We can’t let that maniac win!’

‘Do something, Barnaby.’

Barnaby stood rigid and silent, his jaw clenched, shirt sticking to his sweaty back. At his side, Temperance whispered, ‘Barn?’

He blinked several times, our disjointed, dispirited Barnaby, feeling all those eyes on him, waiting for leadership. Finally, he turned to face them.

‘Well?’ Margaret pressed.

‘We can’t let this go on,’ Lenard whimpered.

‘The man needs to be stopped,’ Nelson said.

The townsfolk growled their assent, but as Barnaby stood there he knew he’d already lost. The letter in his pocket was enough to undo him. Even if he could contest the claims, drag out the ensuing investigation, he was still about to lose the election to Donald. Besides, he thought bitterly, the mining company would throw him to the sharks without blinking. He’d be torn to shreds.

So, this was it, Boris Barnaby, mayor of Fortune: done and dusted and bloody well finished all together.

Except, as it happened, he wasn't quite finished. Not yet. As he stood there, chest heaving, the burning eyes of expectation on him, he willed himself into being. What about everything he'd worked so hard for, he thought? All his ambitions, all his success, the family he'd provided for, the name he'd crafted out for himself over years and years. All of those things, those precious things that he wished he hadn't simply taken for granted. He couldn't just throw them away. He could still do something, couldn't he? Something to shift the tide, something to keep his head above water. Or at least, something to make Donald pay for everything he'd done.

*Hit them before they hit you, Boris.*

When he spoke, finally, it was through sharp, painful breaths.

'We've let that prick and his merry band of lunatics get on for too long. You're right. If Donald wins tomorrow, you can say goodbye to Fortune. We'll be cooked. Probably run out of town.'

Megan's husband stepped forward. 'It'll be fine, surely. We all just need to calm down.'

'You so sure about that? He'll find a way,' Barnaby hissed. 'He's only ever wanted to destroy this town. He's only ever wanted to hurt us. He's not going to stop until he's punished us all.'

There were nods at this. A shout or two of approval.

'We can't let him do this,' Barnaby said, and now his words became more frantic, came tumbling out of his mouth as if they were suggesting themselves. 'We can't let him win. If we let him win we're toast, people. Mark my words. That's pure evil up there – pure unabashed evil – and if we let evil win then that's it. We're finished. You hear? Done. We've got to do something first. We've got to stop them. Before it gets out of hand.'

Barnaby stared at them all, knot pulsing at his temple, his bulging eyes a provocation to them all. *Stop them*, he'd said, and the mad gleam in his eye told the townsfolk exactly what he meant.

And you might think that no, surely, these people would see sense. They'd know that, really, when it came to it, Donald wouldn't be able to get away with all the crazy things Barnaby was suggesting. They'd be rational, wouldn't they?

Well, you might think that, yes. But these people were terrified. After their town had turned into a bizarre sideshow, after their friends and family had disappeared up that hill. After everything that they had ever known had changed, suddenly, irrevocably, before their eyes. After all that, these people were ready to do something rash. They just needed a push.

It took some kneading from Barnaby.

‘They’re not the people you once knew. They’re sick.’

He had to work at their fear like wet dough, had to press and squeeze them, stretch them out, this whole process again, and again.

‘They’re lost to us, and they want to make us suffer.’

Some folk argued against such rashness.

‘We can’t do this,’ they said. ‘This doesn’t have to be the way.’

But they felt the decision sitting deep and unwavering, so they hurried home because they couldn’t stand to hear the unnameable thing named.

Then, under that sputtering streetlamp with the moths gathering and the gulls watching them curiously from the tops of the Wonky, Barnaby convinced those who remained to do the unspeakable.

‘There’s no other choice. It’s us or them.’

‘I can’t let you do it, Barn,’ Temperence whispered.

Barnaby pulled her aside and stuffed the letter in her hand and said, without a tinge of compassion, ‘You said it yourself, Temp. We’re in this together. You screw me and I’ll make sure you live to regret it.’ And she felt the shock of those words, like an iron searing her skin, and she didn’t recognise the man standing before her. The man she’d just opened herself up to.

‘Just don’t do anything stupid,’ she mumbled eventually, and stared down at her feet.

Not even the councillors tried to stop Barnaby. Margaret just watched quietly, her face locked in horror, hands clutching her pearl necklace. And Lenard, too, just nodded without saying a word. Even old Reverend Nelson, man of God, or so he said, muttered a few ‘Amens’ at Barnaby’s words.

As a last plea, Franca stepped forward, holding Beth in her arms. ‘Boris,’ she whispered. ‘Don’t do this. Think of your daughter.’

Barnaby looked at Beth’s sweet, young face, sucking on her thumb and looking up at her deranged daddy with nothing but curious affection. Franca waited, tears staining her cheeks, but Barnaby said nothing. Eventually, she shook her head sadly and went away.



And then, somehow, impossibly, it was decided.

Barnaby looked at those assembled before him, a kind of dazed look on his face. 'This ends now,' he said. 'We do this tonight.'

### 30.

Donald came to see my mother that final night. All the time she'd wasted away there he'd never come to see her, but that night he did. He shuffled in, cautious, less the man who'd just stared down Barnaby and the town, more the man who didn't seem certain of himself, who twitched involuntarily, whose lip trembled ever so slightly in between words. I'd seen this Donald – flashes of it anyway – when he'd visited me, the Donald buried deep beneath that cracked, sallow skin.

He stood at the threshold of her prison. Looking in, he watched my mother lying there, a husk, really, her strength sapped, her manic desperation long since gone. She didn't stir when he said, 'Charmaine.'

With shaking hands, he unlocked the padlock. At this, my mother twitched. She saw Donald's shadow in the dull light.

'Hello,' he said, simply. 'You're awake.'

He pulled the stable door open and stood at the entrance.

'No, no,' my mother whispered, and she dragged herself across the floor, away from Donald.

'It's alright,' he said. 'It's alright.' He thought his words soothing, but they still came as a rattle. To my mother, a death rattle.

She had nowhere else to go. She pushed against the wall of her prison, sat up with the blanket pulled to her chin.

He frowned. 'What are you afraid of? Haven't I fed you? Haven't you been safe in here?'

Donald stepped over the threshold.

'Stay away from me,' my mother croaked. 'Stay back.'

Donald giggled. 'What's the matter? You think I'm dangerous. You've got me all wrong. I've done more for you than you could ever know. Don't you understand the world out there? Don't you realise that the world is going to swallow you whole? You and everyone else. I'm keeping you safe in here.'

'You're delusional.'

He shook his head. 'That's how the enlightened are seen. Demented, broken. Dangerous, even. They are ostracised, cast out to the fringes. Or they are killed. And why? Because they see the truth and they are brave enough to reveal it. They are possessed with enough conviction to hurl the rock at that hall of mirrors. To break it apart and show us the truth.' He nodded at his own pronouncement. 'And if my only delusion is that I thought it might be easier – well, then, that's on me.'

He bowed his head solemnly, stood there in repose until my mother snorted and he jerked up.

'My boy is no sign. That's why people ignore it.'

'Nonsense,' Donald barked. 'They ignore it because they wish to stay in their little dream world. And maybe I can't blame them. Letting go would be too painful. Letting go would be like gnawing off their own hands. I understand,' he said. 'You think I don't, but I do. People are attached to their comfortable lives. That's not their fault. It's the way the world's been created. But it *is* their failing. If they choose to ignore the sign, fair enough. Every revolution has its casualties, doesn't it?'

My mother looked up at him with tears in her eyes. 'It doesn't have to be this way,' she pleaded. 'You can stop this. You can go back to a normal life.'

He looked up, and for a moment they locked eyes, and she saw, in a flash, the look of a man terrified, a man lost in a swirl of his own sorrow and madness. For a brief second, my mother felt a tug of empathy for him. After everything he'd done she still felt sorry for him.

'No,' he whispered. 'I've lost too much.' And then his gaze steeled, and that broken man disappeared. 'You should be thanking me, Charmaine. Your little spy tried to steal my treasure. She would have hurt him. But I put a stop to that.'

So, Megan had been caught. My mother knew that now, and there was no hope left for me, or her. She gave a single, sad laugh, face hot with tears. 'Thank you? You stole my son from me.' She matched Donald's steely gaze. 'I want to kill you.'

'I've realised your boy's potential, Charmaine. He's become something important now. He's not some freak locked up, hidden away. He's powerful, he's significant.' Donald drew a shuddering breath. 'He's beautiful.'

She shot him a look of disgust. 'You're a sick bastard. You haven't done anything but turn him into a monster.'

Donald looked hurt. 'Monster? Impossible. He was a monster when I found him. He was like some blind beast from the dark places of the ocean. He needed me to make him realise his potential. You could have never done that for him.'

'You stole my son and twisted him for your own sick delusions.' She was screaming now, bellowing at Donald until her voice cracked painfully. 'You've never known love, so you destroy other people's happiness. You're a sick fucking –'

Suddenly, Donald was upon her, his fingers around her throat, face twisted in rage. His thumbs pressed the brittle bone beneath her skin, he yanked her and slammed her against the wall. And all the while he bellowed, 'You don't know. You don't fucking know. You don't know what I've lost –'

My mother thought she was dead. With the weight of that man's fury bearing down on her, the heat of his fetid breath, the lick of his spit burning her skin. The air left her lungs, his thumbs crushing her larynx. He would have killed her, you know. He would have torn her apart.

He would have, but he was hauled off my mother at the last moment, caught by surprise, and toppled to the floor. And when he scrambled up, spitting and spluttering, apoplectic, Edith – yes, the very same woman who had abandoned my mother to her fate days before – was standing there, arms raised, tears streaming down her face. She had saved my mother.

Donald stood, disbelieving, shocked enough that his blind rage had subsided and instead he heaved great lungfuls of air.

'Please,' Edith said. 'I couldn't let you – you would have killed her.'

'You fucking dumb bitch,' he spat. He took a step towards her and all she could do was cover her face.

With her last ounce of strength, my mother called out, 'The fish forbids it,' because it was all she could think to say, an inane thing really, and surely it was useless. Miraculously, Donald hesitated, eyes darting to my mother crumbled in a heap on the floor. 'My son – Jonah,' my mother croaked. 'Abhors violence. That would be the greatest sin.'

Donald drew rasping breaths. Then, finally, he spat on the ground and glared at Edith. 'Don't think you won't be punished for this,' he hissed, and he stalked out. 'Come,' he barked.

Before she turned, Edith caught my mother's gaze. Edith nodded, imperceptibly, down at her feet, and my mother heard a dull thud as something dropped from Edith's robes.

She hurried out whispering, 'May the fish forgive me,' as Donald slammed the stable door closed and snatched the lock shut.

My mother listened to them leave, sitting in a heap against the wall, feeling the tenderness of her neck, the spots where Donald's thumbs had pressed. She felt so broken in that moment, my dearest mother. She knew that Donald would likely flay Edith until she begged for death. There was nothing she could do.

She didn't give in, though. Like I said, she was always heroic. Scintillating like the sun. That was her way.

My mother heaved herself up and limped across the filthy floor. She reached for the bundle. It was a dirty piece of cloth, bearing the marks of snot and blood, nothing more. Inside it, though, was a pocket knife.

It was hope.

She felt a trill in her heart, a sudden surge of strength as she staggered across to the far wall, to the spot where she'd broken her nails, bloodied her skin, trying to dig her way to freedom. Before, it had been a useless act of desperation, but now, with this pocket knife, she had a chance.

My mother thought of me, her son, and she knew that no matter what I'd become, no matter if I was no longer the sweet, caring child she'd reared – she would still love me. All she wanted was to hold me close and tell me that everything would be okay.

God, a more courageous woman I'll never know.

But that was just her way.

She flicked open the knife and began to work towards her freedom.

### **31.**

After the procession returned from town, my whole body throbbed with terrified energy, the familiar ache of those burning eyes watching me. But after time, I managed to return to myself, and I knew, more resolutely than ever, that I had to escape.

When Donald burst into the shed in a swirl of agitation, I was lucky, because if he hadn't been so disturbed he might have caught me ricocheting off the glass. But he didn't look up until he reached the tank. I watched his bare chest rise and fall, saw his ribs push against the skin. There were tears in his eyes.

Carefully, he took me from the tank and sat with me on the stage. He didn't speak for some time, just sat with a vacant gaze. I watched him, sensing a strangeness in the way he held himself, neither speaking nor looking at me, just holding me to his chest.

The shed heaved and moaned in the wind. Briefly, rain rattled the tin roof.

'I just want you to know that I'm sorry, boy. For everything. I never wanted it to happen this way. Not really. But I've been left with no other option. It's not up to me anymore.'

He sighed. 'I just wanted to say how proud of you I am. And I'm sorry you never got to say bye to your mum, yeah? I'm sure that – if she could – she'd have told you how much she loves you. But I want you to know I care for you, boy. You're special, you are. Always said that. You mean a lot. To both me and Jules. She's proud of us both.'

He took me to the tank and dropped me back into the water. As he reached for the lid, he looked right at me, and there were tears streaming down his face.

I felt fear fluttering once more in my stomach. I could sense something decisive in his eyes, some terrible decision he'd made, even if I didn't know what.

'I...don't...want...to...be...here...anymore,' I said, my own eyes filling with tears.

Donald's bottom lip quivered. He felt the heaviness of the lid in his hand.

'I'm sorry, boy.'

'I...don't...want...'

'I'm sorry.'

He shook his head, the tears dropping from his face and mixing with the water of my tank.

'I'm sorry.'

He pulled the lid shut. I swam down and watched Donald as he paused at the bottom of my tank. He took one last, lingering look at me, and then took up a bundle of blanket and threw it up and over the tank. Once more, I sat in darkness. Above, a deep growl of thunder.

Then the sky cracked its skin and gushed thunderous rain.

Later, with the rain scattering across the tin roof, the congregation gathered. Those new arrivals – the Geoffrey Clements and the Janet Pembridges of the world stood uncertainly. They felt the bitter tang of soup on their tongues, the warmth trickling through their arms and legs. It all felt so strange.

The Casio watch on Geoffrey's wrist read 11.30PM.

When Donald entered, side-stage, the congregation began to mutter, ‘The fish, the fish, we kiss the fish.’

Donald stopped centre-stage. He held his hands aloft, and the chanting ceased.

‘Brothers. Sisters. We have new friends amongst us.’ Donald spread his arms to the gathering. ‘We welcome you. The fish welcomes you.’

As one: ‘The fish!’

‘I want to thank you all. For all you’ve done. I know the true path can be grim sometimes, frightening even. I know, ‘cause I’ve walked this path myself and I was bloody terrified. But guess what I found at the end of it?’ He left the question hang there for a second or two. ‘The light. And dare I say it? I found myself.’

Donald stared at his feet. Heaved a sigh.

‘When Jules and I lost our little one, before she was even freshly sprouted, we thought that the world had been ripped out from under our feet. And when I lost my Jules, I thought, that was it, you know? I thought to myself, Donald, you are nothing without these women, and you will never be anything. Boy, let me tell you. I was lost, folks, truly lost. I wandered the land, an itinerant drifter lost to the dusty tracks and swirling winds of this country, thinking I’d just keep walking until I died.’

Someone in the crowd stifled a sneeze.

‘And you know what? I as good as died. I drank till I couldn’t stand, smoked hash all day, stole and cheated and lied way my way through life. I was a husk, folks. Nothing but skin and bones. But then – one night I had a dream. Jules, she was in this dream, and she told me not to give up. She told me, Donald, you stupid bloody man, you are special, and you are something, and you need to save yourself before you disappear into dust. And you need to save others, too, those who can’t see what you can see, who don’t have it in them to bring themselves back from the brink.’

Donald returned his gaze to the congregation.

‘She showed me the fish. Told me what I had to do. To make it right, not just for me, but for all of you. We’re all here because of her, folks. My beautiful, radiant Jules. I owe it to her to set things right.’ He faltered, furrowed his brow.

The congregation watched on, waiting.

‘But not everyone wishes to choose the light. Not everyone chooses the word of the fish. Some people’ – and he scowled – ‘would rather destroy what we have created. The Barnabys of the world. Those men in their suits who built that dirty mine. These people hold

nothing but hate in their chests. It sustains them. Nourishes them.’ Donald shook his head sadly. ‘But more sinister than that are the spies and spooks who would come here only to destroy us from the inside. Those’ – he took hold of the blanket – ‘who would attempt to harm the fish!’

And Donald tore back the blanket and once more those eyes were upon me.

‘The fish, the fish, the fish!’

That chant, at first a whisper, but growing, growing, as Donald continued, until it filled the room entirely.

‘There comes a time when we must defend ourselves and our beliefs. Like those pilgrims who once fled persecution from the old world to the new, we must now push back against those who wish us eviscerated. If we know where the poisonous roots lay, then we must tear them from the earth and set them alight.’

At this, the shed doors burst open. My heart stopped. The congregation turned as Dogfish and Brother Whiff wheeled in my mother and Megan, strapped tightly to old hospital gurneys.

I’ll always remember the look on my mother’s face. It is branded into my memory. It haunts me. It was the look of someone who finally sees that which they have most desired, and yet knows they will never touch it again.

I cannot forget that look.

I felt it too, you know, that sudden downwards pull, of life draining away before my very eyes. My mother had returned. She was here. She had not forgotten me. She had just never reached me. And Donald had her – all along she had been here. He’d lied. The snivelling, simpering brute had lied to me.

A sudden rush of bubbling fury propelled me at Donald, forgetting the barrier between us, the glass that kept me contained. He jerked back as I bashed the glass, as I thrashed uncontrollably, scratching and clawing and gnashing my teeth like a rabid beast.

Of course, it did nothing. Donald recomposed himself and the congregation trilled with wonder at my display. The bastards thought I was telling them something.

As the gurneys were wheeled to the front, Donald said. ‘You see, the creature responds in the presence of these enemies. They must be punished, so sayeth the fish!’

‘The fish hath spoken!’

My mother's mouth was gagged, as was Megan's, but their eyes were bursting, desperate and wet with tears. The congregation ignored them. You think they cared? They only had eyes for the fish.

Dogfish and Brother Whiff arranged my mother and Megan in front of the stage. They adjusted the gurneys and pitched them forwards, so now my mother and Megan were upright. Donald approached them.

'This woman is a treacherous spy,' he bellowed, pointing a jagged finger at Megan. 'She was discovered attempting to steal the fish, to destroy the sanctity of this place. A despicable act.' Donald spat at Megan's feet. 'And this woman,' he said, his eyes turning now to my poor, terrified mother. 'Her blasphemy has no limits. She insists that the fish is her own. As if the fish is mortal. But the slut is mistaken.' His lips curled in disgust.

Donald's eyes steeled. 'I wish they could be forgiven for their sins. The fish is kind, the fish is love. But the fish must be protected at all costs. They must be punished. Tit-for-tat, my brothers. Eye for an eye, my sisters. The only answer.' He paused for a moment, but it seemed like an eternity. 'Is death!'

And, of course, as luck would have it, a flash of lightning crackled overhead, a boom of thunder, so that the space was thrown into sudden, terrifying light, and Donald himself seemed to radiate. And hearing his pronouncement, I doubled my efforts to break through to my mother – like an idiot, but I was blind with rage – and the congregation took this as divine confirmation.

That chant, 'The fish, the fish, the fish,' overlapping a hundred times over.

'Look at them. Do you not see the horns of their wickedness sprouting from their heads? Do you not see the fire in their eyes, the fork in their tongues?'

And yes, you know, in that light, and with their heads mushy from that strange bubbling broth, the congregation saw the very things Donald described. They didn't see two young women before them. Instead they saw traitorous devils who had attempted to destroy everything they held dear.

'The evil must be stopped,' Donald bellowed. 'It must be stopped before it is too late.'

Donald pointed to Megan, and Dogfish kicked the gurney forwards until it was just within reach of the crowd, now bubbling, now baying for her flesh. And the crowd surged forwards. Megan pulled with all her might, pushed against those binds with everything she had left in her. She prayed for her daughter. She gushed forth hot tears for her daughter. Behind that gag she said sorry, sorry, she was so sorry. But the congregation was almost upon



her, eyes glassy, chanting chanting chanting that echoing chant. Then they were upon her, breathing hot, frantic heat on her skin. Their fingernails scrambled at her flesh. Their piercing, shivering eyes pushed so terribly close. They clawed and scratched. The gag came loose from Megan's mouth and she issued a shriek, just one air rending scream. But then they were all over her, on top of her, she disappeared under the mass of her bodies, their crushing weight consuming her, stripping her bare, sucking her dry. It was a horrific thing to witness.

And then she was gone.

As that bubbling, writhing mass continued, Donald turned to my mother and he drew a knife from his pocket. A streak of lightning burst the sky and the knife flashed silver. My mother's every fibre fought against the straps. She tried to find my eyes. Donald approached, the knife heavy in his hands, the blade cold. When he reached her, he twisted the gurney so she could see the tank fully, so that she could see her son.

He let her see me one last time. Was that mercy? Or was it a last evil act?

I caught her eyes, she caught mine, and I froze. I watched Donald lift the knife above his head, grip it, the muscles in his arm stretched, the knot at his temple.

He whispered, 'I'm sorry.'

This was the end.

My mother never took her eyes off me. Silently, she said sorry for everything. I read that in her eyes. Those eyes that would always see me as I was – her son.

Donald was crying. He screamed, long and loud, but it was lost under the frantic noise of the congregation, the rain, the thunder.

Somewhere, Geoffrey's wristwatch clicked over to 12AM and beeped.

Then, suddenly, an explosion of noise. The shed shook as if throttled by a giant.

Someone screamed.

The lights went out.

### 32.

Ludwig sat on the top bunk in that gaol cell, back to the wall, feeling the hard steel frame through his paper-thin mattress. He watched the floor, listlessly, as each burst of lightning brought it crackling to life. He thought of Mendelssohn, the way they'd parted, the look on his dearest friend's face. He choked back a sob. He'd been here days now, and neither hide nor shiny bald head had been seen of Mendelssohn. As if he'd forgotten all about Ludwig.

Below him, Jack said, 'You right, mate?'

Ludwig grunted. The bunks shivered as he slipped from the bed and went to the sink. He filled a cup of water and drank it thirstily. He put the cup down and looked out the window, to a slice of sky swirling with rain. His face alternated between hot white and the orange glow of the streetlamp.

Outside, the chime of the town hall clock came deep and resonant. It rang eleven times and then it fell silent.

‘You miss your mate, huh? You and he – you’re...’ Jack stopped himself. ‘Yeah, well, it’s hard. I understand. None of it’s fair.’ He cleared his throat. ‘You want to hurt them, eh? The people who hurt your mate. That ran you out of town. Donald’s lot and all that. All of them.’

Ludwig looked at Jack sitting on the bottom bunk, his back against the wall, face obscured in shadow.

‘I spent so long thinking about what I’d do to Barnaby. If there was no repercussions. Just me and him alone in a room for half an hour. I could do whatever.’ He sighed. ‘When they wanted that mine dug they acted like we were ghosts in our own country. That place up there we been on forever. And then they tore it apart. Our land. Our home. ‘Till it was like a knife wound up there.’

He let his head drop to his chest. Ludwig thought Jack might be crying, but in that strange light, he couldn’t be sure.

‘Can’t ever forgive Barnaby for that. Not for him making my family sick. Not for him scratching us out. Like we never existed. But now. I won’t hurt the man. Won’t fix none.’ He shook his head. ‘He’ll get what’s coming. They all will. Eventually. Bad people get their comeuppance, mate.’

Jack fell silent. A deep roll of thunder.

Ludwig glanced back at the window and felt a sudden constriction of his throat. Mendelssohn’s great, round face looked down at him through the window, his cheeks pressed against the steel bars.

The loveable lump had come back for Ludwig.

Ludwig scrambled up on to the sink.

‘Ludwig!’ Tears as fat as marbles rolled down his face. He grabbed Ludwig’s hands. In that moment, there was no lingering frustration, no hint of the animosity that had separated them. There was only love.

Eventually, Mendelssohn pulled back. ‘We are going to get you free.’

Now, would you believe it, Harry appeared next to Mendelssohn.

‘Alright, Ludwig,’ he beamed. ‘Bloody brilliant seeing you. I’ve got Francine in the car. She’s driving.’ He gave a sick little grin. ‘Haven’t seen her this wired for years.’ Harry produced a length of chain. ‘I’ve always wanted to do this.’

Jack slipped off the bunk, staring up at the window in bemused wonder.

Harry spotted him. ‘Alright, mate? Friend of Ludwig’s, I presume?’

‘You’re not serious, right?’ Jack said. ‘What about the cops?’

Harry shook his head. ‘They’re all gone. We saw a patrol car heading up the hill with a few others on our way in.’

‘Up the hill?’ Jack said. ‘What the hell is Barnaby planning?’

‘Look, let’s make this quick,’ Harry said. ‘And let’s get Charmaine and our boy back. Keep clear, would you?’

He looped the chain around the steel bars and padlocked the chain to itself.

‘Hang on, mate,’ Jack hissed.

But Harry and Mendelssohn had already stepped back from the window. Jack glanced at Ludwig.

‘They’re kidding, aren’t they?’

Ludwig shrugged. They heard feet crunching across gravel. A car door opening and shutting. The roar of an engine.

‘Jesus.’

Ludwig scrambled off the sink. Tyres squealed. They both dived for the other end of the cell as the sink and the window and just about the whole wall collapsed in a flurry of bricks and dust. The room was flooded with sudden light and Ludwig saw Harry’s stricken face behind the windscreen, twisted in horror, and Francine’s, behind the wheel, a mixture of terror and utter glee, hurtling towards them. Instinctively, without hope, Ludwig flung his arms up as Francine slammed on the brakes and the car screeched to a halt.

As the dust settled, Ludwig shivered silently, head still wrapped in his arms, barely believing he was still alive. He heard a car door creak open, the rattling of brick on brick.

Slowly, he opened his eyes. The headlights hit him flush in the face, but he could just make out Francine silhouetted in the light, her head poking out the door.

‘Sorry, luv,’ she chuckled. ‘Wrong pedal.’

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Mendelssohn, Ludwig and Jack sat squashed, shoulder to shoulder, in the back seat. They rocked softly as Harry, reinstated as driver, eased the car up the hill. Francine sat beside him, fiddling with the radio.

