

DIGNITY



a chronicle of labour

TIM GOODING

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by Tim Gooding

Part One

BIRTHDAYS

1925**I**

I clung to her walls like a cat on a carpet. I knew what was coming.

Charlie Shipwater had long concluded that were he to die in the pit it would be while bottom-holing, but in the end, mauled by a runaway skip in E tunnel, it was the slope which did for him. The notices yellowed in a cigarette tin. Residence within an inner pocket of Charlie's suitcoat, pocket buttoned, coat tightly folded, stuffed in a wooden box stencilled 'DANGER – EXPLOSIVES', thrust deep under Malcolm and Sarah's bed, saw the incursion of salt spray slowed but not halted. The flat red tin, Black Cat, ex management, was blistering. The suit smelt of dead air. It had been warm, redolent of back yard and sunday morning, Malcolm remembered, on packing away after a day's hang in the sun. Gesticulating on the line, it had alarmed the dog, Rowdy fearing the wrath of the previous owner had not departed with him. Following Charlie's passing, Malcolm had worn the suit until it pinched at the waist. The family waist was evolving. The trousers had always been a little short. Yet there was wear left. Sarah could darn darns. A boy could grow into it.

Hurrying home from the pit, Malcolm straightaway had been chased back into the street. The house was too small, the walls too thin, for a man to stay. The miners' homes, company-owned, appeared designed on the principle of the hutch: breeding was anticipated and desirable for provision of a future

workforce, but assumed to be a silent activity, or at least that fellow inhabitants of the four rooms would not care if it was not. Malcolm did as he was told. He had no wish to be there at the actual moment. The only thing he knew about the delivery of children, one thing more than he wanted, was that even during drought it involved water. For some reason. His shoulders ached from the bucket yoke. He walked slowly to the pub, downed two or three slow, responsible pints, garnered a flask of Red Mill on tick, walked more slowly home, resisted the Red Mill, knocked just in case, and was greeted by Sarah, still big.

He had not read the clippings to Dot. He turned up the lantern wick. "Killed by a runaway skip". His father would have heard it coming. Malcolm shoved the thought away. His lips moved as he read the sentence he liked most.

"The funeral was well-attended by members of The Grand United Order Of Free Gardeners, and there were many floral tributes."

Malcolm lacked his father's touch in the garden. He read the tribute amid deepening appreciation of the anxiety surrounding the bringing of life into the world. At times he had managed to coax a vegetable from the soil but these small few were undersized misshapen monsters, less tasty and far uglier than the vegetables of his childhood. The type of vegetable that scared children at night. Flowers raised even stronger resistance to his attentions. His blossoms – rare, in the manner of accidents or freaks of nature – or strays from another garden - rapidly blackened with coal dust, choked and died, where the same

varieties of bloom had sprung up multitudinous, joyful and long-living, on his father's watch. Under Charlie Shipwater's hand the garden had been a blaze of colour in the blackened town. One of several such blazes. It was plain there was a secret here, shared by members of The Grand United Order Of Free Gardeners. What befuddled non-member Malcolm was how a man learned the secret in the first place. Were you born with the knack? Was the knowledge passed on, down the generations, digging together in the garden? As pit knowledge passed from father to son, picking at the coalface? For voluble exegesis, post-shift, at the pub? Digging, drinking, his father had not passed on a shred of garden knowledge. There were no other opportunities. Charlie's legacy was the rubbery crescent smile at this moment creeping cheekwards in recognition that fathers needed one thing they did better than their sons. Malcolm wondered what a son of his might be good at, and what one skill he, Malcolm, might keep in reserve to best him. Fishing was a possibility. A probability. Agreed, a boy must be taught how to fish. But where did it say a father must pass on every single one of his angling secrets?

A flattened violet fell from the fold of a clipping listing local court appearances on the afternoon of the burial. The pit had closed for half a shift and Charlie's mates had made next morning's newspaper. Attested by nature of crime and size of fine imposed, Richard Jones could hold the most alcohol whilst Hugh Meiklejohn possessed the loudest and foulest mouth. Malcolm liked to picture The Free Gardeners blind drunk and rioting *in memoriam*.

Malcolm was himself a memorial, reluctant, to mining tragedy. Submerged in a fontful of freezing northern Calvinism, he had been christened Samuel Malcolm Shipwater in memory of ten year old Samuel Horne who had drowned along with twenty five other child workers in the Huskar colliery disaster of 1838. Samuel Horne was a childhood playmate of Malcolm's grandmother Emma, who had insisted upon pit-drowned Samuel's continued commemoration via her pit-bound grandson. Malcolm's certificated appellation was known only to a dwindling few as he had seized the opportunity to dispense with the unwanted tag when enrolling himself on his first day of school.

Sarah shouted his name through the wall, the second syllable mutating into a howl of pain succeeded by witch-like laughter and subsequent admonition, the divided opinions of three women concerning pain, breathing, calmness and the role and level of water, panicked heels on loose timber, a teacup smashing, violent stoking of the fire. Gramma Shipwater shouted his name. Malcolm shouted acknowledgement, several times, in a rhythm, resolved to filch a new Black Cat tin upon his next audience with management, and methodically restored clippings to tin, tin to suit, suit to box, box to bed. Nan Baker and Gramma screeched his name in unison. A purse-lipped moan – Sarah – followed, at length, rising through octaves. Then his name again, from all the voices, like a howling.

"Malcolm! Go! Go!"

"Where?"

"The pub! Go to the pub!"

"Shut."

"Go across the road. Go somewhere."

"Go, Malcolm."

"Go!"

Across the road, a paste-like substance spattered Dot's face, squelched through her knuckles. She thrust an excited arm at her father, fist clenched, before suddenly opening her fingers. Flecks of dinner slop hit Malcolm in the face. The rubbery crescent smile stayed in place. He took another walk with intent to polish off the Red Mill.

The sun dipped behind the western ridge leaving The Bay in cold shadow. The sky took on a deep blue glow, darkening to black in the east. He had seen the colour before, on the blade of a new shovel. Luminous pink streaks held on in the west. It grew darker and colder as he walked down the bush track linking a scattering of cottages to the main road. Emerging from thick scrub into open ground, the cottages fell into two neat rows flanking the road which sliced south through The Bay. Uniformity of house construction exaggerated a perspective which found its vanishing point at the pub atop the southernmost hill.

Based in England, the company found its time consumed in wrestling concerns more pressing than the maintenance of antipodean properties. Weatherboard curled and twisted, loosening nails and creaking in the wind. Tongues of rust accompanied drips, surrounded nail-holes, crept along guttering. Houses

quickly turned grey to match the iron of the tanks. They sank easily into the evening as Malcolm approached, and the kero lamps came on. The Miners Advocate had designated the housing "a disgrace". Malcolm was not sure what it meant, what it said about him, his family, to inhabit a disgrace. He faintly resented the suggestion being broadcast. Perhaps The Bay was a disgrace but it was assuredly not a slum, for if The Bay was a slum, what then was Barnsley, Yorkshire? So ran his mother's argument. Unfamiliar with Barnsley, who was he to disagree? A true slum did not exhibit empty space between dwellings, Gramma said.

He turned left at the level crossing and walked along the railway running from pit to loading jetty, stepping sleeper to sleeper, familiar with the distance between. The faint sheen of rails curving away towards the beach guided him through the darkness as he hurried from the narrow cutting under the white bridge. The white bridge led to the cemetery, where his father lay. A vision of bones came to him. He shook his head and walked faster. The engines were stored for the night but he could not dismiss the thought that something might silently appear behind him, from the direction of E tunnel.

Surf thumped in the dark ahead. He felt it in his feet. Emerging onto the flat of the weighbridge, the full stench of easterly-borne brine and weed hit his face, blowing away the inclination to look behind. The horizon had vanished but he could make out the faint white of the breakers. From the weighbridge, the rails ran southward the length of the beach on a ledge chiselled into the hillside, safely above the sand, before curving eastward at the headland to follow the

jetty out to sea. Malcolm sat on the seaward edge of a sleeper, legs dangling, and rolled a cigarette inside his coat. He wished he had possessed the foresight to have wangled two flasks of Red Mill.

Miners wanted sons. The tradition wove as a black ribbon back to the old, dark, cold country. Did it necessarily adhere in the new? He remembered his first day down. A serious youth, for some reason. Graduating with the rubbery crescent smile. The Bay considered Malcolm's an open face, painted on a closed door. He remembered his relief when Dot was born. As if to emphasise the point, her hair was a light, mousey brown.

The mist caused his cigarette to sputter. Tingled on his face. Haloed lamps on the jetty. The lamps were installed following an attempt to gelignite the piers during the wartime strike. Scab labour was arriving by steamship from Sydney. Striking men lined the cliff top to pelt the scabs with rocks. The women of The Bay kettled them with metal pots and wooden spoons. Baton-wielding police pursued the strikers through the town. Malcolm had taken refuge under the house, in the company of youthful border collie Rowdy, who deemed proceedings a great game until he and master were joined by an unnamed Germanic police dog. Malcolm's mother screamed at the snarling thrash underfoot. Nothing was proven. The police broke three of Malcolm's ribs expressing disappointment that the gelignite box contained only an old suit and newspaper clippings dating from 1911.

Sarah hated fuss. Her mother Eleanor vibrated with it. Fuss, with a north Somerset accent, was the embroidery of Nan Baker's life, adding colour and line to diminished circumstances. Fuss cost nothing, could be manufactured out of nothing, was applicable to everything and available to everybody, no matter how humble. In Nan Baker's quivering hummingbird hands, fuss was both everyday and ceremonial, equally irradiating births, deaths, cups of tea and what to wear. To fuss was to love. Such love had all but ruined Sarah's wedding. Determined to keep it out of her marriage, hearing herself utter an expression like "Into every life a little rain must fall", tinged with north Somerset, or upon seeing herself rearrange Malcolm's shaving things, or wipe a speck of food from the corner of his mouth with the corner of her apron, in horror, Sarah saw her body inhabited by the spirit of her mother. She shuddered the presence out and away, and stiffened her defences. Malcolm made a joke of it, said he didn't care. She did not believe him.

Aware that fuss may rush in to fill a marital vacuum, Sarah forgave her mother. Forgiveness turned to screaming after an hour in the same room. To which her mother's reaction was incomprehension followed by affront followed by guilt, all of which, after extreme show of penitence by her daughter, subsequently proceeded into storage. Of many reasons for wanting the birth over and done with, her mother's spreading presence in a shrinking house was the most potent. It was also the factor most likely to delay proceedings because the hovering presence caused Sarah's insides to clench. When the child appeared to stir early in the evening of the thirty first, Sarah felt that she and

her impending offspring were in accord. The sooner the fuss died down and returned to Swansea, the better.

She stabbed the fire. A log fell with a crash and rolled across the hearth. She winced, stilled herself, and stared deep into the corning beef. Hearing only the wind, she risked a glance over her shoulder before lowering into a squat, like a weightlifter, to address the log. Her knees clicked. She closed her eyes. A door creaked. Straightening as promptly as her condition allowed, she reprised the stare into corning beef. Behind, she knew, her mother was standing in the bedroom doorway, smiling. She jabbed at the beef, arrhythmically. Nan Baker positioned herself within peripheral vision.

"What can I do to help?"

Sarah pretended not to stiffen.

"Would you like me to make the white sauce?"

Sarah stepped back from the fire, hand on stomach, and let out a howl of pain.

"I think it's started."

"I knew. I had a feeling. Keep calm. Keep calm."

Gazing at the bedroom ceiling, realising it had not started after all, or if it had started it had stopped, Sarah concluded that in foolishly following her mother's advice to remain calm she had given her child the completely wrong impression. A decent dose of fraughtness might have convinced the indecisive child that its time had indeed arrived.

"The child knows when you're anxious."

She envied Eve, asleep in the next room, availing herself of bed without Gramma Shipwater for company. Full name Evelyn, Eve had shortened herself upon reading The Book Of Genesis. Five years older than brother Malcolm, Eve was deemed to be simple, but could read, slowly, and draw. Her waking hours were spent with the Bible and in the charcoal sketching of flowers harvested on a daily stride up and down the dry creek bed which snaked behind the house. White lilies were her preferred subject. Sarah was aware that something had happened with Eve and a soldier when Eve was younger. Only Gramma Shipwater and Eve knew what. It was possible Eve did not know, exactly.

The troop to the bedroom attended by flapping entourage recurred several times between late afternoon and midnight as the child started, stopped, sprinted, dawdled, advanced, retreated, lurched, balked, jammed, twisted, turned, lashed out wildly, punching and kicking in tantrum, before folding arms, digging in heels and seeming to decline the jump altogether. Dot had not been like this. Dot had been painful but straightforward, co-operative in a difficult time for both parties, an approach that sat well with Sarah.

Exhaustion, pain, hallucination - a school boyfriend, missing in action, returned - did not impair Sarah's recognition of fussiness when she saw it. It seemed that, despite her best endeavours, the trait had not been expunged from the line but rather had outflanked her by skipping a generation. She upbraided herself. She was a *carrier*. Her unborn child was a *fusser*. While the *donor* sat by her side, head drooping, lower teeth slipping, birdlike grip on her

daughter's hand, having nodded off, enervated by several hours of obsessive stroking. Attending opposite, punctilious but mistrustful of stroking, face down on the bed, Gramma Shipwater appeared to have fallen on her knitting needle in aggravated impatience or ritual surrender, the illusion punctured by gravelly snoring as the Barnsley widow inhaled coal dust from the blanket. The walls of the tiny bedroom appeared to be closing in, jamming slumbering midwives tight against the bed like chairs in a closed saloon.

She glared at the mound under the sheet, impatient for its next peevish move. The worst thing about giving birth was the incessant attention. She resolved that if the birth was not to be a cooperative effort, then it would be a test of wills.

The scream woke Malcolm. Matches fumbled and lost down the thunderpit, door flung open to admit starlight, he was slumped sideways against the wall, boots stinking after stamping on a burning paper bag containing human faeces, Rowdy keenly sniffing, when proceedings re-commenced, if that was what was happening, for the umpteenth time. He kicked at the dog. Get out of it. Eleven hours later, nine minutes before midday, April 1, it was over.

Every birthday. We had to haul you out by the ankles, like a calf. April Fool. A breach birth calf. April Fool. The rope broke. April Fool. In the end we used a length of pit hawser. April Fool. Powered by the skip haulage machine. April Fool. We washed you in with the dishes because of the drought. You smelled like corned beef until the drought broke. You were so slippery with soap and beef fat that you squirted out of mum's arms, landed on your head, squashed your spine, and grew up as broad as you were tall. Or as thick as you were short.

Or like a keg on legs. Or a forty four gallon drum. Or the barrel of a cement mixer. Or a moon-tanned, red-haired Samoan. April Fool. Every birthday. You'd think they'd get sick of it. Dad found a paper bag going up in flames on the doorstep.

"Never stamp out a burning paper bag on April Fool's Day, Ron."

You never know what's inside. Well, you do, but you forget and then it's too late. Every birthday for fifty nine years. We've bought you a bike. You don't have to go to school today. Nerys Ferris is having your baby. April Fool, Ron.

"It's a girl."

Mum's joke. When they let Dad in.

"We called you Ron because you didn't come till later, Ron."

Dad's joke. It's a fair bet he said "See you 'ron" before he jumped. Or fell. Or was pushed. He was sacked for turning up late. Pissed his pants until the pit boss blurted out 'April Fool'.

There was not yet a red hair on the fleshy head – which was more cube than globe - but the translucent eyelids, pink with a pale lash fringing, over eyes the grey of overcast sky, elsewhere the skin pure milk, foretold a life to be eked away from sunlight. It was clear to Malcolm that baby Ron, like himself, was born to mine. In the year of Ron's birth, there were four hundred and three men and fifty horses working in the pit, in three shifts. At the coalface, men worked in pairs. Father with son, brother with brother. A runaway skip had broken the Shipwater line. As of now, Malcolm hewed in the knowledge that in fourteen years the family line would be restored.

Red hair is a sign of intelligence. Red hair is a sign of sporting ability. Red hair is a sign your mother was frightened by a bunch of carrots. Red hair is a sign your mother was frightened by smoking in bed. Red hair is a sign your mother was frightened by your father. And his mother was frightened by his father. And his mother was frightened by his father, and so on, all the way back to the first milk-skinned redhead on the Lothian coal to frighten his wife and so bugger the rest of us backwards, forever. April Fool. There's been some kind of mix-up and you're really Ron Bradman. April Fool. They found your father's body. April Fool. No more. I'm taking a few of the bastards with me. Only some of what they said actually happened. I wasn't born on April the first anyway. April Fool.

1926

I

On my first birthday Auntie Eve stuffed me in Gramma's gladstone bag, smuggled me out the back door, stomped up the creek bed – Auntie Eve had heavy feet – and buried me under a paperbark. Then stomped home and swore blind she hadn't seen me all day. Gramma exhumed me. April Fool, Ron. In the UK the General Strike was called in support of a million miners locked out of their pits because they wouldn't accept wage reductions. The jellyback leaders of the Trades Union Council surrendered after nine days – nine days! – but the coalminers fought on until December, when solidarity triumphed in time for Christmas. The shame-faced pit bosses unlocked the gates, apologised profusely, said they absolutely took the miners' point and strongly recommended the government award a huge rise in wages. Which the government was only too happy to grant. Throwing in bonus paid holiday and a generous pension scheme as a gesture of seasonal goodwill. April Fool. Gramma kept a scrapbook. A letterful of bad news arrived from Barnsley every month.

Malcolm slid through the dark, dodging table, ducking the workshirt hanging stiff and unfriendly above the fireplace. He jabbed at coal to unearth the glow, dropped the poker with a clank and dragged the kettle to the heart of the fire. The crunch of coal, the clank, the scrape of kettle in the dark, did not vary throughout the year, except when Sarah was ill and Dot, standing in, had the night before neglected to fill the kettle. At such times, rare, the tone of the scrape was different, was followed by a loud oath, the stamping of feet out the back door, the squeak of a tap, the heavy note of water entering kettle in anger, while Dot loitered nervously in bed, waiting for a better moment to emerge, which never came. Trapped warmth exaggerated the smell of cooked

meat and musty bedclothes which hung in the house until the sea breeze was let in. He located the doorknob, negotiated the loose tread halfway down, unerringly.

Leaning forward to watch streaks appear in the morning sky, listening to the magpies and twittering wrens, tearing sheets of the Herald into an appropriate size, he amused himself in picturing the entire early shift in simultaneous occupation of the line of thunderpits located behind the line of houses, all listening to magpies and wrens whilst tearing sheets of the Herald. With the more squirrelish miners of The Bay tearing not merely for the moment but with a view to the future. Rip of newspaper and birdsong aside, Malcolm preferred to sit in silence, but had engaged in shouted conversation with seated neighbours when there was strife at the pit. Shouting and strained toileting had continued for days following the Mount Mulligan explosion. The sit was colder in winter, lasting until he heard the kettle boil. He made tea by the glow of the fire. Poured in a tot of Red Mill. Dragged over the chair. Gave the fire a few more jabs. Leaned into the warmth. Sucked noisily at his brew. Thought. Why Charlie Shipwater, a hewer, was in the haulage way at the time of his death was never established. His boots and collection of tools had passed to Malcolm. Eleven at the time, Malcolm had lain out the inheritance on his half of the bedroom floor with the formal precision of a dental assistant. Shovels, picks, mandrills, pinch bar, hatchet, borer, drills and bits, powder tin, crib tin, water bottle, boots. For the better part of six years – three months in France excepted, during which time Gramma had undertaken the task – Malcolm had cleaned the tools, oiled them against rust, rubbed dripping into the boot

leather, in anticipation of progress onto the coal. His graduation to hewer came amid loudening whispers of the role's extinction as the spectre of mechanisation stalked the pits with post-war vigour. Several early model cutters, electric chains and windy picks, were already deployed in the old section. Despite promises, men had been laid off. There had been accidents. Miners needed to hear the roof talk. Machines were noisy.

On his back in an undercut, cutting deeper with pick or hatchet, one handed, there was almost daily a moment when Malcolm became piquantly aware of the weight of the world inches above his face, and considered that it could render him as flat as a stamp before he knew it. "Bottom-holing" was deemed the most dangerous activity of all when winning coal the old way. It would be simple to kick out the timber supports, Malcolm thought. Slam. Gone. At other times he thought about the war. The government had preferred him to stay in the pit. His mother had refused to sign the papers. The women of The Bay had not distributed white feathers. To the outside world, The Bay barely existed. As long as it continued producing coal, The Bay would stay unnoticed. Coming of age, Malcolm had enlisted and sailed to Europe. He was drilling behind the lines within a day of moving up when the armistice denied him the privilege of facing the enemy.