‘Darn reception,’ she muttered. ‘Me show is on and I’m missing it.’

She swivelled in her seat and beamed a gummy smile at the three men in the back.

‘Ludwig. Mendelssohn,’ she nodded to them both. ‘Lovely to see you, chaps.’ Her attention turned to Jack. ‘And my, oh my. Haven’t had such a handsome fella in my midst since my husband passed. My name,’ she said, extending one of those varicosed hands to Jack, ‘is Francine, but you can call me Franny.’ She winked. ‘A real pleasure.’

‘Mum, please,’ Harry muttered.

Jack grinned. ‘Name’s Jack.’ He took Franny’s hand in his own. ‘The pleasure is all mine.’

Franny snapped her hand back and stifled a giggle. She was blushing, ol’ Franny, the saucy devil.

‘You sure you want to come?’ Harry said. ‘We can handle it alright.’

Jack nodded. ‘Aye. I know. But I made Ludwig a promise. And I know that place up there. I can show you where your friends are.’

Ludwig smiled and gripped Jack’s knee briefly. Then, he nestled back into Mendelssohn. After all that, the two of them didn’t need words. Mendelssohn might have said that he was sorry because he knew, now, that he couldn’t hide forever, that if he did, the two of them would always be on the run from those who chose not to understand them. He might have said that you could only hope there was more good in the world than bad. And Ludwig might have said, although not in as many words, that he should have understood Mendelssohn’s paralysis, because it can be hard to stomach the ways of the world when it seems so cruel.

They might have said that, but they didn’t. Really, it didn’t seem like the right time.

So instead, they rode in silence as Francine went back to fiddling with the radio. The fuzzy static amplified the sound of the rain drumming on the roof. The dashboard clock read 11.30PM.

They crested the hill and Donald’s shack was up ahead, the porchlight flickering in the rain.

‘Headlights, headlights,’ Jack hissed.

Harry flicked off the lights.

‘Look. That’ll be Barnaby’s crew.’

Jack pointed to a few cars parked at odd angles in the mud outside the perimeter fence.

‘What now?’ Harry muttered.

‘Wait here.’

The car was filled with a sudden rush of howling wind and rain as Jack slipped out the car. Then, just the rain on the roof.

‘You know, I just realised, it’s been ages since I’ve seen Char and Jonah. Did they go on holiday?’ Francine said.

‘Mum,’ Harry muttered. ‘They’re *here*. We’re going to rescue them.’

Francine frowned. ‘Oh.’ Then: ‘I love a good ol’ fashioned rescue mission,’ she said, rubbing her hands together.

A rap on the window. Francine squealed.

Harry rolled down the window and Jack pushed his soaking mane in. He had to shout against the rain.

‘The way’s clear up there. Which means we need to hurry.’

Mendelssohn went for the door, but Ludwig held him back. Mendelssohn shook his head.

‘No, no, Ludwig. Is time for me to fight for friends.’

Mendelssohn stepped out in the rain. Ludwig followed.

‘Keep the car running,’ Jack said. ‘We might need to get out in a hurry.’

Harry nodded. ‘Thanks, mate.’

The three of them hurried through the driving rain. They ducked past the parked cars, skirted the side of the shack and then they were in the backyard. They stopped to catch their breath. The tents flapped furiously in the wind. The rain pinged off the shack’s corrugated roof. It streamed down their faces and they were almost blinded in that thunderous downpour.

‘Your friend’s in that barn,’ Jack yelled. ‘But the boy’s in the shed.’

‘We get Charmaine first,’ Mendelssohn said. ‘Then, we go for Jonah.’

Jack nodded. ‘Alright, mate.’

They heard a sharp click from behind. A hiss like a viper: ‘Stand up. Nice and slow.’

They turned, and there was Barnaby, his shivering hands clutching a pistol, the wet muck of his hair half-obscuring his demented face. A look of alarm crossed his face at the sight of Jack.

‘You tricky bastard,’ he said. ‘How’d you get out?’ His grip tightened around the pistol. He couldn’t help but sway. He was still drunk. ‘Never mind. It doesn’t really matter, does it? Just get your hands where I can see them.’ His eyes darted between the three of them.

Jack smiled as he lifted his arms above his head.

‘What the fuck are you smiling about?’ Barnaby shouted.

‘There I was thinking I wouldn’t get a last chance to see you,’ Jack said. ‘Before it all came crashing down. So what are you going to do with us, Barnaby?’

Barnaby grinned, a maniacal, unravelling kind of grin. ‘Haven’t decided yet. Maybe you tried to jump me, and the gun went off?’

Jack sneered. ‘You’d do me, would you? Like you tried to do my whole family.’

‘You know I had no fucking choice,’ Barnaby bellowed. ‘You know I did what I did to keep this town alive! I had to. You’d do the same, Jack. When faced with the choice. We look out for our own. That’s how it goes.’

For a moment, he lowered his aim, scratched absently at his forehead with the nozzle. He swayed slightly, grunted. The walkie-talkie on his belt hissed and they heard Earl’s scratchy voice.

‘Barn. We’ve got our side of the shed doused and ready. We’ll light up on your mark.’

Barnaby fumbled with the walkie-talkie and Earl’s voice was cut. Then, he trained the gun back on them.

‘I’m paying for it anyway, aren’t I? What I did. It’s all coming back. I’m done. Finished.’ He said this to no one in particular, the gun still pointing at them, but he was looking at the mud. His chin rested lightly on his chest. He stood so still they thought he might have been sleeping, but then he looked up, and the hardness had returned to his eyes. ‘I’ve got to make it all go away. Donald. That thing. And now, well, it kinda works, doesn’t it? That you’re here. One more loose end to tie up.’

‘You don’t have to do this. You can do right. This time you can do right.’

‘It’s all that’s left, Jack.’

A deep roll of thunder echoed above. The rain was like a scream.

‘You can still make this right.’

A ribbon of lightning twisted in the sky. Another roll of thunder.

‘I’m sorry, Jack.’ He trained the gun on Jack’s chest. ‘I’m sorry.’

Barnaby’s wrist watch beeped. He glanced at it.

‘Midnight,’ he muttered to himself.

His finger quivered against the trigger. He looked at them and shrugged.

‘Listen. I am, you know? I’m sorry for – ’

What Barnaby was sorry for, though, we will never know. For as he said these words the sky burst with light, shuddered with the thundering roar of a beast above them, and Ludwig dived at Barnaby. He knocked him sharply in the midriff, and Barnaby slipped backwards. There was a bang – Ludwig felt the heat of it next to his face – and then a rush of heat and light as he and Barnaby were tossed through the air. Ludwig thought, perhaps, that he saw Mendelssohn and Jack catapult past him, and he considered, for the briefest moment, that he might very well be dead.

### 33.

In the shed, that great explosion tore the air in two. The lights went out. All I could hear was screaming.

The lights fizzled back on. Half the shed had blown in, the walls were on fire. The people were all on fire, dancing like fireflies with their robes alight. That shed, you know, full of paint and rotten timber and petrol, was like a tinderbox.

Donald had my mother before him, the knife held above his head, her face full of terror. I saw them from the tank. He looked startled with the world around him in chaos. But then he readied himself. He had to finish this.

I flung myself at the tank, one last time. I hit the glass with a dull thud. It was impossible.

My mother was lost to me.

But something remarkable happened. That little mark I’d made, the spidery vein in the glass, it began to grow. The glass cracked like bones splintering. Donald turned to the tank. He watched the glass cracking into a million pieces. He said something I didn’t hear.

The tank exploded. I was borne forward, caught in that thundering torrent, that mass of water. Donald threw his arms up, but he was enveloped, consumed. He was nothing in the face of all that liquid.

I woke up and I was lying on the wet floor, shattered glass all around me, breathing hot air. I tried to sit up. My legs wouldn’t allow it. I pulled myself onto my elbows and looked for my mother. I saw bodies on the concrete. I saw blank faces. Life washed clean. I

thought I saw Megan in those bodies. I couldn't be sure. The room was a furnace, the roof alive. It scraped and buckled. The rain poured in from above.

I looked down at my legs and they were covered in blood. There was a shard of glass wedged deep into the skin just below my knee. The pain was unbearable.

I couldn't breathe.

I was terrified.

I figured this was the end. The smoke was so thick now that I could barely see. My eyes stung, every breath burnt my throat. I could do nothing but lie in wait.

And then, through the haze, I saw Donald materialise before me, blood seeping from a deep gash above his brow, beard half singed from his face. He knelt by my side and cupped his hand beneath my head. 'My boy – oh, Jesus. My beautiful boy.' He had tears in his eyes as he fussed over me, passing his hands carefully across my body. His hand brushed the glass in my skin and I winced.

'You're hurt. You're hurt and it's my fault. It's all my fault.' He was sobbing, big shuddering sobs that made his body quiver. He withdrew his hand and looked down at me, still holding my head. 'I didn't mean to hurt you. I'm sorry.'

The roof buckled.

'You're my special boy and I almost lost you.'

A wooden beam snapped sharply and the roof split open. Shards of wood and metal fell from above and Donald threw himself over me. He grunted in pain as a chunk of wood lashed his back.

'We gotta go, boy.'

He lifted me up. I could barely breathe. My head swam.

'Put him down.'

Donald froze. My mother, Charmaine, stood before us, her own body looking broken, wrung out, but not defeated. Of course, she couldn't be defeated. Not my mother.

She saw me in Donald's arms, and perhaps it was the lack of air – my mind playing tricks on me – but she swelled, backlit by a shimmer of fiery light, and – honestly, this I swear I saw – she was breathing actual fire from her nostrils.

Donald clutched me tightly. 'Best stay back, Charmaine. Best you just keep well back.'

My mother pulled herself up to her full height and stepped forward.



‘Now just wait a minute.’ Donald pressed backwards, but the stage was littered with burning debris. His feet crunched across glass.

‘You give my boy back. You give him back or I’ll kill you. I promise you, I’ll tear you apart.’

She limped forwards. Donald pushed back against the hot heat of the sunken roof. All around us was fire and rain.

‘Please, just stop right there. We can talk.’ His voice came out cracked and strained.

‘Give me my boy.’

Donald’s hands shook uncontrollably. I felt an explosion of pain as he wrenched the glass clean from my flesh.

‘I said keep back,’ Donald roared. He held the glass to my neck.

My mother froze, her eyes desperate. ‘Please, no.’

Donald held me tight to his chest. ‘Don’t take another step, alright? The boy. You can’t – not now. You can’t take the boy from me. Not after all this.’

‘You don’t want to hurt him. I know you don’t. Just put him down before he gets hurt.’

‘No, no, no.’ Donald shook his head. ‘Can’t. Not that. Can’t do that.’ He spoke to the air. ‘Me and Jules will take care of the boy. He’s special, our boy.’

‘Donald!’ She edged closer, hands raised in submission.

‘No!’ Donald roared. ‘You never saw how special he is. You just wanted him to be normal. You wanted to take away his power.’

The fire around us crackled and drew closer.

‘I’m the only one who saw what the boy really is,’ he said. ‘What power he truly has. I’m the only one who really cares for him.’

‘And how did you pay him back for it, Donald?’ she said, ‘You used him for your own twisted benefit, to make people do things for you. It wasn’t about Jonah. It never was. It was only ever about you.’

‘Fucking lies!’ Donald waved the glass at her and then pushed it back to my throat. His hand dripped blood. ‘I did it for Jules. It was never about me. It was about Jules, about my little girl. It was about letting those bastards feel the pain that she felt, and the pain that I felt – have always felt – ever since. I can’t give him back to you. I can’t.’

Donald’s whole body shook. His quivering hands slipped across my wet, bloodied skin.

‘Just put down the glass. Why don’t you come across here now, up off the stage? Please.’ She held up her hands to Donald. ‘You’ve got to give me Jonah or he’s going to get hurt. You don’t want that, Donald. I know you don’t.’

The fire burnt incredibly hot behind us. Another bone wrenching snap from above shook embers to the floor around us. And Donald – as consumed by the smoke and heat as I – was suddenly somewhere else entirely, far from the shed. Instead, he saw Jules appear before him, her face kind and beautiful and exactly the way he remembered it from all those years ago. She stepped towards him, both of them in a white space, cool and calm, and held out her hands. He collapsed into her arms, breathed in the sweet scent of vanilla and milk, her smell that he’d always loved. And she whispered to him, gently and lovingly, that voice he’d longed to hear for so many years. ‘Donald. That’s enough now, isn’t it? Isn’t it quite enough now? Aren’t we just so tired. Can’t we just sleep now? Donald?’

And he smiled, but not with that crooked grin he had, because now he was the Donald of more than ten years ago. He nodded yes, and said, ‘I love you,’ over and over and over, until the weight finally lifted.

Well, at least that’s what I hope he saw.

My mother called out Donald’s name and he looked at her as if she wasn’t quite solid. He looked down at me, at the piece of glass in his hand making a tiny cut on my neck, and he threw the glass away. He smiled down at me, and then hobbled forwards and held me out to her. And as she took me from his arms, he looked down at us both and said, ‘Sorry,’ before the roof gave one last heaving crepitation and collapsed on top of him.

The last I saw of Donald was a smile, stretched across his face, looking past us into some unknown distance. I thought, perhaps, that I saw his smile falter, just a fraction, before he was lost, but I couldn’t be sure. And then he was gone.

My mother fell back before we were both crushed. We were lost in a cloud of hot smoke and dust. She lay unconscious, holding me tightly against her chest. I recall so strongly the feeling of her skin, and the smell, her smell, even beneath the acrid tang of the smoke and fire. I will never forget the shape and smell of her in that moment.

But it was too late. Together, with the fire closing in, we had no escape. I felt my breath grow incredibly short, felt my insides burning and suffocating. My ten-year-old child’s brain felt content with my mother’s touch. I closed my eyes.

The fire crackled and burst.

Rain fell heavy on the cement floor.

A hand emerged from the smoke. I was ensnared in a set of fingers and pulled away. I squirmed, but another hand secured me tightly, and then a moment later I felt air, beautiful fresh air almost bursting in my chest. I saw flames, bodies on the ground, and the that half-sunken shed, the last remains of the Church of the Holy Fish. I saw a man, his dark face streaked with blood, beard half singed off his face – Jack, although I didn’t know it at the time. Up ahead, the headlights of a car stung our eyes. Jack carried me across the yard, and then I was received through the car window by the sinewy arms of Francine, her thick red lips pressing against every part of my body.

Jack said, ‘Best get outta here sharpish.’

Harry said, ‘Thank you.’

Jack said something that I didn’t quite catch. He rapped the roof as we pulled away.

We drove and didn’t stop. The rain quit and the clouds cleared as we went down that hill and hit the highway. The sun rose blood red.

They would discover, much later, exactly what had happened up on that hill. Barnaby’s errant bullet had drilled through the gas tanks hooked up at the back of Donald’s shack and blown the place sky high. The petrol that the townsfolk had doused the shed in only added to the conflagration, but no one admitted to that.

With the place still crackling and buckling with heat, Temperence would pick her way across the debris, shell-shocked, her face covered in soot and dirt, as Constable Merrick rounded up survivors. None of the Fish Kissers would remember much of what happened that night, or what had happened to Megan, even with her blood caked under their fingernails.

On the sodden grass behind the house, Temperence would find Barnaby lying on his back, his blistered face charred and red raw, the pink of his gums and the white of his teeth showing through a deep tear in his cheek. She’d think he’d been crying, but she wouldn’t be sure. Then, she’d turned away and throw up on her hands and knees until her stomach was empty.

But as we raced down the highway, we didn’t know about any of that. We didn’t care. We were just putting as much distance between us and Fortune as possible.

In the car, I opened my eyes. Francine held me close to her breast. Harry kept glancing at us both, hands gripping the wheel, urging the car on. I looked across her shoulder and glimpsed my mother and Ludwig, both slumped unconscious in the back seat. I did not see Mendelssohn.

I wanted to reach out and touch my mother. My whole body burnt with heat. My leg throbbed. When my mother opened her eyes, she saw my head poking up over Francine's shoulder and she smiled. She mouthed my name, *Jonah*, and then her eyes shut again.

Later, both my mother and Ludwig stirred. She didn't have to ask him about Mendelssohn before they both burst into sharp, shuddering tears and she held Ludwig tightly as he shook, and didn't stop. None of us spoke as that realisation settled on us, heavily, impossibly. We lost our greatest friend that night. Ludwig lost the man he loved.

I've felt that burden forever.

Francine passed me back to my mother. She held me tight to her chest.

'You...came...back...for...me,' I said.

'I did, darling. I never gave up.' She kissed me on my cheek, a deep, long kiss.

'Everything's going to be fine now, Jonah.'

I nodded.

'I'll never let anything happen to you again. I promise.'

She started crying. 'I'm so sorry, Jonah.'

I nuzzled back into her breast. I could feel her heart beating furiously.

'It's...okay.' I placed my little webbed hand on her chest. Her heart slowed, and then I heard her soft breathing. She'd fallen asleep.

Fortune lay in the distance far behind us.

I would never see it again.

## Epilogue

It was my mother's birthday last week. I called Harry in the morning – the poor old sod can barely hear me anymore, but he knew to send my love to Ludwig. I reminded him to top up the flowers at my mother's grave and I told them I'd do my best to visit. I meant it, or I wanted to mean it, but maybe it was a lie. I'm feeling old and tired myself now – stiff joints, bad back, getting a little myopic – and north Queensland is a hell of a trip from Sydney. I can't do the things I used to do. I'm fifty next week, can you believe that? I've lived longer than anyone could have ever imagined, this little sticky thing, born with death nibbling at my heels.

I like being in the big city. I like my old worker's cottage near the harbour. The place is crumbling, but the rent, if you can believe it, is cheap. And the landlord gives me a wide berth, so I get my peace. The money from my mother's life insurance has almost dried up. I'll have to move on soon. Or maybe I won't. If I'm lucky, my body won't last that long.

Most nights I take a stroll down to the harbour, well after midnight, when there's only the moths and the moon for company. It's not that I want to stay hidden. I never go anywhere without my beanie and a lumpy jacket, but you know, now it doesn't bother me so much. I'm familiar with the stares – habituated to them, I guess. I've had a lifetime of them. The looks can still burn, but not like they used to.

The night of my mother's birthday I took the usual route. I walked past an ocean heaving like an angry drunk, the type that spits and sways and is menacing even from a distance. A man watched me from under a bus shelter as I dashed across the road to cross the bridge. He was smoking a cigarette, the red tip like a smouldering eye as he puffed smoke. Three eyes burning to get a better look, to see beneath the jacket, under the beanie. I felt him watching me until I was out of sight.

I took my time meandering down to the opera house, listening to the water lapping the shore, the ding of a distant buoy. It was pretty much just me out, which was nice. I leant against the balustrade at the water's edge and there was the harbour bridge, looking like a pregnant metallic woman lying on her back with her belly in the air, stuffed to bursting.

The wind picked up and I pulled my jacket close. I thought of Harry and Ludwig in their shack on the beach, mozzies buzzing at their necks. Ludwig would have cooked dinner that night, fed Harry, helped him to the toilet. Maybe they would have sat on the beach and watched the ocean, listening to the sound of the waves amongst the buzz of the cicadas, the scratching of bush turkeys. It was where my mother died, up north in the rainforest.

Eventually, the same chemicals that gave me my form had snatched her life away. We were all there at her side when she died. She was happy. She'd sacrificed everything for me, my mother, just to give me a life. I wish she'd seen me in the big city, living with all those people, living *out there*.

On my way home, I passed an alleyway and heard someone rattling in the rubbish bins lining a fence. I froze. There was a figure rifling around, stooped over the bins. The dark shape stopped, stood suddenly. I thought to run, but my legs didn't listen. The figure turned to face me, half shrouded in the shadows. They took a step closer, and suddenly, I had this sinking feeling, like a stone dropped in my stomach. My skin crawled. My chest tightened. Because this dark figure, they had this gnarled shape, this shaggy hair, and they shuffled along in a particular way, and I was certain I could see the glint of green eyes. I held up my hands, as if that would stop him, and I said something, but I can't remember what.

And then Donald took another step forward, out from the shadows and into the light. But it wasn't Donald, of course. It was just a bloke rifling through the trash in the alleyway near my house. He saw me, and his face drained. He held his own hands up and backed away real quick.

I said, 'It's okay, mate,' but he didn't listen, and he'd already legged it half way down the alleyway.

I raced home.

I went to my bed and burrowed under the covers, my heart bursting in my chest. I hadn't had a nightmare about Donald in years. I thought I'd left him behind for good. But I realised, then, that I'll never really forget. I'll have Donald forever. Sometimes, I'll see Donald on the street, or on a bus, or when I stare long enough in a dark room. I'll just have to learn to live with him.

I rolled over in bed and flicked on the bedside lamp. The picture of my mother looked back at me. She was beautiful, happy. A year before they discovered the cancer. She was smiling until the end, but I liked this photo best. She was a bloody lioness, my mother. I blew away a film of dust and I traced her smile. I started to cry, and I kept crying for the longest time, until I suddenly felt so tired. My whole body ached.

I missed her. I missed my mother who loved me and never gave up on me. Donald had tried to convince me, all those years back, that my mother didn't know how special I was, how unique I was. But she did know. She knew better than anyone. She just wanted me to

have a life. That was it. A life that we could both be proud of. I know when she died, she was bloody proud of me. And I was sure as hell proud of her.

I put the frame down and lay back. I let my breathing slow, wiped away tears. My mother smiled at me from the bedside table and I smiled back. I wanted her there, for real, to tell her how much I loved her, and how much I'd done and seen since she'd died. I couldn't, of course. But that was a nice moment anyway.

# INTRODUCTION

## Finding Fishboy

*Fish Head or Ways to be Human (Fish Head)* is a story set in an isolated and forgotten mining town lost somewhere along the southern Australian coast. It is a story about difference, hope, faith and what it means to be, or to not be, human. And it is a story about cults, corruption, environmental destruction, and, importantly, a boy who looks like a fish. But, really, I see *Fish Head* as a story about Australia. It is a story about the quotidian hardships of everyday people struggling with their identity, with their connection to the country and their treatment of it. And it is a story about the tension of race and cultural practice, of land, the tension of history, and the tension of belief. These are by no means the only tension points that exist in Australia now, or in the past, or into the future, but they are, in my mind, some of the pertinent ones. For me, these are the tensions keeping the fabric of Australian identity taut.

Yet, in many ways, the Australia I have represented in *Fish Head* does not resemble the Australia that we see around us. The characters are, at times, larger than life. The setting of Fortune is entirely fictional, a composite of places that add up to a strange whole. The reality I chose to show was decidedly *not* a real one, although it was born from the real world. That is to say, while a story about a half-human, half-fish is not, in reality, possible, the kernel of the novel *was* grounded in the real world of Australia. I wanted to explore the real place by drawing up, as Milan Kundera says, “*a map of existence*” (43; original emphasis) to investigate the conditions of Australia and the possibilities within it.

*Fish Head* started as something else. Still about Australia, still strange, but different nonetheless. It was about a young boy, Max, who finds a fish that looks like Jesus. Max hefts the fish from the sunken ooze of a dried-up waterhole, and his life, and the town he calls home, changes forever. Yet I became frustrated by this story. Despite creating a world for these characters to live in I could not bring them to life. The intention of the work became unclear to me.

In the end, I chose to abandon Max and the Jesus fish. I destroyed them, metaphorically, and although I mourned their death, it felt like the right thing to do. While writing her 2017 novel *From the Wreck*, Jane Rawson found herself abandoning much of what she had created in order to find the way in to her story (“From”). Writers tear up pages,



painters erase or overwrite their work with fresh paint. Violence begets violence, but often destruction begets creation. For Charles Baudelaire, the very process of creativity is one bound up in destructive energy (*Painter*). Resolving to find a different story to tell, I was confronted by something entirely unexpected. I found, without meaning to, Jonah the Fishboy.

### Coming to the Grotesque

Fishboy, I admit, did not come to me by pure chance. Instead, it was the grotesque that provoked a new way for me to perceive my novel. For most people today, the grotesque acts as a label for something that is disproportionately ugly or offensive in some way. It marks out the unpalatable, the unseemly. But this simple explanation does not encompass the rich and varied lineage of an aesthetic form that Mikhail Bakhtin calls an “ancient type” (30). Writing in the mid-Eighteenth century, John Ruskin said that “the grotesque is, in almost all cases, composed of two elements, one ludicrous, the other fearful; that, as one or other [sic] of these elements prevails, the grotesque falls into two branches, sportive grotesque, and terrible grotesque” (126). Ruskin’s definition captures a further aspect of the grotesque, that is, it is a combination of contradictory parts or elements. However, again, it does not reveal the full complexity of it. I agree with Geoffrey Harpham when he says the grotesque is a “single protean idea that is capable of assuming a multitude of forms” (xv).

The grotesque’s identity as constant shapeshifter makes constraining it to any prescriptive parameter impossible, but also, I argue, pointless. The grotesque is never one thing to all people; it “cannot be captured in ‘one’ definition” (Edwards & Graulund 135). It is myriad in form and, especially, relative. It changes across time and place, and it exists, according to Frederick Burwick, “in the eye of the beholder” (18). With this firmly in mind, this exegesis does not provide a conclusive answer to the question of what is and what is not the grotesque. Doing so would not be possible within the confines of a creative writing exegesis. However, in chapter one I do examine different theoretical positions taken to the grotesque, emphasising, in particular, the work of Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World* and Wolfgang Kayser in *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*. Both Bakhtin and Kayser’s work informed my creative engagement with the form, and I suggest that their conceptions of the grotesque sit on opposing ends of a complex and varied spectrum.

Further, I argue that two of the strongest and most recurrent aspects of the grotesque are play and perceptual disruption, both processes that invite new ways of seeing (Connelly; Remshardt). Frances S. Connelly recognises play as a fundamental attribute of the grotesque,

suggesting that the grotesque pulls open gaps between disparate realities to create a *Spielraum*, or a “room to play” (12). In this space, the playful intermingling of disparate objects, ideas, bodies, can create new possibilities, both creatively and politically. It points to the grotesque as a creative beast, and also emphasises the ethical dimension of the grotesque. Focusing on the grotesque’s penchant for play and its power to challenge perception allows for a narrower focus, while still acknowledging the vast trove of literature surrounding the grotesque. As well, I argue it was the disruption of perception, both within my story and in the Australian experience I wanted to examine, which allowed me to play creatively with my work and led me, eventually, to Fishboy.

While the ideas of Bakhtin and Kayser marked my initial engagement with the grotesque, I continued to build my own language of the grotesque via disparate means, picking and choosing from writers, theorists and artists that appealed to my sense of creativity. I engaged with the grotesque’s “multitude of forms” (Harpham xv) in the hopes that they would provoke a creative response and create a new perspective in my creative artefact. In this way, I was a like a bricoleur, who, as Claude Levi Strauss argues in *The Savage Mind*, uses whatever tools are available for the task at hand (17). This process created a personal concept of the grotesque that is as misshapen and as hybridised as the very best grotesque. If this tack leads to less specificity, then I believe that it supports a point: the grotesque is always changing, always at play, always something different to different people. This, I argue, is what makes it so potent as a tool for creative practice. As a creative writer, I think it is entirely appropriate to invite an array of provocations into the creative process.

Finally, it is important to note that, when discussing specific texts or artefacts, I aim to show how *I* perceived these texts as grotesque, not how others will or should respond to certain grotesque works (and not even that others will necessarily respond to these texts as grotesque works). This is because, as I have argued, the grotesque is relative and will not be experienced by everyone in the same way. I recognise the tension in academic writing of erring too closely to the personal (although I believe it to be wholly important to the process), but I argue that the grotesque, especially, is a deeply and personally affective aesthetic.

## Making Strange

My position is that writers are vital for challenging or disrupting perception. A writer can present the world in a way that calls the reader’s attention to some aspect of life that has been erased, hidden, buried, or wilfully ignored. For me, fiction can be a powerful tool for calling into question the reader’s assumptions and perceptions because fiction is a mode that invites a

playing with and a transformation of reality. As author David Malouf suggests, “What fiction presents is not life as it *is* but life intensified, drawn to a pitch and given significance” (20; original emphasis). Yann Martel says that “fiction is about [...] the selective transforming of reality [...] The twisting of it to bring out its essence” (viii). What both writers talk about here, I think, is the presentation of reality not as it is, but as it could be, a reality that is strange to the reader, something that makes them see the world in a different light. I agree with both Malouf and Martel. Fiction, for me, is about making reality strange in order to show the world as it is, to reveal its essence to the reader, to pique their curiosity.

The Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky argues that art should pursue *ostranenie*, a Russian neologism that Alexandra Berlina says refers to “making the habitual strange in order to reexperience it” (Berlina 24). *Ostranenie* has been variously translated as estrangement and defamiliarization (see Robinson; Jestrovic), and as enstrangement (see Sher). Berlina, in her 2017 translation of Viktor Shklovsky’s work, leaves the term in its Russian form. My preference was to use the term making strange – also used by Alan Wall and Goronwy Tudor Jones in *Myth, Metaphor and Science* (20) – partly because it possessed an unfamiliar syntax and mainly because it encapsulated my position that the strangeness of art can often be its most powerful quality for engendering new ways of seeing.

According to Silvija Jestrovic, *ostranenie* is not, to Shklovsky, a “mere byproduct of aesthetic representation [...]” (Jestrovic 278). Rather, *ostranenie* is “the core of art and its reception” (Jestrovic 278). And this core purpose of art, as Shklovsky understands it, is the making strange of the world around us to affect the way we perceive it. For as Shklovsky says, “The goal of art is to create the sensation of seeing, and not merely recognizing, things” (*Viktor* 80). This way of seeing, according to Benjamin Sher, leads to an “active, dynamic act of perception brought into play by the artist’s technique which allows us to see what, until then, had not and could not yet come into view” (xv).

Shklovsky sees art as more than a means to reinvigorate our gaze. Art can be an active challenge to an existential deadening, for if life is automatized, then “life becomes nothing and disappears” (Shklovsky, *Viktor* 80). Shklovsky’s concept of *ostranenie* works against the ideal of art imitating life, becoming instead a “device for separating art and life that enables the perception of the well known as if seen for the first time” (Jestrovic 278). When making strange, fiction can interrupt the glazed-eyes look, it can arrest the attention of the viewer and refocus their viewpoint. It can “make us feel things [...] make the stone stony” (Shklovsky, *Viktor* 80). Primarily, for Shklovsky, *ostranenie* is created through poetic language. He draws

examples from Leo Tolstoy's writing, suggesting that Tolstoy employs two devices for making strange:

Tolstoy's device of *ostranenie* consists in not calling a thing or event by its name but describing it as if seen for the first time, as if happening for the first time. While doing so, he also avoids calling parts of thing by their usual appellations; instead, he names corresponding parts of other things.

(Shklovsky, *Viktor* 81-82)

These formal characteristics of *ostranenie* are important to consider because they encompass, I think, so many strategies of those artists who seek to make things strange: rendering something in such a way that makes it appear as if "seen for the first time" via unusual verbal or visual language. But my interest in Shklovsky's *ostranenie* is more to do with his assertion that making strange is a core aspect of art, not just a function of it. More than this, though, I see the need for making strange in all facets of our life. I agree with Shklovsky when he argues that we can fall into the trap of seeing the world in an automatic way: "Automatization eats things, clothes, furniture, your wife and the fear of war" (Shklovsky, *Viktor* 80). For me, in a time where demagogues, corporations, and politicians ignore or shout down the realities of environmental destruction and social inequalities, making reality strange to create new sight is wholly necessary.

The act of making strange can be useful not just to how a reader or audience might come to perceive a text, but also to creative practice and the research process itself. In completing this thesis, I shifted between the screen and the page, reading my research and my creative artefact in print format rather than digital, and back again. The difference of attention, at times, is stark. Removing myself from a habitual space created a type of *ostranenie*, where my own words became suddenly strange to me. At other times, simply reformatting the text proved equally useful. While the content remained the same, the way I saw my work changed. The words were made strange, and in the process, I could analyse my work as if for the first time, rather than the thousandth. In this way, the concept of *ostranenie* becomes not just a way to make strange the world for the reader, but also a process that can make strange an artist's own work to create a new perspective and invite creation. In this way, I see *ostranenie* as a playful process of creativity, where making strange can be both a precursor for, or an effect of, creating a *Spielraum*. In chapter two, I explore the intersection of play and *ostranenie* in more detail, while arguing that the grotesque became a potent tool of making strange my own story.

Ralf Remshardt notes that although Shklovsky makes no mention of the grotesque, there are similarities between his call for art to make strange and the grotesque's ability to prompt new ways of seeing (Remshardt 9). The grotesque, with its recombination of heterogenous parts, its intermingling, and its confluence of high and low, is a powerful way of making strange. Without wishing to conflate the two, I see the grotesque and *ostranenie* as exploring concomitant aims, where both make strange by creating a disruption to our regular perception, to the everyday sense-making of the world, and both seek to, or inevitably create, a new way of seeing something, of perceiving it freshly. Given this relationship, in this exegesis I consider the grotesque in two ways: Firstly, as a tool to make a writer's own work strange to them. And secondly, as a mechanism for making strange a work (and the subject it examines) for the reader.

## Stories Matter

Is the grotesque still an effective tool for representation in an age seemingly riddled with grotesque imagery? Geoffrey Harpham suggests that the grotesque, aided by technology, is a "victim of its own success: having existed for many centuries on the disorderly margins of Western culture and the aesthetic conventions that constitute that culture, it is now faced with a situation where the center cannot, or does not choose to hold" (xxi). Similarly, Remshardt wonders whether the postmodern condition – that of hybridity, irony, parody – and easy-access to horror and violence now makes the grotesque impossible to truly experience (14). Popular culture has, Remshardt argues, "absorbed and commodified the rebellious impulses of various sub- and countercultures", and now delivers "transgression as norm" (14). Both Harpham and Remshardt question whether the ubiquity of the grotesque has led to an acclimation to it. If the grotesque is traditionally a marginal creature, what happens when it exists in the centre? Is the world too strange to make stranger? Is the grotesque – and that complementary concept of *ostranenie* – simply passé?

I argue that much of the grotesque imagery Western culture is exposed to is merely a thin strand of the grotesque aesthetic. As I explain in chapter one, the grotesque has existed in Western art and culture across a diverse, and constantly changing continuum. If there is a modern habituation to a certain type of grotesque (the violent, the plain gruesome), then there are many more that can still thrill. The horrifying, alone, is not adequate to describe all forms of grotesquery. Still, it is true to say that the effects of the grotesque aesthetic might be more readily diffused or blunted in a world cluttered with the gruesome. But according to Remshardt, what the grotesque retains in a postmodern condition devoid of meaning, is an

“ethical sense” (16). This ethics is echoed by writers such as Ruskin, Connelly and Susan Cohen Shabot. Shabot argues that the grotesque can create a “philosophy of difference and intersubjectivity” (79). The grotesque body, for instance, represents a bodily ethics where the grotesque “might function as such a figure of imagination, which allows us *to be* the other, and even *to be others to ourselves*” (Cohen Shabot 80; original emphasis). For me, this ethical dimension is an important facet of the grotesque’s production and reception, and it makes the grotesque a tool for inviting new ways of seeing. But the grotesque has also been used to create division and fear of the other. I look at the complexities of this position at the end of chapter one and argue that the grotesque can be both colonising and liberational.

Can fiction still make a difference in these challenging times? I agree with Goorie writer Melissa Lucashenko when she says, “Writers matter a little bit, but great stories told well matter hugely” (“On”). For Lucashenko, “[t]here has never been a civilization that has managed without fiction”, because stories are important to the way we see ourselves in the society (“On”). I agree wholeheartedly with this sentiment because, for me, stories told well do not simply convey meaning, they make us *see* ourselves, and others, too. In the case of Australia (as it is, I think, with all colonised spaces), this recognition is vital. The stories a nation tells itself about who its people are and about how they came to be has ramifications for who belongs and who is excluded, both in a nation’s stories and in people’s lived experience. This is especially important in an Australia where the national narrative is a fraught one built on unstable ground. Witness, for instance, the fervent mythologising of Australia Day and Anzac Day. Paul Daley notes that there is an enduring “tradition of obscurant political bipartisanship” that protects the mythos of Anzac memorialisation while “stubbornly ignoring” Australia’s frontier wars (Daley). When other stories *are* told, there is still a resistance to listen to them. As Lucashenko argues, if there is an increasing desire to listen to stories of Aboriginal Dreaming, there is far less appetite to hear stories of “How the Squatter Raped the Djinn While Stealing Her Land from Under Her With Government Assent. Opening the land, yes, but not that version, thanks very much” (Lucashenko, “On”).

Stories *do* matter. They have always mattered. Our desire to tell stories emerges in us instinctively, a universal trait of humanity “which occurs spontaneously in childhood” (Smith et al. 2). Stories are, in many ways, vital to our humanness. Azar Nafisi says that fictional stories “link us to our past, provide us with critical insight into the present and enable us to envision our lives not just as they are but as they should be or might become” (3). Judith Butler considers literary works as producing a “time that is ‘not yet’ and offers some way to

think a future where none has been thought” (Butler 97-98). In this way, the stories we tell ourselves are not simply important to the here and now, but to the very way we might consider the future, the ‘not yet’, sometimes a prediction, but more often a possibility.

This exegesis goes further than just considering stories as important, but also argues that the *way* we tell our stories is of equal merit for discussion. Because if “writers still have the power to change minds, and influence the shape of things” (Lucashenko, “On”), they can also play or *change* the shape of reality to create the possible conditions for seeing in a new or altered way. For me, the grotesque became a way to do this.

### Other People’s Shoes: Writing Indigenous Characters in *Fish Head*

In this exegesis, I largely approach the grotesque from a non-Indigenous perspective. Why is this the case? Well, for one, I am a non-Indigenous writer and this exegesis is, generally speaking, about my own experiences of the grotesque. I do not think that as a white writer I am excluded from examining an Indigenous perspective entirely, but nor do I subscribe to Lionel Shriver’s assertion that writers of any persuasion should have free reign to “[s]tep into other people’s shoes, and try on their hats”. That approach is fraught, and not so simple, because it ignores a history of (mainly) white privilege and abuse in the appropriation of the cultural and personal stories of minorities. Besides, not everyone looks good in a hat.

With that in mind, this exegesis does contain Indigenous perspectives, research and content. The writings of Melissa Lucashenko have proved particularly important to this study. In my examination of her short work of fictocriticism, “Country: Being and Belonging on Aboriginal Lands”, I posit that the text seeks to attack Australia’s dominant political, cultural and historical centre and disrupt the perception of non-Indigenous readers. I also examine, albeit briefly, Darren Siwes’ portrait work in *Jingli Kwin*. A different piece of research might focus in more detail on Indigenous perspectives, but the primary focus of the exegesis is my own creative work and the way the grotesque brought it to life.

While writing *Fish Head*, I struggled with how to include Indigenous characters in my novel, or whether to include them at all. To do so would invite a level of legitimate scrutiny on the text, and the very real possibility that I would, against my best intentions, perpetuate damaging stereotypes. For a writer, there is perhaps nothing worse than accusations of a character who is half-baked and unrealistic, but more than that, supposing *Fish Head* is ever read by more than my supervisors, a small cluster of friends and family, and two examiners, I feared I would inflict a damage that Indigenous Australians have long had to suffer. As Waanyi writer and essayist Alexis Wright argues, “The truth is, we have simply become other

people's subject matter in the stories they tell, and pay the price of their foolishly playing around with the Aboriginal sense of self [...]” (“What happens” 60).

I had this fear in mind as I wrote my novel. And yet, to me, simply excluding Indigenous characters would be to perpetuate another issue: the erasure of the Indigenous presence, the emptying of the land, so to speak, that supported the fallacy of the legal doctrine of *terra nullius*. How could I tell a story about a rural Australian town and a mine without including Indigenous voices? To me, that seemed a ridiculous proposition. But in walking this path, I could create something equally ridiculous. This is an issue, I think, for all non-Indigenous writers writing about Australia. For instance, it took Peter Carey fourteen novels before he finally assumed the perspective of Indigenous characters and addressed the issue of colonisation head-on in *A Long Way From Home*.

Wiradjuri writer Anita Heiss argues that non-Indigenous writers *can* write Indigenous characters, but their approach must be informed, well researched (including consultation), and not mere tokenism: “if you are just going to slot in an Indigenous character to ‘tick the box’, then you really are better off leaving them out altogether” (qtd. in Case).

Acknowledging the complexities of telling an Australian history from both an Indigenous and non-Indigenous experience, Arrente poet Jennifer Martiniello notes:

For many issues there is also a white story, not just a black story – after all, we didn't create the last 200 years of crap all by ourselves. So long as white writers are aware that there are boundaries they cannot cross when they are writing, and where or what the appropriate protocols are for dealing with Aboriginal people, their stories and their communities, then their work may be approved. (qtd. in Heiss 200)

Black and White stories *do* exist alongside one another. So, then, I chose to include Indigenous characters in *Fish Head*, but I tried to match my intentions with informed research. Writing by Alexis Wright (“What happens”), Bruce Pascoe (“Andrew”; *Little*; “Australia”) and Lucashenko (“Not”; “I Pity”) gave me varied (but by no means exhaustive) perspectives on Aboriginality, connection to country, the importance of stories, and the experiences of Indigenous Australians. The documentary *Dirt Cheap: 30 Years On*, about uranium mining in Kakadu, provided insights into how Indigenous communities respond to incursions on their land. On cultural protocol, I consulted with my sister, Lilla Berry, a young Indigenous woman whose opinion I trust and value. However, I recognise that I am treading on unstable ground. If there are things that I have got wrong, then I must learn from my



mistakes. However, it remains my belief that to talk about Australia you must talk also about Indigenous issues. To not do so, I think, is an erasure; an emptying of the land that mirrors the one perpetrated by colonial invaders more than two centuries ago, and that still continues to this day.

## Conclusion

This exegesis is about finding Fishboy. It explores the methodology behind the creation of my novel *Fish Head*, where the grotesque became a way to make my own work strange to me and opened up playful possibilities for my story that I had not yet seen. This exegesis is also about what Jonah the Fishboy did to my novel, what he allowed me to do, and what his monstrosity and hybridity allowed me to say about otherness. Important to this discussion is the assertion that stories matter, but also important is *how* we tell them. In this way, I examine the story *Fish Head* was trying to tell, but also how I told it. In chapter two, I trace the developments and discoveries that brought me to Jonah the Fishboy and argue that the grotesque became both a way to make strange my own work and the way *into* the story I wanted to tell about Australia. In chapter three I discuss how the language of the grotesque was used by newly arrived Europeans to understand Australian space, before briefly examining Rosa Campbell Praed's "The Bunyip". Then, I examine Melissa Lucashenko's short work of fictocriticism "Country: Being and Belonging on Aboriginal Lands", to show how an experience of the grotesque can unearth Australia's repressed history of genocide and acquisition of land. In chapter four, I turn my attention to issues of Australian identity by examining the grotesque in Peter Carey's novel *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith*. Finally, I return to *Fish Head* in chapter five to discuss how the monstrous and grotesque body of Jonah the Fishboy changed the shape of my novel. While other texts would have generated sufficiently fascinating discussions on the grotesque in Australian fiction, I chose Lucashenko and Carey's texts, especially, because they matched the intentions of my own. That is, they both, in their own ways, sought to interrogate and subvert Australian narratives of land, identity and history. In this exegesis, my analysis of these texts focuses more deliberately on how each make use of, or exhibit the grotesque in their own right, but it should be said that they both, in various ways, informed *Fish Head*. Most obviously, for instance, readers might see similarities in Carey's eponymous character, Tristan Smith, and the narrator of *Fish Head*, Jonah the Fishboy.

Important to my discussions of these exemplary texts is how the grotesque has been used to conceptualise Australian space and experience. It is not my intention to formalise a

tradition of the grotesque in Australia. To my knowledge, this remains an unheeded project, if not a fascinating one. The gothic, which at times overlaps with the intentions and aesthetics of the grotesque, has enjoyed more sustained focus in this country. Ken Gelder and Racheal Weaver's anthology of colonial gothic fiction and Gerry Turcotte's *Peripheral Fear* are both useful references in this regard. The grotesque in Australia, so far, has no parallel to these studies, although Greg Rattcliffe, Michael Ackland, and Daniel Hempel's exemplary essays on the grotesque in Australian fiction were especially useful to my research.

# CHAPTER ONE

## Capturing the Grotesque

If the grotesque is an ever-shifting beast that seeks to constantly elude capture, then how, exactly, do we talk about it? How can we say, exactly, what the grotesque is? The OED states that the grotesque, as a noun, is a “kind of decorative painting or sculpture, consisting of the interweaving of human and animal forms with foliage and flowers”. This definition is strictly true if the grotesque should only describe the type of fantastical imagery discovered in the fifteenth century in grottoes buried beneath Rome. It might explain the genesis of the grotesque as a term, but it describes only one facet.

Today, the grotesque is likely used to describe something offensive, something that seems off, not quite right. The other definition supplied by the OED is that the grotesque, as an adjective, is something that is “comically or repulsively ugly or distorted”. Again, this helps explain another important aspect of the grotesque – its proximity to both distortion and repulsiveness, as well as laughter – but it remains inadequate to capture the complexity of the term. Not surprisingly, neither of these definitions hold the detritus of the changing forms, styles, and provocations that the grotesque has been associated with over the last six hundred years, nor do they capture the multitude of shapes and designs and incongruities that the grotesque signifies.

Geoffrey Harpham calls the grotesque a “species of confusion” (xv):

As an adjective [the grotesque] has no descriptive value; its sole function is to represent a condition of overcrowding or contradiction in the place where the modifier should be [...] The grotesque is a concept without form: the word nearly always modifies such indeterminate nouns as *monster*, *object* or *thing*. As a noun it implies that an object either occupies multiple categories or that it falls between categories; it implies the collision of other nouns, or the impossibility of finding a synonym, nothing more [...] [W]e must recognize that grotesques have no consistent properties other than their own grotesqueness, and that they do not manifest predictable behaviour. (Harpham 3)

Harpham’s account of the grotesque does not especially make its meaning clear, but that is his intention, because the grotesque “accommodates the things left over when the categories

of language are exhausted” (Harpham 3). It becomes a word for a “non-thing”, a category Harpham says contains all the things that cannot be packed into orderly compartments. In other words, those things that are taboo, “the objects in the interstices of consciousness” that are suppressed (Harpham 3).

Harpham’s contention that the grotesque holds a thing where language exhausts itself is useful, because it points to the sheer difficulty in apprehending the grotesque. If it is beyond language, then how can it be described? Still, this species of confusion *can* be witnessed with some certainty: the bizarre intermingling of plant and human in Giuseppe Arcimboldo’s portrait *Winter*; Gregor Samsa’s terrifying transformation into a giant beetle in Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*; plastic artist Patricia Piccinini’s silicon sculptures, uncanny hybrids rendered in the in-betweenness of human and other; Goya’s haunting and gruesome *Saturn Devouring his Son*, a depiction of the Greek myth of Cronus eating his children. These works exhibit a confluence of categories, the human and the non-human, bodies made monstrous or alien, an overlap of life and death. For some observers, these examples might elicit little more than a shrug. But for those who fall under their spell, images such as these contain what Harpham would call “a condition of overcrowding or contradiction” (3). These works suggest that a foundation of the grotesque is contradiction, and further to that, undecidability (Remshardt 22).

I have promised no definitive expression of the grotesque not because I want to shirk that responsibility, but because, I think, it remains an improbable if not impossible task to try. Perhaps it is because the grotesque is, especially so, a relative beast. As Connelly argues, what is grotesque for one person or culture might not be so for another (14). Further, Remshardt points out that “the grotesque in concept and affective response shows itself subject to ongoing revision over time” (11). Even when apprehended, the grotesque might suddenly change its shape. It makes the grotesque a “concept without form” (Harpham 3). I agree with Bernard McElroy when he suggests that the grotesque is not “an absolute which is either fully present or not at all. Rather, it is a continuum which may be present in varying degrees in otherwise disparate works” (2).

Instead of conclusively answering what is and what is not the grotesque, I will briefly outline two of the theoretical positions that first introduced me to the grotesque – those of Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and his World* and Wolfgang Kayser in *The Grottesque in Art and Literature*. These two texts first opened up my writing to the possibilities of the grotesque, and helped me, in their own way, to find Fishboy. While they offer contradictory

terms (yes, as always, contradiction!), I argue that one way to understand the grotesque is by positioning its different incarnations, and the responses it yields, on a spectrum between these two theoretical positions.

### The Universal Body and the Fear of Life

Mikhail Bakhtin's study of the carnivalesque, grotesque realism and the grotesque body in the work of fifteenth century French writer Francois Rabelais has been one of the most influential texts on the grotesque in the twentieth century. Bakhtin positions the bodily element of grotesque realism as "deeply positive" (19), one that revolves around folk humour and a universal, redemptive laughter. His grotesque is primarily a comic one, a style built on exaggeration, hyperbole and excessiveness (Bakhtin 303). The carnival-grotesque form is a world of inversion and transgression, and functions to "liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted" (Bakhtin 34). Degradation in all its forms is one of the most important aspects of grotesque realism, from the high order to the low, the body to the earth, in the parody of styles and conventions: "all the other forms of grotesque realism degrade, bring down to earth, turn their subject into flesh" (Bakhtin 20). This degradation extends to the body; the grotesque body is most concerned with the "acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy, and birth" (Bakhtin 21). In this way, the grotesque body stands in direct contrast to classicist ideals of beauty and the body as closed and separate from outside influence (Bakhtin 315).

According to Bakhtin, the grotesque body is never complete, its boundaries never closed off; it is a body always in the act of transforming; a body where the "outward and inward features are often merged into one" (Bakhtin 318). This means that one indispensable trait of the grotesque image is ambivalence: "For in this image we find both poles of transformation, the old and the new, the dying and the procreating, the beginning and the end of the metamorphosis" (Bakhtin 24).

Bakhtin's conception of the carnivalesque and the grotesque body have enjoyed sustained critical interest, but his ideas are not without contention. Most particularly, his utopian character of the grotesque and the carnival is disputed. Maria Sofia Pimentel Biscaia says that the utopia of the carnival as Bakhtin describes it "never existed. In other words, a mythology has been created in order to meet his purposes" (13). Harpham claims that Bakhtin, with his insistence on the positive and universal notion of carnival laughter, underestimates "the force of alienation in the grotesque" (Harpham 72). Remshardt says, "On

the one hand, the anarchic impulse [of carnival] tends to pose a threat to the integrity of authority, on the other hand, the cathartic factors within the practices of carnival keep it from becoming that threat” (45).

I would say that these arguments do not make Bakhtin’s conception of the grotesque any less worthwhile. His grotesque body remains deeply ethical, allowing for a reconceptualization of the human body and a repositioning of it from the abstract towards the earthly. It has positive ramifications for interrogating the cultural positions taken on, for instance, the female body, the disabled body and the queer body. Bakhtin’s theories of the grotesque body have informed, for instance, Julia Kristeva’s work on the *abject*. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva states,

There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable [...] Unflaggingly, like an inescapable boomerage, a vortex of summons and repulsion places the one haunted by it literally beside himself. (1)

Kristeva’s *abject* focuses on a body that, like Bakhtin’s, is penetrable, that exists alongside blood, filth and dung, where the inside and outside are in constant and open negotiation. Connelly says the *abject* “describes the disgust and repulsion experienced when we encounter the body in process” (144). As an aesthetic for feminist re-conceptions of the body, it can become a “means to repulse the objectifying gaze directed toward the body in general and the female nude in particular” (Connelly 144). Mary Russo’s *The Female Grotesque* is a powerful scholarly contribution to the feminine grotesque, and Biscaia’s *Postcolonial and Feminist Grotesque* contributes further to this area. I acknowledge the importance and enduring nature of these studies – especially those of Kristeva and Russo – in developing and extending the field of the feminine grotesque, and feminist criticism more broadly, but this exegesis does not detail them in great length. For my purposes, thinking more broadly about the grotesque body proved more apt.