He fished to unwind. Fishing was solitary and above ground. As a youth, he had fashioned his own rod, under the guidance of his father. He had harvested the bamboo. Formed the guides. Wound the bindings. Applied the varnish. The result was a beautiful instrument. His first savings upon entry to the pit

went towards a wooden sidecast reel, an object of singular beauty in his regard. Rod and reel had endured. The Bay presented any number of good spots, hosting a variety of catch. The tidal rock platforms at either each end of the beach. Blackfish. Cod. The beach. Whiting. Bream. Flathead. The point of the loading jetty. Jewfish. Tailor. Snapper. If nothing else, leatherjacket lurking around the piles. The jetty was his favourite spot, his favourite time late saturday night. On a rising tide and no moon. No work next day, nothing overhead but stars. On a still night the noise from the pub reached the end of the jetty. Malcolm had his rum. In May, when the tailor were running, he stayed all night. When the tailor were not running, nor anything else, and not a bite was to be had, he would still, frequently, stay all night. One thousand feet out to sea, thirty feet above the high water mark, he could, he felt, cast a hook and sinker over the edge of the world. Where there be monsters. It would be easy, he imagined, for such a monster to pull a fisherman off the jetty and over the global rim. Then again, it would be just as easy to plunge off without the assistance of a monster. Despite the exaggerated height required to accommodate large coal steamers, the sea still broke over the planking in heavy weather. Locals knew the warning signs. The jetty was a long walk. Walking back it grew longer.

II

Only after tea and trousers did Malcolm light the kerosene lamp. He started. Ron stood in the bedroom doorway, extruding, dough-like, from a shrunken singlet, frown rippling over wildly dilated pupils.

"Where are your pants, lad?"

His offspring looked down, gave consideration to what he saw.

"How long have you been standing there? Sarah, where are his pants?"

Sarah slid through the narrow straits separating table, rickety chairs, explosive boxes, keros tins. The lamp was her signal to prepare the crib.

"He shouldn't sleep in the same bed as his sister without pants."

"He doesn't wear pants yet. What happened to your nappy, Ron? His bottom's freezing, Malcolm."

"He was watching me."

"Were you watching your father, Ron? Is that what you were doing? Were you watching your father - ?"

Sarah recognised the spirit of her mother, wandering.

"His bottom's freezing. How long was he standing there? Let's get you by the fire, Ron."

Arms spread like wings, Ron pissed on the flames. The yellow arc hit with a hiss, producing steam to clear the nostrils. Malcolm snatched his boots to safety. In full flow, Ron frowned while seeming to contemplate a deep mystery sourced in his penis. Gathering him up the without plan of future action, Sarah found her child to possess a tank of profound capacity. Hobnails crunched on the gravel outside. Pissing wherever parked, Ron observed Malcolm insert himself into the stiff envelope of his shirt, then grimy sweater, like a white worm. Still pissing, airborne once more, he watched his father crack a greasy neckerchief like a short whip, to unstiffen it, before donning a dark vest and jacket, both slightly small. Still pissing, he found himself returned to the hearth, where his mother rotated him, as though fine-tuning the alignment of a statue, such that the stream no longer dampened the fire but

hissed away on the fireplace wall. He studied Sarah handing Malcolm his water bottle and crib tin. Saw his father kiss his mother's cheek, check the Red Mill in his pocket, and leave.

His stare blackened, pupils overflowing irises, in descrying the dark shape of his father meld with a passing rank of other dark shapes. Disembodied faces appeared momentarily, ruddied by the suck on a pipe or durry, to the crunch of unseen boots.

“Get back inside, Ron. Now.”

Square bum retreated on bow-legs.

The lick of the kitchen lamp spread under the brattice curtain. He discovered he could discern the lamp-glow through closed eyelids. The talent provided a subject for research while feigning sleep. The crunch on the gravel faded. At the sound of the loose stair-tread, he slipped from bedroom to verandah, clambered onto a fruit crate – pre-positioned - and chinned the rail. A swarm of tiny lights bobbed like fireflies in the distance as the workforce hustled from lamp cabin to pit, and vanished. “Down *The Pit*”, Dot spat, as though her brother was thick.

Eyes closed, I could see The Pit. It was darker than dark, choked with dust you could feel peppering your face. Men died in The Pit. Horses drowned in The Pit. Runaway skips tore through The Pit. The roof of The Pit spoke. When the roof said “Run for your life!”, the men ran. Dad said The Pit bored all the way through to China. You could hear ching chong voices behind the coalface. Gramma said the Barnsley pits bored right through China and kept going all the way down to Hell. Gramma had worn black since 1911 and looked like she knew.

When Gramma's mother was a girl, she was a hurrier, crawling on hands and knees, topless, dragging a coal tram on a chain between her legs. Her sister shoved the tram from behind, with her forehead, and lost the front of her hair.

“They sent little children down the pit too, until Huskar.”

Twenty five years of sunlight and sea water and detached cottages on grassy ground had wrought negligible change in Gramma Shipwater. The West Riding clung to her grimly.

Dad home in the morning meant one thing: strife at The Pit. He was never sick. Coughing and spitting didn't count. They all coughed. They all spat. Black bullets, at the ground or a wall they didn't like. Or sometimes, in a good mood, long black monster goolies which cartwheeled through the air in a big lazy arc, over management fences, where they wound themselves round and round the bosses' geraniums to underline an industrial point. Dad kept a crusty rag under his pillow. They all kept crusty rags under their pillows. His cuts healed as tattoos. Black spots on his knuckles, pencil lines on his face, buttons down his back. He swore like buggery when he couldn't go down The Pit. He needed to dig the coal to power the train to carry the coal to power the ship to carry the coal to power the train to carry the coal. Slack blew over The Bay. Raindrops stained washing. Trees wore a coat of grit. Red clay turned black. The Bay drank The Pit in its water.

1927

I

On my second birthday, Dot swore a Horsebite wouldn't hurt. Then she gave me one. Cedric swore that my life would have been totally different if I'd just held out – hung in – clung on - until one second after midday. My hair would've been shit brown and my skin like I'd spent nine months incubating in a tannery. After a while they didn't even wait for April the first.

The Pit had no bathhouse. The unwashed crunched heavily into the hotel, faces and hands black, flesh beneath tripe-white from the day's intake of foul air and darkness, gaunt-boned from the labour. Drenched shirts clung to their chests. Bugging eyes and grinning teeth gave the look of tired-but-happy spooks. Late arrivals, the minority washed, having ducked home, scrubbed briskly, changed and fled, made excuses as they poured down blacks to catch up. Beneath work caps – never removed for drinking - the mean height was more than an inch below national average, a margin which would have been greater but for the lowering effect of the Great War and government preference for coalminers to remain at home. Taller miners were hunched and took longer to straighten after work. As pints despatched dust, lips returned, moist red, while tripe pallor retreated before a spreading ruddiness.

Close listening revealed a pub roar streaked and studded with burred 'r's, rounded vowels, glottal stops, apostrophied endings, vanished definite articles, rate, raaht, reet, and roit, 'ark, sithee and sirrah, indicating heritages in the pits of Durham, Nottingham, Lancashire, Yorkshire, and seemingly more biblical Derby, where it mizzled. Undaunted, fibrous Ayrshire and Lanarkshire shoved

wet-lipped through the Sassenach hubbub, hacking consonants and rolling 'r's, while Rhondda, Cynon, Merthyr, Ebbw and other assorted Valleys Welsh slipped through, proud but mostly minding how they went, each distinctly different, at least to one another, but as a group dropping both beginning and end of certain words through a mutual interest in sound and flow. Irish brogue seemed to make itself scarce – the northern coalfields were predominantly protestant - but it was there and ready to stand up for itself.

Stool balanced on two legs, back against the bar, away from the fray of the taps, Malcolm teetered, eyes closed, and listened in an attentive languor. Perhaps to keep amused, perhaps because his mind was haunted, he was convinced the burrs became more burred as the hour grew late. The lilts became increasingly lilting, the 'r's longer rolling, or was it trilling?, the brogues broguer. Was it them or was it him? The black with a Red Mill chaser? The swirling repetition? However achieved, he could swear he heard the voices of his workmates develop progressively into the overwrought regional accents of rustic jokes and home country tales. All of which he had heard before. Did no-one else notice the repetition? Malcolm only spoke when spoken to. What was new to talk about? Unless there had been an accident or management was trying, again, still, to pull some bastard of a trick. The same voices, the same paint on the same walls, the same pit, was comfort and discomfort. Now, he had a son. A baby, to sit on the bar.

His hands were filthy. They went right round my chest. I can feel the grip now. Even though, these days, I'm the size of a boss's house. The men came up and stared, way too close, like

dogs do when you're asleep. The faces were black. With eyes like white wheels. And bad teeth. Their breath stank worse than Rowdy's.

"Look at the hair!"

"His head's on fire!"

"Look at the freckles!"

"They took him out too early. He's not done."

"What're you frowning at, boy? I won't bite. What's the boy frowning at?"

Rowdy trotted in for his daily pint. Lapped it up, then put his nose right down in the glass. His tongue swirled round the bottom. Mopping up every drop.

Alert to the three brothers Meiklejohn tending exaggeratedly Glaswegian, Malcolm wondered if son was hearing what father was hearing. He smiled at the boy. Hearing was one thing. What to make of it, another. Malcolm's engagement with regional accents of the old country never ventured beyond amusement. He had no wish to venture beyond. For were consideration of the voices to travel further, and deeper, while in Lanarkshire vein, the brothers Meiklejohn might have been heard to tend, more specifically, south east Glaswegian. From where, still later, their tones might have migrated into the hinterland. To Blantyre. To the "Dixons" pits. Where a brother might have silently attended the graves of Robert Meiklejohn – aged twenty six - and Thomas Meiklejohn – aged seventeen – distant uncles, unmet, who had perished along with two hundred and five other men and boys in the disaster of 1877. From the vantage point of the teetering stool – and now, the bar nearby? - the softer tones of Short Owen Jones, Richard "Dickie" Jones,

Johnno Jones and a cohort of Davis, Davies, Davy, Hughes, Jenkins, and Evans, if pursued, might have been heard to penetrate deeper into their various vales, with perhaps a sidetrack up the Rhymney to pay respects at Senghenydd – which only they could pronounce – where of the record four hundred and thirty nine who died in 1913, forty four were named Jones. Or now and then, an antipodean Welshman might have been intercepted while returning up the valley of the Taff to burrow into the anthracite of Merthyr Vale, nearby Aberfan, and the highest rates of black lung, contracted at a younger age, within the United Kingdom. Simultaneously, Lionel Thorpe's Derby roots might be perceived to deepen and spread across and under the family county, his basso rumbling through the streets of historic Chesterfield where resided any number of coalmining Thorpes, including John Thorpe, one of twenty seven to perish in the 1871 explosion of firedamp at the Renishaw Park colliery. Billy Burns's Wigan would thicken and perhaps, occasionally, wind its way back to the High Brooks and Ince Hall collieries where explosions of firedamp had accounted for thirty seven, including Jeremiah Burns, and fifteen including John Burns, respectively. Less frequently, upon getting a second wind, Billy might well move on to the Douglas Bank colliery and a lift cage accident where five men fell two hundred dark yards to their deaths. Fred Pratt's Durham, resurgent in a prouder, sadder heart, would natter in Pitmatic while marching four abreast in black to the pithead at Pelton Fell where an explosion of firedamp in the Busty Bank seam, ignited by a miner's safety lamp, had killed twenty four men and boys, including Freddie's grandfather. Wingnut Vella's Maltese-English would break speed records in its return to Valetta, so becoming indecipherable, such that

whether or not Wingnut made reference to Maltese pit deaths, neither Malcolm nor anyone else would be able to tell. The decline of the British Empire had darkened Malta's economic future. Wingnut's father had mined limestone. Coal, in Australia, he had imagined, would be no different. No Frenchman worked in The Bay Pit, but had this been the case, Courrières, 1906, and its one thousand and ninety nine dead would have lain in a shallow mass grave at the back of the man's mind.

Like every winner of coal, Malcolm worked in the shadow of dark statistics. Knowledge of details was scant, and localised, but the red roll was there, names and places scrolling in their thousands, down the years, in the gloom of collective pit memory. Charlie Shipwater's name was on the list. To some, the roll represented a call to battle, to others, something to shove to the back of the mind or in which to feel a perverse, insular, exploited defiance. In others, over time, it became the source of a curdling resentment, to be relieved and aggravated by alcohol, which sometimes found release in the home. To Malcolm, the list was the blackest joke he knew. That the gravity of history seemed to elude him persuaded Gramma Shipwater that her son was soft. To her dismay, she found the solemnity of pit heritage could not be transmitted by a widowed mother, in the home, despite her continued attempts. Chronicles of exploitation, rebellion, history, could only pass to the son from the father, at the coalface. Gurgling, eyes huge, the son of her son now lay on his stomach on a bar towel, rocking. The hair on his head, newly sprouted, shone molten red, the colour of a bushfire sun. The first fiery tendrils, on their appearing, had shocked even Malcolm. He now felt proudly, if easily, outdone. Redder

than his father's, and that of any Shipwater before him, Ron's hair at this time was also the reddest it would ever be.

II

Jockey Caulfield slipped me my first black. A seven ounce glass. Dad was having a leak. They reckon I got through it. After that, Jockey slipped me one every time Dad sat me on the bar. I was a regular by the age of eighteen months.

“What's your name, laddie? Spit it out. What's the wee lad's name?”

Both floridly-accented version and the translation to standard English co-existed in Malcolm's head. He never quite believed his ears. They were exaggerating, surely.

“Ron.”

Ron's pupils dilated in keeping with the accelerating proximity of Hughie Meiklejohn's face. Hughie's head was disproportionately large in relation to his body, and mostly forehead. While not evident after a shift, on sundays, following washing, brushing and candle-waxing, Hughie Meiklejohn bore a distinct resemblance to Lenin. A giant-headed, eye-rolling, glottal-stopping Lenin.

“Ron.”

“Rrrrronnnnn”, heard Malcolm. Extemporising on the single syllable, top lip curled upwards like a horse, Hughie's tongue vibrated at speed, showering spittle. His surviving teeth were short and brown.

“And the wee bairn was born on April Fool's Day? Are ye sure the bairn is yours?”

“Don't take any notice, Ron”, said his father.

These last were formative words, frequently intoned, in Ron's own voice, within his own head, throughout his life.

"Are ye sure the bairn is yours?"

Malcolm replied – not for the first time - that he knew no-one in The Bay capable of the advance planning required for such an elaborate April Fool's joke. The reply seemed to bounce off Hughie's forehead. Whence Hughie stared at Malcolm, blankly, or deep in thought, before bear-hugging the April Fool of a father and lifting him bodily from the stool, which crashed to the floor as Malcolm became aware of his ribcage caving in, his legs dangling, his face blasted by the full force of mature Meiklejohn breath: beer, tobacco, The Pit, something far more foul from Mrs Meiklejohn's stove, a dark hint of hellfire Marxism.

"Read the Russians. Russians pray with their eyes open. Tell your son. And never forget."

How could Malcolm forget? How could anyone forget? Forget what? He knew what, but kept this last sequence of thought to himself. Historical grievance illuminated by alcohol rendered two of three Meiklejohn brothers amiably violent, tending less amiable with the passage of time. Middle brother Alec, a bachelor and admirer of American folk music, was spared the fury in the blood. Hughie and Leonard were furious with everyone and all but everything. At the heart of Meiklejohn ire - misery inverted, deeply incomprehensible to anyone Bay born - lay the desire to return to Glasgow. Historical grievance, sectarian contest, tribal feud, all lacked pungency in the New World. The old antagonisms had emigrated with their carriers but Meiklejohn eyes could see them seeping from the skin, at least from the skin of others, to evaporate in

antipodean sunshine. The blood was thinning. Angry men were being made lazy. Leonard, youngest Meiklejohn, having departed Scotland aged two, perhaps in compensation for having no memory of Scotland whatsoever, perhaps because he was the shortest of the brothers, was the angriest Meiklejohn of all. Wrath had nurtured in him a leather throat and stentorian volume. As democratically elected Bell Boy, it was Leonard's task, when a Lodge Meeting was called at short notice, to appropriate the school bell and tour The Bay tolling and crying the details.

Malcolm found himself back on the stool. Experience told him Hughie was now hearing a distant skirl from across the loch and seeing the golden light. Perhaps he was even seeing Janet Gemmel. The Scot lifted Short Owen Jones and hugged tight in hope that a song might emerge. Short Owen, who resembled an oversized bath toy in a shabby suit, could maintain perfect pitch under prolonged hugging. His tenor rippled with beauty. West Cessnock had several times attempted to poach him. The first note, sustained, dramatic, saw Hughie's eyes cease rolling. His lips formed a small red ring with which he kissed Short Owen before gently returning the Welshman to the floor and withdrawing backwards like a parent leaving a child's room at night. Whence, knocking a trapper boy off a stool, he sat, listening, like an enchanted giant. Malcolm had long lost surprise that a Welsh air would quieten an angry Scotsman so. The sweet tones of Short Owen Jones formed glissandi over the evening as it grew late, until ruined by a less-talented chorus. Publican Jumpy Bates topped pints and quietly removed breakables. Just beyond the golden light of goodwill and forgiveness lay a brawl.

III

“ ’ bit prop’s ear off in scrum.”

The voice was akin to that of a small bird. The face evidenced complete absence of teeth and a withering, cheery, peer. Short, a mere head higher than the bar, with a wrestler’s chest, Billy Burns juttied his peer to within six inches of the baby on the bar, who went cross-eyed at the sight.

“’ad teeth in them days. Prop were from ‘ull. ‘e were from St ‘elen’s, I would’ve bit both ear off.”

He bellowed, high pitched and bird-like, before zooming his peer to within three inches. Ron’s head lolled like a sparrow with a broken neck. His pupils dilated to black holes.

“Don’t take any notice, Ron.”

Those words again. I noticed. Billy’s gums dripped.

“I’m a lucky man, young Ron. I were trapper boy in Douglas Bank.”

Billy paused for effect. Of which there was none. Then whistled an extended descending note in illustration of a heavy object plummeting to earth before raising an eyebrow several times more than necessary to indicate his singular good fortune in avoiding a terrible death by cage cable failure. Ron’s three-red-haired eyebrow reflexively attempted mimicry.

“Trapper boy in Douglas Bank. I’m a lucky man.”

He sucked his pint in loud punctuation as the eyebrow underlined the point. Then held out his hand, palm upwards.

“You’ll do. You’ll do. You’ll do.”

Opening and closing the ventilation traps to allow passage of the wheelers was the traditional employment of novice boys. The task mandated sitting in one place for eight hours. Most trapper boys, Malcolm included, had not managed this feat at school. Terror led to discovery of the talent on the first day down in the pit. Terror inhabited The Pit like gas. Unseen, skulking, waiting to take you by the throat, blow you sky high. At the end of a good week, when terror remained ambient, was not prelude to death or maiming, a good trapper – one who did not keep a wheeler waiting - might receive a “you’ll do” – a small amount of cash – as reward for service.

“You’ll do.”

Would the boy do? Did the father want him to do? A dark snippet of future flitted past. Billy laughed like a frayed squeeze box, walked to the window and spat, clearing the verandah rail despite his shortness of stature.

“Friggin’ Wigan.”

Happy Billy was one who did not want to go home. Fifteen years later, scraping gull shit from the timber marking Billy Burns’ resting place, Ron would realise there was no town of Frigginwiggin in Lancashire.

IV

“Fair skin. Red hair. Just like me.”

Lionel Thorpe’s face loomed like a black planet.

“Got family in Derby, have you, lad?”

“No, Lionel.”

“Fair skin. Red hair. Just like me.”

Lionel cackled without smiling. That the coal-encrusted eminence ex Derbyshire truly did possess fair skin and red hair only became apparent once

a week, in church, when it was also confirmed, if further proof were needed, that a Thorpe could never be as fair-skinned nor red-haired as a Shipwater, no matter how hard they tried.

“Denomination?”

Lionel was devout.

“Whoever’s in town.”

A long black finger arrowed at Ron. His eyes crossed and he toppled backwards.

“Sunlight is our enemy.”

Malcolm’s grasp of second-hand sailor’s blouse, the last available hem at the last possible moment, averted his son’s plummet behind the bar.

“I can feel sunshine two mile underground.”

Lionel Thorpe proclaimed the ability to pinpoint at any moment the precise location of his solar enemy two miles of solid earth and any amount of sky overhead. Lionel also claimed, while on the coal, to hear waves breaking overhead. Deeming pit and beach an unfortunate, popish combination, sun and sea breeding as they did a dangerous relaxation of mind and spirit – an observation shared in generality with two of three Meiklejohns - the Derbyshire man yearned for return to the midlands, or at least the above-ground portion of it, but in vain, the patriarch’s family not sharing his longing for leaden skies, dank streets and foul smells. That he hankered for home but remained in The Bay evidenced a state of pleasure in sin, mortifying to Lionel while sober. The uncrossable distance back home became his distance from God. Malcolm was not God-fearing. The closest he had come was to pray for the return of his father but no answer came. Maintaining rubbery

nonchalance, heeding his own advice to *take no notice*, he could nod, look blank, smile and go deaf at the same time, then follow up with a diverting and humorous remark, the sum of which behaviours allowed him never to speak the truth. He found pleasure in fishing but even then was suspicious of the feeling. Ron fell asleep on the bar. Malcolm laid the bar towel over his son and tucked him in for the night. Malcolm was a stayer but unsure why. He looked out the window. Moonlight flecked the ocean.

1928

I

On my third birthday Dot swore a Chinese Burn wouldn't hurt. Mum swore tripe was delicious. Dad swore sons with buck teeth were born to be beer bottle openers. Billy Burns taught me how to open a bottle with my eye socket. Billy had taken too long to master the skill himself but was intent on saving the teeth of the younger generation. I graduated from the bar to the floor. I had a handle on the place by now. Drinkers. They're like Craven A. They never vary. As it turned out, the pub and the behaviour required of its constituency was the only person, place or thing I ever did get a handle on. I'm getting ahead of myself. Don't take any notice.

"He stinks of beer, Malcolm."

She hurled the towel out the window.

"He was cold."

The smell of burnt wick curled after his mother as she crept from the room. He rolled off the bed. A gap between hessian and jamb afforded covert study of the Shipwater regimen. His mother, warming hands, stared daggers at the kettle. Gramma's blueveined wrist twirled. Needles speared wool inside the Gladstone bag. Grandda's pipe, hidden under the wool. His union card. A photo taken on the pier. Eve steered charcoal over paper. Corned beef. Tea. Rum. Observations augmented by odours. His father, out of sight, shouted. Eve began to rock. Grimy lilies fell to the floor. Wet floorboards. Winter.

Sarah sensed the watching eye behind. She patted him down, drew the hessian firmly upon leaving. The kettle boiled. His mother hurried it away.

Attaining the back door, he continued observation. Sodden black clothes, heaped. The tin tub. Round. Mother scrubbing father's back. Dot getting in the way. Father's hands clasped over his lap. The saucepan tipped over his head. Grit streaming. Hair reddening. Fouled water on the garden. Sunset beyond the ridge.

"I'll tan your hide, boy. Get back to bed."

Splicing morning and evening gleanings to the hours when his father was with the fireflies, in *The Pit*, Ron ascertained that his father did the same things at the same time every day, except Sunday. And that what he did, apart from Sunday, was Work. Work, prepare for Work, recover from Work. Work inflected everything. Work in *The Pit*. Which, Ron had also ascertained, was dark, filthy, dangerous, maze-like, and *a bastard of a place*. Given which it ploughed his brow that he was unable to fathom *why on earth* his father and the other men of The Bay went to Work in The Pit, the question accruing even greater gravitas upon his registering the existence of other forms of Work, less dark, filthy, dangerous, and maze-like, in less *bastards of places*, than The Pit.

"Your grandfather and great grandfather had red hair, and I have red hair, and now you have red hair. You have the reddest hair of all, son. You are the

culmination of the great and longstanding tradition of red-haired Shipwater coalminers, none of whom ever had a clue why they worked in The Pit.”

“Malcolm. Just this once?”

“You don’t get anything in this world unless you work for it, Ron.”

“Men work so pit boss can grow rich.”

“Mother.”

Gramma’s wrists twirled with arthritic violence.

“Never forget how many good men have died, Ron. Never forget how your grandda died. God rest his soul. Pit bosses grow fat as pigs while good men die.”

“He’s only three, mother.”

“Mt Kembla, Ron. Firedamp. Ninety six dead.”

“Mother.”

“South Bulli. Eighty one dead.”

“Mother.”

“One day working class will throw off its chains and create workers’ paradise.”

“Don’t take any notice, Ron.”

“If we work hard in this world, we get a big holiday in Heaven, little Ronnie”

“It’s all shite, son.”

“Harry, for goodness sake.”

“What’s the definition of enthusiasm, Ron?”

“Come with Nanna, Ron. Quickly.”

“A dunnyman who throws himself into his work. Haaa.”

“Your Pop lost his manners in the war.”

“Don’t be vague, blame General Haig.”

Dot pulled up her dress.

“Frontbottoms don’t go down The Pit any more. Ha ha.”

She poked out her tongue to highlight the point.

“Work is the curse of the drinking class, lad.”

Never did get a handle on it.

“Ron. You’re frowning again.”

School photographs would confirm that Ron was frowning while believing he was smiling. The bottom half of his face would smile, rubbery like his father, while the top half would corrugate, perturbed by something upon which he could not put his finger, a wordless, unsettling, shrouded thing.

“People like us can’t afford to pick and choose. Don’t ask why.”

In his mother’s eyes, Picky was Fussy’s identical twin and both should have been drowned at birth.

Driven underground, the question flourished, began to entertain inquisitions way beyond its station. Not longer limiting scrutiny to dark, filthy, dangerous,

maze-like and *bastard* confines, the inquisitor spent the greater part of his fourth year straining every faculty to point of throbbing in the endeavour to identify a convincing reason for toil *of any sort*. Facial furrows deepened to ditches as *toil in toto* came under suspicion. He wanted to believe. To be impressed by the rewards of Work. To embrace the Dignity of Labour. To imagine the Paradise to Come, in this or the next world. Or simply, as his mother would have it, to Accept One's Fate. Which was Work. Yet even as he considered these philosophies, arguing that these were highly credible and widely accepted arguments, honesty drove him to admit that he sensed a hole. Found a hole as a toe does, in a sheet in the dark, without looking. A hole which, once found, was unerringly found again and again, growing larger each time, until it became a dreadful rip, lying in wait, a maw in which a man might get lost for life.

II

I couldn't understand why I wasn't the Prince Of Wales. This is a bit difficult to explain. I saw my first stamp. We didn't get many letters. The stamp had a picture of a head on it. Gramma filled me in. It was the head of Bloody King George. And it should've been chopped off a long time ago. It looked like it had been chopped off, on the stamp. Anyway, I'd never heard of kings before. Let alone Bloody King George. Every man I'd known up till then worked in The Pit. So naturally I asked if Bloody King George worked in The Pit. You should've heard Gramma shriek. Bloody King George never went near The Bloody Pit. Or any bloody pit. He owned a lot of bloody pits. And he was in evil alliance with the owners of all the other bloody pits. Bloody King George didn't work. Work? Bloody King George? What Bloody King George did was wage imperial war and oppress his subjects. Bloody King George was the Bloody Grand Excuse My French Poobah of the Bloody Ruling Class. Bloody King George was half the reason men went down into The Pit, like Dad, and died down there, like

Grandda. The other half of the reason, Pit Bosses and Sundry Other Capitalist Bloodsuckers, had been covered by Gramma in one of our earlier discussions of Work. But she gave it another run. Dad managed to get a word in edgewise. He maintained that they put the King's head on stamps because the King's head was tiny. As were the heads of the rest of his family. Including his eldest son. The tiny-headed Prince of Wales. Who wasn't me, or I wasn't him. Which worried me. How did that happen? Why was I me? And not him? How was it I was born to hew coal and the Prince of Wales was born to be King of England? Later, I thought Hobbsie had put that one to bed when he rammed The Complete History Of The Kings And Queens Of England down our throats in school. It was all down to who killed the most people a long time ago. And who pretty much kept doing it until everyone else took the hint. While selectively inbreeding so that their heads became tinier over time. I wasn't the Prince of Wales because we Shipwaters hadn't knocked off enough people a long time ago and consistently married our cousin so that our heads would fit on stamps. Well that's me sorted, I thought. Wrong. Never got a handle on that, either.

He had not long begun to grapple with the conflicting philosophies attendant on the social inequity manifest in Work, than his father ceased to Work. Instead, he slept. Fished. Trapped rabbit. Harvested stillborn, stunted vegetables. Downed black with a Red Mill chaser. On tick. Or in exchange for fish. Or when gainfully employed drunks shouted a round or paid for fish they might easily have caught themselves. The blind caprices of the quarterly cavil contributed to a broadening puzzlement. At the pub, he saw the chaser begin to chase itself. Sarah dipped into reserves that as a miner's wife only she knew about.

Mum woke me up to tell me I was frowning in my sleep.

III

Malcolm was cavilled back into the pit when Perce Finch lost an arm to a falling floater in the Old Section. Perce and his co-workers heard nothing. The pony hauling the chain cutter panicked and snapped a hind leg. Shot and snigged to the surface, the animal's destination became thereafter the subject of rumour. Malcolm went back to work on the repaired coal cutter.

He watched them clatter in, excited, talking fast, to drink quickly, most slowing as the day weighed in to sit and stare, shoulders hunched, hands around a glass reminding them of young girl's waists. The expanding quiet made the remaining rowdy few in a far corner seem rowdier, these voices flying over his head, echoing, until complete silence and a yellowed timber emptiness settled over the bar. Men slipped away, drawn by hunger or love, a few by both. The first was for many the second. Stayers stayed until summoned by a child or levered out by conscience. In straitened times, when a man ought to be drinking less, a spouse might appear on the verandah. The number of spouses on the verandah was an index of the national economy, within which Coal was King. More than half a dozen wives on the verandah was an infallible sign that the government of the day would lose an election.

They've all gone across the white bridge. And I'm banned. The new publican wants to hook into the weekend tourist trade. Plus suck in a heap of brand new regulars from the housing development when it goes ahead. Regulars who'll behave themselves. Hughie claimed capitalists use mortgages to keep the population docile. "Docile as fooking donkeys", he said. He pronounced it "Morrrrrtgages". And Ffffffooooooking". The truth is I quit before the

bastard banned me. “I withdraw my patronage from this hostelry in protest at the disrespectful treatment of historically loyal locals,” I said.

1929

I

On my fourth birthday Pop Baker swore he'd stuff me in a sugar bag full of bricks and drop it off the jetty to teach me to swim. They split their sides. I never learnt to swim. Pop Baker wore a leather helmet and slopped shit everywhere as he ferried his cans into back yards after midnight.

A dark clot of men moved up the road, yelling, brandishing pick-handles, sticks and a hoe, resembling a cadre from a peasant uprising who had taken a wrong turn at Swansea. Ron thought they looked heavily-dressed for summer.

"Basher Gang! Basher Gang! Run!"

Jimmy ran, simultaneously wetting himself, as he sought the safety of the creek bed. Ron looked to Cedric for a second opinion. Four-year-old Jimmy Blizzard was a known alarmist, his eyes, the colour of new dung, routinely white-rimmed in apprehension. Why would the Basher Gang come to the Bay? Here the men were laid off, not locked out. Then again, it was known the Basher Gang had bashed miners' children in Kurri Kurri. How far was Kurri Kurri? What did a Basher Gang look like? Weren't its constituents policemen? Or freed criminals posing as policemen? Bearing batons not garden tools? Who travelled, in uniform, by open truck? Nerys Ferris suddenly thought differently, as was her wont, particularly when not centre of attention, and screamed. Her golliwog hit the ground.

"Basher Gang! Run!"

Looking to Cedric for further second opinion, Ron found himself, but for a prostrate golliwog, alone

Down the road, Headmaster Hobbs latched the school gate and established a defensive position directly behind the barrier, shoes dug in, countenance indicating that the Basher Gang would need his express permission before proceeding to bash the student body, currently vacating the yard for the creek, the classroom or the darkness beneath the school building. Doors closed along the street. A laid-off hewer, with axe, secured his verandah. A stout woman flaunted a rolling pin. Another prepared to hurl the contents of a tub of something foul at the Basher Gang. The butcher selected a cleaver. Word was run up and over the hill, to the pub. Ron's forehead pulsed as he watched from the flimsy cover of the ti-tree allowing closest observation of the impending bashing.

"That's not the Basher Gang! That's my Freddie!"

Jimmy was last to return. He had broken a bone in his foot.

"Norman Brown's been shot! They've shot Norman Brown!"

II

"Staring at that clipping's not going to bring him back!

He had not before seen the box marked DANGER - EXPLOSIVES open. A long, narrow column of tiny typeface, penetrated by sunlight, quivered in his father's hand.

"It's not going to bring back that poor Norman Brown either! That poor Norman Brown. He were not soft like the men round here."

The rubber in Malcolm's face had turned hard and brittle. The shooting of Norman Brown was undeniably serious. Malcolm was ashamed. Even in this dire time he could still feel a dark joke, or worse, some light throwaway, larkish, assembling itself from the bad dust in his head. A devil, mocking. He

tried to let seriousness enter him. It took his forehead in a vice but never truly got in. Reading the clippings to his son, in solidarity, seemed a thing to do, but his son was staring into the box and not listening to a word he read. He felt the urge to sit on the end of the loading jetty.

"Your father would be at Rothbury right now", said Gramma.

"How would he get there?"

"Charlie'd walk all night if he had to."

"Would he take the hoe or the mattock?"

A devil, mocking.

"You're soft in the head, boy. That poor Norman Brown."

No-one in The Bay knew Norman Brown. They knew he was a Northern Districts miner, locked out of his mine by The Baron, John Brown. They heard he was in a crowd of men who rushed a scab-worked colliery. He had not been at the front of the rush. Still, a police bullet had killed him. The Bay spoke his name as though he had lived next door. Dead, by police bullet, on their behalf. It could have been one of them, they thought, if they had been there. They felt bitter, as though they had been there. They felt guilty that they were not there. Still. The cadre left their sticks and implements on the verandah of the pub. The whistle did not blow for the men to report for work, so they could not refuse to do so. A letter of condolence was sent by The Bay Lodge Secretary. The newspaper said women threw aprons over their heads and wept in the streets of Greta. It was a strange Christmas, approaching.

Rowdy inserted his nose in the box, withdrew suddenly as though bitten, and backed out of the room. Ron noted the look in the dog's eyes. What was in that box, apart from old newspaper?

"That was his suit. Grampa's. Your Grampa wore an exploding suit."

He stepped back.

"Malcolm. Show some respect. Are we going to Greta?"

"Your grandfather was a member of The Grand United Order Of Free Gardeners. They grew flat flowers for sending in the mail."

Malcolm tipped something from the cigarette tin onto his palm.

"Are we? Going to Greta?"

III

Three wiry arms poked in through the driver's side rear window, clinging to whatever was available. Four more limbs poked through on the passenger's side. Malcolm's face appeared every few miles, smile rubbery again, pit-tattooed hand anchoring his hat. Five women and children rode inside the Austin. Hec Morgan drove. Ron had not before travelled in a car. He wanted to be on the running boards, in the wind and sun with the men, but was jammed in the dark between a rear door and the expanse of Mrs Caulfield. Her doughy arm was dotted with sandfly bites. He turned his head away. Mrs Caulfield expanded into the vacated space. Something sharp under her dress stuck into his cheek. Through a diagonal window, he glimpsed a beer bottle pass from hand to hand, outside. The seat leather smelt good.

"Bastards! Bastards!"

Gramma Shipwater. He burrowed up into the Caulfield dough, squirmed to the surface. A police car passed slowly, thinking.

"Why don't you shoot us, you bastards!?"

The swerving Austin became an inflamed anemone, howling women squeezed out every window, men leaning from running boards, fists shaking. Ron found himself squashed beneath Mrs Caulfield's bosom. It smelled of powder. He burrowed up the valley once more. The beer bottle smashed on the road behind the police car. The police saw the men's bared teeth and thought better of stopping.

The cemetery at Greta was full, fence railings lost in the crowd which flooded onto the road, filtered into surrounding bush. The Bay mourners grouped on a margin appropriate to their non-participation in the lockout. Headmaster Hobbs wore a hat. Ron peered through the forest of mourning legs, entertained by the similarity of suit pants, until abruptly hoisted onto his father's shoulders, at Gramma's behest, to witness a long box bobbing along on top of the crowd. The box dipped, but never sank. He worried. A dead man lay in that box. What did Norman Brown look like, in there? Did he look dead? Was there a hole in him? The box stopped, becalmed on the sea of caps and hats, then sank like a ship going down, bow first. The sun beat on Ron's frown, warming his worry. There it was again. The peril of Work. Grampa Charlie was killed at Work. Norman Brown died wanting to Work. The police shot him to prevent his going to Work. The sea of caps and hats, the forest of legs, *were* Work. He clambered down. Malcolm stroked his forehead and felt the frown increase. Sarah took his hand. Dot wore a look indicating she alone understood tragedy, before poking out her tongue, triumphantly producing an Anzac biscuit and shoving it whole into her mouth as her eyes sparked at him.

Auntie Eve sobbed, loudly. She had not wanted to attend the funeral.

Gramma had enforced her presence through instruction on all the good men who had died so that she could have a new dress one day. There were many black dresses at Greta but to Ron, Gramma's dress was blackest of all. Coal death black. It suited her. Ron imagined a dark line of skips, waiting in a siding beside the ocean. He and Cedric and Jimmy had played in an empty skip, taking turns to stand outside and pull the rusty release pin, causing the two inside to tumble out the underside door, like coal.

1930

I

On my fifth birthday, Jimmy Blizzard announced that Coal Baron John Brown was dead.

Jimmy got everything wrong. The Baron was dead. He'd fallen off his perch in March.

Didn't get to enjoy the pit bosses' victory in the lockout. April Fool, Baron. You just wanted to punch Jimmy. But he had chalky bones.

Dad woke me to give me the good news: I didn't have to start school after all!

Tiny creatures swam on the inside of his eyelids. Some resembled bent hairs, or streaks, drifting. Others, tiny furry spots, appeared similar to weightless particles he had observed floating in the shaft of sunlight that warmed his desk in the afternoon. A third species, neither streak nor spot, seemed akin to things seen skimming the surface of the lagoon, never staying still, when it was hot and there was no wind. He had discovered the existence of the swimmers on his first day at school, since when capture and identification had proven irresistible but beyond his powers. Pursued by a rolling eyeball, the creatures slipped away or skipped off, teasingly, to disappear into the black unknown beyond vision before he could pin them down.

It soothed to open his eyes and observe dust floating in sunlight. Dust behaved predictably, did not defy intimate observation, perversely, like the swimmers behind his eyelids. He promptly identified iron-red dust, local variety, in the beam. From the school yard. Perhaps the road. Which way was the wind blowing? There was no wind. There was no traffic. Concluding the red dust

had originated in the playground, he further hypothesised, with degree of certainty, that the particles had been stirred up by Cockie Laura and British Bulldog at playlunch. The morning break was still called playlunch, although few now ate at this time. Most fathers had been on short time for a year or more, if they worked at all, and the soup did not arrive until twelve thirty. The soup. Ron frowned and curled his toes as a vision of the soup descended. Thin, strained. The colour of the lagoon. Scooped from the lagoon. A lifeless corner, where not even skimming things ventured. He had more than once been tempted to remark openly upon the lagoonish quality of the soup but an inner voice had instructed: "Don't." He frowned harder, squeezed the vision of the brownish liquid until it vanished, like a letter through a slot, before switching focus to the black dust which could also be found floating in school sunlight. From the pit, or slack alley. Kathleen the loco. Black dust floated less comfortably, fell more rapidly, than red dust. Only recently he had discovered a third dust, strange and starlike, of unknown origin, which *ascended* as he watched, drifting against the red and black grain, never seeming to land. Putting ear to desk he could hear the sprinkle of dust hitting timber, where it collected and solidified in scars on the desktop, accentuating the initials and scatalogical commentary of pupils past and present. The desk felt warm to his ear.

He saw a line of trees. Trees? Where had trees come from? He opened his eyes. Trees. There. Out the window. He closed his eyes. And could still see the line of trees. Pink-tinged trees, yes, but trees. Wait. Were these simply tree-like veins, in his eyelids? Bearing uncanny resemblance to the view out the

classroom window? He checked his findings. Trees. Yes. Real trees, not imaginary trees? Yes. The paperbarks lining the creek behind the school? Yes. The giant angophora between the paperbarks and the school from which Fritz the eponymously boche divebombing magpie plummeted to bloody young Allied skulls every October-November for the duration of Ron's education? Yes. A line scrawled across the playground, purporting to mark the limit of the bird's attack zone, moved back and forth each year like the Western Front, where the teacher who had named the bird had served with distinction.

He stared hard through his eyelids at the mural depicting the landing at Gallipoli. Were the shapes he saw just the swimming creatures? Or pink-tinged men scaling the heights above the Dardanelles to take on Johnny Turk? He jutted his neck, so to stare harder. Was that Uncle Bill? Pinned down under fire? He zoomed in, at speed. Saw pink-tinged Uncle Bill remain pinned down under fire. A swimmer would have slipped away. He switched attack to a varnished timber shield affixed to the opposite wall. Were those the names of The Glorious Dead or swimmers organising themselves into alphabet shapes with intent to deceive? He could not yet read but Uncle Bill's name had been pointed out to him and he remembered exactly where it was and what it looked like. And yes! It was there! Eyes closed, Uncle Bill's name was there. Accompanied by all the other Glorious Dead of The Bay. He informed Jimmy and Cedric, seated either side, that he could see through his eyelids. Everything he saw was pink, but he saw it. His disciples saw nothing.