If Bakhtin’s concept of the grotesque body is, as he says, “deeply positive” (19), then it ignores the fact that the grotesque can describe something more psychological, more terrifying. In contrast, then, to Bakhtin’s positive, liberational concept of the grotesque and carnival, is Wolfgang Kayser’s concept of the grotesque, outlined in *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*. While Bakhtin’s grotesque realism connected more deeply with the earthly

and the bodily and sought revelation and revolution, Kayser concerned himself more with the psychological forces of the grotesque:

The grotesque world is – and is not – our own world. The ambiguous way in which we are affected by it results from our awareness that the familiar and apparently harmonious world is alienated under the impact of abysmal forces, which break it up and shatter its coherence. (Kayser 37)

Like Bakhtin, Kayser finds laughter in the grotesque, but the laughter is not revelatory. Rather, his grotesque laughter is a laughter in the face of fear and death. While he accepts play into the equation – in fact, Kayser calls the grotesque a play with the absurd – Kayser says there is a “sinister quality inherent even in this playful world” (21). An encounter with the grotesque throws up a confusion of feelings; there is something alluring about a grotesque deformation, but it is appalling as well (Kayser 31). As Kayser suggests, the basic response is “one of surprise and horror, an agonising fear in the presence of a world which breaks apart and remains inaccessible” (31).

What type of thing belongs to Kayser’s grotesque? For one, monsters of all types, the gruesome bone-crushers, the terrifying demons, and hybrid incongruities. Plants feature when they intermingle with the human, and animals, too, because “in animals familiar to him, modern man may experience the strangeness of something totally different from himself and suggestive of abysmal ominousness” (Kayser 182). Mechanical objects become grotesque when they are “demonically destructive and overpower their makers” (Kayser 183), while humans rendered as puppets, marionettes or automatons, or with faces like masks, are a powerful grotesque image because they point to a loss of human control (Kayser 183). Essentially, what the grotesque does is show a world transformed and made strange to us: “The grotesque is the estranged world” (Kayser 184). The response is one of alienation and terror:

We are so strongly affected and terrified because it is our world which ceases to be reliable, and we feel that we would be unable to live in this changed world. The grotesque instils fear of life rather than fear of death. (Kayser 184)

In this way, the grotesque shares psychological space with the uncanny, as posited in 1919 by Sigmund Freud in his essay of the same name. Edwards and Graulund argue that “the uncanny, like the grotesque, depends on a conflict or confrontation based on the notion of incongruity or the juxtaposition of opposites” (7). Connelly suggests that the uncanny calls our individual subjectivity into question: “We experience the uncanny when we are unable to

determine our relation with something we encounter, to establish a psyching boundary between it and ourselves” (116). I will return to the uncanny as a response allied to the grotesque in chapter three, as it relates to Melissa Lucashenko’s “Country: Being and Belonging on Aboriginal land”.

But Kayser also saw the grotesque as a way to control our terror of the unknown, “an attempt to invoke and subdue the demonic aspects of the world” (Kayser 188). It is hardly an optimistic standpoint, but it does, at the very least, position the grotesque as a tool to aid in conceptualising the unknown, a way to give shape to terror so that it can be overcome. Overall, though, I argue that Kayser’s grotesque sits at the opposing spectrum to Bakhtin’s. If Kayser pays greater attention to the psychologically dangerous elements of the grotesque, he veers too far from its regenerative qualities, its ability to push us towards new ways of seeing that challenge the taken-for-granted. McElroy contends that both Kayser and Bakhtin make an error in their conceptions of the grotesque: they mistake “the part for the whole. Any broad discussion of the grotesque in art is, of necessity, headed for areas that include *both* the serious and the comic” (McElroy 15; my emphasis). This might be the case, but I argue that, taken as positions on a spectrum, Bakhtin’s and Kayser’s work reflects the poles that the gamut of grotesques might inhabit, even while they contradict one another. It was certainly the case that both works – as well as others – influenced and changed the shape of my work. Both, in their own way, led me to Jonah the Fishboy.

My argument remains that there can be no definitive shape to a form that is, by nature, a shapeshifter. However, there are, I think, two further ways of understanding the grotesque. As Connelly argues, one way of considering the grotesque is as a verb rather than a noun, that is, “by what it does, rather than what it is” (2). Following Connelly and Remshardt, in particular, I suggest that what the grotesque does is invite play, as well as disrupting our perception.

### An Invitation to Play: Perception and the *Spielraum*

Play is an integral aspect of the grotesque (Connelly 14). In fact, both Kayser and Bakhtin identify the “central concept of the grotesque as play” (McElroy 2). Play, here, does not necessarily mean the type of things that children do, although children’s games often descend into the weird and surreal, or even the gruesome. Instead, the play of the grotesque is the rubbing together and intermingling of different, often juxtaposing characteristics, materials, emotional states and so on. It is both experimentation and interrogation, creation and destruction. The “grotesque *plays* with Western concepts of binarity by hosting them and then



*exploding* their inner balance” (Remshardt 254; my emphases). The grotesque is also a play with our minds. The surrealists, for instance, played with reality, their representational techniques were “games to destabilize the rational, intentional mind” (Connelly 142). Playfulness is often what the grotesque does best, but it is usually the play a daredevil entertains, like juggling chainsaws and flambeaus in increasing levels of danger.

If the grotesque is about play it is also about “perspective and perception” (Remshardt 10). When confronted by the grotesque, says Remshardt, the very act of perception is foregrounded and the transaction between aesthetics and semantics becomes an agonising struggle (10). This is because the grotesque trades off ambiguity, incongruence and ambivalence, all states of perception that confront perceptual memory with the unexpected. When caught in the gaze of the grotesque we are “reminded of the fickleness of our senses, we become self-conscious” (Remshardt 10). According to Remshardt, the grotesque forces us into “perceiving one’s own perception” (10). An encounter with the grotesque, then, can be like seeing yourself seeing, if not physically, then mentally, as if watching yourself enact absurdities in your own dreams.

Psychologist Ronald T Kellogg says that “the mind comes to know the world through sensing and perceiving the environment” (33). But perceiving the world around us is a complex process that goes through “multiple stages and transformations of mental representations” (Kellogg 33). What we see and how we make sense of what we perceive, therefore, is not instantaneous. As Kellogg says, in all seriousness, “Even to recognize your own mother involves a sequence of processing stages that is complex and can take as long as half a second” (33). Perception also relies on both the information stored in our memory and the information we glean from the environment. Our perception of the world is built from our expectations of how we think the world should look or sound based on the memory we have of our previous experiences (Kellogg 34). In effect, the way we perceive things is as much about how we *expect* to perceive them – I expect the avocado to be green because it has always been green – as how we are perceiving them in the environment. But what happens when the process of perception is interrupted by a world that does not conform to the expectations we have of it? Or, more particularly, what happens to the way we perceive the world when the grotesque rears its head?

If cognitive psychology shows that the process of perception is not instant and goes through multiple and complex stages, then the grotesque exploits this aspect of our psychological construction. It takes advantage of the fact that there is a “‘perception gap’

between our knowledge of the phenomenal presence of an object and our full recognition of its visual qualities” (Remshardt 24). In an encounter with the grotesque, our perception is interrupted, and the brain struggles to complete the internal process of perceiving what it sees. Perception suddenly becomes a conscious act. Remshardt says, “The exposure to the grotesque calls the entire conceit of perception into question by breaking down its sensual and intellectual components and manifesting its attendant fragility” (21). Disorder in perception, though, causes an existential as well as intellectual crisis, because for any life-form a “degree of orderliness in the environment” is required for “orientation, well-being, and, ultimately, survival” (Remshardt 21). A world of ordered expectation is a world that can be navigated safely. To have a world in disorder, though, is to be under threat. The grotesque creates these disorderly conditions in its effort to resist a smooth process of perception. It short-circuits the entire process, resists the orderly, and leaves the perception gap disconnected.

This perception gap is what Connelly calls a *Spielraum* or “room to play” (12), a term she draws from Erik Erikson’s 1972 paper *Play and Actuality*. Erikson suggests that in the *Spielraum*, play becomes the “restoration and creation of a *leeway of mastery* in a set of developments or circumstance” (133; original emphasis). For children, play becomes “an infinite resource of what is potential in man” (Erikson 127). Play helps us discover, it helps us test and develop, and the *Spielraum* describes “the creative possibilities of play in human and cultural development” (Connelly 12). The grotesque, according to Connelly, can do something similar, because the perception gap created by grotesque’s confounding forms creates a perceptual space to play with what we know and see. Connelly’s vision of the *Spielraum* sees the play of the grotesque as beneficial to our development, a space to challenge and “forge new possibilities” (12). For as Connelly says, the gaps opened up by the grotesque must be bridged in order to emerge on the other side of any perceptual disruption (12). In the process of re-circuiting our perception, the grotesque invites fragments to combine, to become something new, a playful act that “underscores the creative force that is the grotesque” (Connelly 13). In the context of this exegesis, the perception gap, this *Spielraum* that the grotesque creates, is at the core of what I think is important, even vital, about the grotesque.

But the *Spielraum* is also what is created for a reader *by* a writer. As I argue in chapters three and four, this perception gap is also what is encountered in both Melissa Lucashenko’s “Country: Being and Belonging on Aboriginal Lands”, and Peter Carey’s *The*

*Unusual Life of Tristan Smith*. Because, really, in the end, what the grotesque does by creating a *Spielraum* is provide the opportunity to come across new meaning by making strange, and by revealing what is unseen or hidden. Remshardt says that the grotesque highlights “what is *possible* alongside, underneath, above and despite our fortifications of morality and logic” (261; original emphasis). In this process of breaking through and breaking open, posits Wilson Yates, “insights into different ways of being and, perhaps, new possibilities for wisdom and wholeness” can be experienced (2).

### Colonisation and Liberation: The Grotesque as Protest

Lastly, I want to discuss the grotesque as a tool that can both colonise *and* liberate. Agata Krzychylkiewicz argues that, widely speaking, the purpose of the grotesque is to “highlight the contradictions inherent in life and in people, and to make the reader aware of the absurdities in the real world” (Krzychylkiewicz 206). The grotesque acts as a type of *ostranienie* that interrogates, exposes, questions, and unearths aspects of the world we no longer see or choose to ignore. At its most effective “the grotesque turns received ideas, normal expectations, and social and artistic conventions against themselves” (Connelly 11). In the modern era, the grotesque becomes “the weapon of choice for social protest”, “the quintessential voice of the outsider” (Connelly 18, 23).

While I agree with Krzychylkiewicz and Connelly that the grotesque can be a potent form of political and social disruption, it has also been used as a harmful tool of colonisation. Greg Ratcliffe suggests that the grotesque has, at times, marked certain groups of people as other, to “delineate and preserve the territory of particular social formations” (Ratcliffe 13). Here, the grotesque loses its edge as a socially progressive disruptor and instead becomes a form that turns an unknown space or people into something fearful. This, to me, marks the grotesque as both negative and positive, a mode of representation that can straddle either end of the spectrum I outlined earlier in this chapter, and sometimes at overlapping moments. In chapter three, I look more specifically at how the grotesque was used to conceptualise Australian space to advance the colonial project. For now, I will provide a brief illustrative example of what I see as the liberational potential of the grotesque.

Photographer and visual artist Darren Siwes’ portrait *Jingli Kwin* aptly demonstrates this potential. In his portrait (Figure 1), a man and woman are dressed in regal garbs, their vivid blue sashes adorned with medals, the woman with pearl necklace and tiara, the man with an officer’s hat and black suit. Together, they are dressed in the manner of royalty (likely British), of those firmly entrenched in the centre of political and social power. And



**Figure 1 - Darren Siwes, Jingli Kwin, 2013, Greenway Gallery**

yet, their Aboriginal identities are not suppressed, despite the garishly thick make-up applied to their skin – seemingly, an inversion of the minstrel ‘black face’ used by white performers in America. In Siwes’ portrait, the characters sit in-between two racial categories: not this, not that. Their identity projects both instability and hybridity, a quality of undecidability suggesting proximity to the grotesque. Siwes’ characters act to interrupt the ‘order of things’ and the perceived hierarchy in Australia, as those long treated by the colonisers as peripheral and other present themselves in the guise of the royal class. The margins attack and disrupt the socio-political centre, the colonised become the colonisers, and the social strata of Australia is pulled into question as anxieties about class and identity are wrenched open. The grotesque becomes protest, or at the very least, a form of interrogation to renew and resituate the gaze in a way that might constitute what Darren Jorgenson calls a “counter-grotesque”. I contend that the grotesque as a force of liberation has also been an essential tool for writers wishing to unearth the buried aspects of Australian culture and history. In chapters three and four I will show, through case studies, how the grotesque can be employed to address issues of Australia’s layered and buried topography, and its uncertainties surrounding identity.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *Fish Head*, or how I came to write a novel of the grotesque

By the time I had finished writing the final draft of *Fish Head*, the protagonist and narrator of my story, Jonah the Fishboy, felt like a character I had known forever. Yet this was not always the case. Before Jonah, *Fish Head* was driven by something else (and another title). It took a moment of destruction followed by an engagement with the grotesque before I found Fishboy. In this chapter, I discuss the methodology behind my creation of *Fish Head*, where the grotesque became a way to make strange my own work and encourage a play with my own perception.

It all started with a boy and a fish that looked like Jesus.<sup>1</sup> The boy, Max, hefts the strange scaly creature from the ooze of a sunken, drained waterhole and his life, and the little town he calls home, changes forever. In the beginning, that was all I had – that little slice of a moment, that strange scene.

The Jesus fish had been with me for some time, although I cannot recall where, exactly, it came from. At times, it was there in the foreground, swishing its scaly tail, winking at me with its beard and thorny crown. At other moments, it lurked in the shadows, content with the murky depths of my penumbral periphery. But it was always there, insistent.

Writing in *ISLAND*, Carmel Bird speaks of the “insistent” images that refuse to go away. She writes:

It so happens that the butterflies that flit across the pages of my fiction arrived there, as so much in fiction seems to do, by an unconscious process. There was never a deliberate intention to have them there [...] They have, as it were, *unconscious*, thematic and textual significance. And they are insistent. Try as I might to erase them from a piece of writing, there they will be. (15; original emphasis)

Here, Bird’s identification of the unconscious process of fiction writing is a trope that many writers ascribe to, and I agree that a writer is often the beneficiary of their unconscious working away in the background. More importantly, I agree with Bird’s acknowledgment that

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<sup>1</sup> Sections of this chapter have been re-worked and will appear in “The Broken Body of ‘Fishboy’: The Grotesque as Bursting Boundaries”

ideas can be insistent, because the Jesus fish proved to be such a thing, born seemingly from my unconscious, and then refusing, like an unwanted guest, to leave. However, while Bird recognizes the significance of her butterflies, for me, as I will show, the Jesus fish was not so compliant.

I began to build a world for the Jesus fish. I created Fortune, an outback mining town, and I filled that world with people and their memories, histories and all the rest. There was the Fortune cemetery that had no one buried in it; a tin-shed museum that proudly exhibited spurious myths the town had convinced itself were true; the waterhole that the children spent swimming in during hot Summers, the same waterhole where Max would find the Jesus fish. But the story world the Jesus fish inhabited frustrated me. No matter how much I shifted the story around, no matter how much I manipulated things, I came to a loggerheads time and time again. Something was wrong.

It was the Jesus fish.

Despite its continued presence over years, its unrelenting insistence to be made solid, the Jesus fish eluded my attempts at corralling it into something that made sense to me. I asked myself constantly: what the hell did a fish that looked like Jesus matter to an Australian town in the middle of nowhere? At the behest of my supervisor, I went away and thought about that question for weeks. I decided to write every reason I could think of and it came out like a shopping list of Australian hang-ups, desires, and anxieties:

- Because we are aware of our own mortality and a Jesus fish suggests salvation in an afterlife. The promise of eternal life.
- Because some people would use a Jesus fish to exploit others' deep-seated beliefs to make financial gains.
- Because people want to believe there is still mystery and magic in everyday life. That there are things beyond what Science can explain.
- Because a Jesus fish is a sign that God has chosen Australia – that Christianity has its sacred place in this land.

I also discovered that although the mix of religious denominations has shifted considerably in the last 50 years (significantly, more than 30 percent identify as non-religious), 52 percent of Australians still identify as Christian (Australian Bureau of Statistics). Despite his flagging influence, Jesus, in fish form or not, still holds considerable significance in Australia.

But the novel I was trying to write still felt flat, uninspired. Maybe it wasn't a question of whether a Jesus fish mattered to Australia, maybe it simply did not matter to me. A fish that looks like Jesus, I thought, was not strange enough. After all, people already find

divine lineaments in cheese sandwiches or see the Holy Mother in wall-stains. The Jesus fish was not allowing me to tell the story I really wanted to tell. To me, it was not saying anything about the Australia that I felt compelled to investigate, the Australia devilishly afraid in the face of difference, or in the presence of human bodies not doing what we think they should. The Australia addicted to panic and a fear of the other, a fear that writer David Marr says we have “carried with us from the childhood of the nation” (235). That was the story of Australia that I wanted to tell.

Eventually, I did away with everything until all I had left was the Jesus fish and the boy who discovers it. I was back to square one having sat frustratingly at the boundaries of a world I had created but did not have access to.

What could I do? Persevere, or relinquish the work I had undertaken? To me, it was clear that I had exhausted my vision for the project. Perhaps I could take advice from novelist Thomas Keneally, who said that “[e]veryone has gone through the loss of faith in the material” (144). Yes, a fair assumption, and one, then, that would put me in perfect company with many others. So, then, persevere. Except, Keneally also went on to say that “[s]ometimes the novel dies beneath you like a horse, and when it begins to really smell, bury it” (144). I had to wonder, then, what smells worse: a dead horse or a dead fish?

### An Almighty Bang: Destruction as Creation

As I will show, a moment of destruction precipitated the creation of *Jonah the Fishboy*. I will now examine the relationship between creativity and destruction, and how some writers and artists have relied on destruction as a necessary precursor to the creation of new work.

As Jane Rawson was writing her novel *From the Wreck*, she found herself at a dead end. Originally, Rawson intended *From the Wreck* as a historical novel about a steamship – the *Admella* – wrecked off the coast of South Australia in 1859. The event had a personal connection for Rawson: her great-great-grandfather, George Hills, was one of twenty-four survivors to make it to land. Rawson says that she had been trying to write about George Hills since 2009 (“From”). Eventually she realised that she “couldn’t bring this book to life. It was flat. It was dead” (“Inside”). Six years after beginning her historical novel, Rawson decided to pull apart and discard the story she had envisioned. If Rawson’s destruction was largely a psychological shedding, then Brunette Lenkic describes an actual physical destruction of her work in her *Overland* article “A Novel Ending”. Lenkic declares she has “finally finished shredding her novel”, saying that it was “the work of many days, feeding it into the machine sheet by sheet and watching the pages re-emerge as linguine”.

Creators have always had to destroy, twist, dismantle, or pull apart their work. There can be a cathartic aspect to the process – of unshackling oneself from an obsession that has grown too strong and too resistant. But it can also feel like a necessary act. Art historian Laura Gray believes that destruction is a “necessary act taking place before the coming of a new world or new order” (12). Destruction is not simply senseless violence but an “intellectual act”, an act that is part of the creative process and that can seek to transform, critique and interrogate boundaries of art, culture, and the canon (10). Destruction becomes, for Gray, the catalyst for change, becomes regenerative, births life. Jennifer Walden agrees, suggesting that modernity has been “characterised as the destruction of tradition. Thus far *historically*, art and destruction, as well as creation, have never been far away from each other” (Walden 1; original emphasis).

Charles Baudelaire sees creativity itself as a destructive process. He speaks of the artist working in a feverish state while others sleep:

skirmishing with his pencil, his pen, his brush, splashing his glass of water up to the ceiling, wiping his pen on his shirt, in a ferment of violent activity, as though afraid that the image might escape him, cantankerous though alone, elbowing himself on. (Baudelaire, *Painter* 12)

Here, in the throes of creation, the potential for destruction is witnessed, as the artist, caught in a whirlwind of activity, flings instruments of creation with reckless abandon. The kinship between destruction and creation becomes even more intimate, then, with one not necessarily precipitating the other in any sequential order, but instead occupying the same space simultaneously. According to Richard D.E Burton, “artistic creation was itself for Baudelaire a process of rupture, wrenching and release, a sometimes violent unleashing of repressed energies” (319). Baudelaire, then, asks us to consider the destruction/creation dialectic as inherent to the creative process.

The idea of creation through destruction was taken up as the methodological impetus of the avant-garde who, Maggie Nelson notes, dismantled or destroyed the mediated object in “order to reveal its ‘convulsive conception of life’” (19). This rhetoric, though, was not harmless. The avant-garde’s mission was often “marked by violence and rupture” (Nelson 19). For instance, the Futurist movement’s views on creation through destruction saw them espouse the “purifying role of war and call for the destruction of museums” (Gray 10). Hardly a gentle sentiment.



Contemporaneously, the intersection of destruction, art and culture retains dangerous dimensions in the space of ideological conflict, such as what has occurred in Syria and Iraq at the hands of IS. IS's desecration of ancient monuments and cultural artefacts is an attempt to wipe away culture, and little, if indeed anything, can be said for it. And yet, when viewed from the other side, the destruction is justified by IS in order to create a new caliphate. Benjamin Isakhan and Jose Antonio Gonzalez Zarandona argue that "the heritage destruction undertaken by the IS are not only very carefully planned and executed, but also couched within a broader religious, historical and political framework that seeks to justify their violent iconoclasm". The line between destruction for destruction's sake, and destruction for the sake of creating something new or different is murky, the parameters contentiously subjective. In my mind, intent is a vital aspect of any destructive endeavour. An artist destroys only to allow the genesis of something different, something new and hitherto unknown. The saboteur destroys to wreak havoc, to disarm, to inflict pain.

Despite the potential pitfalls and dangers of destructive creation, breaking from conventional artistic practice by destroying or breaking apart continues to hold sway for some practitioners. Artist Daniel Reeve says, "Creativity often comes through destruction. An act of breaking, redrawing and refashioning can often be the precursor to creation, a new beginning" (159). Like Baudelaire, Peter Conrad sees destruction and creation as inseparable, asking, is it "possible to think of creation without imagining its opposite, destruction?" (6). Seemingly, the answer is no. Creation myths abound with stories of destruction and death leading to new life. Gray asserts, "Stories of resurrection from death – Osiris being made whole to participate in the afterlife, Persephone and Odysseus visiting the underworld and returning to life, the resurrection of Christ – form part of our collective unconscious" (11). In the creation stories of the Bible, God simply blinked and created life as we know it, but the scientific version of the Universe's creation starts from something more akin to destruction: an almighty bang.

Lenkic suggests that shredding her novel acted as a catalyst for further destruction; it became an act that "stimulated a hunger in me to rid myself of more writing". In the first instance, destruction begets destruction rather than creation. Having realised her novel sharply resembled another writer's work, Lenkic considers continuing her path of destruction. Yet she remains reluctant, saying that "there is one character in it, not the woman but a vulnerable young man, who has potential". Lenkic's recognition of the vulnerable young man shows that, within the very thing that might ultimately need to be destroyed, new creative life

can emerge. Indeed, not just creative life, but life itself. In the accompanying notes for Lenkic's article she says that "some of the novel linguine is now boosting the growth of my herb garden".

Rather than physically destroying her work, Rawson's decision was to "start all over again and rewrite the story from the perspective of an alien creature" ("From"). The result, Rawson says, was "both a combination of a family story and historical fiction, as well as being pretty extreme speculative fiction set in an historical era" ("Invented"). In order to write her novel, Rawson had to destroy what was flat and dead on the page and transform it through a speculative lens. In essence, Rawson, like Lenkic, had to make strange her own process of envisioning her work. She had to strip back, discard, and play with the work before she could 'see' it anew.

In the throes of my own creative impasse I thought I had no other option left to me but to abandon the work. Mine was not a physical shredding like Lenkic's. Instead, I took the metaphorical hammer to the Jesus fish and the boy who finds it. I laid waste to them both, consigned them to the dustbin of my mind, and I assumed, for a time, that I could simply forget them for good.

In the immediate aftermath, I was like a guilty child who had just put their hand through a seventeenth century Paolo Porpora oil painting (Holmes), an accidental iconoclast filled with immediate regret as security guards swarm in with truncheons and menacing snarls. My decision to destroy dawned on me with a giddy excitement. Then, I felt relief. Then, deep despair. Later, I felt everything at once.

And then –

One day as I sat placidly on the bus, Jonah the Fishboy came to me. Baudelaire likens inspiration to a convulsion, something almost violent in its repercussions. It occurs, he says, like a "nervous shock [...] in the very core of the brain" (*Painter* 8). If I had been somewhere private I might have yelled out in shock, or triumph, or fear, because it did seem like a sudden little eruption had taken place inside of me. For a little while, I felt utterly strange and light, as if I had been filled with an especially buoyant gas.

Jonah the Fishboy sat in a dark little nook of my mind. Somewhat dazed, I asked, 'What are you doing here?'

He sucked his tiny webbed hand, unable to speak.

## Room to Play: Creating the Spielraum

Like Rawson and Lenkic, I believe the act of making strange became integral to me finding Fishboy. After a moment of destruction, the appearance of Jonah the Fishboy led me to perceive my work in a totally new way. Before I explore this more deeply, I will first consider, briefly, how it often takes moments of perceptual disruption before new ways of seeing can take hold.

The discovery of the grotesque in the fifteenth century is well known and often told. When excavators delved into the subterranean spaces of the Roman Emperor Nero's long-buried Domus Aurea palace in Rome they were faced with an excessive profusion of images that astounded them. Deep below the city streets of Rome, they discovered that almost "every square inch of the walls of the Domus Aurea was ornamentally articulated" with images that intermingled human, animal and plant-life (Remshardt 26). These curious abominations seemed to "reveal the artistic imagination run wild, connecting one thought to another with no discernible logic" (Connelly 27). The discovery of this playful confluence of images quickly became "emblems of artistic audacity and creative freedom" (Connelly 3).