The duster ricocheted off a wall and hit him above the ear. The clunk of wood on skull was familiar to the class. He ducked, too late, arms flailing overhead. Fritz the divebombing magpie! - was it October-November? - before registering the duster now lying on his desk and the puff of white chalk above. Puffs of chalk also lingered like flak near the wall and in the vicinity of his ear. Puffs of chalk flak were to accompany him throughout his school career, joining red and black dust floating in the sunlight.

"You're a clown, son. A clown of the first water. What are you?"

"A clown, sir."

"He can see through his eyelids, sir!"

Thanks, Cedric.

"Is that right? You can see through your eyelids?"

"Yes, sir."

"Close your eyes. Can you see what I'm holding in my hand now?"

What's the first water? What's the second water? What water? I got six of Hobbsie's best. Six didn't hurt. I got another six for informing Hobbsie that it didn't hurt. Twelve didn't hurt either. Hobbsie flat out refused to believe I could see Uncle Bill through my eyelids. Cedric and Jimmy got six too. Every one of Jimmy's fingers was broken. That's what he said, anyway. It got him out of Writing. He had chalky bones. Part of Jimmy was always in plaster or wire. While Hobbsie was distracted, breaking Jimmy's fingers, Cedric rubbed coloured chalk on his hands so that when he got caned, it was like his hand exploded. That got him six more. The cane split after two. Cedric had doctored the end with a drawing pin. Hobbsie went mental. There were little flecks of white foam in the corners of his mouth. Not

just when he was belting us, most of the time. He looked like a frog. The foam stretched like elastic as he crapped on. He crapped on a lot. I used to focus on the foam when he yelled at me up close. The flecks stretched but never busted. And he never wiped them away. Hobbsie's head was dark red and shiny, like he'd been polished by a grocer. The thumb and first finger on his left hand were yellow from pipe stuffing. Log Cabin. His s's buzzed and his tongue made this little wet click, like water dripping, when he spoke. Staring hard at the flecks of foam, listening to the buzzing and clicking, I could put myself into a trance. From outside it looked like I was paying attention. Later on Hobbsie could pick it.

"It's the quiet ones you've got to watch. Don't think I can't see you hiding up the back, son."

How was I supposed to know troublemakers sat up the back?

"That hair of yours will give you away every time."

Hobbsie could spot red hair with his back turned.

"I think you'd better sit up the front."

I stood in the back row for the school photo, too, until Hobbsie dragged me up front. I was shorter than the girls. Shorter and wider. I only appear in one school photo. Sitting cross-legged beside Nerys Ferris. You can see up her dress.

"Red is the colour of danger in nature, class. I've never known a redhead, man or woman, that was not a troublemaker."

He was raddled. *Troublemaker*.

Seeking to negate the mark, he loitered on the fringe of any group larger than a pair in an attempt to blend in, much as he had once seen the dark shape of his father meld with the larger dark shape of marching men.

"You with the red hair!"

1931

I

On my sixth birthday, Jimmy pointed out that my fly was undone. I didn't have a fly. I had a hole with a flap you tucked inside. Only Cedric had amputated the flap while I slept through Hobbsie's Complete History Of The Kings And Queens Of England, soaked the flap in the inkwell, and shot it at Nerys Ferris. So I had a hole. A hole is not a fly. Chalky-boned dill Jimmy got everything wrong. It didn't matter to Jimmy. He still cacked himself senseless, arms by his sides, shoulders pumping up and down like a two-stroke out of whack. I told Dad that me, Cedric and Jimmy were picked out of school to draw the quarterly cavil and we drew him 'deficient'. April Fool, Dad. 'Deficient' was a luxury by the end of the year. Men walked through The Bay and kept going. Carts with bored horses collected slack and scrap. The butcher's shop closed.

A voice strongly recommended he try his hardest to remain silent as, once more, a vision of the approaching soup descended upon him, darkly, thin crust of fat breaking up and floating on top in pieces like dirty ice on a foul lagoon. Those towards the head of the queue received the big bergs. He endeavoured to blend in at the end of the line. Cedric was second last, always, Jimmy third last, always. Loitering at the far end of the queue allowed the voice more time to convince him that he was not hungry, and to deny the second voice which told him the first voice was not telling the truth. He closed his eyes and with minimal effort supplanted the premonition of soup with a hallucination of cream buns, custard tarts, vanilla slices iced both pink and luminous yellow, pineapple doughnuts, jam doughnuts, doughnuts chocolate, strawberry and caramel topped, apple turnovers, pink-iced finger buns, meringues of any

colour but especially blue, pink, white and green, jam and cream horns, and greasy flakey pastry ‘matches’, the treats floating in front of him for vicarious sampling before circling around his head as scrumptious clouds depicted in the style of Botticelli. Not yet having partaken of a single example of these luxuries, only having heard them described, albeit in significant detail, by a more worldly school colleague, offspring of the managerial class, Ron would later discover that the orbiting pastries and cakes, as he envisioned them, did not necessarily match the genuine articles. His first encounter with the antipodean interpretation of a vanilla slice – the luminosity, the mattress-like consistency, the dental impression left after biting - was to stay with him all his life. Some of his imaginings had not even been invented as yet. If invention was how pastries came into being.

He opened his eyes. The soup was significantly closer, could now be smelt. Not for the first time, the inner voice which instructed “Do not on any account open your mouth, Ron” was, if not shouted down, outreasoned by the inner voice which counselled “Speak the truth, Ron.” He confided his observations on the soup to Cedric and Jimmy. Their mirth confused him. He considered the information science, not comedy. His observations on the soup reached the head of the queue long before he did.

"You with the red hair!"

He attempted negotiation. Insisted on a correct distinction between science and comedy. Redefined juvenile ingratitude. Failing to persuade the mothers of hungry families and wives of laid-off miners servicing the soup queue, he looked for support among ill-clothed nit-headed classmates whose eyes, wide

and evil and *soup-loving*, twinkled over the rims of enamel mugs their fathers took to work in better times. He resorted to seeking compassion. He knew he was gone when Hobbsie sipped a cup of soup in solidarity.

Thinking was the problem. The more I thought, the more things didn't make sense. Most things, if you think about them, don't make sense. Like me. I didn't make sense. Why was I me? Not the body me who had to go down The Pit when it turned fourteen, not the me who wasn't the Prince Of Wales, but the spooky me who lived inside the body me, looking out, at things which didn't make sense, including me standing in a soup queue thinking about cakes and pastries I'd only ever heard about from bloody Four Eyes Goldfinch. Did I draw me in some weird cavil?

Left ear stretched skyward in the vice of a yellow thumb and forefinger, head askew, toes brushing the ground like a hanged man, he still managed to inflame the situation.

"What is that, son? A frown or a smirk?"

Why was I a human and Rowdy was a dog? What was it like being Rowdy? Was he thinking? Was he laughing? What was in his head? Dad said there was nothing in Rowdy's head. How could there be nothing in his head? Did he think nothing all the time? Was he laughing at nothing? How can you laugh at nothing? What about when he chased things in his sleep? You can't chase nothing. I bet he was thinking about cats and rabbits. I tried to think nothing and I couldn't. I used to lie in bed and try to think nothing all night. Dot reckoned me thinking about nothing kept her awake.

1932

I

On my seventh birthday Dad announced that I was old enough to start Work. Unpaid. Tearing up newspaper for the thunderpit. Starting at the bottom, he said. In a pit. Not The Pit, but good practice. I had to find a newspaper first. Dad was on the susso. Did the Prince of Wales tear up newspaper for the thunderpit? Nerys Ferris always came up with killer April Fool jokes. Will you be my boyfriend, Ron? Would you like to see my undies?

Enid Davies passed him a note. Lurid imaginings of what might constitute a “secret birthday look” overrode knowledge that it was April Fool’s Day and that Nerys was spelt with a “y”, The scream rolled Cedric off the roof.

"You with the red hair! What're you doing in the girls' toilet?"

That from the far corner of the school grounds, amid shade falling on the far side of the pine tree, on the far side of the school building, through the darkness between supporting piers, between the crosshatched timbers of the tankstand, past a hundred other offenders committing far more serious offences in far more obvious locations, through the wall of red dust kicked up in the yard by further miscreants, pretending to be at play but unarguably up to no good, last of all through the corrugated iron of the toilet block, that Mr Hobbs saw him and him only confirmed for Ron that Mr Hobbs possessed bloodnut-seeking x-ray vision . Mr Hobbs did not see the three other boys who ran out of the girls' toilet. He did not see Cedric on the roof. He did not see Jimmy run from the boys' in filthy rag undies. He saw only the red beacon of troublemaking.

"That hair of yours is like the Soldiers' Point lighthouse."

He only heard me, too. And he only smelt me. He blamed me for Cedric's farting. Even when it clearly wasn't me letting off, Hobbsie reckoned I was the brains behind it. The Brains Behind Farting. I had that over the Prince Of Wales. Cedric could fart at will. He had directional control too. He could lift a cheek and blast away at an angle. He could aim farts. Jimmy specialised in SBDs in class and lighting hispers under the building. The human flamethrower. With chalky bones. I was the brains behind Jimmy's blasts, too. Hobbsie was a terrific long-distance shot with a duster. Dad couldn't afford to buy me a hat.

Burdened by genetic freight and an inauspicious birthday, Ron sought refuge in dreams, waking and otherwise, of patisserie.

Nerys Ferris's lips were smeared with strawberry cream as she danced and sang the delights of the Swansea Cake Shop. She never looked so beautiful. Four Eyes Goldfinch gave her the cream bun. I don't know what she gave him. A doctor's up the creek, probably. I know what she gave his father. And what he gave her. Old man Goldfinch was pit undermanager. This was later. Anyway. Acting on information, next saturday morning I walked all the way to Swansea to see for myself. I dodged tiger snakes, I pulled ticks out of my cavities, I twisted my ankle in a rabbit hole on the downhill run, but I got there before the Cake Shop shut. The window was empty, except for a few crappy scones that looked like they'd bounce and a mountain of dead flies. Died of starvation, from what I could see. Flaming Four Eyes Goldfinch. What a bullshitter. Nerys Ferris christened him Four Eyes. Behind his back, of course. His real name was Craig. She christened his little sister One Eye. One Eye had a brown paper patch over one side of her glasses. Her arms had blue bruises where Nerys Ferris pinched her every day. The Goldfinches lived on Snob Hill.

Nerys Ferris's front teeth were square and had a big gap between them. Her skin was white as fresh milk. With strawberry coloured spots. Her hair shone on a dark day and she knew it. Her sneer could boil a billy. She thought I was a clown with no prospects. Knock me down with a feather. How wrong was she? Still, she wasn't as fierce as she thought. She hid it, but I made her laugh.

1933

I

On my eighth birthday, I decided to have another go at not standing out by fitting in. I signed up for The Bay Junior Soccer Team. Team sport was the gateway to drinking, the grown-up way to fit in. Ma Caulfield and Una Meiklejohn sewed our shirts. Not out of the same material. They weren't speaking. Mum hand-sewed my pants.

A ruck of stumpy eight-year-olds in outsized shorts hacked at a ball somewhere unseen in their midst. A stickish nine-year-old protruded skyward from the flailing. A fat ten-year-old Maltese with moustache controlled possession at the heart. The sheen of new boots located the offspring of either Pit Manager or Pit Accountant. As the scrimmage moved upfield and down it also span, slowly, yet generating centrifugal force sufficient to throw off eight-year-old matter, sending it toppling backwards in the dirt, to rise under parental harangue and rejoin assault on the lumbering overage Maltese with moustache and ball. The hacking clump was trailed, vaguely, at a distance, by a squat barefooted redhead whose parents remained silent and whose shorts were largest of all by significant measure. Onfield isolation and thin legs exaggerated the room for growth. A stiff onshore breeze ballooned the garment into spinnakers of no propulsive effect as the wearer meandered along paths apparent only to himself. Paths the ball never followed but which the gaze of spectators did. Locals avoided eye contact with the parents, while opposition support drew comfort.

"He'll grow into them, Malcolm."

"What's he doing now?"

Eyes closed, their offspring gazed skyward, head rotating in increments, seeming to follow some object moving across the heavens. Clutches of crowd shielded their eyes to track his line of sight. Listening for a lost mail plane, seeking a sea eagle or formation of pelicans, they saw only chilly blue sky with a white quarter moon.

"Whaet's yoor wee lad playing at?"

The porridge-thick accent easily out-Scotted Hughie Meiklejohn. Coach Gordy had trialled for Heart Of Midlothian. Hearts. The Jam Tarts. Lately arrived, he had voyaged to Australia hoping to heal disappointment with sunshine. As weighbridge operator, Gordy was quickly found to be short with both weights and people.

"Ron's got his sights set on higher things, Gordon."

Deep in the heart of the ruck, a shiny new boot made sweet contact with the ball, unwitnessed by a parent elsewhere busy planning to lay off more men. Goal-bound, only to cannon into a Maltese knee, shoot into clear air and, breeze-assisted, sail fifty metres in a breathtaking arc before returning to earth, the ball bounced gently towards the solo redhead in spinnakered shorts who had not yet kicked leather in anger or otherwise. Whose father now knew hope.

"Go, son, go! Go!"

A lull fell like a net over the sidelines. The ruck stood transfixed.

"Kick it, Ron! Kick it!"

Disbelief turned anticipation. Alert to the onset of a golden moment, threaded with renewed belief in a benevolent God and the great, funny, democratic game he had invented. Even strange redheaded kids with big pants get a go. Yet opportunity must be grasped. The ball bounced closer. Sat up. Said "Kick me, Ron. Kick me hard." Sideline hearts stopped.

"For God's sake, son! It's there in front of you! Kick it! Kick the flaming thing! Open your eyes!"

The swimming things bounded away, happy as gazelles, into the glazey wherever. Frowning, eyes wide, Ron showed the ball no mercy.

I scored a goal. The winning goal. With my very first kick. A thirty yard drive into the top left hand corner. Fearful, it was. Coach Gordy looked like a mullet who'd seen Jesus with fins. The crowd went apeshit. Like they'd witnessed a miracle. Well, they had. Nerys Ferris wet herself. In a good way. She didn't run onto the field and hug me, let alone throw off her clothes, but looking back, I think this was the day I flicked her switch. I still remember the hollow leathery sound of the pill as I punished it. The feel of it on my foot. The sound of the crowd. Cedric acclaimed it the single greatest greatest greatest kick he'd ever seen. Still says it. Never be beaten, he says. I gave the thing an almighty tonk. Nearly burst the net. Our goalie never had a chance.

"Yae're naever aever reely here, son."

The accent got thicker the more I heard it. Dad had warned me this would happen.

"Waere on airth waere yae!?"

I was thirty yards out from our goal, playing soccer against this team of things on the inside of my eyelids. They wore tiny shirts the exact reverse of our shirts. I was also trying to correctly imagine a pineapple doughnut. I had a lot on my mind.

"Whae dae yae thenk yae waere DOON?!"

Jimmy cried. Jimmy was our goalie.

"It was a Noan Goal!", said Jimmy. "It wasn't my fault! It was a Noan Goal!"

Jimmy still believes Angus Noan made a terrible mistake in the Scottish Cup Final of 1913.

Betty Blizzard, Jimmy's mum, she bawled too. My mum told her to pull herself together because it was only a game. Bob Blizzard threatened to king hit my old man if he didn't stop laughing like a drain. This was before Bob burnt to death and fell into Swansea Channel. Dad and Cedric kept laughing. Them plus all of Swansea. Plus me. And Nerys Ferris.

"It's nae funny, laddie."

It was for a while. It was funny for a while. So was Coach Gordy's accent. The more I listened, the funnier it got. Just like Dad had said.

"The werst ain goal ae hae seen in over forty yairs ay fitball. Thae woorned mae about yae."

They. Who they? Which they? This was the first time I heard of the mysterious They that warned people about me. They bred like They Rabbits after my Noan Goal.

"But ae decide ta gee yae a wee chance. An wha' huppens?"

"The worst own goal in over forty years of football?"

I wasn't me that said it. It was one of the voices. It just came out.

"A smairt mooth'll gaet yae ae thec eer, laddie. Jes' wha', i' the naim of Jaesus, Mairy an friggin' Joseph, ded yae thenk yae waere DOOON!"

OK. I confess. I knew it was our goal. I did. I knew which way we were running. I knew there were two sides, playing against each other. I knew we were nil all with thirty seconds to play. But it just didn't make sense. You know how when things suddenly don't make sense? Like when you stare at a word and it stops being a word and turns into squiggles? Or you stare too hard at someone's nose? When I opened my eyes and saw the pill with my name on it, I thought: why go to all the trouble of trying to get it down the other end of the field, across seventy yards of dirt, through a pack of Swansea clods, past their giant Malteser and their over-age ring-in goalie? It didn't make sense when I could just plant it past stupid Jimmy, who was picking a cathead burr out of his foot at the time. It wasn't clear at the time, but looking back, this was a breakthrough.

It wasn't till after Dad was dead that I worked out he laughed when he was disappointed. He was probably smiling with disappointment when he drowned or the shark got him. Mum agreed with me.

"There are plenty of things in this life that make no sense, Ron. No sense at all. None whatsoever."

That's what I thought.

"Our job is to ignore them and just get on with it."

Walking home, alone, a voice repeatedly assured Ron that he was not responsible, that his riposte to the coach did indeed *just come out*. This voice was occasionally interrupted by a further voice, that of a perfectionist, opining that the comment would have been more effectively delivered with a thick Midlothian accent.

II

The faint flame of *fitting in* continued to flicker behind his frown. That nothing made sense, not even football, was an uncommon viewpoint in The Bay. In the hope that dismissal of team sports as an absurd way to fill the time was premature, based as it was on a single game of a single team sport, Ron reconsidered his position and, on the weekend following his soccer debut and retirement, played his initial Under Four Stone Sevens Rugby League match. Given a run in the forwards in the first half, in accordance with Coach Reg's gut feeling that red hair equated to a fiery disposition, Ron found himself switched to the left wing for the second half, the ball reaching this position but once, hitting him on the back of the head, his eyes closed at the time. His father tried not to laugh.

Malcolm did not bother attempting to restrain his mirth when, late in the match, Ron crash-tackled a Lakes' front rower whose back happened to be turned at the time. The giant prop was chewing a blade of grass while

watching his team's fullback line up a place kick. The referee's back was also turned. The buckled giant was carried off by relatives.

Nerys Ferris was there so I was motivated.

Ron required protection as, claiming provocation, he left the field. The front page of the Lakes Junior Rugby League Club Monthly Newsletter described the tackle as "sickening" and demanded Ron banned for life. Malcolm stored several copies of the article inside the Explosives box. A coaching rethink occurred in The Bay camp. They had misjudged the red-haired lad. Here was something they could use. A swollen crowd attended the Under Four Stone Sevens' next fixture.

Disappointment blanketed The Bay Boys' sideline support when it became clear not one in the line of bobbing heads taking the field was thatched in red, even as suspicion wound its way through the opposition. The Heights' coach was of the view that The Bay's secret weapon had simply dyed his hair. An imaginative assistant proffered that perhaps Ron was being kept under wraps until a strategic moment, when he would spear out from behind a clump of ti-tree. Play was delayed until every adjacent clump of ti-tree, coastal banksia, and wattle was declared clear of red-haired missiles. Cockatoos were posted amid the vegetation. The Heights' team took pains not to turn its back on The Bay during the taking of place kicks. The nervous state of the opposition led to easy victory for The Bay.

I got out while on top. Preserved the legend. But I had brought down the Lakes Goliath like a log and I had the tackling knack. I put the talent to good use during a cloudburst, when The Bay was as dark as night. I barrelled out of the scrub and tackled Nerys Ferris as she was running home along the creek. I was back in the scrub before she worked out what had happened. She never found out it was me. Or if she did she never let on. My hand touched her bum. It felt like a melon. A tight melon. A few weeks later, in heavy fog, I took out Four Eyes Goldfinch's legs from under him with a classic grass-cutter. I sent Herbert Hobbs flying into a flooded gutter with a shoulder charge. I levelled huge Toby Crabb. I was the Phantom Tackler. Operating in conditions of low visibility. I cut down Caulfields, Meiklejohns, Davies, and Jones boys without fear or favour. I only ever tackled one girl. Nerys Ferris. She liked to feel special.

III

"It's not funny, Malcolm."

Ron opted for silence. That he offered no explanation for crash-tackling and placing a hand on the bum of Una Meiklejohn, late-middle-aged matriarch of the seething Glaswegian clan, in heavy smoke, at the height of a bushfire emergency, made the offence all the more amusing to his father. Malcolm would have been disappointed to learn it was a mistake, attributable to a similarity of stature amid thick smoke. He turned his face from Sarah as he went through the motions of thrashing the living daylights out of his son.

The living daylights within Ron took not the slightest notice of his father's thrashings. Nor did the external Ron, beyond over-acted yelping at the moment of impact and glowering aftermath as he rubbed the reddened back of his legs. Son sensed that father sensed that son found father's thrashings to be lacking in authority. Always had. An assessment with which the father concurred. A look exchanged when afterwards shaking hands questioned the

need to continue to attempt thrashing, let alone a good thrashing, if both punisher and punished believed the thrashing lacked authority. Son would soon be too old to thrash anyway. He would thrash back. They left it at that and said nothing.

Gramma Shipwater was right, he thought. His father were soft. Was soft, Hobbsie would correct, within his head. Yet it was also true that his father went down The Pit when his whistle blew, went on the coal 'deficient' or not, was solid in dispute, resisted "speed up", struck against mechanical pillar extraction on the grounds of danger and rejoiced at its subsequent abandonment like every other good man in The Bay. When the whistle failed to blow, he trapped rabbits, caught fish, drank and oversaw a dying garden. Whistle or no, he married a woman he loved. Fathered two healthy children. Played team sport. Smoked like a chimney. Drank like a fish. Spat black phlegm. None of which indicated softness. But yet again, he was soft. It was in his laugh. His father could laugh at anything. Everything. He laughed when his vegetables died. He laughed when Gramma told him he 'were soft'. So what was so wrong with being soft?

His father took him fishing off the loading jetty. His mother waved them away from the front door. He was unsure of how old he was when he realised his father preferred to fish alone, at night. Nor what led to the realisation. Maybe it was simply that he, Ron, never caught anything, being too busy staring out to sea or into the depths, like windows, through closed but pellucid eyelids.

1934

I

In the Depression, the government slapped a ban on cream buns for the working class. Supply and consumption. They didn't want the resting workforce getting overweight in the interim before capitalism righted its ship. Schedule A of the Proletarian Pastries Act (1932) listed finger buns, vanilla slices, apple turnovers, pineapple doughnuts, cream horns, and a whole host of other baked items as prohibited delicacies. Naturally a black market sprang up. My first cream bun was a secret birthday present. Nan Baker made me promise not to tell mum. Or Dot. Nan said she got hold of the outlawed bun from a French swagman. Raspberry, it was. With a dob of red jam like a nipple. I'd seen a nipple by then. By accident. I didn't like the bun but I forced it down. I didn't want to seem picky. That was a mistake. The outlawed buns kept coming.

"Why do we go to school, sir?"

I wasn't being a smartarse. I wanted to know. The History Of The Kings and Queens of England and the four main islands of Japan and the driest desert and the highest waterfall in the world and the size of a housebrick and the weight of a bushel of wheat had some secret connection to The Pit that I couldn't figure. Otherwise, why was there a picture of The Pit head and the loading jetty on the school badge? I thought Hobbsie'd jump at the chance to explain. He went completely mental and lost accuracy. The duster took a great chunk out of Gallipoli. I was checking if Uncle Bill had survived when Hobbsie charged, gripped my head, twisted it to the front like turning off a tap, and knocked out his pipe on my skull. Weeks later I was still finding burnt tobacco in my hair.

Ron was ordered to stand in the corridor outside the classroom, at attention, for a week, the sentence amended to two weeks after he was found standing at ease with hands in pockets. Transcending leg cramps after two days, he came to enjoy his fortnight as a statue, with a warning to troublemakers - *"I was once like you are now. You will be as I am now, if you muck up in Hobbsie's class"* - inscribed across his forehead. He discovered the ability to stare directly ahead, at nothing, unblinking, neither frowning nor smirking, resistant to any and all attempts at eye contact as classmates filed past. He further discovered that, left undisturbed, he could pass an entire day with eyes closed, in micro-focus pursuing, identifying, cataloguing the tiny two-dimensional creatures who spent their lives sliding about the world behind his eyelids. Adjusting focal length, he was also able, through these self-same eyelids, to observe goings-on in the corridor and the world beyond the windows, outside. Early on the afternoon of the final friday of his exile, he observed Punchy – Rowdy's son - and his son, Rusty, trot up the concrete path, peer through the window and laugh at the master. What was it about dogs? He loved them. As he watched the pair trot away, the sun threw a band of warmth across his moth-eaten jumper and for an instant he thought he glimpsed – recognised - the culprit, the clown, the discomfiting joker lurking behind life and the world, and everything made sense. Or if it didn't, it did not matter. The nameless thing no longer terrified him. The sunny sword of happiness had pierced his chest. His frown flew away. He laughed like a dog, noiselessly, eyes closed. The moment passed. It was to happen again, but rarely, and never when he was actively looking. He discovered he could sleep standing up.

II

Directly below the office window, under the water tanks, hard against the wall, lay the Headmaster's blind spot. Cedric's aggressive promotion of his best friend's strangeness had resulted in control of this prized territory. Offensive description, illicit narrative, anatomical prurience, smoke, might drift up from below but by the time Mr Hobbs had seized a cane, hustled from the building and skidded around the corner like Charlie Chaplin, he would unfailingly discover his blind spot vacated. The lingering smell of misbehaviour taunted him.

A quorum was two, full membership three. Ron's brow furrowed like a rug across which a dog had scuttled. He raised the first item on the agenda.

"Does anyone else hear voices?"

Absence of mirth troubled Cedric. He ceased horse-biting Jimmy who in show of intellectual solidarity was attempting to mirror Ron's brow as best he could, while the mind reeled within. Ron continued to mine the dangerous seam.

"I hear voices in my head. Hundreds of them - "

The meeting froze. Nerys Ferris was suddenly present, sitting cross-legged, triangle of thick blue underwear facing Ron. Early signs of Craig Goldfinch being a sissy confirmed by new spectacles, Nerys Ferris, in a Damascene moment, saw social cachet within - and in being seen within - the lair of the Phantom Tackler, and that the visit to the girls' toilet on his seventh birthday could be construed as flattery. In addition, Ron had appeared to ignore her ever since. Only Cedric, eyes muttering "Membership is males only", challenged the blonde presence. Working on change from within, Nerys Ferris

smiled the most perfect smile in The Bay, at Ron. He closed his eyes and saw a triangle of orange underpants. Cedric sought aggrieved refuge in picking his nose and displaying the resulting nugget to Nerys Ferris before devouring it.

A voice warned me not to tell them about the voices. Especially not Nerys Ferris. Nerys Ferris would tell The Bay. The Bay would tell the world. The world would tell the solar system. The solar system would tell the universe. The universe would tell infinity.

Had she heard? Nerys Ferris was busy adjusting a bobby pin.

I had to tell someone.

"Sometimes the voices come of out my mouth. But they're not me."

Jimmy looked to Cedric for a lead. None came. Nerys Ferris appeared frozen in the bobby pin position. It dawned on Ron that he was paddling against the current, up an unexplored river, deep into a coal-coloured region on the map where Cedric, Jimmy, and Nerys Ferris could not follow, only await his return. If he returned. He abandoned the expedition and returned to territory already claimed.

"Why *is* there a picture of The Pit head and the loading jetty on the school badge?"

In their cups, members would later admit that Ron's thinking had been years ahead.

"Why do we go to school if we're going down The Pit?"

Nerys Ferris spread a handkerchief for her head and lay flat on her back, to think. She pulled her dress down in the direction of her knees.

"Because you can't go down The Pit until you're fourteen."

Captain Ron looked directly into the eyes of Nerys Ferris for the first time.

"Why do girls wear the badge when they don't go down The Pit at all?"

Nerys Ferris again smiled the most perfect smile in The Bay.

"I'm not going down The Pit", said Jimmy. "Chalky bones."

The quorum of scorn was poisoned with envy artificially flavoured as disdain.

Cedric looked to the Captain in strong recommendation: "Burn him?"

"I want to go down. Mum won't let me. I want to go down."

Jimmy's eyes watered red. His nose bubbled thick yellow.

"Burn him", said Nerys Ferris.

The voices with the questions never stopped. Gallipoli was pitted with duster craters.

"Did Noah take amoebas on the ark, sir? How many had divided and multiplied by the time the waters had subsided, sir?"

"Why is the hole in men's pants called a fly, sir?"

"You know how you wake up and find a dog staring at you, sir, right up close, with his nose holes opening and shutting, and dripping, and he's laughing warm dog breath in your face, sir? And you don't know how long he's been there, sir? What is the dog laughing at, sir?"

It only hit me after I landed in trouble that a voice had got me to do its dirty work again. I was just the middleman but it was me who copped the duster in the head or the whack around the ears or the cane on the hand or the fifteen inch metal-edged ruler across the knuckles or the electrical cord on the back of the legs or the razor strop across the bum. Between questions, I stared out the window and waited for school to end.

III

A tiny glow reddened in the faraway dark. Smells of grease and brine and coal wrestled for supremacy as he advanced, smoke and rum heating a central pipe in his chest, bare feet wary of cracks edged by stiletto'd splinters. The jetty creaked. Moaned, even. The sea splashed and slopped below. The planking curved away to nowhere, twin sets of rails linking the shore to someplace far away, unseen in the night. No ship was docked beneath the chutes. The whistle had not blown for several days. Faintly lit in difficult times, the jetty was populated by shadowy winches, boat davits and steamer moorings, pipes and boilers, a tall jib crane resembling a monstrous water bird. He thought he saw a shadow move. It was nothing. The jetty moved. So did the moon. He lost sight of the tiny red glow. He had forgotten how long it took to walk the quarter mile. How it offered abundant time to turn back. How high the planking was above the tideline. He peered over the side. The moon put points on the water. He did not plan to disturb his father, just sit with him.

Two large leatherjackets, dorsal spines erect, shared a bucket with a bobbing rum flask. A tot or two left, he noted. The rod lay on the jetty, thick green string looping into darkness and water a long way below.

“Dad?”

The green loop straightened. The rod clattered across the planks. He slammed down a foot. The rod had been crafted by his father. The hooked creature seemed to pause. He seized the rod, jammed the reel and heaved back as he had been shown. The bamboo bowed and pointed into the dark, to where the reinvigorated creature now was tearing out to sea.

“Dad!”

The line snapped. The bamboo straightened. The string became a tendril, floating on the night. It was like reeling in air. He went in search of his father.

The body was never found. Out of earshot of the bereaved, The Bay hypothesised: drunk, fell in, drowned. Drunk, took a leak, fell in, drowned, Northerly current. He'll turn up. Shark? Maybe he won't. Drowned, then shark. Freak wave, shark. Freak wave, drowned, shark. Freak wave, head hit pile, drowned, shark. Jumped? Didn't finish his rum. Where was his tobacco? The leatherjackets died in the bucket before the arrival of Swansea Police.

No theory of Malcolm's fate was ever proven correct. Sightings of wiry red-haired men thought to resemble missing person Malcolm Shipwater were made up and down the east coast of New South Wales and southern Queensland. Most sightings occurred during holiday periods. Malcolm, or someone not unlike him, was observed drinking to excess in hotels at Ulladulla, Buladelah, Brunswick Heads, and Moolooloobah. He was reported drinking and fishing from the breakwater at Iluka, off the bridge at The Entrance, the rocks at Avoca Beach, and piers at Long Jetty and Greenwell Point. Betty Blizzard, journeying by bus to a miner's wedding in Helensburgh near Wollongong, claimed to see Malcolm hitch-hiking outside the Kangy Angy roadhouse, where he accepted a lift in a grey Austin with Queensland number plates and garish black and gold fringed souvenir cushions on the back seat, driven by a young woman who, according to Betty Blizzard, looked fast. Betty was known to possess a keen eye, having spotted husband Bob's burnt

body tearing through the heads on an outgoing tide in a choppy Swansea Channel. Sightings dwindled after a year or so. Twenty five years after the disappearance, seeking a larger than average parking spot on the Gold Coast, Cedric motored past a red-bearded but otherwise balding man, beach rod in one hand, fingers of the other up the gills of a huge flathead, having his photograph taken in front of a “Single Men Only” boarding house in Coolangatta. The man was gone by the time Cedric had parked car, boat, and home-made caravan. The boarding house disclaimed knowledge of a red bearded lodger. No photograph of hirsute fisherman and flathead ever turned up. The notice in the corner store window quickly aged in the Gold Coast sun. Ron held to the thought that perhaps the current had taken his father somewhere no-one had ever been before. He interred several clippings headlined “Mystery Disappearance”, along with a classified detailing the Memorial Service, inside the rusty Black Cat tin.

The red-haired male in a suit, escorting Sarah, Gramma, Dot, and Eve - bearing wooden chair - to the end of the jetty, reminded ageing onlookers of Charlie Shipwater. Killed by a runaway skip in E tunnel. The fit was tight, long in the leg. He had managed to button the topmost button. His mother had darned every fray and moth-hole. She had made him clean his teeth. That didn't make sense either. A cold south-easter blew off the sea. Thin clouds streaked across a low cement-coloured sky, heading inland. The service was short. Sarah threw a wattle wreath, woven by Dot, into choppy brown water. Gramma occupied the chair, face and hands dull blue, veins dark. Short Owen Jones sang. One thousand feet out to sea, in a south-easterly, Short Owen's

voice sounded weaker than Ron remembered. The jetty shifted underfoot with the swell. The wreath washed back into shore and battered against the edge of the rock platform beneath the jetty.

Sarah shook as she kissed him goodnight. She took Dot into bed with her. Eve and Gramma now had a bed each. He waited before climbing out the window. Creeping low along the side of the house, he heard sobbing through the weatherboards. A stiff-backed shadow sat on a kitchen chair on the verandah. A lamp in a window across the road gave sufficient light to yellow Gramma Shipwater's eyes. An odour confirmed her identity. She stared ahead, offered no indication of noticing her grandson. Possibly, the sight was inadequate to interrupt her thoughts. Ron quietly reversed, to abscond via the creek bed, soggy for the first time in years.

IV

Billy Burns, head gleaming, gums grinning, propounded a new theory: Malcolm had run away. Had simply gotten the hell out of The Bay. Lucky Malcolm! Taking a pair of Meiklejohns and several Jones's into his confidence, Billy revealed for the first time that he, Billy, might know of another miner – no names, no pack drill - who might also have run away. Thirty years before. Leaving behind a family in Wigan. But no fishing rod on Wigan pier. Billy winked. There was sweat on his eyelid. He – this fellow – had another family now.

“That was smart move by our Malcolm.”

They discussed where smart lucky Malcolm might be. In a city hotel room with a woman, a woman who worked, proved popular. Ron removed a glass of

dregs from the railing, downed it and replaced the empty as prurient elements of the theory held miners' attention. He caught snatches of several scenarios as he progressed along the rail. The wait for suitable moment – a toilet visit, donation to the whiparound, extravagant illustration of a theory – allowed him to acquaint with the breadth of The Bay's imagination. By the end of the rail he could no longer discern what he made of what he heard, but had gained the courage to filch a near-full pint of black and transport it to the darkness of the beer garden, a steep slope of mangey grass and pit pony shit behind the pub. He fell asleep clutching the black. Woken by the sound of a Welsh Mountain Pony chewing by his ear, he found he had not spilled a drop. It was a skill that was to stay with him, wherever he slept.

The following day he escorted his mother to Swansea Council Chambers where she placed the results of the whiparound as down payment on a burial plot for Malcolm, when he turned up.

1935

I

I was a greyhound in a past life. Sleek. Fast. Muzzled. Maybe that's what Rowdy was laughing at. Him and his descendants. Maria was convinced I'd go back to being a greyhound in the next life. I wasn't keen on sniffing other dogs' bums but I guessed you got used to it. Maybe Rowdy was also laughing at that. Sometimes when he went into the bedroom you could see him wondering where dad had gone. He was pretty old by now.

"I expect this sort of rubbish from you, Shipwater. But must you drag others down with you?"

Nerys Ferris's entire body lit up red, like a nightclub neon. On fire.

"Ron's Dictionary of Doggish is the start of a whole new communication between humans and animals. I am his editor. The Dictionary of Doggish is our contribution to the school magazine."

I don't think she meant to make things worse

"Ron can speak to dogs, Mr Hobbs."

"My word. Master Shipwater never ceases to amaze."

Maybe she did.

“Doggish is the universal canine language, Mr Hobbs. Did you know that a sausage dog in China can communicate with a kelpie in Egypt?”

“I did not know that.”

Nerys Ferris was hard to stop once she got going.

“Or that there are only nineteen letters in the dog alphabet?”

“I did not know that either.”

“Or that the best way to listen to dogs is with your head tilted to one side?”

She demonstrated the technique. The class followed her lead. So did Hobbsie.

“I see. Of course, there will be “A Doggish Grammar” to follow, will there not? Then “A Thesaurus of Doggish?”

Whatever that was. Hobbsie tilted his head again, waiting for the answer. Nerys Ferris beamed at me, confident I would hit Hobbsie with an undeniable response. I stared at the floor.

“And, this being only the English-Doggish edition, there will needs be editions in French-Doggish, Spanish-Doggish, German-Doggish, Italian-Doggish. Cat-Doggish..”

Hobbsie waited, yellow-fingering his pipe, until I couldn't stop myself from looking up.

"It appears we have a serious author, scribbling away, undiscovered, right here in our midst."

He lit his pipe seriously slowly.

"Would you do the class the honour of reading us this serious work of yours, in full, out loud, Master Shipwater?"

A voice told me to say no.

"Stand up, please. It frees the chest for oration."

A voice told me to stay sitting. Hobbsie stood behind me, sucking gurgley smoke.

"I can't hear you."

A voice told me to stay silent. He blew a cloud of alcoholic smoke around my head.

"I CAN'T HEAR YOU!"

Ron delivered an impassioned reading.

"A". AROOOOOOOO. 1. I am lonely. 2. Full moon tonight. 3. Please let me out of the

shed. AROO ROO ROO. 1. (accusatory) Where have you been? Where's my dinner?

(Insistent, accompanied by frantic tail wagging, jumping, pawing, running to icebox or meat safe then back to check if human is following.) 2. Here! My dinner is in here! Here!

Accompanying oratory with precise impersonations of canine body language, he substantiated the seriousness of his subject. Outstaying an early storm of scorn, his commitment to the evangelising of Doggish proved in the end undeniable. His enthusiasm for the canine language infectious, his pronunciation correct and eminently communicable.

FOOF. 1. I have been rolling in something. 2. I am wearing this smell just for you. 3. I have been hunting creatures that live down holes. 4. One died down its hole.”

Mr Hobbs was slow to realise that immoderate disdain had jammed his normally reliable classroom radar. By the time his errant flame-haired linguist had arrived at the letter “Y” and begun unmasking the several meanings of “Yap” (*I live indoors so you can’t get me; I wear a wool vest in winter; She knitted it; I sleep on the end of her bed; She’s a widow; Big dog. Please pick me up. Etc.*), the class had become a pound out of control.

HEH. The cat is dead. HAK. Grass. Grass! Identify from KAK. Hairball! Get this hairball out! Get out, hairball!

Conversant in Doggish, swiftly finding mere conversation dull, classmates bit, snarled, growled, yelped, and threw their heads back in howling mania.

“M.” MIP! MIP MIP! Meaning uncertain. Spoken in sleep. Often heard while dog running in sleep. May refer to cats or rabbits.

Several students developed violent hairballs which no amount of hacking seemed capable of releasing. Others yowled for release from the shed. The elongate “Arooooooooo” of loneliness rent the school air, plaintive head notes in high octaves travelling as far north as the general store and south to the pub. Many if not all of the lonely sought solace in barking for beer. Ron read on.

NIKNIKNIKNIK. 1. Flea. (Accompanied by body chewing, whirring back leg.) 2. Itch. 3. Summer is here. 4. Mange. Sorry. 5. It's in my ear!

The Tank Gang Membership's recent tremulous faith in The Captain was restored in full. Strengthened. Deepened. Drilled its way into solid rock and took hold like Victorian wharf pillars.

RRAK RRAK. 1. I am from England, Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland. One day I will return home. 2. Slow down. I have short legs.

Cedric loped from desk to desk, cocking a leg to mark furniture as his territory, underlining his claim via vigorous scratching of the ground with rear legs whilst declaiming the definitive "Horf! Horf Horf Horf!" (*My tree. My lamppost. My fence. It's mine. All mine. Etc.*) Nose streaming yellow in excitement, small dog Jimmy followed Cedric's lead, anointing furniture a second time until Cedric bit him. After which assault Jimmy circled the room yelping "Yi Yi Yi Yi!" (*Vet!? No! No! Not The SleepMaker! You'll have to catch me first! Help!*) until it became clear not a single vet was to be found in the kennels as The SleepMaker

resided in Swansea. Jimmy reverted to announcing “Baf” (*I am small but I am behind a fence*) from the lee side of an overturned desk.

WOOFFLLBBLL. 1. I slobber but I am harmless. 2. See my hanging dribble? It gets longer when I swing my head. 3. Don’t you want the ball? I thought you wanted the ball? What’s wrong with the ball?

Nerys Ferris informed an uncommonly inattentive world, in queenly Doggish ending in ballistic upward inflection, that she was originally from England, Scotland, Wales, or Northern Ireland. And that one day she would return home.

YOWWW? Are you really having me put to sleep?

Dot chased cats in her sleep until Cedric stuck a cold nose up her bottom. At which she uttered the appropriate “Ike!” before, sensing an opportunity to pursue a secret torch, she attempted to respond in kind. Crude mating attempts were made on the floor at the rear of the room. Deemed to smell unfriendly, Mr Hobbs’ found his attempts to calm the yowling pack greeted with a resolute “Rrrrrrrrrr” (*I dislike your smell. I will go for the throat.*) and extravagant show of bad teeth. Public reading concluded, Ron sat mute in the eye of the howling.