It was not the first time that images such as these had proliferated. Around 19 BCE, Horace's *Ars Poetica* attacked imagery that intermingled the human with the animal as being like a "sick man's dreams" (Horace 79). In 27 CE, Vitruvius "launched an exasperated diatribe" against monstrous forms that did not exist in nature (Connelly 27). In the Domus Aurea, the discovery of these forgotten ornamental visions that "seemed to mock and fly in the face of their classical aesthetics" (Remshardt 4), suggested to Renaissance artists a renewal in the act of representation. In effect, representation itself was made strange and a new way of seeing created. It was not long before this new form of expression took hold, and soon artists such as Raphael and Ghirlandaio were experimenting with pictorial representation in stunning new ways (Biscaia 63).

History suggests that when singular moments of new artistic expression emerge they can have profound effects on human perception. Margaret Wertheim's expansive study, *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace*, charts the evolution of human's perception of space – from the ethereal unknown of the cosmos to computer generated virtual worlds. In one example, Wertheim suggests that the introduction of perspective in painting radically altered the way the West thought about space, both physical and spiritual, and "gave rise to a startling new

realism” (88). The possibly apocryphal<sup>2</sup> story of *The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat Station*, a 50-second film by Auguste and Louis Lumière shown in 1895, provides another illustrative example: as the audience watched the train coming towards them on the screen, their response was to scream and dive out of the way, such was their intense belief that the illusion they were witnessing was real. True or not, the audience could have easily found the moving image shocking, having never seen anything quite like it, or on that scale. Later, the transition between black and white television to colour in the mid-twentieth century created an appetite for the type of reality that colour television approximated. E.H. Gombrich says that while black and white television had been entirely enchanting beforehand, it suddenly “lacked an element that could, and therefore should, be there, and those who had to do without it felt ‘deprived’ and disadvantaged” (xxvi; original emphasis). In these examples, as in others, the advent of a new form of expression and representation creates a way of seeing that people have not yet imagined.

For me, the appearance of the grotesque Jonah the Fishboy acted as a catalyst for new sight by interrupting my perception and creating my own *Spielraum*. As I argued in chapter one, the grotesque pulls open a gap in our perception, and in the midst of this rupture, the mind must bridge the gap, so to speak, to bring perception back to order. But in that process our perception is changed irrevocably. This disruption of perception is exemplified in Jonah the Fishboy’s first appearance before the horror-stricken crowd in *Fish Head*:

The crowd saw the scaled skin, shimmering iridescently in the light; they saw the deep black eyes, impossibly black with depths that never ceased. They saw that my body, this fish boy, did not conform to anything they knew or had ever seen. (53)

In that moment, the townsfolk see something that exists between two conceptual worlds: the human and the animal, the real and the unbelievable. Unable to look away, they are torn between revulsion, terror, and deep-seated fascination. They are experiencing, as Remshardt might put it, a “crisis of representation” (10), and their way of seeing is suddenly and irrevocably changed.

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<sup>2</sup> While Martin Loiperdinger’s essay “Lumiere’s Arrival of the Train: Cinema’s Founding Myth” challenges the notion that the audience would have been unable to distinguish reality from the images on screen, Ray Zone argues in a response that there had been a recent locomotive accident in Paris some two months before. Zone says: “It seems highly likely that this train disaster may have been on the minds of Parisian patrons viewing L’Arrivée d’un Train at the Grand Cafe and affected their response to the motion picture image of an approaching locomotive” (146).

My own encounter with Jonah the Fishboy came like a sudden shock to the system. His appearance instigated a perceptual disruption, a moment of *ostranenie*, that created my own *Spielraum* and led me to see my novel in a totally new light. This moment parallels Peter Carey's experience – his witnessing of a young man in a wheelchair – that led to the creation of the protagonist from his novel *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* (which I discuss in greater detail in chapter four). Originally, Carey had wanted a character to inhabit a mouse suit in order to become powerful, but he struggled to find a psychological reason for a person to stay inside such a suit. Seeing a person on a street in New York changed his perspective. Carey says:

There was a young man in a wheelchair with just a hideously mined face and limbs, very small [...] But I looked away sort of fast, so I don't really have a good visual recall, except the horror of being a human being trapped inside that. At first I just sort of recoiled from him, but I later [...] saw these eyes, you know, really bright, intelligent eyes, which made me think of the human being trapped inside the body. So I was thinking all day there's somebody with a damn good psychological reason to be inside a mouse. In other words, here's a character who I really should choose to investigate. ("An Interview" 76)

I want to be careful here of ascribing any grotesqueness to the young man that Carey saw – no doubt, he was a disabled man with physical impediments, but, as discussed in chapter one, the grotesque has done as much to create damaging otherness as it has to create the means for liberation. I hardly want to perpetuate that problem. However, Carey *did* see the young man as grotesque – he calls the man “so misshapen, monstrous” (“An Interview” 76). And Carey *was* taken aback by the form of the young man. The encounter appeared to engender a sort of horrified fascination that he could not stop thinking about. It was, I think, something akin to a grotesque experience – the confluence of horror and deep interest – and it showed Carey another way into his story. I see it as a moment of *ostranenie* that opened a *Spielraum* where Carey could find clarity in his vision.

In my case, the appearance of Jonah the Fishboy broke open my perception of the story I was trying to tell. With the familiar suddenly made strange, I began to ‘see’ the story entirely differently. What had before seemed like one possibility was now multiple, a proliferation of avenues and perspectives to explore and play with. The grotesque became the tool for reinvigorating my gaze. It became a provocation for new ways of seeing and creation. By pulling apart Max and the Jesus fish and then allowing them to recombine into a hybrid

grotesque I created my own *Spielraum*, room to play and experiment. As Kundera says, the novel is a “realm of play and of hypotheses” (78). I agree, and I would add that writing a novel is like building a system that must undergo experimentation. Every shift in the story, every new or altered character, every different location proposed or played with, is like adding or subtracting an ingredient to see what reaction occurs. Within the world of my fiction, adding Jonah the Fishboy was like squirting nitric acid into a beaker of hydrazine.

Julienne Van Loon writes that play is a “crucial and ongoing experiment that helps us to ‘be’ in the world.” It becomes a way to understand the self and its relationship to the world, what Van Loon calls an “endless repetition and renegotiation” that is never fully complete. This is true, I think, for the work of fiction, where play can be, as it was for me, a methodology for considering the meaning of the work, as well as an act of negotiation between the work and the world, brought on through the “oscillation of a number of binaries: inside and outside, or distance and immersion, or objective and subjective, or plural and singular” (Van Loon). Through this oscillation, play brings the writer, potentially, to a discovery of what the work can be, a back and forth that constantly shifts the parameters, the limitations, the boundaries of the writing: not this, that; not that, this, but also that. This was true of *Fish Head*.

But Van Loon sees play as essential to research, too: “Play, in fact, is at the heart of any research process. It is the seed that germinates an idea” (Van Loon). Here, as in the fiction writing process, play becomes a disposition not just an activity, a developmental tool that encourages a “playfulness” with the material, an act that “gives birth to the energy” of experimentation (Van Loon). This brings the relationship between creative practice and research closer together, where practice both precipitates and intertwines with the research process, although Paul Carter argues that while “‘creative research’ [...] ought to be an acknowledged tautology [...] in the present cultural climate it is in fact an oxymoron” (7). This view, in a university research climate where “narrowly reductive” empiricist notions of research prevail, means that the pursuit of knowledge and the act of creativity can only be seen as “mutually exclusive” (Carter 7). But seeing research in purely empirical terms, argues Carter, ends up being detrimental to both scientific invention and creative practice (7). Instead, the inherent playfulness of creative practice should strengthen research processes. According to Van Loon, and I would agree, “the sense of permeability and restlessness so crucial to creative practice, has much to offer everyone implicated in the game of research

[...] [I]t is through creative practice that innovation, in the true sense of the word, is first glimpsed” (Van Loon).

As I have argued, the play with the grotesque became my way of negotiating the space between the work and the world, and between the work and me. And as a means of play, the grotesque acts on a number of the binaries Van Loon identifies. But more than an oscillation between two points, the grotesque becomes an intermingling that I argue heightens this playful potential, because the play of the grotesque is simultaneously both inside *and* outside, open *and* closed, plural *and* singular. In creative practice, the play of the grotesque can become a play of images and themes, an intermingling of voices and characters. In research, the play of the grotesque, while perhaps not applied literally, can invite openness and hybridity between disciplines, a mixing of ideas that shock us into new ways of perceiving knowledge. As the US neuroscientist Stuart Brown puts it, play is a state that allows us to “explore the possible,” but also an act that can help override a “differential of power” (Brown). If I consider this alongside my creative and research practice, play becomes a tool to see everything for its individual merits, to explore the possibility of each part, rather than to ignore things via some imagined hierarchy. The grotesque, as an ideal that attacks hierarchy and boundaries, might be said to play with differential power in a particularly potent way.

If there is a risk to this play, it is that the grotesque can become a consuming force that actually limits the necessary separation of distance and immersion. When absorbed in the world of the grotesque, everything can begin to take on a shade of grotesquery. As Mary Russo writes in the opening of *The Female Grotesque*, “to live with the grotesque as I have done [...] can be a claustrophobic experience” (1). It requires, then, a concerted effort to prise yourself away from what you are looking at, to force yourself to step back.

Still, as a playful method for both creative practice and research, the grotesque, I argue, can be a tool to provoke new ways of seeing and being. Wilson Yates argues that the grotesque becomes “a means through which we can see and respond to the world differently” (2). The result of my experimental play with the grotesque was exactly this, and it was both the fictive and the real world that I could now see and respond to differently. I argue that the process I undertook to create Fishboy – destroying, then playfully recreating – created a new way for me to understand the anxieties of the Australian identity that I wanted to interrogate. The grotesque shape of Jonah the Fishboy made me realise that my story was not simply about religious belief but belief in humanness. What is it that we believe to be human? In

what ways does one enact humanness? How does one move within and without that space, and why, in Australia, do some of us desperately demarcate the normal from the other? Jonah the Fishboy threw up these questions by confusing any boundaries between human and non-human. Like the fifteenth century artists who first discovered those intermingled images under the streets of Rome, I was seeing a whole other way of conceptualising normality and otherness, real-world fears in Australia. As Edwards and Graulund argue, “a grotesque figure can disrupt notions of normality in favour of conceptualizing and recognizing broader varieties of being” (10). I argue that finding Fishboy allowed me to do exactly this.



## CHAPTER THREE

### The Strange Scribblings of Nature: Conceptualising Australia through the Grotesque

Writing in 1880 in a preface to the poems of Adam Lindsay Gordon, Marcus Clarke noted, “In Australia alone is to be found the grotesque, the weird, the strange scribblings of nature learning how to write” (Clarke 35). Clarke’s poetics of Australia marked the dominant landscape as one of “Weird Melancholy” (35). It was a “fantastic land of monstrosities” (Clarke 36), a space filled with inversions and hybridity. According to Michael Ackland, Clarke saw the grotesque as a “quintessential component of antipodean experience” (Ackland 215), and Clarke’s assessment says a great deal about how newly arriving Europeans related to, and understood, the Australian space.

Clarke’s vision of Australia was by no means a novel one. Paul Longley Arthur says that for hundreds of years prior to colonization, “European writers invented the Antipodes in striking and often bizarre ways [...]” (38). The hypothetical southern landmass of the antipodes had existed in the “Classical imagination” as far back as the fifth century BC (Arthur 38), envisioned as a place of inconceivable strangeness proliferated by monsters and radical inversions of flora and fauna. In other words, the very space was imagined using the language of the grotesque.

Ratcliffe argues that in marking Australia as a world of monstrosities the British Empire sought to “justify its invasion of the country”, designating the space as otherworldly in order to justifiably bring it under colonial control (13). Here be monsters, they said, not civilized humans. Hempel agrees, arguing that the representational power of the grotesque “supported and legitimized imperial ideology”, playing a critical role in the ideology that informed the invasion of Australia (305). The projected image of a continent filled with grotesquery meant that, even before invasion began in earnest, Europeans had created an imagined space “uninhabited by civilised people” (Ratcliffe 15). This, according to Ratcliffe, meant that the space was fit for the fallacy of *terra nullius* (15), a legal mechanism used by the British to declare the Australian continent unowned before they themselves took ‘legal’ possession of it (Banner).

The ramifications of the *terra nullius* fallacy have been painful and long lasting. *Terra nullius* endured largely unimpeded until the *Mabo vs Queensland No.2* High Court case in

1992 overturned the doctrine and recognised native title in Australian law (Australian Inst. of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders). Despite this, argues Jillian Kramer, there is still “ongoing (re)production of the legal fiction of *terra nullius* within contemporary Australian politico-juridical infrastructure”, where the intersection of elements such as economic productivity and supposed equality (e.g. ‘colourblindness’) are “consistently mobilised [...] to (re)assert white sovereignty” (Kramer 192, 197). It is not within my purview to examine the legacy of *terra nullius* further. Still, it pays to note that the grotesque played some role in this most devastating of legal fallacies, one that remains woven into Australia’s cultural and political fabric. It points to the colonizing aspect of the grotesque that I have described.

After the British invasion, the colonizers faced a world stranger than their imaginations had first thought, a space where “nothing conformed to the European ontological categories” (Ratcliffe 15). Both flora and fauna twisted free of the Linnaean categories Europeans had relied on to make sense of their world. The natural environment, remarks Hempel, challenged the dominating Eurocentric biological paradigm (310). It was not until Darwin’s evolutionary theory entered scientific parlance that a level of evidence could explain the perceived monstrosities and aberrations of taxonomy encountered by Europeans (Hempel 310).

In response to a world made strange to them, European writers continued to imagine and experience Australian space within the imaginative and conceptual framework of the grotesque. Ackland argues that this framework was integral to the way “displaced Europeans” experienced “their wide-flung colonial empires” (211). These denizens of distant empires

were confronted with unexpected inversions and confounding circumstances, which rendered the grotesque an important aspect of colonial experience and a crucial element in literary attempts to encapsulate, or to re-envision local identity. (Ackland 211)

One such writer was Rosa Campbell Praed, whose short gothic story “The Bunyip” I argue is an example of colonial era writers using the grotesque to conceptualise a non-Indigenous experience of Australian space. This story acts to take possession of Australian space. In contrast, Melissa Lucashenko’s “Country: Being and Belonging on Aboriginal Land” writes back to the colonial legacy of dispossession by making strange the process of colonisation. While I do not see Lucashenko’s text as a direct rebuke to Praed’s, it is useful to place these texts alongside one another in order to consider how the Australian experience has been

conceptualised by colonial and contemporary writers, and how the grotesque works to both reveal and erase the realities of space and country in Australia.

### Writing Monsters: Rosa Campbell Praed's "The Bunyip"

Rosa Campbell Praed's "The Bunyip" uses the grotesque to express the unsettling and threatening nature of the bush as experienced by early colonial settlers. According to Christa Knellwolf King, the story describes "the archetypal fear of getting lost in the bush as a basis for building a sense of community" (117). In other words, Praed's tale acts to write into the bush landscape a collective non-Indigenous presence that is strengthened by solidarity in the face of adversity. In this way, it is an affirmation of colonial control of the land.

Briefly, "The Bunyip" concerns a group of bushmen camped near a lagoon trading ghost stories by firelight. When they hear the terrifying echo of what sounds like a young child lost in the dark, their talk turns to the bunyip, a legendary monster of the bush. Eventually, as the wailing of the child continues, the bushmen pluck up the courage to set off through the darkness in search of the child. At the story's close, the bushmen discover the body of Little Nancy. King notes that Praed's story enmeshes two Australian myths: "the Bunyip and that of the babes lost in the bush" (King 115). Here, in a story that ends with the death of an innocent child, the "ever-present and very realistic danger of getting lost in the bush is framed by the imaginary fear of the bunyip" (King 115).

Praed renders a landscape full of "spectral white gums" that rise like "an army of ghosts around you" (Praed 117). In Praed's bush, the loneliness of a lagoon at night is broken by "the flapping of the she-oak's scaly bark, the queer gurgling 'grrur-urr-r' of an opossum in the distance" (Praed 120). The landscape is alive, heaving with every breath, filled with frightening noises and unseen movement; a space that is "indescribably uncanny and fascinating", and that engenders "a luxurious terror" (Praed 120). Most strikingly, although it is never witnessed, Praed's bunyip acts as a physical embodiment of the grotesque, a hybrid monster whose shape is defined by contradiction and undecidability. The bunyip is described in Praed's story as being sometimes like a "gigantic snake; sometimes as a species of rhinoceros, with a smooth pulpy skin and a head like that of a calf; sometimes as a huge pig, its body yellow, crossed with black stripes" (Praed 119). Both Praed's description of the bush setting and her focus on the bunyip creates a feeling that "animates and spectralises the bush as a definitive setting for nightmare and terror" (Gelder and Weaver 4).

For colonial writers, the aesthetics of the grotesque helped to explain a landscape still alien to the writer. It gave language to a space where the original language was still unknown.

Hempel says that, for colonial writers, “the felt lack of an authentic relationship between writer and space, this missing mediation between the nonindigenous subject and its alien surroundings, can be remedied only through the grotesque” (315). The myth of the bunyip helped colonial writers and the wider, non-Indigenous population fill the landscape with a mythos that felt authentic to the place. This, argues King, was important, because the “radically different character of the landscape [...] prevented the importation of traditional myths” (King 111). But it was also an act of appropriation, with Praed resorting “to Aboriginal traditions as a basis for a meaningful interaction with the bush. The legend of the Bunyip is taken out of the context of Aboriginal myths and spirituality” (King 118). Praed’s use of the grotesque reaffirms the colonial project by taking possession of the landscape and its stories, as the non-Indigenous writer selectively uses aspects of Aboriginal culture while erasing the presence of Aboriginal people themselves. Despite this, Ken Gelder and Rachael Weaver argue that gothic tales such as Praed’s give the reader “a range of vivid unsettling counter-narratives to the more familiar tales of colonial promise and optimism we are often asked to take for granted” (Gelder and Weaver 9). Thought of in this way, “The Bunyip” provides a counter-mythology of the landscape, one where the landscape overpowers the colonial aggressor, rather than the other way around.

Still, Praed’s story asserts a non-Indigenous perspective of space and country, one that is rendered through non-Indigenous stories. Praed seeks to take possession of the landscape. Even if “The Bunyip” does, in its own way, subvert the tropes of colonial writing by providing a counter-mythology, it still draws a grotesque vision of Australian space and experience that puts the primacy of non-Indigenous experience over an Indigenous one. Praed’s colonial narrative participates in, and reflects, what Elleke Boehmer might call in colonial fiction an “imperial self-absorption”, where “any conflict which emerged would always in the first place have to do with the colonizer, with his attempt to shape his world in his image” (Boehmer 63). The grotesque in Praed’s text performs a double act, erasing even as it reveals.

In contrast, Melissa Lucashenko’s “Country: Being and Belonging on Aboriginal Land” writes back to this colonial erasure by speaking to an Indigenous perspective of Australian experience and space. It acts, I think, as a piece that interrogates the very way that country and belonging have been spoken and written about since colonialism, in some ways mimicking these discourses in order to attack the centre and unsettle taken-for-granted perceptions of Australian space and country. In doing so, I argue, the piece accommodates

the presence of the grotesque. However, before I examine this piece in more detail, it is useful to more broadly consider Lucashenko's approach to country and belonging.

### Writing Country: Lucashenko's "Country: Being and Belonging on Aboriginal Land"

Melissa Lucashenko's work, at the time of writing, encompasses six novels and many short stories and essays. Her fiction writing is rich with vernacular and idioms, a prose that can be at once caustic, ironic and skilfully weaved. Her 2013 novel *Mullumbimby* opens with a passage that aptly exemplifies this: "It is a truth universally acknowledged, Jo decided, that a bored teenager with a permanent marker is a pain in the bloody neck. And if it isn't, then it fucken well should be" (1). The narrator in many of Lucashenko's texts seems, to me, to be a protean mix of Lucashenko herself and her novels' protagonists. Lucashenko's narrators continually use interrogative 'ehs' and rhetorical questioning throughout, creating what feels like an oral type of storytelling. Her writing also pushes towards a deep well of emotional complexity. Anne Brewster suggests that Lucashenko's characters emerge from "various forms of fierce suffering into new understandings of their Aboriginal identity and belonging" (250). Reviewing Lucashenko's *Mullumbimby*, Eve Vincent writes that Lucashenko's "realist fictional representation" of native title and the conflicts that arise from it "captures the rawness of lived experience" (Vincent). In fact, much of Lucashenko's writing concerns issues of native title, land and belonging to country. As Jessica Gildersleeve says, Lucashenko's body of work "both interrogates and seeks to illuminate the meaning of place, story and belonging, not just for Aboriginal people but (and increasingly so) for all Australians" (80). It is these ideas of country and belonging – and how the grotesque might illuminate them – that I will focus on in the rest of this chapter.

Lucashenko says, "When you write a place you stake a claim to it" ("I Pity" 5). She is speaking, here, about places that are inextricably connected to Aboriginal place, and in Australia, this is everywhere: "We all write in an Aboriginal land" (Lucashenko, "I Pity" 8). Her novel *Mullumbimby* was named as such because she wanted to make a "deliberate assertion that Mullumbimby is an Aboriginal place, a Goorie place" (Lucashenko, "I Pity" 5). Although colonisation has meant that the Indigenous stories of Mullumbimby have been largely overwritten, Lucashenko sought to "make sure that no non-Goorie writer wrote a novel with that title" (Lucashenko, "I Pity" 5). In effect, Lucashenko, herself a Goorie woman, sought to lay claim to a space that has been dominated by non-Indigenous history. Hers is a call – or a challenge – to the layered topography of Australian space, the palimpsest

nature of the colonised land. Such a challenge is incredibly tricky when it goes against the grain of Australia's 'official' narrative of non-Indigenous belonging (Elder 17). This narrative, however, is increasingly being questioned. Margaret Henderson and Leigh Dale argue that while Australia's 'official' narrative attempts to "maintain colonialist ways of knowing", it is troubled by a collection of voices "who offer dissonant histories and presents" (Henderson and Dale 1).

Lucashenko plays this challenge out in "Country: Being and Belonging on Aboriginal Land" (herein "Country"), but she does so in a way that is different in approach to her novels and short stories. The tone of "Country" is formal, measured in its language and emotion, and without the colloquial idioms and polyphonic nature of Lucashenko's usual narrative voice. It is a piece that could be called fictocriticism, a form that Donna M. Hancox and Vivienne Muller describe as a "postmodern mode capable of engendering productive dialogue between the creative and the analytical/critical, eschewing these forms as separate and mutually exclusive and in the process challenging established conventions of academically 'acceptable' writing" (147). Anna Gibbs calls fictocriticism a "self-conscious mixing of registers and (already mixed) genres [...]", a form that, like the novel as Mikhail Bakhtin imagines it, is multi-voiced, multi-disciplinary, and multi-modal (Gibbs). I will not unpack fictocriticism as a form in this exegesis – indeed, Hancox and Muller note that there is considerable debate surrounding what exactly constitutes fictocriticism (147). However, it is interesting to note that fictocriticism is both hybrid – it mixes and intermingles various approaches, disciplines and voices – and that it also acts to challenge, open-up and play with ways of thinking, seeing, and speaking. It is not my intention to claim fictocriticism as an example of the grotesque, but I do think they share similar interrogative spaces because both intend to intermingle, to join or mix together disparate parts in order to effect ways of seeing and thinking. Primarily, the grotesque achieves this effect via imagery, whether conjured through visual or verbal language, but a grotesque response can also be created with more abstract and conceptual play, where, for instance, literary forms and language – as in the example of fictocriticism – are hybridized and played with. This distinction becomes important when considering Lucashenko's "Country", which does not necessarily possess the visual play I have previously connected to the grotesque. Instead, Lukashenko's work, approached here as fictocriticism, is primarily a play with form and language that creates a disjunction between tone and narrative content. This, I argue, opens up the possibility of affecting a grotesque response in the reader.

Published in the *Journal of Australian Studies*, “Country” peels open and interrogates the question of country, both as Lucashenko understands it as an Indigenous woman, and how it is understood by non-Indigenous people. While I call it a work of fictocriticism, Henderson and Dale, the issue’s editors, call it fiction in inverted commas. Such a classification, they say, “obscures the essay’s truth value”, although “it can be read as an allegory of the entire set of issues surrounding Australian country and non-Indigenous attempts to possess it” (Henderson and Dale 1-2). “Country” can, and I think should, be read both as essay and fiction, which could mark it as fictocriticism. Yet the piece does not yield so easily to classification. Instead, it trades off ambiguity. For instance, after first exploring the issues surrounding her identification of country, Lucashenko begins the ‘fictional’ portion of the piece with this preface: “As I waited I found this story about being and belonging to country” (“Country” 10). It is unclear, then, if this is her story or someone else’s. The reader cannot be sure, and so there is a certain level of ambivalence and contradiction. These are qualities, I argue, that hold throughout, and that facilitated, for me, an experience of the grotesque.

“Country” begins with a discussion of methodology. Lucashenko concedes, “I have given myself a fair amount of trouble writing this piece” (“Country” 9). For her, the complexity of country – what it means to some, and what it means to others – makes it difficult to unpack. Country is a term that comes incredibly loaded in an Australia that “still has a Raj mentality and a vindictive adherence to colonial myth” (Pascoe, “Australia”). Bruce Pascoe writes, “There is nothing postcolonial about Australia” (“Australia”). Indigenous Australians still suffer from intergenerational trauma and structural disadvantage as a result of invasion and subsequent and ongoing institutionalised racism. Catriona Elder argues that mainstream Australia still holds a long-held anxiety about country and belonging that “stems from the repressed or denied knowledge that Australia is someone else’s place” (17). To absolve non-Indigenous Australians of blame in the deadly repression of Indigenous Australians, the “original ‘emptying’ of the [Australian] space is never completely acknowledged” in the national narrative (Elder 17). Germaine Greer contends that this repression has brought about the continued and rampant destruction of our natural landscape, seemingly administered with a “pathological indifference” (Greer 2). Greer says that we trash our land because we “suspect that it belongs to someone else” (2).

While I believe that financial gain and acquisition of capital and power has a lot to do with it, I think Greer has a point. When John Howard was asked by Kerry O’Brien in a 7:30 interview about native title, Howard, Australia’s prime minister at the time, lamented:

What has happened with native title is that the pendulum has swung too far in one direction [...] [Labour and the Democrats] are effectively saying that Aboriginal people of Australia should have the potential right of veto over further development of 78 per cent of the land mass of Australia. (Howard 4-5)

Howard, I think, expresses an uneasy sentiment here, a fear that the land he feels should be made 'productive' is being held hostage by Indigenous Australians. To me, these are the words of a man who fears the land does indeed belong to someone else.

The complexity of country in Australia is what makes writing about it so tricky for Lucashenko. Indigenous Australians think about it in one way, while many non-Indigenous people, like the former prime minister of Australia, think about it differently. In writing "Country", Lucashenko's difficulty was compounded because she no longer lived on country that "is in any sense my own [...] I was forced to grope for meanings while surrounded by what was literally unfamiliar" ("Country" 9). Rather than asking Aboriginal people about country, because to them "it would have seemed a strange, almost ridiculous question" ("Country" 9), Lucashenko instead "spoke aloud to white people" ("Country" 9). In some ways, their responses reflected the sentiment expressed by Howard. Those who understood that country and belonging were synonymous for Aboriginal people still said that their own belonging was more of a "non-belonging here. Or a belonging to an unwanted place, an illegitimate belonging" (Lucashenko, "Country" 9). While Lucashenko found that non-Indigenous people often displayed an ambivalence to country, or else an uncertainty in the way they should connect to it, she, too, found herself uneasy about how to best talk about it:

And after all this talk and reading my answers were still false, disgusting to me. I wavered politically. First to one edge – this is our country, not yours in your historical murders and current shame – and then to another – we all share country, we all must live here, Aboriginal and Other alike, and the only question is how to do that honourably. (Lucashenko, "Country" 9-10)

In the end, Lucashenko turned to a story: "As I waited [to find a way to talk about country] I found this story about being and belonging to country" (Lucashenko, "Country" 10).

Speaking through story, I argue, created room for Lucashenko to play – her own *Spielraum* – where she was able to consider country from the vantage point of a different method of address. It was not a strange turn for a celebrated fiction and essay writer, but it was a different approach to the one she had struggled with. But it is her approach to the telling of



this story that I find most compelling, because her approach, whether she intended it or not, created an experience of the grotesque. For me, this acted as a moment of *ostranenie* where I, as the reader, was forced to consider the complexities of country and belonging in a new way. Keeping in mind that some people will experience the grotesque in a work where others may not, I will now address the elements within Lucashenko's story that create an unsettling estrangement through the grotesque as I experienced it.

### Without Calling it Murder: Unsettled Country

Discussing the relationship between postcolonial texts and the grotesque, Edwards and Graulund argue that grotesquerie can be used to “undermine former colonial ontologies and challenge the power dynamics such as ‘us’ and ‘them’, foreign and familiar, centre and periphery” (124). This process, they suggest, can work to “rewrite the centre; not only by writing *back* to it, but also by creating an alternative centre” (Edwards and Graulund 124; original emphasis). Lucashenko's text, I suggest, does something similar: her text acts to highlight the peripheral concept of country – peripheral in the sense that it does not enjoy primacy amongst mainstream cultural and political ideas of land and land use<sup>3</sup> – in a way that centralizes it, and challenges the power dynamic of the political and historical centre. Here, Lucashenko's “Country” performs what Edwards and Graulund might call an attack on “the boundaries that have been established by the forces of colonial power” (Edwards and Graulund 124). Through this strategy of subversion, “Country” becomes an “unsettlement of any overly comforting/comfortable identification for whites with liberal pluralist conceptions of country” (Henderson and Dale 2). And while there are works that could do this very thing without being grotesque, or invoking the grotesque, I argue that Lucashenko subverts the centre in such a way that *does* allow her text to create an experience of the grotesque.

Lucashenko begins her story by evoking a fairy tale: “Once upon a time, to coin a phrase, a family lived in the forest in a house they built themselves” (“Country” 10). Lucashenko situates her story in a European tradition, perhaps appropriating it as an act of subversion. Jack Zipes argues that fairy tales play a role as a “subversive alternative” in the process of civilizing (xii). The fairy tale has proven useful for writers to *rewrite* and subvert traditional modes and norms. For instance, Angela Carter's series of shorts *The Bloody Chamber* takes old fairy tales and uses “them to write new ones” and to explore ideas of what

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<sup>3</sup> A cursory glance at how difficult native title claims are, and how multinational mining interests still take precedent over Indigenous rights to ownership of the land tells us this is still true.

a different present and future might be (Simpson *ix*). The title story of *The Bloody Chamber*, a reimagining of Charles Perrault's seventeenth century fairy tale *Bluebeard*, is a piece of "radical revisionism" (Campbell 27). Marion May Campbell says that *The Bloody Chamber* "pushes to the limit the slumbering logic of patriarchal terror", and acts as a "feminist deviance" from Perrault's original (Campbell 28, 115).

Maggie Nolan argues that the traditional oral stories of Aboriginal language groups have been dismissed by non-Indigenous readers as children's literature (267). While there is nothing inherently wrong with children's literature, such a simplification flattens the nuance and erases the complexities inherent in these oral stories. Such a label "operates as a form of white paternalism and reveals the lack of understanding about the role these stories play in Indigenous communities" (Nolan 261). Considering that fairy tales are themselves founded from an oral tradition and have also, at one time,<sup>4</sup> been dismissed as children's literature without serious critical merit (Seifert), I argue that Lucashenko might adopt this form for serious effect, as a further 'up yours' to the white literary establishment. Fairy tales are not necessarily examples of the grotesque (although fairy tales can accommodate the grotesque). However, by using the fairy tale form in this way, as a means for the margins (what is deemed culturally trivial) to encroach upon the literary centre, "Country" does mimic the intention of the grotesque. For the grotesque is, if anything, a boundary dweller, a creature on the margins that creates its greatest tension when it assails the normative centre.

Further, the fairy tale mode in Lucashenko's "Country" creates a timelessness and a placelessness that might dislocate the reader, an idea of a 'long ago' that may or may not actually be a 'now'. The effect is destabilizing, and the space that Lucashenko evokes becomes not our world but a version of our world, something half-dream, half reality. Kayser suggests that some of the "essential ingredients of the grotesque" are confusion, the fantastic, and "even a kind of alienation of the world" (51). Again, these qualities do not necessarily make Lucashenko's text a work of the grotesque, but they can, as they did for me, facilitate a response aligned with an experience of the grotesque.

The language in the opening paragraphs of Lucashenko's 'fiction' is simple, pastoral, mostly idyllic: "The woman lived in the wooden house that she had designed with her own cleverness, and which she and the man had constructed with their own labour" ("Country" 10). The man has the "gift of agreement in him", and on weekends "they put their work aside

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<sup>4</sup> Although this attitude has increasingly shifted since the 1980s as, according to Jack Zipes, "a more diverse and sophisticated appreciation and study of the literary fairy tale" has occurred (xi).

and tended the garden” (Lucashenko, “Country” 10). Their life in the forest is entirely peaceful, and once they have a family, they watch their four children – described, respectively, as a farmer, a doctor, a diplomat, and a cook – “become big, and they were pleased to think that their children were loved and of use in the world” (Lucashenko, “Country” 11).

Yet after the father dies in a tragic accident, strangers arrive in the forest. The newcomers are ambiguously identified, described only as “ignorant people with no agreement in them. All they knew was their own ways, and their own needs” (Lucashenko, “Country” 11). Although their identities are not articulated, readers cognizant of Australian history will likely read the implication. These strangers are European invaders. The distance created by withholding that obvious truth, though, becomes unsettling.

The idyll of Lucashenko’s story is penetrated suddenly and mostly violently in the following line, but again, it is delivered with such an incongruously measured tone and brevity that the violence of it is enhanced rather than subdued. Lucashenko writes, “We shouldn’t be so surprised that the strangers brutally killed the farmer and threw his body in the scrub. They murdered the mother without calling it murder” (“Country” 11). In this moment, the reader is suddenly implicated in the action, with Lucashenko’s use of the plural pronoun ‘we’ ensnaring the reader, dragging them into the net of the story, and then forcing them into an ethical position. Shouldn’t we be surprised at the sight of a sudden and violent murder? Well, no. Lucashenko disallows it. Instead, the reader must watch on as the strangers burn the house to the ground, set themselves up on “ancestral grounds” and plough the “people’s cemetery to grow their crops” (Lucashenko, “Country” 11). When the doctor returns home a year later, having been away for many years, he stumbles “against his brother’s skull” half buried in the ground (Lucashenko, “Country” 11). He finds his home unrecognisable. The doctor accuses the strangers of murder, but their response is one of puzzled indifference, even when the doctor can clearly see the “body of his mother [...] dusty and unmourned in the corner of the main room” (Lucashenko, “Country” 11). The stranger’s muted response: “What corpse?” (Lucashenko, “Country” 11).

This is where, for me, the vertiginous effect of the grotesque in Lucashenko’s text really takes hold. I have argued that the text trades on the intermingling and contradiction of forms and tone – from idyllic fairy tale to monstrous violence – in a way that might unsettle the reader. But in this moment, despite the mother’s corpse sitting in plain sight, the response from the strangers, their playing it dumb, threatens to turn the whole procedure into a farce.

In some ways, it recalls the absurdity of the late-1980s comedy *Weekend at Bernie's*, where two men play puppeteers to a corpse in order to keep themselves alive. Lucashenko's "Country" is no Hollywood oddball comedy, for the terror of that scene is palpable. But the barefaced lie of these strangers *is*, I think, farcical. The effect, at least for me, is one of laughter, but it is a repulsed laughter, immediately unsettling and uncomfortable. Here, I recall Ruskin's assertion that "the grotesque is, in almost all cases, composed of two elements, one ludicrous, the other fearful" (126). And while I argued that this feels like an oversimplification, the basis of it still holds true: the grotesque *is* about contradiction, and it *is* so often a confluence of both horror and laughter, repulsion and attraction. Not just that, but the grotesque's ambivalence breeds an undecidability that the reader must work to decipher. I argue that this very trait of ambivalence is so pervasive in Lucashenko's text because I do not know whether to laugh, or to shudder in terror at the brazenness of these strangers. In the end, I do both.

As I argued in chapter one, laughter is almost always in close proximity to the grotesque, where in some examples the laughter elicited by the grotesque can be an "infernal, annihilating laughter" (Connelly 16). Like Ruskin, most critics agree that laughter often cohabitates with horror where ever the grotesque is concerned (Baudelaire, "Essence of Laughter"; Kayser; Bakhtin; Kristeva; Harpham; McElroy; Remshardt). But according to Remshardt, laughter is one of the more complex companions of the grotesque because we do not know how seriously to treat laughter in relation to it (81). I have already pointed out the distinction between Kayser and Bakhtin in the role played by laughter in the grotesque. Whereas Kayser imagines laughter as a way to bring evil under control, Bakhtin's concept of carnival laughter and the grotesque body represents a "festive laughter", a "laughter of all the people"; it is regenerative, universal, and utopian, directed both at the higher order, and at carnival folk themselves (Bakhtin 11). Seemingly taking their cues from both Bakhtin and Kayser, Edwards and Graulund provide an illustrative list of laughter's effects. To them, laughter can be both emancipatory and colonising, both inclusive and exclusive (Edwards and Graulund 93). It can be a "politically-charged weapon of irony" and, at an extreme end of its spectrum, "laughter can be a response to horror and a means of survival deeply rooted in a literary and visual culture preoccupied with terror and surmounting its effects" (Edwards and Graulund 93). Laughter, then, is a complex human response, and not a simple one. I would say that the laughter induced by the grotesque can be any of the things Edwards and Graulund

describe depending on the source and the spectator who witnesses it. The point is that laughter, like the grotesque, is relative.

To me, Lucashenko's "Country" does not possess the utopian quality of laughter that Bakhtin describes. It is not a moment of regenerative laughter, although it perhaps possesses an unsettling ambivalence, one that points to an assertion as well as a denial. But neither does it appear to be a laughter that seeks to surmount the effects of horror, at least according to Kayser's logic that the grotesque brings evil to heel. For me, Remshardt's assertion of grotesque laughter as "self-conscious" (88) expresses more particularly the experience engendered by Lucashenko's text:

Grotesque art [...] creates such self-conscious laughter to mark the boundaries of the generically manageable and the aesthetically representable in the culture from which it springs, yet the laughter is always a token of a boundary already violated. Thus our laughter becomes an echo of the original transgression, simultaneously rejecting and endorsing it. (Remshardt 88)

The response of laughter in Lucashenko's text, for me, *was* a self-conscious one, not regenerative, not a response to quell evil, but an "echo of the original transgression", like an outwards ripple created by the original violation of Australian space over two hundred years ago. For me, it *was* a laughter that simultaneously rejected and endorsed, because I did feel shame, as I think many other readers would, as I was forced to (re)recognise an Australian history founded on the violence and dispossession resulting from colonisation. Not just shame, though, but an endorsement, too, even if it is an endorsement uncomfortably felt. My laughter acted as a recognition that I am, as a non-Indigenous Australian, standing on stolen land, and who has, in my own way, profited from that dispossession. My response of laughter, then, becomes self-conscious, a recognition of my complicity in that history. And this self-conscious laughter, brought on by the contradiction of humour and terror in the text, allows the grotesque to emerge as a powerful force of making strange.

### Uncanny Country

Finally, I focus on the uncanny quality of Lucashenko's text, a trait that I believe strengthens the presence of the grotesque here.

Lucashenko does not explicitly say that this is a story about the dispossession of Indigenous Australians, and in fact, the mother and father characters could themselves be mistaken for European settlers made good. But by the story's close, the connection seems clear enough to me. This *is* about the violence and dispossession of country that resulted from

British colonisation. In the stranger's blinkered response to their crimes, "Country" is about the self-imposed blindness that the official narrative of Australian history still upholds. It is about these things, yet it does not signpost them, and it is true to say that "Country" could be a story about any event of colonisation. But in reading "Country", readers are faced with an uncanny return of a repressed truth, an unearthing of layered topography soaked in destruction, both human and cultural. And here, I think, in this sudden return of the repressed, is where the grotesque so powerfully emerges in Lucashenko's work.

Sigmund Freud discusses the uncanny at length in his 1919 essay "The Uncanny". The term uncanny is translated from the German *unheimlich*, a term that is roughly translated in English as unhomely, and which, as Freud suggests, makes it the opposite of *heimlich*, or homely (220). It follows, Freud says, that *unheimlich* is the "opposite of what is familiar" (220). Yet the uncanny is more complex than this. The uncanny is not what is simply unfamiliar, but what has been made unfamiliar through repression. Here is Freud:

For this uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression. This reference to the factor of repression enables us, furthermore, to understand Schelling's definition of the uncanny as something which ought to have remained hidden but has come to light. (241)

Freud gives the uncanny a frightening dimension – not unlike Kayser's description of the grotesque as the estranged world – positioning the uncanny as "that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" (Freud 220). Both the grotesque and the uncanny suggest a world that we are alienated from, where the familiar is rendered suddenly beyond accessible language. Both create ambivalence in the receiver, a contradiction of emotional responses. And both suggest a return of some 'thing' demarcated from us, pushed away – a taboo we can no longer face. The uncanny is the return, as Freud says, of the repressed, of the things we keep hidden, by design, or otherwise, and often relates to the feeling we have in relation "to death and dead bodies, to the return of the dead, and to spirits and ghosts" (Freud 241).

Lucashenko's "Country" is not, I would say, a ghost story, despite the mother's corpse in a chair, the skull of the brother half buried in the ground. In fact, I have argued that it is positioned almost as a quasi-fairy tale. Freud says that the elements of a fairy tale "can exert no uncanny influence", because "the world of reality is left behind from the very start

and the animistic system of beliefs is frankly adopted” (Freud 250). On the other hand, if the writer devises a world that moves into the “world of common reality” then “everything that would have uncanny effect in reality has it in [the writer’s] story” (Freud 249). I argue that “Country” is, in fact, connected to the “world of common reality”, and although that reality is hazy around the edges, the story is no less sharp in reflecting the world. And if it is not a ghost story, it is still a story that is haunted by history and past misdeeds, recalling the atrocities of colonialism and nation-building in Australia and unearthing the blood-soaked strata that Australia’s ‘official’ narrative has tried to elide. Lucashenko’s “Country” is a return: it calls forth the ghosts, history, a shameful narrative, and as it does so, the result is something uncanny. This story of murder, of dispossession, *is* one that we (me, the reader, Australia) know but do not wish to admit to. David Punter says that “if we have a sense of the uncanny it is because the barriers between the known and the unknown are teetering on the brink of collapse” (130). This, I argue, is exactly what Lucashenko’s text does – the known and the unknown become dissoluble, mingled together, and the feeling is one of deep uncertainty – fear even – because there is a sense, at least in some way “that we have *been here before*” (Punter 130; original emphasis).

When the doctor calls the strangers “thieves and murderers and liars in my father’s country” (Lucashenko, “Country” 11), the strangers overpower him and take him prisoner. As the strangers lead the doctor away, one of them, a woman, approaches the doctor “with a sorrowful look”:

‘Why do you to speak to us in this way?’ asked the woman of the strangers’ clan. Tears welled in her eyes and she wrung her hands. ‘Why do you have such hard words when this is our home and we are now the people of this place and we belong here?’

And the doctor had no answer that she had ears to hear. (Lucasheko, “Country” 11)

For me, the implication of this final line is clear: non-Indigenous people have never truly listened to what Indigenous people have told them about their country, about what it means to them. For the 2019 reader the continued relevance of Lucashenko’s text enhances the uncanny feeling further. In 2017, a delegation of Indigenous nations from across Australia called for, amongst other things, “the establishment of a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution” (Referendum Council). Perhaps typically, this was rejected by successive Prime Ministers. Malcolm Turnbull claimed there was no “realistic prospect of being supported by

a majority of Australians in a majority of states” (Thorpe), a sentiment echoed later by his replacement, Scott Morrison (Karp). Turnbull showed by his reaction that Indigenous Australians still have no “answer that [he has] ears to hear”. It has long been the case that non-Indigenous Australia has failed to truly listen to the answers that Indigenous Australians have provided. Lucashenko’s text leaves readers with the deeply unsettling feeling that nothing has been fixed, and nor will it be fixed until all Australians learn to listen.

Lucashenko deftly applies a sanitised, emotionless language that mimics<sup>5</sup> the official narrative of Australian settlement: one without bloodshed, without violence or conflict. It conjures, I think, a complacency in the reader, perhaps equivalent to that same complacency many in Australia’s political centre have when it comes to issues of land rights and dispossession. If the reader is initially tricked into assuming Lucashenko’s story is sweet-natured and tempered, it is almost impossible to escape the sudden eruption of violence, the murder and the dispossession of land; that hideous truth that informs Australia’s contemporary making. It is this violence, contradicted by an emotionless and measured tone, and then by a moment of absurdity which elicits a self-conscious laughter, that creates so sharply an uncanny response.

I argue that “Country” challenges the reader’s perception by creating a moment of *ostranenie*. Because what “Country” does, I think, is force the non-Indigenous reader to acknowledge the very unsettling of the space they walk across. It plays with a contradiction of form and style to create a world that is ours but not ours, and in that process “Country” makes our sense of this world, the world the reader inhabits, seem suddenly strange and uncanny. In some ways, *Fish Head* has a similar intention: it presents a world that is and is not our own, an Australian space made strange. *Fish Head* is not the same type of story as Lucashenko’s, and it is important for me to acknowledge that as a non-Indigenous writer, my consideration of land and belonging comes from a position of privilege, and therefore cannot be easily compared. Yet *Fish Head* does share similar concerns. It does focus on land and belonging and the country that has been overwritten by non-Indigenous invasion and occupation. Especially, *Fish Head* seeks to do with the grotesque what I argue Lucashenko’s “Country” does: to reveal to the reader the realities of colonised land in Australia.

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<sup>5</sup> Homi Bhabha’s mimicry comes to mind, where the “effect of mimicry on the authority of colonial discourse is profound and disturbing” (2004: 123).



While Rosa Campbell Praed's gothic tale of the grotesque bunyip conceptualises Australian space and experience through a non-Indigenous perspective, effectively colonising it, Lucashenko's text performs what Bill Ashcroft et al. might call a writing back to the Imperial centre in the hopes of reclaiming what was taken. In doing so, "Country" disrupts the perception of a settled past and a fixed future. Lucashenko's text refuses to provide easy answers to the reader. For me, there was no easy settlement, as the uncanny unearthed the repressed and elicited a grotesque response. Instead, I was left with a story that I had to come to terms with alone. I had to bridge the perceptual gap that "Country" had cleaved open in order to come out on the other side with new sight.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Grotesque, Identity and Place in Peter Carey's *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith*

As I argued in my introduction, stories matter. They help to reveal something about who we are, and how we think about our past, our present and our future. In Peter Carey's *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith*, the Eficans, enthralled by the glittering Voorstandish *Sirkus*, attempt to recreate their culture through the telling of their own stories. For some Eficans, stories are the means to reinvent a whole country, even if this attempt ultimately fails. In chapter three, I examined the way some Australian stories envision land and belonging to country, and how the grotesque can be used to both confirm or repudiate a colonial worldview of country. In this chapter, I look at *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* as an example of how the grotesque can be used to interrogate stories of cultural identity. In this case, Carey uses a grotesque protagonist and narrator, as I have done in *Fish Head*, to challenge the complexities of identity and cultural belonging in Australia.

#### Who belongs? Identity in Australia

What does it mean to be Australian, and who belongs to that tenuous category? If Benedict Anderson is correct in saying that a nation is an “imagined political community” (6) – essentially a construct – then how do Australians imagine that community? Any discussion of identity, whether it be of the individual or of the collective, is bound to be messy and contested. Given the opportunity, that conversation would easily encompass an entire theoretical study. What follows, then, necessarily, is a brief highlight of ideas surrounding identity in Australia.

Writing in *Griffith Review*, Dennis Altman says that Australians “continue to agonise about national identity” (85), about what it means to be Australian. Although Australia formed a federation independent of the British in 1901, the Queen is still Australia's head of state, underlining a “strange duality that afflicts Australia's nationhood” (Altman 80). And although Australia has the oldest continuing civilisation in the world, and is “largely, a migrant nation” (Glover 177), constructions of mainstream Australian identity have traditionally erased these types of people, instead privileging elements of “non-indigenous, whiteness, masculinity and heterosexuality” (Elder 6). As Elder writes, “National identities

and national stories are not truths that reflect the total experience of the citizenry. Rather they reflect the experiences and desires of particular – often powerful – groups” (27). This means that national identity is spoken about in one way – in the way that suits the dominant group, in this case Anglo Australians – while the reality is vastly different: Australian identity is not a homogenous whole, but a hybrid one composed of many overlapping stories and bodies. According to Altman, the true shape of Australia’s national identity is “elastic, and can easily contain very different perceptions of self and community” (Altman 86). Ashcroft et al. argue that hybridity is inevitable in a postcolonial nation because the inhabitants must negotiate an identity that encompasses both “indigenous ontology” and the imposed colonial systems (195). Yet as Chris Berry argues, mainstream Australia has struggled with accepting the idea of cultural hybridity into the national narrative:

In Australia, we have strained to mould our postcoloniality to fit the model of the homogenous nation, with a token nod in the direction of multiculturalism and aboriginality. Forms of cultural hybridity are an inevitable result of the forces of international trade and imperialism that create postcoloniality, but we have ignored this. (48)

I argue that the disconnect in how mainstream Australian identity is imagined, where the reality of lived experience and identity is ignored within the mainstream story of homogeneity, leads to a sort of dislocation of this identity, a type of simultaneous belonging and nonbelonging for those who are not a part of the dominant group. Perhaps this is most keenly felt by Indigenous Australians, whose own stories have suffered, argues Wright, because of a “history of imposed agendas” (“What happens” 63); of assimilationist policies and a refusal to listen to Aboriginal stories, and a political class who have continually taken self-determination away from Aboriginal people. The constant attack by antagonistic voices – Wright identifies the media, especially, as a particularly powerful voice speaking for and about Indigenous people – makes cultural identity a sometimes-unstable parameter for Indigenous Australians. Wright says,

Our heritage will always be weighed by how prepared we are to compromise or lose sight of our cultural storytelling vision. The further we bend our stories to suit mainstream Australia, resulting in further loss of our cultural norms, the more we hasten our total acculturation into mainstream Australian society. (“What happens” 75)

Yet, according to Peter Beilharz, even Australians who might ostensibly sit *within* the dominant group can still feel a type of dislocation, a sense that they exist inside and outside of place and culture simultaneously; they are both “here, and there, home and away. The image of hybridity or grafting appeals, however clumsily” (*Thinking* 32). According to Beilharz,

We carry all kinds of cultural baggage today, English by precedent, American by media, Australian by place, multicultural by circumstance; we are Lemontey’s people, the absent centre of a Universe without centres, everything and nothing all at once, similar yet different. (*Imagining* 109)

Beilharz cannot speak for every Australian, especially not for Indigenous Australians. I will not presume that I can either. Certainly, I think that it would be a false equivalency to suggest Anglo Australians and Indigenous Australians suffer from the same type of cultural dislocation; the losers of Australia’s colonial history are clearly not the invaders. It is important, then, to stress that, while I empathise with Beilharz’s assessment, others may convincingly not. Beilharz appeals to me, though, because I, too, have felt a curious tug away from Australia. I have felt strangely connected to parts of the world I have only ever briefly visited, if at all. I think Beilharz is right in acknowledging the soft power of US media, for instance, in creating a cultural connection with many Australians, despite Australia’s geographical distance from the place.

I argue that the processes of colonisation – which Sheila Collingwood Whittick argues “physically *displaces* and psychically disorients all those concerned” (xiii; my emphasis) – has meant that many Australians – both Indigenous and non-Indigenous – are dislocated from their ‘place’. Further, this dislocation is emphasised by the effects of globalisation and the mass movement of people in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, both of which create, in their own way, the condition of being “here and there, home and away” (Beilharz, *Thinking* 32). There can be benefits to this split-identity – this here and there – but it also reflects the damage wrought by colonialism. Either way, identity in Australia is not necessarily fixed to a single place or culture. It is sometimes disconnected, connected to another place, or connected to two places simultaneously.