"There's one in every circus."

Pocketing his pipe, Mr Hobbs picked up and shook Ron as if emptying the last obstinate grains of wheat from a hessian sack, a bag which subsequently

appeared to contain fluid, not grain, as Ron relieved himself. He noted a ringworm-like red glow emitting wisps of smoke in the region of Mr Hobbs' tweed pocket.

"Look at me when I'm talking to you, son."

Mr Hobbs tore The Dictionary of Doggish in half as a strongman rends a phone book. Then tore it in half again. And in half yet again. Failing to halve the provocative lexicon for a fourth time, he hurled the shreds of reference material out the window. The morning breeze being onshore, fragments fluttered back into the classroom, floating on the faint smell of ocean weed. Mr Hobbs scrunched and hurled each delinquent scrap out the window again, one by one, as though each were a personal affront, continuing to hurl until not a single shred was able to or dared flutter back inside, following which he slammed the window shut, causing the bottom pane of glass to fall out and smash to bits on the tankstand. Cedric had jemmied the putty. The student body cheered a moment long awaited. Mr Hobbs gazed out the window, breathing deeply, in a silence that seemed to last minutes, before registering that his pocket was afire.

II

As he moved along the line of outstretched arms Mr Hobbs explained that although caning was the traditional way of putting down "student uprising", the mass caning-in-progress did not necessarily indicate a personal disapproval of uprisings, he in fact being generally in favour of rising up, but simply that there was a time and a place. If the hand under caning dropped from the perpendicular, knuckles were flick-caned on the upstroke. He did not cane the girls, instead instructing them to calculate, in their heads, how many cuts in

total had been administered in the single caning session. Girls who wrongly calculated the product of forty one times six were detained after school and made to read a novel by Joseph Conrad. One Eye Goldfinch was first to arrive at the correct total of two hundred and forty six. Three canes had been destroyed in administering the two hundred and forty six cuts. Mr Hobbs instructed the girls to deploy this statistic in working out, again in their heads, the average hits per cane before splintering occurred. Again One Eye Goldfinch was first to compute the correct figure of eighty two. Mr Hobbs then asked, if he had a total of twenty canes, how many cuts could he administer before running out of canes?

“One thousand, six hundred and forty cuts, sir.”

One Eye Goldfinch completed the arithmetic trifecta. Although the figure was viewed as a challenge by the males of the class, and despite, in the wake of the canine uprising, Mr Hobbs lining them up first thing every monday morning for the remainder of the school year and caning them six times while the girls chanted the arithmetic - attendance varying but One Eye Goldfinch being always first to arrive at the correct answer - Mr Hobbs never ran out of canes, maintaining a seemingly inexhaustible store of corrective weaponry in an old golf bag locked in a cupboard. The Bay had no golf course. No-one in The Bay played golf. On occasion, locals had witnessed The Schoolteacher tramping the dune line brandishing what was thought to be a golf club, every now and then halting to dig feet into the sand and wiggle his rear like a cat about to pounce, before taking an ungainly swing at a clump of spinifex. At other times he had been observed walking the tide line, clubbing cuttlefish and dry kelp into the sea. Or dried bluebottles following an overnight south-easter.

Mrs Hobbs was rarely seen. When she was, it was but briefly, passing a window. It was rumoured she played the piano.

The flecks of foam in the corners of Mr Hobbs' mouth exercised with added vigour as he turned attention to The Ringleader.

"You're a clown, Shipwater. What are you?"

He had answered the question, in the affirmative, many times before. Buoyed by the success of his public reading, he now exercised his right to remain silent and glower while Nerys Ferris spoke passionately in his defence. Mr Hobbs digested the argument.

"A clown, not remotely interested in learning."

Nerys Ferris proceeded to argue vigorously and at length for clemency. Mr Hobbs attended with greater patience than he and class thought possible, until the Ferris filibuster wound down in exhaustion.

Nerys Ferris ran out of things to say. This was a first. And she ran out of things to say about me.

"You'll wind up a laughing stock, boy."

Ron stood, slowly, and freed his chest for oration. His forehead shone as smooth as a baby's bottom.

"So?"

Prior to ventilation of this monosyllable, he had deemed infamy as garb he had no desire to wear, and had for a decade taken pains, unsuccessfully, to avoid. Notoriety sat back, growing all the while, and waited for the reluctant repute to take ownership. Now, in an instant, Ron opted not merely to don the livery of troublemaker on occasion, when appropriate, but to take up permanent, full-time residence within. Mr Hobbs tossed him like a fat caber, back into his seat.

“So?”

"So?" didn't just fly out of my mouth before I could shut it. The warning voice was saying "For God's sake, Ron, don't say it!" The squealing voice was saying "Hobbsie'll mash you into jelly and throw you out in the corridor for the whole school to wade through!" Then everything went quiet. And a low, calm voice said "Say it, Ron. Say 'So?'"

The reputation featured abundant room for growth. Snugness would be achieved with maturity. Thereafter, snugness proving boring, *colossal* proving several sizes too small, uncontainable, Ron burst free.

“So?”

Before "So?" I saw everything through a window. Things were outside if I was inside and inside if I was outside. I was even outside or inside me sometimes, watching me say things I didn't want to say and do things I didn't want to do. After "So?", the window disappeared. Glass, frame and all. And Hobbsie was about to mash me into jelly.

“So?” was the only credible answer to the unanswerable “Why?” The twin monosyllables became the bookends of his world view. He had been right all along. Nothing made sense.

“So?”

Hobbsie didn't mash me into jelly. Or mash me into anything else. Hobbsie was gobstruck. Cedric, Jimmy, Nerys Ferris, Dot, Four Eyes, One Eye Goldfinch, the whole class, all gobstruck. It was my low, calm voice. It was me.

Mr Hobbs watched the emu hunt for scraps of dictionary for several minutes before slamming the window shut. The top pane of glass fell out. The frame stayed empty for years. The final missing word - “Haruff” (*I was bluffing. It got away. But I gave it a fright*) - was located two days later, within the folds of a dated tomato sauce sandwich deep in Jimmy’s pocket. Nerys Ferris’s expertise with Clag proved crucial to assembly of the second edition. Ron was exiled to the corridor for a month.

“So?”

Hobbsie lasted a few more years. On my last day I asked him about the connection between the capital of the Belgian Congo and The Pit. And the atrocities committed by King Leopold in the Belgian Congo, including the chopping off of natives’ hands, and The Pit. You should’ve seen his flecks of foam stretch.

Question for Hobbsie: “When is the time and what is the place for an uprising?”

1936

I

On the morning of Ron's eleventh birthday, a black Riley with burgundy upholstery and coating of dust halted outside the school gate. The student population clattered to the windows, some of which retained glass. Monsignor Kippax tucked a tightly-folded copy of the Swansea-Belmont Times under one papist arm so as to extend the other and clasp Mr Hobbs' lapsed Methodist hand, which was slow in arriving.

"We have driven at *high speed* from St Catherine's."

Monsignor Kippax laughed at his personal display of venial daring.

"So as to be first. I trust we are not too late?"

The Monsignor withdrew a gold-embossed envelope from an inside pocket, tapping it on his hand as he surveyed the grounds. Mr Hobbs discerned the Swansea-Belmont Times to be folded open at the real estate section.

"It seems to be precisely what we are seeking."

Mr Hobbs explained that a protestant devil with red hair was abroad.

"So?"

II

Apart from the death of eleven miners in an explosion at Wonthaggi, it had been a year of quiet recovery, during which Betty Blizzard had taught her son to bake. Jimmy had successfully completed his first sponge, a double-decker flooded in toilet-roof passionfruit icing, the bulk of which was devoured by Ron, who kept his friend's domestic secret close. Mastery of cream buns surely lay in the near future. Less excitingly, Cedric had embraced communism,

attending meetings in Cessnock and Kurri Kurri with his father, and currently talked too much for Ron's liking. "Cedric the Red" enjoyed his new nickname, except when confronted by Nerys Ferris's gleeful suggestion that he had rushed into the arms of communism out of jealousy for Ron's escalating infamy, a monster which Red Ced had helped create, but which now had very much a life of its own. A life which remained keen to include Nerys Ferris, despite a recent rejuvenation in resistance to his attentions. Cedric assured Ron that his amour's late disavowal of involvement with The Dictionary Of Doggish was simply playing hard to get. And that the field was open because he, Cedric, was not remotely interested in Nerys Ferris.

Nerys Ferris was the only girl in The Bay – and probably the whole world - that Cedric was not remotely interested in. Ced had the knack with girls. Never passed it on. If it could be passed on. What is it about knacks? Grandda had a knack for growing vegetables. Dad had a knack for catching fish. I had a knack for trouble. Vegetables. Fish. Girls. Trouble? It didn't make sense. Anyway, it turned out Cedric's knack got him a regular meeting with Dot in our chicken coop. It turned out Cedric had regular meetings with lots of girls in the chicken coops of The Bay. And the budgie and finch aviaries and the pigeon roosts. He never let on. Out of respect for the girls' reputations, he said, later, after Dot told me my equal best mate had led a secret love life, in coops, avaries and roosts, since he was eight. Dot spilled the beans on Chicken Cooper Cedric after catching One Eye Goldfinch wiping feathers and birdshit off her school uniform on the day after the eye doctor took the brown paper off her glasses.

Question for Hobbsie: Where does a knack come from and how do you get rid of it?

1937

I

On Ron's twelfth birthday, despite the official arrival of autumn, The Bay remained a declared tinderbox. Having remained a declared tinderbox for more than six months, The Bay was edgy as it faced the possibility of remaining a declared tinderbox in winter, when sparks would of necessity fly from chimneys. The Bay Volunteer Bush Fire Brigade responded with summerish alacrity to reports of a suspicious-looking Chinaman seen setting fires in bushland around The Bay, finding telltale scatterings of over-cooked rice and what were taken to be charred wattle chopsticks. The pyromanic Oriental was never apprehended. ABC regional radio quoted an anonymous source describing the events as a "Chinese Burn."

"So?"

II

Coal cutters, mechanical loaders and electric locomotives would not cost jobs. April Fool. The Miners Federation campaign against mechanisation went from strength to strength. April Fool. The Lockout wage cuts were restored. April Fool. There was a strike against bringing in a forty hour week. April Fool.

Red Cedric wasn't fooled. He had a bold plan to get the hell out of The Bay. He was going to walk to Wyong, catch the train, join Wirth's Circus, get paid to be shot out of a cannon, lead the campaign for improved wages and conditions for human cannonballs and ancillary staff under the Big Top, save the resulting higher wages and visit Trotsky in Mexico - where

Enemy Of The People Number One was hiding out from Stalin – with intent to offer his services as a bodyguard. He promised to send me a postcard from Mexico City.

Pilfered tobacco and several tots of rum in a milk bottle accompanied him out the window. The moon resembled a fingernail clipping. One of his mother's. Lacking the coal underneath. Sarah cut her nails while seated on the back step. Once, on venturing out to pour dishwater on the dying garden, a sharp two-horned clipping had embedded itself in his foot, whereupon after extraction, he saw for a moment that he held the moon in his hand. He gave consideration to sharing the poetic notion with Nerys Ferris with whom, inside his head, he now spent increasing time capering, before flicking the clipping away. She was in his head now, in sturdy underwear, ignoring him as he snaked through the cemetery, marble slabs and white timber crosses, the majority marking miners and their babies, faint-lit by the fingernail clipping above. The sand was cold and squeaked underfoot. Ron sat atop a dune, smoking, swigging rum, listening to the soft crunch of waves in the dark below, while continuing the undressing of Nerys Ferris. She played hard to undress. He could not truly picture what lay underneath. Things had changed since he, Cedric and Nerys Ferris had practised as doctors and nurses in the Ferris chicken coop hospital. Cedric had seen previous medical experience and it showed. He would not reveal upon whom he had operated. Only that he had operated several times. Ron pictured what Nerys Ferris had shown him but had a strong feeling things were not like that any more. Knife-edged grass bearing itchy hairs flourished as a protective moat around her house. Her lamp was out. Skulling the OP, rolling a fag, Ron simultaneously endeavoured

to draw Nerys Ferris to the window by thinking about her and only her.

Tossing pebbles after midnight lay beyond the frontier of his courage. Nerys

Ferris now had norks. Her lamp stayed out.

“So?”

1938

I

On Ron's thirteenth birthday the Swansea Times carried an item concerning "a well-endowed young female scantily clad in rabbit fur" sighted running through bushland near Moonie Moonie. Picking up the item, The Sydney Morning Herald dubbed her the "Moonie Moonie Nymph".

"So?"

Ron was convinced Nerys Ferris would enjoy the joke, indeed be flattered by certain aspects of the nymph's physical description.

Discussion of the changing shape of Nerys Ferris accompanied initiation of Cedric and Jimmy into the practice of filching drinks from the railing of the pub verandah. The Master taught his apprentices well. The efficiency with which pints were pilfered, drained by the three in concert and the empty glassware returned to the rail, left distracted victims shaking heads in puzzlement at their own capacity to put it away. That the railing had become a precarious place to leave a drink unattended proved a conclusion too far.

Ron employed a spear of dry grass to address a cigarette butt afloat in a residue of stout. An array of topless women suddenly appeared in his peripheral vision as Cedric fanned his hand. The butt fell back into the stout. "The ol' man finds out, I'm dead", said Cedric.

He cackled, looking over his cards. The recalcitrant butt continued to hold Ron's complete attention.

"Trotsky. Trotsky?", said Cedric.

The butt made it up the side of the glass. He drained the stout and collected his cards. Fumbling the fan, a topless woman dropped into his lap. Cedric struggled with the heat of a cheap brandy with which someone else had earlier struggled and lost. Several glasses, some still actionable, littered the periphery. Cedric switched to ale.

"Trotsky's a spiv, he reckons. Dad. He just parrots Stalin - "

Jimmy tore out of the darkness, wet-lipped and jabbering.

"I saw her! I saw her!"

"Shit Jimmy - !"

Cedric made to rise, with intent to Chinese Burn. Sudden altitude went to his head. He toppled sideways and rolled down the slope, laughing.

"Under the white bridge. I just saw her. The Moonie Moonie Nymph!"

Beer induced overexcitement in Jimmy.

"She had nothing on!"

"Rabbit fur. She wears rabbit fur."

"Not any more!"

"Have you been drinking?"

The interrogation, straight-faced, confused Jimmy.

"I saw her!"

Cedric staggered back up the slope and seized Jimmy's wrist.

"Wha' s she doing?"

"What?"

“Under the bridge. Wha’s she doing under the bridge, Jimmy?”

“I don’t know. I was just pissing off the bridge and I saw her.”

“You din’t piss on her, did you?”

“Di’ you piss on the Moonie Moonie Nymph?”

Ron fell back laughing. Felt the alcohol slosh in his stomach. Cedric screeched in amusement, stopped mid-screch, released Jimmy and hurried from the beer garden, hand over mouth.

“Ced - ?”

Ron and Jimmy stumbled after in amused concern. Cedric, on the move, legs spread, vomited a rope-like line down the middle of the road, in the direction of home, and was not seen again in the Bay for forty seven years. His legacy of voluble distress triggered Jimmy to hurl on the spot, repeatedly, until empty, then crawl under a low bottlebrush and lie moaning, on his back, until he blacked out.

Ron had paced himself. He kicked on alone, in the main downing the miners’ staple, top-fermented black ale, but when presented with opportunity, not baulking at bottom-fermented pale ale, lager old and new, stout, black and tans and shandies, chased down by assorted rums, brandies and ports, some swimming in milk, the admixture in his gut topped off by two exotic concoctions, one green, one yellow, both translucent, served in tiny glasses with stems, to Alec Meiklejohn.

A gulp went down the wrong way, shot back up and hosed out both nostrils.

Lurching down the slope, nose pouring black, he managed to save half which,

after his alarmed passageways had calmed, he downed for a second time. He did a final run of the verandah rail, downing the gleanings as he staggered back to the paddock, fell over a fence and on hands and knees evacuated his innards. Nothing made sense. Billy Burns raised his pint, only to discover the glass empty bar a crottin of pit pony shit.

He could not keep down water. His stomach began to eat itself. On day three, by trial and error, he successfully ingested a black hair of the dog and a number of Jimmy's scones as the sun set.

II

The scrawl on the postcard was microscopic. Cedric's writing had been shrinking to accommodate the growing number and size of his political outpourings ever since he converted to communism and discovered a bottomless well of words. As far as I could make out, he was boarding with Auntie Joy in Newtown, she was a red too, her militancy was OP strength, his plan had worked perfectly up till the point he found out that Wirth's circus weren't hiring human cannonballs, the logical alternative to human cannonballing was running away to sea, he had made it as far as the wharf, he was the youngest bloke in the Waterside Workers Federation, the government and their running dog lickspittle lackeys and fascist fellow travellers hated the Waterside Workers because the union refused to ship pig iron to the Japs, the Japs were racist imperialist fascists at war with Mother Russia, the south coast pits had gone out in in sympathy with the Waterside Workers, but The Bay Pit had not gone out, so Cedric was horrified, scandalised, you name it, the lack of solidarity was class treachery, it was personal as well as political backstabbing, or in bourgeois sentimentalist terms, a knife through his heart, he only allowed himself bourgeois sentimentalism because we were mates, he was at first inclined to see this betrayal in the context of the Meiklejohn/Thorpe Thesis, that is, The Pit's proximity to sunshine and the beach had resulted in lack of class rigour, he had

recently visited the south coast pits with a W.W. solidarity cadre, his eyes had been opened to the materialist reality that each and every notoriously red-ragging south coast pit had its own slice of seashore, the south coast pits thus formed an unbroken chain of sun-and-surf drenched militancy as long as the seam it mined, therefore the beach/pit dialectic did not inevitably lead to reactionism, ipso facto the Meiklejohn/Thorpe Thesis was proven incorrect, the motives of its proponents were suspect, even Blind Freddie could see that now, and if The Bay Boys didn't stop being Good Boys, come the revolution, Cedric the Red would not be shooting over our heads. Ipso facto? I wrote back to say that Hughie Meiklejohn had upped and moved down to the Illawarra in sympathy with their sympathy. But only temporarily. The rampant Catholicism had driven him back north within a week.. Up in the northern fields, we did manage to go out for fourteen days in the August general strike. Although a hundred and fifty men didn't get to go out because they'd already gone out. Cavilled out. On their ears. And their arses. For good. Mechanical cutters and loaders were moving in, tunnel by tunnel. But the Federation gave surviving membership the drum: we were in a strong position. Coal stocks were low and there was going to be another war. The Federation had it arse backwards. War was the traditional method of getting out of The Pit.

Cedric's Second Newtown Postcard proclaimed that he was off to Spain to fight the fascists. Some of his waterside mates were already there. Women too. Older women. Cedric had met a nurse — ten years older than him - who was sailing next day and one thing led to another. One thing always led to another with Cedric. Like I said. He had the knack. If there was a chicken coop in Spain, London to a brick Cedric the Red would be sure to meet a local *senorita* in there. Or a *senora*. And one thing would lead to another.

Cedric's Third Newtown Postcard argued, at length, that Trotsky was lucky Stalin had exiled him from the Soviet Union because Stalin was now arresting all the old Octoberists,

putting them on trial for crimes they didn't commit, like wrecking and plotting and incorrect tendencies, then having them shot in the basement of the Lubyanka. Cedric's mail was that the Octoberists were drugged by Lysenko-ist doctors then hypnotised into confessing by a Rasputinist Tendency Mesmerist kept by Stalin as a human pet. Lysenko-ist? Hughie's mail was that the correctly-accused Octoberists were 'crypto-fascists' who got what was coming. Hughie called the Coal Barons 'ruling class fascists'. He called the Labor Party 'social fascists'. He called the Miners Federation leadership 'left phrase mongers'. He said the capitalists wanted the coming war because it would make them rich while the working class did the fighting and dying. You couldn't argue with that.

So, come the revolution, just whose heads would Cedric shoot over? The Bay wasn't a bolshevik hotspot but there was still a variety of Reds holed up in the village. Hobbsie was a quiet Department of Education red. Hughie Meiklejohn was a loud 'Hands Off Russia' red. Alec Meiklejohn, a Presbyterian confirmed bachelor red. Leonard Meiklejohn, a permanently-pissed-off-I-hate-everyone-because-my-brothers-are-red red. Lionel Thorpe, a nocturnal Methodist red. Wingnut Vella, a psycho bomb-throwing red until the day his preferred bomb-throwing arm became stuck behind his back, in an Act Of God, according to Wingnut. He was about to hurl a bomb at a courthouse - back in Malta this was - when the Lord seized his arm and twisted it behind his back in a half Nelson to show the hot-headed youth that violence was not the way to achieve political change. After that, in show of penance and commitment to change via peaceful means, Wingnut kept the arm permanently behind his back. Cedric himself was a not-so-keen-on-Russia red because Stalin was not-so-keen-on-Trotsky. I was a fellow traveller. In the end, whether or not he would shoot over my head remained a grey area.