This hybridity and dislocation, I believe, can be powerfully expressed through the grotesque aesthetic. For instance, in Suneeta Peres da Costa’s debut novel *Homework*, the protagonist Mina, whose family migrates to Australia from India, is born with alien-like nodes that protrude from her skull. These nodes, which make Mina a “specimen of public intrigue”

(Peres da Costa 4), are emblematic of Mina's cultural dislocation and otherness. In her 1984 novel *Milk and Honey*, Western Australian author Elizabeth Jolley interrogates the tenuous, unstable identity that the migratory experience can create. Here the grotesque figure of Waldemar, an intellectually disabled boy living in the Heimbach's family attic, acts as a double, or distorted mirror, to Jacob, a migrant from Austria boarding with the Heimbach's. Jacob's turmoil stems from his failed attempts to live in two cultural spaces simultaneously, and Waldemar is the centrifugal force by which the novel's dramas rotate. These two examples show that where hybridity exists the grotesque often manifests.

I said in chapter three that the grotesque was instrumental to how Europeans came to perceive the Australian space in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. I argue that it remains a vital frame through which to understand an Australian identity that is hybrid and dislocated. I agree with Hempel when he says that the grotesque "holds a pivotal place" (305) in Australia's cultural identity, and that it has persisted as a way of thinking about experience. The gothic, for instance, which frequently intersects with facets of the grotesque, has been a "consistent presence in Australia since European settlement" (Turcotte, "Australian Gothic" 1), and a grotesque aesthetic, whether or not wrapped in gothic tropes, has remained a powerful tool for writers to interrogate Australian space and experience.

I will now turn to Peter Carey's *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* to explore one example of how the grotesque has been used to conceptualise the condition of hybridity and dislocation that I see as central to an Australian identity.

### Peter Carey and the Grotesque

Much of Peter Carey's work interrogates the Australian national identity and how Australians think about their place in the world. Sue Ryan-Fazilleau sees Carey's writing as, especially, interrogating Australia's exclusion from the "meta-narratives of British and American history and culture" (121). In service of that interrogation, I argue, Carey has employed elements of the grotesque, either as central motifs or as a way to colour his stories. In Bruce Cook's review of Carey's 1992 novel *The Tax Inspector*, Cook says Carey's work has "a wild, chance-taking quality, an eye for the grotesque, that seems to put him in harmony with the spirit of the age" (Cook). In Rebecca Vaughan's dissertation "The entire system of degradation, turnovers, and travesties: a study of the carnivalesque and the grotesque in the fiction of Peter Carey", she outlines Carey's use of the carnivalesque as described by Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and his World*. According to Bakhtin, the grotesque body finds its expression most powerfully in the folk tradition of the carnivalesque. The carnival acts as an

opportunity to perform a wild, jubilant inversion of the social order, to display reversals of hierarchies and the status-quo, where “all the symbols of the carnival idiom are filled with this pathos of change and renewal, with the sense of gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities” (11). In *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith*, the frenetic megacity of Saarlim becomes the carnival writ-large, a hyper-version of New York city. The Voorstand *Sirkus*, a kind of *Cirque De Soleil* on overdrive where the mythology of Voorstand is enacted using holograms and feats of death-defying acrobatics, becomes a space of wild jubilation. Of Carey’s work more broadly, Vaughan argues that Carey writes “through physicality [...] it is a grotesque physicality” (Vaughan 7). Speaking specifically of *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith*, Bruce Woodcock points to the “mixture of the grotesque and the circus-like which might suggest analogies with the carnivalesque and the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin” (Woodcock 113).

Carey’s short-story collection *The Fat Man in History* provides some apt examples of a grotesque aesthetic. In “Crabs”, the titular character undergoes a metamorphosis into a car, like an oily, petrol-fuelled Kafka beetle: “Crabs has decided to become a motor vehicle in good health” (Carey, *Fat* 19). “Withdrawal” centres on a man who keeps a collection of photographs depicting murder victims in the back of his shop: “There is an ordinariness about the photographs which makes them all the more shocking” (Carey, *Fat* 68). Later, in a perverse twist, a pig the man has hired to eat a corpse becomes addicted to heroin, and the man is left to care for the pig by satiating its addiction. In “The Fat Man in History”, the cultural disdain for fatness has reached its logical conclusion: the overweight are ostracised and forced to live stealthily together in an old house, where they plot a coup. The coup is undone, however, when Florence Nightingale, ostensibly a sympathiser from outside the house, convinces the six fat men to cannibalise Fantoni, the self-appointed leader of the house. This act of cannibalism is a powerful moment of taboo, described by the narrator in a perversely matter-of-fact way (Carey, *Fat* 139-140). Edwards and Graulund suggest that acts of cannibalism become grotesque because they represent “the taboo desire *par excellence*, for [cannibalism] breaks down artificial distinctions between the human and the animal, even the human-as-animal, and figures the flesh of the human body as meat” (7).

Peter Carey’s 1994 picaresque novel *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* works as a powerful exemplar of the grotesque conceit that runs through many of his texts. The grotesque is especially brought to life through the novel’s eponymous protagonist and narrator, Tristan Smith. I contend that Tristan Smith’s grotesque body is a way for Carey to

explore Australian identity as culturally hybrid and dislocated. Before I explore the text in more detail, it pays to note that my approach to Carey's text is different from that of Lucashenko's "Country". While Lucashenko's text is not written with the express intention of being a work of the grotesque, I think that Carey's is. Critics have noted Carey's affinity for the grotesque and the carnivalesque, at least in much of his earlier work (Cook; Woodcock). *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* is no exception to this. However, I would not say that it engenders a grotesque response from the reader – or, at the very least, that was not the effect on me. But Carey does, I argue, make use of a grotesque aesthetic in the service of his objective: to show the reader different ways of being, and to interrogate the intermingled nature of Australian cultural identity. This means that my exploration of *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* is more about the presence of the grotesque, rather than, as in the preceding chapter, the effect of the grotesque. In other words, here I talk more about the grotesque as it *is*, rather than what it *does*.

### An Unusual Life

*The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* is set between the fictional spaces of Efica and Voorstand. The story is narrated by Tristan Smith, an Efrican born of a Voorstander mother, Felicity Smith, who runs a small but persistent agit-prop theatre in Chemin Rouge, the Efrican capital. The novel takes place in two books, and two locations: the first is situated in Efica, an Australian-esque colonial boundary dweller, as Tristan finds his place in the world as an actor. The political murder of his mother as orchestrated by the Voorstand secret service closes the first book and leads Tristan, ten years later, to travel to Voorstand, the decadent but culturally powerful neo-imperial nation that has a tight political and cultural hold over Efica. *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* is as much about the grotesque Tristan Smith coming to terms with his body and his future as it is about political turmoil, cultural imperialism, and the implications of a postcolonial condition. It is, in its scope and its invention, both impressive, strange, and otherworldly, a mixture of tragedy, scatological humour, adventure tale, and satire.

I argue that *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* has a lot to do with Australia, though there is no mention of Australia anywhere in the text. And while references to Britain and other European nations, such as France and the Netherlands, are used to extend a narrative of colonialism, none of these are placed explicitly in connection to an Australian space. Instead, Carey gives us two fully realised places, both as mythical to a reader as the antipodes once was, but filled with history, culture, and inhabitants that is as detailed as it is fantastical. But

despite Carey's imagined space, and his omission of clearly connecting this imagined world to Australia, the novel is, as Carey himself has noted in interviews, about Australia (Ryan-Fazilleau 122). Not only Australia, it should be said, but the US too. For if Efica is an imaginative remake of Australia, then Voorstand, with its culturally pervasive *Sirkus*, its military power and its exceptionalism, is a hyperbolic and, in many ways, fantastical version of the US. Through Efica and Voorstand, Carey explores the relationship between the new-world nations of Australia and the US, and the way their cultures, economies, and politics have historically mixed. According to Carey, Australia has had a "long emotional, culturally and politically complex relationship" with the US ("Peter Carey"). It is this "complex relationship" that Carey explores in *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith*.

Writer and critic James Bradley writes that in Carey's novel the Efrican culture exists, "like all colonial cultures", in a "state of contradiction" (Bradley 658). Like Australia, Efica's cultural identity is one split between places and cultural markers. As a colonised space, Efica is caught between several cultural precedents, having been, at various times, colonised by the French and the British. Although the cultural detritus of their presence is still seen in the language and the culture, none of these colonial forebears have remained. So, in the end, it is the persuasive cultural power of Voorstand that Efica is most obsessed with. Tristan says to the implied reader, who, as it turns out, is a native Voorstander:

We have danced to you, cried with you, and even when we write our manifestos against you, even when we beg you please to leave our lives alone, we admire you, not just because we have woven your music into our love affairs and wedding feasts, not just for what we imagine you are, but for what you once were [...] (Carey, *Unusual* 292)

Efica is a land previously transformed by colonialism, abandoned by the British and the French as an "unsuccessful idea" (Carey, *Unusual* 32), then transformed once more by Voorstand's neo-colonial project. It leaves Eficans to understand themselves not as a cultural and historical place in their own right but as the "periphery shouting at the centre" (Carey, *Unusual* 31). The cultural identity of the Eficans, then, is split. Their sense of self, dislocated as it is, is hybrid and unsettled, and they want for a cultural story that they can proudly call their own. Such an outcome, though, according to Ashcroft et al., is impossible. Speaking of post-colonialism more generally, they say that "[p]ost-colonial culture is inevitably a hybridized phenomenon involving the dialectical relationship between the 'grafted' European cultural systems and an indigenous ontology, with its impulse to create or recreate an



independent local identity” (Ashcroft et al. 195). The point here is that all attempts to create a national culture and identity will always be shaped by both the hierarchical imperial centre, as well as a subversion of that centre by the peripheral indigenous population. This is true of Efica, too. Bradley suggests that

the Eficans struggle with the urgent task of making a culture from the thin harvest of their own land, simultaneously grappling with the knowledge that any such culture will ultimately be no more than a crude aping of the imported conventions used to construct it. (658)

Yet it is not for lack of trying. Tristan’s mother Felicity is a beautiful actor who owns and runs the Feu Follet Theatre in the Efrican capital of Chemin Rouge. Felicity, as a Voorstander who considers herself Efrican, reflects Beilharz’s cultural hybrid who is “simultaneously here, and there, home and away” (Beilharz, *Thinking* 32). The Feu Follet collective’s agit-prop mission is to create culture: “What this poor theatre saw itself doing was inventing the culture of its people” (Carey, *Unusual* 50). More than just inventing the culture, in fact. When Tristan’s biological father Bill Millefleur prepares to leave Efica for a life in the Voorstand *Sirkus*, Felicity tells him, “You belong here, with us. We have important work to do. *We have a whole damn country to invent*” (53; my emphasis).

In the face of the monolithic multinational *Sirkus*, the Feu Follet’s agit-prop theatre is cowed, and it fails in Felicity’s mission to invent “the culture of its people” (Carey, *Unusual* 50). Instead, Efica is enthralled by the explosive, shimmering *Sirkus*. Ryan-Fazilleau argues that “culture is such a powerful and insidious weapon of colonial oppression that decolonized societies continue to revere the culture of the former imperial power and to denigrate their own long after political independence has been achieved” (129). The cultural pull of the Voorstand *Sirkus* – modelled on Disney –<sup>6</sup> is so great that the culture the Feu Follet seeks to create is smothered. In the end, Efica is left without a culture of its own, and in turn, without real freedom. This condition reflects how Carey sees Australia’s relationship to the British and the US:

Most nations are self-deceiving in the way they tell themselves stories, and Australia is no different. Australians like to think of themselves as proud and anti-authoritarian – we’re more like babies. We carry a lot of the scars of

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<sup>6</sup> It is interesting to note that, since Carey presciently drew the metaphorical line between his imagined *Sirkus* and the real-world Disney in his consideration of cultural imperialism, Disney has only grown more expansive, and has turned, really, into a grotesque multi-limbed monster with obscene levels of cultural power and influence globally.

colonialism with us, and so even though we like to pretend that we're sort of free and independent, we're really just like pets. The level of our freedom is as long as the leash that does this to us, and this nation [America] is one nation that can do that to us, and Britain was another. We deny that a great deal.

(Carey, "An Interview" 84)

For Efica, an impoverishment of cultural identity to call their own leads the Eficans to suffer from a "pain of unbelonging" (Ryan-Fazilleau). The pain of unbelonging, as described by Collingwood-Whittick via Germaine Greer, is meant to capture the feeling of alienation, a type of unbelonging, that both the colonizers and the colonized feel in the process of colonisation:

Dislodged from their existential moorings, emotionally destabilized by the fissure that opens up in their lives [...] colonizers and colonized alike, are afflicted by a psychological malaise. (Collingwood-Whittick xxx-xiv)

Caught between attempts to individualise themselves culturally, while still enthralled by their colonial and neo-colonial masters, means that the Eficans suffer from this psychological malaise. This is, I argue, an idea that drives *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith*, and it is the grotesque that comes to symbolise the damage wrought by such a condition. This expression finds form most acutely in the shape of Tristan Smith, whose "malformed body is somehow an emblem of the stunted growth that enforced servitude to an alien power produces" (Hassel 175). I will discuss further how Tristan acts as an embodiment of the culture he inhabits, but first I will detail his grotesque form.

Tristan bears many hallmarks of the grotesque, most obviously in his perceived physical monstrosity. He is variously described in the novel as "monstrous" (28), a "mutant" (157), a "gruesome little thing" (31), and as a "lipless little tragedy [...] [with a] gaunt little praying mantis head" (37). His clubbed feet mean that, as he grows older, he becomes "strong in the shoulders, withered and tangled in the legs" (67). Overall, Tristan, with his leaky, drooling body that expels acrid bile like "the colour of summer grass" (Carey, *Unusual* 19), and his lipless rag-mouth, powerfully assumes the shape of Bakhtin's grotesque body: "the most important of all human features for the grotesque is the mouth [...] The grotesque face is actually reduced to the gaping mouth" (Bakhtin 317). It is telling that Tristan is equally defined by his inability to speak properly, confirming his mouth to be his defining feature.

Born hideously deformed, Tristan is forced to endure surgical work to transform his body: “I found myself held down like a frog in a dissecting room, pinned at the legs and arms” (Carey, *Unusual* 62). Like Bakhtin’s grotesque body, which is a body in “the act of becoming [...] it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body” (Bakhtin 317), Tristan’s body is never finished, literally re-built and re-created. In an attempt to make the lipless Tristan look ‘normal’, the Efrican doctors seek to fix his mouth, but Felicity

chanced to see their ‘similar case’ and was so distressed by this poor man’s goldfish pout, she would not let them touch my mouth. Either way, there was no chance I would ever have a smile you would recognize. (Carey, *Unusual* 63).

Once more, Tristan’s mouth is acutely rendered. It defines his features.

If Tristan assumes the features of a grotesque body as Bakhtin conceives it, I argue that the emotional response he engenders in other characters conforms more comfortably to Kayser’s concept of the grotesque, that is, that which creates “fear of life rather than fear of death” (Kayser 185). Tristan is loved by his mother, but his father, Bill, finds himself “in the middle of horror” when he first sees his son (Carey, *Unusual* 41). Later, when a 10-year-old Tristan escapes from the hospital via the drainpipes, his performance is witnessed by a crowd of onlookers in the street below. In this moment, as the crowd watches, wracked by horror, Tristan realises his own monstrosity:

Faces were tilted up towards me. I turned to them. The faces were all wrong. They were not faces looking at an actor. Nor were they looking at something as simple as a boy on a pipe. The faces looked at something like snot, like slime, like something dripping down towards them from which they wished to take their eyes and which, the clearer and closer it became, produced in their own eyes and lips such grotesque contortions that I knew – properly, fully, for the first time in my life – I was a monster. (Carey, *Unusual* 156)

Tristan’s grotesque shape, I argue, borders both the positive Bakhtinian conception of the grotesque, and the more oppressive, negative concept advanced by Kayser, sometimes simultaneously. In this way, Carey uses Tristan’s grotesque shape to express a type of colonisation, as well as a liberation, of identity. In the novel’s second book, Tristan drags the whole Voorstand secret service into his sphere when he is mistakenly given the status of a terrorist. Later, Tristan appropriates Voorstand culture and uses it against them when he

literally inhabits a Bruder Mouse cyborg (a further act of grotesque hybridity – the human entwined with machine). As Lisa Meyer argues, when Tristan enters the mouse suit, he doesn't really entrap himself so much as free himself. Because within the costume he gains authority and he speaks about his mother's death. That's the tool used by a lot of oppressed or "victimized" people; they turn the system back against itself. (78)

Beilharz offers a similar argument, stating that "Tristan Smith's life line is as the mouse. Its suit, in the form of a simi, a cyborg, offers him both a body, a carapace, and a face, a mask, and in this way he becomes an unexpected star in the centre" (*Thinking* 306). Eventually, he "screws the Empire" (Beilharz, *Thinking* 307). As it turns out, this happens both figuratively and literally, when Tristan, dressed as Bruder Mouse, sleeps with Peggy Kram, a powerful culture-maker in Voorstand.

Despite his grotesque shape, Tristan has real agency and can even manipulate Voorstand as they have manipulated Efica. Tristan's grotesque body becomes liberating. On the other hand, his life has been crippled by his deformity. If he is to reflect the cultural dislocation of his Efrican culture (and in turn, Australia's), then his grotesque shape is so often damning.

It is not just Tristan's physical body that marks him as other. He is also marked by an identity that is split, misshapen, hybridised. Here, I mean that Tristan's grotesqueness stems not only from his physical shape but also from his cultural make-up. His mother's Voorstander heritage marks Tristan as not fully Efrican, despite it being his birthplace. Tristan is, as Ashcroft suggests, an "*embodiment* of the colonized culture" ("Simulation" 200; original emphasis). He is pulled between two cultural spaces, defiantly Efrican in his identity yet a Voorstander by heritage, and still drawn to the most pervasive cultural product of Voorstand – the *Sirkus*. Even Tristan's familial relationships point to a type of belonging and unbelonging, a here and there that the colonized culture might suffer. In effect, Tristan has three fathers: his biological one, Bill, a talented actor at the Feu Follet; his mother's lover, Vincent Theroux, a wealthy political-activist; and Wally Paccione, a street-wise fifty-year-old who spends much of his life taking care of Tristan. Both Bill and Vincent could lay some claim to be Tristan's father, and both seek to impose some paternal control. Yet both, in their own way, refuse responsibility for, and abandon, Tristan. Wally, on the other hand, who cannot claim *any* biological connection, remains devoted to Tristan and acts most like his father. In this way, Tristan's familial hybridity reflects the genesis of Efrican culture, where

the English and French all sought to lay claim before each abandoning Efica once they realised it was a doomed project.

I think it is true to say that Efica *could* feasibly stand for many colonized cultures – and Ashcroft is certainly right in saying that Tristan embodies these. Yet, owing to Carey’s own cultural connection to Australia and his admission that the novel *is* about Australia, I would suggest that it is Australia’s colonized culture that Tristan most strongly embodies. When Tristan is born, he is described as a “marsupial not ready to leave its mother’s pouch – skin folds, wide staring eyes” (46). This description recalls Bakhtin’s assessment that the intermingling of the human and the animal is “one of the most ancient grotesque forms” (318). But Ryan-Fazilleau argues that when Carey describes Tristan as a sticky marsupial still blind in its pouch, he extends an

obvious metaphor for [his] vision of Australian culture: a culture that did not have time to complete its second phase of gestation before being torn from the mother country’s protection and abandoned, far from home, incomplete and vulnerable. (Ryan-Fazilleau 135)

### The Damage Done

In an interview with Carey that appeared in the *Chicago Review*, Lisa Meyer says that she saw “Tristan’s deformed body, as perhaps symbolizing the damage caused by economic, political and territorial colonialism” (Meyer 77). Carey accepts that as a reasonable interpretation:

I was not blind to the possibility of that reading: this monstrous little body representing, at least in my Australian readers’ minds, something to do with the damage done. (Carey, “An Interview” 77)

Carey is equivocal here, yes, but it is telling that he thinks his Australian readers in particular might interpret Tristan in such a way. If Tristan’s grotesqueness, “with his personal experience of social rejection and parental abandonment [...]” means that he “mirrors [Efica’s] history” (Ryan Fazilleau 135), then I would argue Tristan also mirrors Australia’s history. Tristan’s grotesque form *is* an embodiment of Australia’s cultural dislocation and the hybrid identity of its people. Does Tristan’s grotesque body only show “the damage done”? I would say it is more than that. The grotesque in Carey’s text challenges the unstable spaces and identities that many Australians take for granted. While I do not think it provokes the same powerful perceptual rupturing as other more potent grotesques, I argue it provides the reader with an opportunity to see Australian culture and identity in a new way. Carey’s novel

explores the potential for a cultural shout-back, the “periphery shouting at the centre” (Carey, *Unusual* 32), and Tristan’s grotesque shape proves potentially destabilising to cultural hegemony and national narratives of identity. For while Tristan’s body clearly handicaps him for much of his life, it is also what allows him to inhabit the symbolically (and physically) powerful Bruder Mouse and turn Voorstand culture (as the oppressor) against itself. In this way, Tristan, through his grotesquery, becomes what Connelly would call the “quintessential voice of the outsider” (23). In the same way, my own protagonist and narrator, Jonah the Fishboy, acts to destabilise notions of identity, as well as humanness. As I discuss in the next chapter, Jonah is, in some way, the voice of the outsider attacking the centre. He leads the townsfolk to question their way of seeing things and causes many others to question their faith and their understanding of humanness. But he also shows the “the damage done”, in this case, by environmental destruction, as his incredible shape is attributed, at least potentially, to the toxic uranium mine that has destroyed the land. And if Jonah, like Tristan, is limited by his grotesque body, he is also made powerful by it. This is demonstrated most obviously by his experience in his fish tank. Jonah says, as he discovers the power of his body in water, that “[i]n this tank, despite being Donald’s prisoner, I felt free” (62). Yet like Tristan Smith, Jonah’s body is often more debilitating than otherwise.

Tristan was never likely to bring down an entire government or fully destabilise Voorstand’s cultural grip on Efica. The novel ends with Tristan escaping Voorstand, having effectively infiltrated Voorstand’s political and cultural centre. Tristan’s last words, while not necessarily celebratory, at least point to something open, and perhaps even hopeful: “At that time, although I did not know it, my unusual life was really just beginning” (Carey, *Unusual* 414). As is true, I think, of Australia.

The unease of Australia’s national identity continues. Tristan’s unusual life does not necessarily sound a positive note on how, if ever, Australia might reconcile its unstable cultural identity, but it does imagine a scenario where those who sit outside the official narratives of Australia’s history might find their way in from the periphery. And it is here, in the centre, where a destabilising change might take place. The grotesque, in this way, sharpens the edge of that attack.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Ways to be Human

As I argued in chapter two, changing the shape of my creations did not just allow me *into* my narrative, it also changed the shape of my story. Effectively, the grotesque became a method of *ostranenie* that reinvigorated my approach to the work. In this chapter I explore what Jonah the Fishboy did for my novel, and how playing with the grotesque allowed me to tell my story in a different way. In effect, by creating Jonah the Fishboy and then allowing him to take centre-stage as the narrator, I aimed to give the grotesque other a voice.

Jonah is not normal. He himself admits to as much in the opening passages of *Fish Head*. He warns the reader, preparing them for the strangeness that follows, “I am not the kid at the back of the class that picks their nose and surreptitiously eats what is excavated. I am not the reclusive prodigy whose artistic talents people knowingly nod their heads to, thinking, oh, such a treat, such a divine creation” (8). Jonah playfully sets up the limits of normality and deviance and then explodes them entirely when he admits, “I was born a fish [...] which is a nicer way of saying: I was born a monster” (8-9).

It is hard to argue with Jonah’s description of himself as monstrous. When his mother, Charmaine, first sees her son, having given birth to him in the passenger seat of a smashed up 1972 Toyota Hilux, she cannot believe what she is seeing:

She saw a child, yes, with arms and legs and all the other things you’d expect when you were expecting. I was tiny, small enough to fit in a pair of cupped palms. I was early, you know. I hadn’t been cooking for long enough. But it wasn’t this that made her shudder. No. It was the scaly skin, shimmering phosphorescent. It was the deep black eyes, eyes that dominated much of my oblong head, like a balloon pinched at the bottom. It was the holes where ears should have been, and the thick rubbery lips. It was the gills either side of my neck, fluttering with every gulp of air. (9)

Charmaine’s shock at her creation matched my own. The transformation that took place, seeing my characters change from a young boy and a Jesus fish into Jonah the Fishboy, took me by surprise. The introduction of the monstrous grotesque changed, irrevocably, the shape of my story. I will now explore the monstrous grotesque in more detail before turning to the

idea of monsters and what they can tell us about culture. Finally, I discuss what the creation of Jonah the Fishboy as monstrous other allowed me to say about difference.

## Making Monsters

Monsters have long lived in close quarters with the grotesque. The monsters of Western antiquity are often depicted as having grotesque bodies that are built on contradiction and hybridity; they often feature as impossible combinations of plant, animal or human (Edwards and Graulund 36). In fact, the aesthetics of the monstrous and the grotesque often converge, at times becoming entirely synonymous with one another (Danow 35). Sirens, Medusa, centaurs, hydras, giants – these monsters all exhibit intermingling, hybridity, excess; traits shared by the grotesque. Remshardt suggests that the grotesque is not all that interested in the alien monster, the sort that is only found in the fantastic. Instead, he says that “the grotesque is more narrowly interested in the monstrosity that holds a warped mirror to humanity” (Remshardt 61). The extra-terrestrial monsters of Ridley Scott’s motion picture *Alien* are terrifying, for certain, but they become grotesque once they transgress the confines of the human body and grow within, when the boundaries between the alien and the human are broken. The monstrous grotesque, then, might be said to include those monsters that play with the natural order of things, that show some confluence between the imaginable and unimaginable, the human with the *inhuman*. That is perhaps why monstrous bodies, like the grotesque more generally, often attack the idea of the human body as a fixed, contained object, where identity as a stable parameter is challenged. With its focus on the body, the monstrous grotesque could be said to be a “strong” grotesque, that is, a type of grotesque less liable to lose its edge as discourse shifts (Remshardt 13). The grotesques that concern the human body, says Remshardt, can be more closely connected to a “hypothetical “core” of grotesqueness” (13).

Connelly argues that the monstrous – alongside the abject and the demonic – is now most readily associated with the grotesque because the monstrous grotesque, like the abject, “makes visual what is most threatening, inspiring fear and repulsion as it tears at the ultimate boundary between self and oblivion” (Connelly 115). Like so many other grotesques, the monster attacks the centre from the margins; it calls into question the ideals of normality, of congruity and stability. An encounter with monstrousness can create an “overwhelming desire to draw a boundary between ourselves and their fearful otherness” (Connelly 116). And like the grotesque, the monster resists meaning, it refuses to be contained by structures or frameworks. According to Jeffrey Cohen, “[Monsters] are disturbing hybrids whose



externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration. And so the monster is dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions” (6).

If there is a physical as well as psychological danger inherent in the monster’s form – they are, largely, interested in eating us, according to Marina Warner (10) – there is also something alluring about these beasties and bogeys. Connelly says the grotesque monster elicits “intense fascination”, even as they drag the spectator into a “fearful, liminal world that threatens the carefully constructed veneer of our identity” (Connelly 115). The grotesque monster helps us act out or exorcise our fears, and because of this, monsters are an enduring and ever popular embodiment of fear. Like many people’s experience of horror films, the response to monsters can sometimes be gleeful. Warner says that monsters are often courted with “greedy intensity” because monstrous encounters represent “a quest for catharsis through sensation, through the rush and high produced by an aesthetic of fear” (9). Yet not all grotesque monsters will be terrifying. Connelly brackets the abject and the monstrous within a traumatic strand of the grotesque, in contrast, for instance, to the wit and laughter of the carnivalesque (115). However, Edwards and Graulund argue that “these hybridized, grotesque-monsters can also be [...] comically absurd or ludicrous” (37).

Given the right conditions, the grotesque and the monstrous readily converge. In its hybridity, its undecidability, its transgression, the monster can be one of the most powerful embodiments of the grotesque. As I will now show, the monster is a complex creation: a fearful boundary dweller that can be as enticing as it is terrifying.

### Here be Monsters: the Monster in Culture

Liz Gloyn argues that monsters are manifestations of all the fears a culture obsesses over. What we are afraid of takes shape in monstrous form: “Culture defines the shape of a monster it gives birth to” (Gloyn). This means that the monster can often be read because, according to Cohen, the monstrous body is “pure culture. A construct and a project, the monster exists only to be read: the *monstrum* is etymologically ‘that which reveals,’ ‘that which warns’” (Cohen 4). It makes the monster “an object of knowledge” (Shildrick 10), but it is an object that disturbs and reorganises “bodies of power and domains of knowledge” (Foucault, *Abnormal* 62). For instance, in the monsters of the Middle Ages, the unnatural mixture of the human and the nonhuman disturbed an ontology informed by early Christian belief by embodying transgression and “inner corruption” (Edwards and Graulund 36).

What might the West's modern monster obsessions say about Western culture? Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* shows a disturbance of the completeness of the human body and captures a fear of technological overreach; the zombie disturbs life and death and can represent the dead-eyed dangers of rampant consumerism, as in George A. Romero's film *Dawn of the Dead*; in the 1980s and early 90s, the vampire foregrounded a time of great anxiety in AIDS and HIV, when "the literary link between queer, undead and blood became juxtaposed onto the suddenly immediate links between queer, blood and HIV" (Lavigne 2). There is not space enough to unpack the depth of monstrous beings across cultures. However, it should be said that monsters do appear across all cultures of the world. For instance, Christine Judith Nicholls outlines the rich history of monsters across Aboriginal language groups in Australia. She points out that while these monsters embody fear and anxiety, these

Monstrous Beings and their narratives serve a critically important social function that contributes to the maintenance of life: that of instilling into young and old alike a healthy respect and commensurate fear of the specific dangers, both environmental and psychic, in particular places. (Nicholls)

The monster, though, should not always be read as having simply emerged of its own accord from the murky depths to terrorise us. Even if culture informs a monster's shape, the monster is still molded by someone's hand. So often, the maker of monsters is the demagogue or the politician seeking to gain and maintain power through a process of defining limits. In these instances, it is often the marginalised that are made monstrous. Cohen says that any "kind of alterity can be inscribed across (constructed through) the monstrous body, but for the most part monstrous difference tends to be cultural, political, racial, economic, sexual" (7).

Connelly agrees, stating that those who suffer monstrous transformations are often our cultural "boundary creatures", those who represent what is "threatening to the norm" (116). In Western culture especially, the monstrous grotesque is often inextricable from the body and the feminine (Connelly 116). It was Aristotle, says Connelly, who set up the woman's body as "monstrous by nature" because it deviated from the 'normative' male body (117). Monstrous women figures abound in myth and fiction, the mythological Medusa providing a particularly enduring example of this. In all these cases, the monster functions as "dialectical other", incorporating "the Outside, the Beyond [...] all those loci that are rhetorically placed as distant and distinct but originate Within" (Cohen 7).

As I discussed in chapter one, the grotesque can function as a debilitating and colonising force of control, and here we see the potential power of the monster working

towards that end. If it is often the powerful that create monsters to manipulate, the general population cannot be absolved of blame in monster making. Monsters might find such solid footing because they *do* tap into our collective fears, and because collectively communities allow the words of politicians and the media to go unchallenged. In *Fish Head* it is both Donald Walker, the self-appointed messiah behind The Church of the Holy Fish, and the mayor of Fortune, Boris Barnaby, who act as the chief fearmongers. Both men, via different means, use Jonah the Fishboy to incite fear and distrust, and both do so to manipulate their way to power. But the townsfolk become both complicit in this process, as well as actively perpetuating it. Perhaps this is because, as Gloyn argues, monsters are both “feared and desired”. Monsters scare the hell out of us, but they also help us test the limits and boundaries of cultural spaces and normality, they give us subjects to ascribe otherness and difference to so that we might feel normal in contrast. As Cohen says, monsters police “the borders of the possible, interdicting through [their] grotesque body some behaviors and actions, envaluing others” (13).

Monsters, then, are complex. They are our cultural fears made manifest, but when fear can be exploited, so, too, can the creation and governance of monsters. And if they border the limits of normality and possibilities, then monster making can be incredibly harmful, because it is so often the marginalised that are made monstrous. Given all this, how might the reader interpret Jonah’s grotesque monstrousness? Does he become anything other than an embodiment of the fear of the other? Or does he assume a liberatory pose? I will now examine how *Fish Head* explores monstrousness, what it seeks to say about humanness and otherness, and what the creation of Jonah the Fishboy helped me to say.

### The Many Monsters of Fortune

*Fish Head* explores all types of perceived monstrosity. Most obviously there is Jonah the Fishboy, whose monstrous hybridity becomes a source of deep horror *and* fascination for the people of Fortune and, in time, the nation. As a monster, Jonah confirms Gloyn’s argument that the monster can be both feared and desired. In one way, Jonah terrifies the townsfolk, disrupting “the borders separating what is acceptable within the categories of ‘human’ and ‘non human’” (Edwards and Graulund 40), as well as unearthing their unease about land and the ramifications of the nearby uranium mine on their environment. But as the centrepiece of Donald Walker’s cult, Jonah also inspires hope and desire in others, evidence that the unbelievable can happen. Where does he sit on a spectrum of the grotesque? For me, Jonah, with his physically open body (witness the gills fluttering on his neck), his bulbous and

exaggerated eyes, and his penchant for scatological humour, is a manifestation of Bakhtin's grotesque body. But he also inspires terror and a feeling that reality is dissolving and alienated, which marks him as grotesque in the Kayserian sense. In this way, Jonah is like Carey's Tristan Smith, embodying each end of the grotesque spectrum, often simultaneously.

But if Jonah is the most obvious monster, he is by no means the only one. Many of the central characters in *Fish Head* are, in their own way, either perceived by other characters as monstrous, struggling internally and externally with their own monsters, or perpetrating monstrous acts. The subtitle of *Fish Head* is *Ways to Be Human*, and I intend that each character acts as a marker of deviance from the 'norm', either in shape, belief, or behaviour. In *Fish Head*, no one can easily slip into the category of normal. Each character struggles with their own deviance, and each performs an act of perceived transgression.

Donald Walker is a "skeletal creature" with a head like a "shrivelled pumpkin" (33), a description that recalls Arcimboldo's grotesque portraits intermingling human and plant. He is, in his callousness, his outbursts of violence, and his exploitation of people's insecurities, a monstrous figure. Yet to his followers, Donald is not a monster, he is a messiah. He exemplifies the complexity of the monstrous figure of wartime conflicts and ideological battles, for he is only a monster in the eyes of those who are against him, not to those who share his beliefs. Ironically, Donald himself fails to embrace deviance. Before the reader is introduced to Donald, he has already watched his wife, Jules, wither away to nothing on her bed, "tubes sticking out her body like translucent worms, monitors beeping. Gaunt and waxy. So far from human" (9). For Donald, Jules' crumbling, defeated body, is itself monstrous, and the shame of those thoughts and the need to hurt those who destroyed her body drives him to his eventual end.

Charmaine's proximity to monsters is always felt. That her own progeny is monstrous connects her to a lineage of monstrous births which were at one time believed to be brought upon by the corruption of the woman herself, whether morally, or sexually (Kukla). However, Charmaine's 'corruption', if there really is one, more likely comes from an environmental source – Fortune's nuclear mine.

Charmaine's own turmoil builds from the painful acknowledgement that the world will always see Jonah as something hideous: "My son will never have a normal life" (38). This mixture of guilt and anger is compounded by her own actions on the night of Jonah's birth: "And then, finally, her hands shaking violently, taking a bundle of the blanket and pushing it across my face, holding it there a moment as I wriggled in her arms, while she

sobbed” (105). While Charmaine does not go through with the infanticide, that moment of violence haunts her. And yet, it is not until Jonah appears on television alongside Donald that Charmaine sees, with a sudden clarity, that her son is a monster. She suffers a moment of uncanny recognition, the emergence of a painful acknowledgment long repressed:

It was the feeling that had gripped her when she saw me on that television, lit garishly by the hot heat of the cans, my features stark under the scrutinizing gaze of the camera. What she’d seen on that television wasn’t her son at all. What she’d seen wasn’t the child she’d reared delicately, dutifully, for ten years. No, I’m afraid to report, with a deep heaviness in my heart, that what she saw in that tank was a monster. (105-106)

That it takes a television – the chief icon maker of the twentieth century – for Charmaine to see her son as a monster, speaks to the primacy many cultures give to the captured and moving image, and the power it has in shaping our reality. Susan Sontag said more than forty years ago that we experience reality through images, that we have an addiction to them (Sontag). In *Fish Head*, the editor-in-chief of the *Fortune Herald*, Richard Quinten, uses this addiction to further his own interests through his coverage of Jonah and Donald’s church, a nod to the mass-media’s role in perpetuating monsters in mainstream culture.

Mayor Boris Barnaby believes himself to be haunted by the monsters of a long-repressed transgression: his decision to throw baby Jonah into a dam in order to save the nearby uranium mine, and himself, from investigation. When Barnaby witnesses Jonah again in the town hall, he becomes convinced that Jonah has returned from the dead and is now punishing him for his misdeeds. From that point, Barnaby’s actions push him closer to a violent monstrousness, to a callous disregard for human life, culminating in his ordering the townsfolk to destroy Donald’s church. In his desperation, like any good demagogue, Barnaby draws up boundaries and makes monsters of Donald’s followers in his attempts to divide the town, to pit *them* against *us*, and push the townsfolk towards violent retribution. Here, Barnaby successfully creates what Cohen would call the monsters “born of political expedience”, those that are used to justify military action, such as invasions or colonisations of people (Cohen 13). In the end, Barnaby’s very shape is made horrifying as a result of his monstrous behaviour: he is found after the fire at Donald’s shack, prostrate on the ground, “his blistered face charred and red raw, the pink of his gums and the white of his teeth showing through a deep tear in his cheek” (202).

Others do not escape the net of monstrosity. Donald's followers, the Fish Kissers, become so twisted by his words, and by the hallucinogens he feeds them, that they murder an innocent woman. The townsfolk who remain in town become so consumed by their prejudice and the vitriol they have for the Fish Kissers, but also any other outsider that threatens their ideas of normality, that they are willing to follow Barnaby up the hill to destroy the church and anyone in it.

Finally, there are those in *Fish Head* who are perceived as aberrant and monstrous for their difference. Ludwig and Mendelssohn, friends of Charmaine and Jonah, are othered because of their foreignness, but especially because of their sexuality as gay men, and are forced out of Fortune. This act literally and figuratively pushes them beyond the borders of acceptability. Jack Murnane and his family are similarly kept at the physical margins of the town, as well as in the margins of the town's collective consciousness. They are othered because of their Aboriginality, and feared because they interrupt the town's ownership of, and belonging to, the land around Fortune. Like the strangers in Lucashenko's "Country", the townsfolk are unable, or unwilling, to recognise the fact that the land they live on is stolen. Jack, despite his best efforts, has no answers that Barnaby and the town have ears to hear. Lastly, Megan, who is ostensibly a sanctioned member of the Fortune community, is othered alongside Jack by townsfolk who throw veiled accusations of miscegenation her way.

### The Emergence of Difference

In her introduction to *Embodying the Monster*, Margrit Shelrick says,

So long as the monstrous remains the absolute other in its corporeal difference it poses few problems [...] Once, however, it begins to resemble those of us who lay claim to the primary term of identity, or to reflect back aspects of ourselves that are repressed then its indeterminate status – neither wholly self nor wholly other – becomes deeply disturbing [...] To valorise the monster, then, is to challenge the parameters of the subject as defined within logocentric discourse. (2-3)

Jonah the Fishboy seeks to challenge the parameters of the human as a closed and complete being. He is not disturbing, or at least is not intended to be disturbing to the reader, but he does disturb the 'natural' order of things, of humanness. His monstrous body seeks to show, as Foucault might say, "the emergence of difference" (*Order of Things* 171). But the presence of so many other 'monsters' in *Fish Head* allowed me to aim to further disturb the boundaries between what is grotesque and what is not. For when every character in *Fish Head* could

arguably assume, at least in some way, a grotesque monstrousness, then perhaps normality is itself questioned. In other words, when a fishboy appears just as normal, just as human, if not more so than some of the other characters in Fortune, *Fish Head* aims to assert that none of us are 'normal', that normal and abnormal do not exist as simple binaries, and that we are, all of us, searching for our own ways to be human.

Does this allow the monstrous grotesque in *Fish Head* to assume a liberatory pose? I think it at least attempts to by showing that monstrousness is a label that anyone can assume or can have thrust upon them. At risk in my pursuit is the normalisation of monstrous behaviour. Do Donald and Barnaby's actions become diluted when surrounded by so many other 'monsters'? Perhaps, but *Fish Head* ultimately seeks to present human behaviour and identity as complex, where any of us are capable of both good and evil. No one in *Fish Head* is simply a monster, but all are pushed into questionable acts. That, to me, is simply being human.

I argue, though, that beyond showing that we are all capable of monstrosity, or of being made monstrous, *Fish Head* is meant to give monstrosity a voice. In the act of tearing apart Max and the Jesus fish, and by allowing the grotesque to reconstitute them into Jonah the Fishboy, I hoped to give the grotesque the opportunity to speak, to have breath, to let its experience ooze onto the page. Although it is reasonable enough to suggest that, in fact, a fish that looks like Jesus, with a beard and thorny crowd, is already grotesque, it would have been a grotesque without voice. Instead, Jonah the Fishboy became the window into Fortune, and the reader is asked to perceive the world of the novel from the outsider, not the insider. Here, my intention was that the grotesque monster is not just a challenge to normative binaries through its beastly indeterminacy, but that it actively challenges a reader by bringing forth the voice of the other, by inviting the reader to consider the position of the other. Sarah Cohen Shabot suggests that we can be moral subjects only so far as we can "*imagine* ourselves in the position of the other" (80; original emphasis). And the grotesque, Shabot argues, with its bodies in open and continuous becoming, with its intrusion of the margins on the centre, its magnification of difference and otherness, can be the powerful ethical imagination that helps us see, or even be, the other:

Imagining, constantly (re)creating ourselves in the grotesque manner, might help us to accept more easily our own *deformities*, our own defects and *excesses*, as well as those of the others. Imagining ourselves as *grotesque figures*, might save us from the struggle for perfection and from the willing to

destroy or annihilate ours and, mainly, other's difference(s). (Shabot 80; original emphasis)

Jonah the Fishboy seeks to create this connection between the reader and otherness. But is this connection successful? Some readings might find that Jonah is too central to the narrative to be considered truly 'other', not an outsider, really, not peripheral, but actually the insider. Or, in a fictional world where the centre has always already been subverted by the periphery, the power of the 'other' might be seen as blunted, like the grotesque in a 21<sup>st</sup> century world of the gruesome. For some readers, this might be the case, the affective possibility of Jonah's otherness diminished. I acknowledge these possibilities, but I argue this does not mark *Fish Head* as ineffective because I think Jonah does remain a challenging force for the reader; he is always pulling them into the text and asking them to consider the legitimacy of other character's actions and thoughts, the way they see otherness. Like Tristan Smith's direct addresses to an imagined Voorstand reader, or like Lucashenko's implication of the reader in "Country" through the sudden use of a second-person address – "We shouldn't be surprised that the strangers brutally killed the farmer and threw his body in the scrub" (Lucashenko, "Country" 11; my emphasis) – Jonah is the margins shouting at the centre. As a monster with a voice, Jonah asks us to question our perception of the world and how we perceive deviance, and as Cohen would say, to "reevaluate our cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, our tolerance towards expression" (20). Whether or not *Fish Head* effectively does all that is for the reader to decide. In the end, what I hope Jonah does, like Tristan Smith and Lucashenko in "Country", is demand of us that we not just look, but that we also see.





# CONCLUSION

## Changing the Shape of Things

The stories we tell – about ourselves, about each other, about the future – are important. If we tell these stories well, we can seek out new possibilities; we can imagine and build better futures. I agree with Anzar Nafisi who says, “Imaginative knowledge is not something you have today and discard tomorrow. It is a way of perceiving the world and relating to it” (3). Fiction does have truth to it. It does connect us to the world, to other people, and to other ways of seeing.

But the way we tell those stories is also important. The way writers choose to consider our reality, and reflect it back to readers, can change the way the reader sees the world around them. It can lead to new ways of seeing. I have no wish to be prescriptive, and I have not intended to show that any one way of telling stories is right or wrong. Instead, I have aimed to show that the grotesque, simply as one way of telling stories, can be a powerful and emancipatory tool (and a colonising one as well). It can be a way to unearth and uncover the repressed and elided things, those parts of ourselves that we no longer see, or that we hide for fear of what they might do once we acknowledge them. I think there is some truth in Germaine Greer’s assertion that Australia participates in a “self-destructive denial” of its colonial past (8). It chooses not to listen to the stories of its history, or it chooses to change the shape of the stories to suit the denial. As Alexis Wright says, “If you ever wanted to know why Australia is not capable of grappling with the truth of its history, it is because we have remained in this storytelling war with each other” (“What happens” 61). Something tells me that if mainstream Australia could end this war and come to terms with its story, its legacy of dispossession, and if it could also learn to listen to the stories of Aboriginal people in this country, then Australia would have a chance to truly grow into itself. For now, much of the Australian mainstream seems content to pursue a wilful blindness, even if a whiff of change shoots through the breeze. Bruce Pascoe says, “Justice holds up the scales of judgement and wears a blindfold so that no partiality is allowed. In Australia we prefer our children to dispense with the scales of justice and make do with the blindfold” (“Andrew” 227). While the grotesque cannot remove this blindfold on its own, it does present itself as a potent method of revealing these sorts of denials, of bringing these buried stories to light. This, I contend, is more important now than ever.

I have shown how the grotesque, for me, became not just a way to tell a story, but a way *into* a story. The destruction of Jesus fish and the boy who finds it was an act that helped suggest an entirely different way to approach my story about Australian experience. The grotesque makes good use of this destructive process, for where there is something broken apart, there are pieces to bring back together, to meld and to recreate. In its openness, and with its power to pull open gaps, the grotesque creates a *Spielraum*, a space for playing with constituent elements to encourage creation. I have argued that putting things into play is an integral component for how the grotesque creates its wicked forms.

The grotesque is also a play with human perception. It plays with our expectations, subverts our perceptual memory; our “gaze is rebuked. The eye is misled, not led” (Remshardt 24). In this way, I argue it is a highly effective way to make strange the world around us, to create a moment of *ostranenie*, to “make the stone stony” (Shklovsky 80), or in my case, the fish fishy. The grotesque confounds meaning and interrupts our senses and the way we see. If effective, the grotesque forces us to bridge the gap of perception and come out on the other side with new sight. As Yates says, an encounter with the grotesque can create “insights into different ways of being and, perhaps, *new possibilities for wisdom and wholeness*” (2; my emphasis).

This makes the grotesque a powerful tool for conceptualising Australian spaces and stories. As I have argued in this exegesis, writers, artists and thinkers have used the grotesque to make sense of Australian experience. First, it was used as a colonising force to create otherness and legitimise control, but it has also become a tool for resistance, a form that can attack the centre from the margins in what could be called “counter-grotesques” (Jorgenson). There are a range of texts beyond my chosen works that this exegesis could have explored, including Barbara Baynton’s *Bush Studies*, Louis Nowra’s *The Misery of Beauty*, Elizabeth Jolley’s *Milk and Honey*, *The Sooterkin* by Tom Gilling, *Homework* by Suneeta Peres da Costa, *The Spruiker’s Tale* by Catherine Rey and Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria*. Some weave the grotesque into the fabric of their narratives, others use it to effect at opportune moments, but in most cases, it becomes a way to magnify the narrative, to call attention to something. But what do these texts say about how Australia sees itself? How does the grotesque become a means to conceptualise Australian experience? These texts are worthy of examination when considering the grotesque in Australia, and all of them would have added to my enquiry but for limited space. Further research could engage with the breadth of the grotesque across

Australian literary history to find patterns in what these texts are trying to say about Australia and how the grotesque becomes the means to do it.

Lucashenko and Carey provide illustrative examples of how the grotesque aesthetic can be used to conceptualise the Australian experience, and to question assumptions about what that experience should look like. These texts share similar objectives, I think, with my own novel, *Fish Head*, where both use or exhibit elements of the grotesque to interrogate, challenge and unearth aspects of the Australian experience of space and identity. In Lucashenko's short piece of fictocriticism, "Country: Being and Belonging to Country", the play with contradictory forms and tones and the use of the uncanny allows the grotesque to emerge. The response, for me, was deeply unsettling, as the violent history of Australia's layered topography was uncovered. At the end of "Country", the uncanny space of Australia reverberates deeply to the surface, and the sorrow of Australia's history must be contemplated as a new way of seeing is encouraged. In Carey's *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith*, the eponymous protagonist becomes a marker for Australia's hybrid and dislocated identity. Through the grotesque body of Tristan Smith and the imagined spaces of Efica and Voorstand, Carey interrogates, attacks, and questions the condition of belonging and unbelonging in a postcolonial space. Here, the grotesque interrogates the assumptions of an Australian identity, and what it means to be Australian. My research in this field, while not comprehensive, adds further exemplary texts to the field of the Australian grotesque, an area still waiting for a true survey of this rich history. The conclusions I draw show that the grotesque has long been used to conceptualise these unstable markers and continues to find purchase as a powerful way of drawing out the complexities of what it means to be and belong to Australia. My contribution aims to benefit researchers looking at the relationship between the grotesque and stories that explore the Australian experience of space and identity.

In my own novel, *Fish Head, or Ways to be Human*, the grotesque was not just a way to tell my story, but a way *into* my story. Jonah the Fishboy's grotesque body allows for an examination of our fear of otherness and normality, our fear of bodies and what they should and should not be. As an island nation, Australia has had a long history of fearing, and perhaps choosing to fear, those outside our borders, as well as within. It still does. The ever-present and encroaching space of our oceans, that murky periphery, has given Australians more than enough room to inscribe and imagine monsters lurking on its borderlands. Like the map-makers of old, Australia looks around and declares: here be monsters. I aim for *Fish*

*Head* to interrogate that mentality, to see, with self-conscious sight, that perceived deviance is never far from Australia's political discourse. While I could argue that all of this would have been possible without relying on the grotesque, the result would have looked entirely different. My contention remains, then, that although the grotesque is not the only way to tell stories, it is a powerful possibility, a way into the weird and bizarre spaces of Australia.

Stories *do* matter. They help us understand ourselves and others, and the possibilities of now and the future. They are also ways to challenge the everyday stories we tell ourselves, that we take as gospel, that have become our foundational myths. I have argued that one way to do this in fiction writing is through *ostranenie*, the making strange of reality, and in this case, through the grotesque. This exegesis focuses on my own experience of this process, but further research might engage more deeply with this idea of making strange, and how different artists, writers and thinkers make use of *ostranenie* and the grotesque to create new ideas and provoke creativity. Still, the research here outlines a novel approach to creative practice by suggesting the important intersection of destruction, the grotesque, making strange and play. While I refrain from any prescriptive declarations, the research aims to offer practitioners with valuable tools for creative provocation that might unlock new ways of approaching creative work. Not everything in this exegesis will prove useful to all writers (I see it firmly as a "take what works" approach), but my intention is that creative practitioners, including those researching within the academy, will still find benefit in my conclusions that the grotesque can be used as a powerful tool to play with a reader's perception as much as with their own.

Australia is full of stories, both central and peripheral. Some of these stories find audiences more difficult to come by. But it is vital that we always tell our stories, tell them in different ways and allow for different stories to be heard so that we can create new ways of seeing. And while it is by no means the only way to tell a story, the grotesque can be a way for a story to speak differently, a way to magnify and interrogate, and a way to change the shape of things.

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