1939

I

On Ron's fourteenth birthday, he completed his schooling.

"So?"

So General Franco also declared victory in Spain, on my birthday. Cedric's Fourth Newtown Postcard expressed hope that El Caudillo's triumph was a falangist April Fool's Joke. A tasteless prank, wrote Cedric, even for the Falange, who were bull-slaughtering conquistadorist fascists, The Fifth Newtown Postcard, with more long hand-wringing words than you could poke a stick at, announced that at one second past midday, the statute of limitation for April Fool's pranks, Cedric the Red had embarked upon a steep downward spiral of the spirit from which only a rousing speech from Trotsky, revealing that Stalin had been hit by a bus, would see him recover. Something like that. The boat from Newtown to Spain never sailed. Red Auntie Joy instructed him to take the longer historical view.

On my first day of work in the Swansea Cake Shop, the Fat Lady gave me permission to eat as much as I wanted. So I did. She swore I'd soon get sick of cakes and pastry just like she did. I didn't. I emptied the shop and it had to close its doors. April Fool. I was so nervous about going down The Pit that I couldn't keep Jimmy's rainbow sponge roll down. Cedric had a plan. Jimmy had a plan too, as it turned out. I didn't have a plan.

Dogs with masters on the coal dozed by the gate. Thoughts of his father attended. Perhaps Malcolm too was lying somewhere, in the sun, one eye open, watching the world go by. The Bay was a contract pit, giving Short Owen Jones to walk with a briskness Ron strained to match. Others, on longer

legs, ran or motored from the hip in the manner of Olympic walkers. Hewers, fillers and wheelers – contract men - bustled past slower-moving shiftmen, abusing the wage-sluggards whilst overtaking. Ron trailed Short Owen into the mouth of the drift, a smallish gawping hole in a hillside of scratchy forest. A second hole admitted narrow gauge rail lines. The twin holes were serviced by a scattering of rusty corrugated iron workshops and lean-to's on stilts, straddling track upon which long lines of wagons arrived empty and echoing, to depart heaving with the black diamond. Two flues, an angled line of stables, weatherboard office and residences larger than miners' cottages, and which had seen paint, added to the impression that someone – perhaps the English owners - had simply scattered the structures like dice. Jack Lang's promised bathhouse had not yet materialised. The surrounding bush, dry and straggly but a proven survivor, crept into the gaps, eager to resume full ownership when the coal ran out. The smell of horses mingled with that of machinery, men, engine smoke, grease, and salt air.

The steep downward slope brought the thought of a runaway skip. He frowned the thought away. Short Owen paused at a junction called 'Eyesight', following a procedure which allowed eyes to adjust to the dark and so deter Nystagmus. Ron crashed into his rear. The two sat, pupils dilating, as hewers, fillers and wheelers hurried through 'Eyesight' without stopping. By the time Ron arrived at the trapdoor in 12 South, two miles in and under the hillside, two hundred and fifty feet below sea level, Malcolm's boots were killing him.

Jesus Wept. I faked it. Jesus wept! It was so foul I faked faking it. My heart was thumping in my ears. Jesus wept. No wonder Dad ran away or jumped or did whatever he did. It was dark as hell. With my lamp on. And hot as hell. Hotter than hell. Blokes hosed down other blokes while they worked. They worked in their undies. Filthy saggy undies, soaked in sweat and whatever else, because there was no toilet. One bloke worked in his wife's undies. It's the truth! Other blokes had lap-laps or loincloths or little skirts made of cut up potato sacks. You wouldn't believe the state of Hughie Marx Meiklejohn's undies. I wasn't sucked in by the voice telling me to ask if they were Russian undies. Everyone was screaming over the din of the haulage and shot-firing and the cutters in the other tunnel and all sorts of different bells telling you different things, like the roof is falling in so run like hell, or stop hewing, we've holed the underside of a Ching Chong rice paddy. There was an explosion down the end of a bord. I thought the roof was coming down. Short Owen Jones didn't even jump. After a goaf fall, the wind blast was like being hit by a wall. There was dust everywhere. Thicker than Kathleen's smoke. Miners like to see what they're breathing. One of Dad's jokes. It wasn't the fluffy dust I used to watch in school. It was big floating rocks, like Hobbsie's picture of the asteroid belt. It got up all your cracks and in all your holes. Coaldust can spontaneously combust. Which is extra bad if it happens up your crack. They sprayed the dust with water and poured stone dust on top to keep it down but it wouldn't stay down. Running only stirred it up so the men all took their time. Another of Dad's jokes. They all ran like the clappers because time was money. And the dust loved it. Short Owen Jones said the dust was worse in the Illawarra. Not just the old diggers get dusted down there. Young men too. Whole families get dusted. All you need is the right sort of lungs. And when you find out you've got them, it's too late.

The Old Men's section was full of rickety blokes with red-ring eyes, coughing and spitting to a rhythm. Some were over seventy. They wore suits and hats until the last minute before starting work. Hobbsie told us about animals who spend their whole lives underground, how

they evolved to be white as a sheet and blind as a bat. Old coalminers can top that. They evolve to be deaf as a post and bent as a pin and poor as a church mouse too. Hobbsie said I could've worked in a bank. I tried to picture what animals who worked in a bank would evolve into. The Lodge made an exception to seniority because I was the family breadwinner.

The Bay was bord and pillar. E tunnel had been going more than forty years so it had bords and pillars coming out its arse. Beg pardon. E tunnel wasn't the only tunnel. Hobbsie had taught us the alphabet so I figured there had to be at least four more. There was a maze of the bastards travelling miles in every direction. Out under the sea. So far out you evolved a Kūwi accent. No-one had a map but everyone except me knew where they were. When Short Owen veered off into his bord I missed the turn and a pit pony bit me. A flaming wheeler's horse bit me! A chomp like a rabbit trap, it had. Took a chunk out of my arm. The wheeler swore at me. I trod in horse shit too. I hoped it was horseshit. There was plenty of human shit around. And piss. You could smell it although it was tucked away in corners and old workings, unlike the horse shit. I hoisted a picture of a vanilla slice with Nerys Ferris astride and held it in my head for the whole shift. I could sleep on a vanilla slice mattress. With Nerys Ferris. Pink or yellow. We'd have relations all night then eat the bed for breakfast. Jimmy was working up a first vanilla slice. Without Nerys Ferris but still something to look forward to. His mum could always get ingredients. She knew a man who knew a man.

A beam of light ricocheted wildly off roof, floor and walls as the source, a lumpy shadow, rotated in the manner of a lost, frantic lighthouse. His body squirted panic. He heard a shout - his name? - drowning in the din of the pit. A glow flickered round a distant bend. Followed by a second, yellowish flare.

“Fucking come on!”

He rebounded from whatever solid was in his way.

“Fucking come on!”

The screech of shot-firer Fizzer Phillips encouraging a damp taper was Bay tradition, comforting, like a magpie carol at sunrise. Fizzer bore a pocketful of damp tapers. The Bay, with several water sources overhead, including the South Pacific Ocean, was a wet pit.

“Fucking come on you bastard! Bastard! Bastard!”

He hurled a sodden taper at the coalface.

“Fucking come on you bastard!”

Shot firing was a dangerous job, said to require acumen, instinct, experience. Fizzer Phillips was considered a first rate fool. An unfunny first rate fool. Who specialised in missed shots which, left uncleared, might later explode in a hewer’s face. How Fizzer gained entry to night school, let alone passed exams and attained a Deputy’s ticket, was a daily source of scatological consternation. Shot firing without the prerequisites of nouse had rapidly rendered The Fizz deaf. Between oaths, over and over, all shift, every day, he whistled a partial tune which he could not hear and workmates could never identify.

Fizzer’s latest taper caught in the flame of his cap lamp. A beaked face, eyes like bullet holes, appeared in the glow. Failed tapers littered the ground around his boots. His left leg was timber below the knee. He applied the tremulous flame to a fuse protruding from the coalface. The fuse resisted his attentions. He leaned in close to prolong the life of the guttering flame and offer encouragement.

“Come on. Fucking come on. Fucking fuses!”

The fuse sparked in his face. Not staying to celebrate, he turned and ran straight into Ron.

“Shit Jesus!”

Ron’s head hit the ground and bounced. He scrabbled for his cap. The acetylene flame had drowned in dust.

“Run!”

Fizzer pulled Ron to his feet *en passant*, smooth as a dance move, and disappeared at wooden-legged speed into the blackness. Ron frowned at the sparking fuse for a full second. The penny dropped into his bowels. He ran. Careering, stumbling, cannoning off pit ribs, slipping on horseshit, pursuing distant lights which promptly went out. Encountering intersections where running straight ahead was no longer an option, he made random choices. The explosion, when it came, came from ahead, not behind. He saw the flash.

Two tiny pink moons danced on his closed lids. One moon stopped dancing. The other zoomed in to uncomfortably close range. Lionel Thorpe’s eyeballs oscillated, permanently frantic, in raspberry-rimmed sockets. Lionel had nystagmus. He was Fizzer Phillip’s hewing mate.

“I know you”, said Lionel.

Ron did not remember, or did not recognise, the black planet that was the face of Lionel Thorpe.

“Lost, are you?”

“Didn’t you hear the whistle?”

Fizzer and Lionel scampered off like gnomes to rip coal. The dust in their bord had not yet cleared but they were contract men.

“Don’t wander off like that, boy!”

Two more beams approached, slowly, like a cross-eyed car, on uneven ground, at midnight. Short Owen was shirtless under his single-breasted suit coat.

“We promised your da we’d look after you, didn’t we, Tinsnips?”

Tinsnips smiled, shirtless also, above grimey flap-like shorts and hobnailed boots. Tinsnips had been Malcolm’s wheeler. Short Owen Jones had inherited him following Malcolm’s departure and mentored his rise to the position of hewer. Tinsnips had been kicked in the head by a Belgian or possibly French horse while attempting to stretch a Belgian or possibly French chicken’s neck, in a bomb-blasted barn somewhere south west of Polygon Wood. The powers-that-be thus found the excuse they had been seeking to ship Tinsnips home.

Being a coalminer, they had tried to deter his enlistment in the first place, only for Tinsnips to put his foot down. A metal plate held his cracked skull together.

“This your cap?”

Tinsnips smiled. Co-workers could never decide whether Tinsnips’ mental faculties had been diminished by the horse’s hoof or the permanent smile merely indicated adoption of simpler attitude to life, post-war.

“Don’t wander off again. Many’s the new boy gets himself lost and wanders the pit to this very day, never to be found again, young Ronnie. Isn’t that right, Tinsnips?”

Tinsnips smiled.

“Sometimes you can hear them calling in the dark. Remember poor wee Robbie MacDougal, Tinsnips?”

Tinsnips smiled.

The pre-war wooden box stencilled “DANGER – EXPLOSIVES” deformed sideways under his weight. The nails held but he sat with calves tensed.

“You know what you’re supposed to be doing?”

“No, Mr Jones.”

Short Owen roared and shook like a tickled toad. Tinsnips smiled.

“Your father was a joker too. We’ll leave him to it, eh Tinsnips?”

Tinsnips smiled.

Ron rehearsed the imminent labour in his mind as a jerky cartoon with him in it, only for the vanilla slice with reclining Nerys Ferris to reappear, uninvited, and supplant preparation for toil with untimely hunger. Having that morning discovering his father’s tobacco pouch jammed in the toe of his left boot, damp and smelling of mould with hint of stale beer, he tore off a plug, scraped away the furry growths and chewed tobacco for the first time. The taste was like nothing he could identify. Humus, maybe. He had never chewed humus but his father had deployed it in the garden - without success - and his tastebuds could guess. The vanilla slice came to mind once more, without Nerys Ferris, and coated with mould, as he chewed.

A distant metallic rumble snaked its way through the ambient cacophony. His frown dropped into place. He put an ear – still ringing from Fizzer Phillips’ shot-firing - to a trapdoor. His frown doubled in folds, deepened in overhang. The rumble, closing fast, had grown to a roar. The runaway skip crashed into his mind.

“Open the flaming doors!”

He hauled on the trapdoor rope. The line tore from its mooring and fell apart, powdery, like old rag.

“Am I supposed to flaming knock, am I?”

Clawing the door bracing, he pulled to no effect, outmuscled by weight of timber and opposing airflow. He paused for conjecture. The doors had been glued shut in a combined April Foolist initiation jape, surely.

“Sweet baby Jesus! What’re you playing at?”

He wedged his fingers in the gap between, jagged timber, and yanked. Nails tore away. He heard the impatient clack of a hoof on a steel rail.

“Open the flaming doors, you lazy little shit! Mary mother of god.”

A door weakened. Jamming a boot in the gap, levering, he inserted the shin above, the knee, then a hand and arm up to the elbow.

“You’re flaming well costing me flaming money!”

A voice – stern – grampa Charlie? - recommended Ron not air a first underground “So?”

A deep breath allowed intrusion of the rest of his body. A second breath facilitated rotation of ninety degrees. He stood wedged, arms aloft, like Samson. In a temple whose roof did not need his help to fall. Facing Leonard Meiklejohn.

“Sweet baby Jesus. They warned me about you.”

The mysterious They, again. Whoever They were, They had warned Hobbsie, Coach Gordy, and several others above ground, and now They were two miles below the surface of the earth, warning the angriest of the Meiklejohns and who knows else. In defiance of an impish whisper sounding not unlike Cedric

urging him to “Go on, give it a go, he won’t kill you”, a second opportunity to proffer “So?” was passed up.

“Mary Mother Of God. Are we fighting to keep your job, you fat little shit?

Leonard Meiklejohn was the first adult to call Ron fat. His lamp illuminated a putrid wad inside Ron’s mouth. He averted the beam.

“Never knew a redhead you could trust.”

The third opportunity was the most tempting. His heritage was being insulted. He concluded it was a trap and remained mute, but “So?” continued to flutter on wings within his mind. It felt good.

“Jesus Mary and Joseph! Open the flaming doors!!”

Meiklejohn eyeballs at six inches, bulging and veined with wrath, catalysed the superhuman strength needed to part the doors. Wheeler and pony - a knowing Shetland from Breeza who wore a long fringe and answered to the name Roy - passed through the trap. Leonard was only angry at humans. He and ponies, any pony, and there were many, were tight. Leonard bore tidbits. His pockets were long chewed through. Wheelers changed places every quarter, with the cavil. Ponies stayed where they were. They knew their routes. Released, under airflow, the doors crashed into the rear of the departing skip.

“Jesus Mary and Joseph!”

The rumbling on the other side receded into the din.

IV

When son Jimmy was three years old, Bob Blizzard caught fire on New Year’s Eve in Swansea and either burnt to death or drowned in the channel trying to put himself out. Enacting a traditional New Years Eve ritual, Bob and several other parties were trying to raze the wooden bridge connecting the southern

half of the town with its cross-channel twin. Alertness of police and fire brigade to local history had thus far thwarted fifty years of attempts to burn the structure to the waterline. On the New Year's Eve of Bob's death, an out-of-control diversionary blaze had torn through a nearby national park, threatening the western fringe of The Bay and concentrating the minds of local services. A red glow outlined hills on the horizon while closer to the coast flames leapt from the bridge at several points. Festive exuberance led Bob Blizzard to dance in Christmas pyjamas which were highly inflammable. The channel was running hard under a king tide.

Betty Blizzard, nee Elizabeth Caulfield, of Anglo-Saxon mining stock, was reared to be a coal-winner's wife, so to embrace misadventure – lay-offs and cavil outs, strikes - always strikes - sickly children, injury, sudden death – as a permanent feature of life. The duty of the miner's wife was to be prepared. Two weeks prior to her husband's death, Betty had persuaded Bob to invest in a dairy cow obtained cheaply from a new friend. Betty had planted a vegetable garden using seed procured at no cost from the same unidentified friend, and similarly sourced three chickens. Bob fox-proofed the chicken house and at Betty's insistence covertly drowned a neighbour's cat. That the resultant healthy home-grown diet seemed to have no beneficial effect upon her son's bones perturbed Betty.

Following Bob's fiery but wet demise, Betty took in the washing and ironing of, cleaned the offices and residences for, several echelons of mine management, duties which led to an encounter with mine undermanager Willy Goldfinch,

further leading Betty to discreetly befriend Willy on convenient occasions. For his part, Willy looked kindly upon her fatherless chalk-boned only child and when the time came, secured him a job up top.

By the time he commenced work as a token boy and billy boiler, it was necessary for the twin yellow streams on Jimmy's upper lip to traverse a dark Mediterranean shadow. Inky eyebrows loomed over a small head on a long neck with pointy lump at the front. His work shorts and shirtsleeves were too short, the limbs protruding as though attempting escape. A plaster-encased right arm reclined in a rag hammock, with the first, second and third fingers wired in situ following an altercation with a sashless window.

Contract miners were paid per tonnage mined. Tokens on strings identified skips for purposes of payment. The job of a token boy was to collect the tokens from the skips and hang them on hooks, ready for reuse. The same tokens were deployed in the quarterly cavil for work places. Jimmy's wired right hand was proving disadvantageous in untangling the knot of tokens which confronted him on his first day. Nerves and pressure of responsibility saw the knot rapidly enlarge, become more knotted, and struggle escalate. Jimmy resorted to petulant flailing, left and right overhead, before repeatedly bashing the recalcitrant knot on the ground, each time the knot tightening like a fist clenched harder. Viewed from a distant management window, a one armed youth appeared to wrestle a squid.

"O'Brien."

The tokens flew. Goldfinch ducked.

“Shite! Beg pardon Mr Goldfinch.”

The fright caused Jimmy’s voice to break. His apology resembled the bark of a large foreign dog, at a volume far louder than required to bridge the distance between himself and Willy Goldfinch, who stepped back.

Willy Goldfinch, late of Nottingham and London, managerially accented, wore a brown suit, a black hat, and thought himself a soft cop as regards his dealings with the workforce. Educated, cut from superior cloth, he had determined on the ship to Australia that he would not live up to the toffee-nosed bullying stereotype, would be firm but fair to Scots, Irish, and Welshman alike.

“First day on the job can be tricky.”

He clutched a package, newspaper-wrapped.

“I didn’t see your mother in church yesterday.”

“Sick”, barked Jimmy.

The vocal volume – with which Jimmy surprised himself - did not adjust to Willy Goldfinch’s closing proximity.

“Take this home”, said Goldfinch.

The package was soggy. Cold.

“Your mother tells me you make meringues now.”

The fin of a flathead pierced Jimmy’s good hand. He sucked the wound with sloppy vigour.

“Being the only boy in The Bay who can cook is nothing to be sneezed at.

You’ll be making pavlova soon.”

“Am I being replaced by a machine, Mr Goldfinch?”

“A hard worker like you will have a job as long as he wants it.”

“Mum will be happy to hear that, Mr Goldfinch.”

Willy listed the benefits of mechanisation, laying particular stress on the safety aspect, as he wrapped a handkerchief around Jimmy’s hand. Blood – an excessive amount, it seemed to Willy, for the fin of a single flathead - seeped through stiff white Egyptian cotton monogrammed “W.G.”, in blue.

“Is Ron?”, barked Jimmy. “Is Ron getting laid off?”

“Seniority. Last on, first off. The union makes the rules, not me.”

“We came on together.”

“You have your mother to look after.”

“Ron’s father drowned too. Or he might’ve got taken by a shark. But he probably drowned first.”

That both their fathers had drowned, albeit unconfirmed in one case and fire-affected in the other, had created yet another bond between Ron and Jimmy, a tie strengthened with the onset of puberty in fatherless homes and the need to work in or above a fatherless pit. Moreover, long before leaving, Cedric had made it no secret that his post-schooling venture, fomenting industrial trouble under the Big Top, did not necessarily include his Tank Gang confreres. And so it had proven. Jimmy swabbed tears and bubbling nose with the handkerchief-bandaged hand.

“I’m not really fourteen, Mr Goldfinch.”

Willy reflected upon his employment of under-aged labour. And the fate of his handkerchief.

“Maybe I can arrange something for your mate Ron.”

“Up top?”

“Up top. So tell me, how is the mood of the men?”

Jimmy vacuumed a small avalanche of mucous back into the twin cavities above, while he assessed the undermanager’s subtext.

“I hear there’s talk of a stay-in?”

Jimmy shrugged.

“The men say they won’t hear the roof talk. With machines. Like what happened to Perce Finch. Especially if they’re doing pillars.”

“That’s a furphy, Jimmy. Machines will make pillar extraction safer. Do they want the mine to close for good?”

“What’s a furphy?”

Willy listed the benefits of coal to civilization. Jimmy learned that, without coal, there would be no civilization. Civilization was built on coal. He learned that coal miners, indeed any miners, but especially coal miners, had Goldfinch’s respect and admiration. The undermanager did admit to concern that a minority of red raggers was white-anting Australian civilization in the service of foreign masters and that this was counter to the freedom for which he, Willy Goldfinch, had fought in the Great War.

“Will the Reds take our houses?”

“The Reds take anything they want, Brian. Look at Russia.”

Willy detailed his understanding of the men’s need for job security, how he too desired security of employ, and how history had proven that the only security was progress. The Bay was finished if it stood still and he, Willy Goldfinch, would not let that happen.

“I trust your mother will be well enough to come to the dance?”

“She’ll feel much better when I tell her the news. And give her the fish.”

“I’ll find someone to untangle those tokens. Would you like to move onto spragging skips?”

“Can I do that with one hand?”

Willy patted Jimmy’s head, briefly. The hair was stiff and gritty to the touch

“Run that fish home before it goes off. And tell your mate Ron to come and see me.”

Flathead clasped to chest, Jimmy leapt from sleeper to sleeper, twisting but not breaking his ankle, further confirming it was his lucky day. His best mate was joining him up top. A steam whistle scream from the direction of the jetty caused him to flee the tracks and undertake a shortcut over a bordering slack heap. Halfway up, momentum no longer compensating for the small surface area of bony feet, he sank up to his knees in undersized coal. It felt warm down in there. Warm to hot. Smoke had been reported. He extracted a leg as though withdrawing a dipstick. Extracting the second leg without consolidating the first, he toppled backwards and rolled down the heap, flathead to chest. Hitting hard ground he remained prone, flathead beneath folded arms, coal black from head to toe, methodically self-examining for chalky breakage.

Cleared of injury – yet more confirmation that it was his lucky day – and taking the longer shortcut around the slack heap, he collided with Nerys Ferris, chewing gum and practising her jitterbug in the fossil remnants of a school uniform. Despite her strawberry blonde hair and pale skin exaggerating

Jimmy's appearing as sooty as a foreigner, Nerys Ferris recognised him immediately.

"Hey Skinny. When you were born, were your eyes in single file?"

"Pretend you're a gun and shoot through, Nerys."

"Ha ha, Skinny. Your mother told my mother there's going to be a stay-in. So who else did she tell? Did she tell her boyfriend?"

"Pretend you're a nut and bolt, Nerys."

Jimmy made it to the gutter. It was not far enough.

"I heard Goldfinch is looking for a secretary", said Nerys Ferris.

"He's got a secretary."

"She's leaving."

Nerys Ferris never looked more unattractive to Jimmy.

V

Saturday night played on his mind as ponies, skips and wheelers passed through his doors without mishap. Between wheelers he aimed his lamp at the wall and created shadow puppets with his hands. A dog. A rabbit. A chook. A shadow in the shape of the naked Nerys Ferris proved beyond his capability.

Nerys Ferris would be at the dance, with her constellations of strawberry-turning-golden freckles and breasts like the Snowy Mountains, with cherries on top. Nerys Ferris had seemed to pay him less and less attention as the breasts grew more and more until now she paid him no attention at all. Identifying her as The Moonie Moonie Nymph had been a mistake, he concluded. Cedric had often opined that the Queen Of The Bay had bigger fish to fry. Ron contemplated Nerys Ferris accompanying him into the sand dunes on Saturday night. He saw her hair lit by moonlight as she lay naked in the dunes.

He would need rum first. A lot of rum. Nerys Ferris had seen him without his dacks and told every other girl in school that she had witnessed his tiny teapot. Certain local females still laughed. A roar shot through the veins of The Pit. His beam touched the rolling cloud an instant before it took him with it.

Where was he? He could see nothing but blackness. Perhaps he was blind. He crawled. If he was heading in the wrong direction, deeper into The Pit, he would eventually arrive at the turntable at the end of the bord, where return tracks would guide him back to the flat where there would be - should be - men and light. Before that, he hoped, there would be sound. Sound travelled better than light underground.

He heard coughing. If that's what it was. Cursing. Strange laughter. Whip-crack whistling. Signals. The clang of metal and thud of wood. The hiss of dust. All amid the ringing in the head.

"Quiet! Shut the fuck up! Fucking quiet!"

The aggrieved burr of Hughie Meiklejohn. He crawled towards the expletives.

"Listen. Fucking listen, you fools!"

Bumping off the tommy-dodds rounding a bend, he came upon a circle of miners, like a statue of Russian workers, lamps directed upwards to a roof lower overhead than before. Dickie Jones jumped and swore, before putting a finger to his lips, as a squat trapper rose up before him. Hughie and Leonard Meiklejohn glared brotherly murder. Tinsnips smiled.

The glistening droplet swelled within its skin. The men mouthed silent expletives. The Bay was a damp pit but this was different. Donny Caulfield, tempted to touch, raised a finger like a camper under wet canvas. Hughie knocked the hand away. The swollen bead hung by a glassy thread. Rock creaked. The droplet quivered and fell. A second droplet formed quickly. Dickie directed the circle to depart on soft tread. The men slid into the darkness. A louder creak was followed by the sound of splitting rock.

“Out! Run!”

They ran as a unit, the stumbling catching the falling. Ron clung to Dickie Jones’s coat. The blast, from behind, did not knock him down this time. When the noise finally died, and they did not find themselves crushed, they stopped running.

“Is she finished?”

It was a small fall, by historic standards. Water, neither salt nor fresh, did not gush from above, the tunnels were not flooded. The rock had likely been cracked and loosened by the earlier goaf collapse.

Only Tinsnips’ head and shoulders were visible. They dug with bare hands. Donny Caulfield was despatched to the carpentry shop, up top, where iodine and bandages were stored. The drift was two miles in length.

VI

Hughie’s face spoke of desire to king hit undermanager Goldfinch but, as Lodge Secretary, the Scot settled for a tirade focussed on the shallowness of the workings, the water lurking above, and the dangers in proposed mechanisation. Inwardly, Hughie was conflicted on the latter, his German

mentor having declared that mechanisation was an inevitable step on the road to socialism. With all due respect to the German, the Federation took a counter position, arguing that high productivity and coal cheaper than the rest of the world meant local capacity exceeded demand, so rendering mechanisation unnecessary and to be opposed. Hughie fell in with the Fed viewpoint but as a purist was inwardly troubled. Outwardly, he bellowed. Any suggestion of mechanical extraction of pillars, as had been attempted at Coalcliff, would have the same industrial result it had had at Coalcliff.

Ron was one of eight to take turns bearing Tinsnips home. The fabric in the stretcher had rotted and was barely able to support the crushed man. Eleanor Morgan, under instruction to fetch the doctor from Swansea, galloped past on 'Moonlight'. Hughie spaced explosive outbursts with silent indignations, giant head shaking, all the way to Tinsnips' cottage. It was explained to Ron that pit safety and the political conundrum surrounding mechanisation were but the tip of the Hughie Meiklejohn iceberg of troubles.

"Stalin's done a deal with Hitler without consulting him. It's Hughie Marx Hitler Meiklejohn now."

Lodge President Dickie Jones spoke calmly in the intervals between Scottish rants. Tinsnips had heard the roof give warning but been too slow. How much more dangerous would their section of the pit become when filled with the roar of machinery? Mass mechanisation would lead to extinction of the hewer, one way or the other. Hughie fired the argument to logical conclusion: pit

owners and management could – would - simply wait for attrition by injury and death to accomplish the required reduction of the workforce, then bring in the machines. Dickie did not share the Glaswegian's logic, averring that the bosses would not be willing to wait that long. Mass retrenchment was far more efficient. Ron was already persuaded that he was never returning to The Pit. With a codicil. He would stay until saturday night as he needed money for rum.

Tinsnips was a bachelor. He had a mother somewhere. No-one could remember where. He lived in a shanty which sagged in the middle, as though the dwelling was painted on canvas draped over a rope. Inside, flooring dipped to the centre where the ground beneath had subsided into an abandoned working. Rent for the dwelling, a patchwork of timber, iron and hessian bagging, was deducted from Tinsnips' fortnightly pay packet. Ron touched an interior wall. His finger pierced two layers of ancient paint separated by empty space that was once timber and poked into the room on the other side. A gale had removed a section of roof sheeting over a bedroom, leaving a hole the size of a horse. Tinsnips kept the door closed. Malcolm had pronounced Tinsnips the fastest wheeler in the pit, deeming the trait a mixed blessing: "Tinsnips never bloody stops!" Towards the end Malcolm was heartily sick of Tinsnips and his sober haste. "Too many bloody you'll dos", he would say, searching pocket for coins. They lay Tinsnips on a foul single bed and left. A three quarter moon sat dull in a flinty sky.

VII

The lower limbs had been amputated to discourage climbing. The trunk, cleft by some long unremembered force, ran black when it rained, a dark stain radiating in tributaries from its base. Windward limbs grew polio-stunted and twisted, sprouting sickly blackened twigs with needles in sparse tufts, the whole in moonlight casting a skeletal shadow over the teacher's cottage. To leeward, the tree flourished, reaching inland and skyward for space and air free of coal. Ex-students reminisced about exploding cones and the sweet medicinal smell of flaming pine in bushfire season. In his first week of teaching, Mr Hobbs discovered his bicycle relocated and wedged immovably in the cleft. Removable parts vanished overnight. The frame was now part of the tree.

Fence palings parted like a tent flap. A shaft of moonlight lit red thatch atop a box-like head, the early hint of a red moustache. By the commencement of his working life, Ron had also sprouted red thatch in hidden parts of his body and undertaken nocturnal emissions into a retired football sock but in other respects had grown more out than up, his height levelling off at a pit-appropriate five seven eight inches. Clothes off, spied upon, he evidenced cement-mixer squatness with hints of a fleshy rotundity featuring breast-like points which his mother found difficult to fathom. Sarah was aware that his grandmother had on occasion covertly plied him with sugary treats, but one or two vanilla slices or cream buns per year were surely insufficient explanation.

“Jimmy? Jimmy.”

Jimmy's upper half dared the moonlight, head and neck protruding incrementally, like an early cartoon tortoise.

“I feel sick.”

“Don’t be a sook. He’s asleep.”

Moving in militaristic crouch to the front door, Ron slipped a folded paper under the rail spike doorknocker. A large brown paper bag, pulled from his pocket and rustling loudly upon opening, shot Jimmy back through the gap in the fence. Ron held the paper bag open and waited. Jimmy reappeared, moon lit.

“What if he catches us?”

“He won’t.”

“But what if he does?”

“He won’t.”

Ron waited, paper bag held open.

“He broke your collarbone.”

“That was Cedric.”

“Your fingers, then.”

He closed his eyes, long-suffering.

“I thought we were mates”.

Jimmy scuttled across, pulled down his shorts, and squatted over the open bag.

“Any more biscuits?”

Two halves of a biscuit emerged, not without struggle, from the shorts.

“Good biscuits. Baked one-handed? Wipe your nose.”

A shard of rag smeared the familiar thick yellow stripes across the top lip, adding biscuit crumbs to the mix. Jimmy pulled up his shorts.

“I’m too nervous.”

“Keep trying.”

Jimmy downed shorts and resumed the drop squat. A shrieking whistle cut the sound of surf.

“Kathleen”, said Ron.

“Last run. Down through the screens.”

They monitored the movement of Kathleen’s whistle while waiting for Jimmy’s inner workings to oblige.

“Through the level crossing.”

“Round the curve. Up the bank.”

“Under the white bridge.”

“Past the cemetery.”

“Into the weighbridge sidings.”

The whistle slowly died. Jimmy pulled up his shorts with a form of finality.

“I’m bunged up.”

“Hold the bag.”

Ron picked biscuit from his back teeth as he squatted.

“Any more?”

Jimmy located a further half biscuit.

“Here she comes”, said Ron.

“Oh!”

“There’s more.”

He finished. They checked the contents of the bag.

“What a beauty.”

Ron folded over the top of the bag.

“Matches”, he said.

Jimmy checked his pockets.

“I forgot.”

“You forgot on purpose.”

Jimmy shook his head too emphatically.

“You’re a flaming sook, Jimmy.”

Ron produced a box of matches and rattled it in Jimmy’s face.

“April Fool.”

He struck a match. The paper bag flamed. He banged furiously on the door, then ran. Leaping like hares through the fence, he and Jimmy shot across the schoolyard and rolled into the forward observation position, where they exchanged the secret handshake.

Mr Hobbs’ discovery of a flaming object on his stoop induced a flurry of stomping before comprehension saw him swear, retch, and hop from the stoop on the unfouled leg.

“Don’t think I don’t know it’s you, Shipwater. And don’t think I don’t know you two are in cahoots, Bugg and Blizzard.”

He sought a patch of grass. The yard was dust. Smeared scraps of paper smouldered on the stoop, flaming briefly as dry paper was encountered. Ron’s young shit stank.

“A final statement on your education, is it? I tried.”

He hurled a rock into the darkness, without luck.

“Happy birthday, Shipwater.”

Scraping sole on fallen fence, picking at fouled seams with twigs which snapped, he resiled from attending to shit-clogged eyelets and, one-shoe’d, took refuge in stuffing his pipe.

“Did one of you drop a handkerchief?”

He heard a whisper of alarm, cut short.

“There’s a name on it. Ah, yes. The runniest nose in the school. I’m getting the police.”

He lit up. Lambent glow found Jimmy’s face, streaked with rivulets of tears and snot.

“Please don’t get the police, sir.”

Jimmy blew his nose melodramatically and wiped his face with rigour before apprehending the rag in his hand. Mr Hobbs seized an ear, lifted the attached body onto tiptoes and held it suspended while blowing test smoke through his nostrils. The sharp shot through the beak was energising. He addressed the darkness.

“Letting your best mate take the rap, are you? What sort of coward lets his mate go to gaol for him?”

“I don’t want to go to gaol! Ron!?”

Mr Hobbs watched pipe smoke drift upward through pine branches.

“According to the law, you have committed a serious assault.”

“He made me do it, sir. I’m bunged up anyway. Ron! Tell him I’m bunged up!”

Ron stepped from the darkness.

“He’s bunged up, sir.”

Mr Hobbs scowled at his befouled shoe.

“Do you have a toothbrush, Shipwater?”

“I don’t know. No, sir.”

“Fetch it. Then I’ll let your mate go.”

Ron and Mr Hobbs locked eyes.

“April Fool”, said Mr Hobbs.

He puffed smoke from a corner of his mouth.

“Come here, Shipwater.”

He lifted Ron skyward by the ear, simultaneously releasing Jimmy.

“Fetch Constable Vella, Blizzard.”

Jimmy tried not to meet Ron’s gaze as he scrambled away, fell though the gap in the fence, and broke a thumb.

“I thought I’d seen the last of you, Shipwater.”

There was a weariness to the exchange. A sudden attempt to break free saw the yellow pincer hold and the Ron’s ear stretch to a pink gnomish point. Mr Hobbs hauled him, by the organ, to the stoop.

“Sit.”

Ron perched a cheek on a cleaner edge. Mr Hobbs saw the folded missive under the rail spike.

“What is this?”

“It’s a list.”

“Read it, please.”

“Can I stand up? To clear the chest for oration?”

“No.”

He read.

“Why is it the quiet ones you’ve got to watch?”

The gurgle of pipe was the only evident reaction.

“Continue.”

“How was I supposed to know troublemakers always sit up the back?”

The pipe gurgled again. The eyebrows above it were arched.

“Continue.”

“Is red really the colour of danger in nature?”

Mr Hobbs knocked the pipe empty on a window ledge.

“Continue.”

“What is the first water? What is the second water?”

Locating a mean patch of grass which had earlier eluded him, Mr Hobbs cleaned out the bowl.

“Things don’t make sense, sir.”

“Indeed. Now I have a question for you. Is that a frown or a smirk?”

“I don’t know, sir.”

Mr Hobbs took the circular yellow tin from a pocket, gave the pipe bowl a suspicious sniff and final scoop of forefinger inside handkerchief, then re-packed.

“Why is there a picture of the pit head and the loading jetty on the school badge?”

“Karl Marx will tell you, when you’re older. And you discover the benefits of reading.”

He noted the ex-student’s gaze fixed on his mouth, pupils like train tunnels.

“Why do you stare at me, Shipwater?”

Ron took the risk.

“Little flecks of white foam stretch in the corner of your mouth when you talk.

Sir. Like wee elastic bands.”

Mr Hobbs wiped the corners of his mouth before sniffing the pipe once more. The hint of grass in port wine tobacco did not deter. He closed his eyes and lit up.

“I’m glad we’re finally having this talk, Shipwater.”

“When I stare harder, your teeth grow.”

“Do they now?”

“Then they turn into an old back fence. And your head turns into a house. Your hair looks like a roof. The door is where your mouth is. It’s wide open and inside I can see a dark hall with a carpet. The house is red when you’re angry. That’s when I know a duster is coming. You’re a good shot, sir. Mum reckons there’s a ring of scars round my head, like a dotted line saying where to cut.”

“You were never really there, were you? Present. In class.”

Ron closed his eyes, saw the rise and fall of the glow, as Mr Hobbs puffed.

“Can you really see through your eyelids?”

“Yes, sir. Especially when it’s sunny. Everything looks pink. You never believed I could see Gallipoli.”

“I believe I am beginning to.”

Mr Hobbs located a wooden soft drink box, tipped out beer bottles and inspected for redbacks before taking a seat.

“I could see the Honour Roll too. I could see ‘W.W. Shipwater, M.M’ in gold letters. I could see Nerys Ferris out the window too, hanging upside down on the goal posts, sucking a licorice strap. Her lips were black and her underpants were blue. Can I smoke, sir?”

“It will stunt your growth.”

“I work now.”

He felt older as he clicked open the lid and attached a paper to his lip.

“You don’t have to go down the pit, you know, Shipwater.”

“I’m already down it. Dad put me on the list the day I started school.”

“Herbert has a trainee position in a bank. You could do something like that.

Work with your brain. You’re brighter than Herbert, you know. Herbert just pays attention.”

“Herbert dacked me in front of Nerys Ferris.”

“Would I be correct in deducing you are an admirer of Nerys Ferris?”

The rollie bore resemblance to a miniature megaphone. As he lit up, the tobacco fell burning into his lap. The paper flamed, burnt his lips and singed his downy proto-moustache. The smell of burnt hair induced an attack of sneezing. A nugget of encrusted coal grit shot from a nostril.

“Would you like me to roll that for you?”

“I hear voices when girls look at me.”

“What do these voices say?”

“Run. Pretend you don’t see her. Throw a rock at her. Pull your pants out of your crack. They all speak at once.”

Mr Hobbs rolled a smoke of a greater than average paper-to-tobacco ratio.

Ron coughed himself off the stoop trying to impress with a drawback.

“Me and Jimmy are getting the hell out of The Bay. We’re going to build a boat and sail away to see the longest river in the world. The Nile. And the highest mountain. Mt Everest. And the capital of Venezuela. Caracas. And the Pygmy Bushmen of the Kalahari and the Blue Men of Morocco and the Yellow Peril of Asia.”

A second drawback stayed down several seconds before he exploded.

“Jimmy’s not coming back with Constable Vella, is he?”

The explosion in his lungs became laughter.

“He’s hiding under the house.”

The laughter reverted to coughing. He felt faint from lack of breath.

“You better go home too. Go. Before I change my mind.”

Mr Hobbs ran a more comprehending gaze down the long list of questions compiled over the course of his schooling of Ron Shipwater.

“You’re right, Shipwater. There is no connection between the longest river in the world and the pit.”

“It didn’t make sense, sir.”

“Good luck, Shipwater.”

Taking the shortcut home along the railway track, he smoked Mr Hobbs’ rollie down to a maggot-like stub before flicking it into the dark like a grown man.

The engines were stored for the night but he could not resist turning around, several times, in case one roared out of the dark and ran him down. It was too late to go the long way.

1940

I

My fifteenth birthday was a peach. Undermanager Goldfinch informed me that I had prospects. I was management material and it was only a matter of time.

And Hitler said he was sorry. Poland was a mistake. The might of the German armed forces had taken a wrong turn at the Brandenburg Gate. That man Stalin had switched road signs. Stalin was a Permanent April Foolist. Every day was April 1 to Uncle Joe. He was switching road signs left and right all across Europe. France was Adolf's next wrong turn. Then he took a wrong turn towards the Poms. Even the Luftwaffe was fooled. Hand it to that man Stalin. He was a card. Adolf and Uncle Joe laughed like drains.

Heavy swell crashed into the piles. The spray blew across the rock platform which curved beneath the jetty. Ron sipped at two remnant pints in rotation as Jimmy rolled a cigarette with his good hand of the moment. They talked of Tinsnips' bad luck in copping a rockfall just days before managerial offering of the opportunity to be cavilled out for a machine. In the stiff maritime breeze, Ron's clothing clung tight, caught in cracks, while Jimmy's fluttered on his frame like rag-ended flags.

"I want to be replaced by a machine", said Ron.

He hurled an empty glass at the sea. It shattered on the edge of the rock platform, almost silently, amid the crash of the swell.

"I'll put the word on Goldfinch again. I'll get you up top, mate."

Jimmy's new voice had by now achieved a blaring stability. Ron downed his mate's black with a pointed skepticism and hurled the glass, successfully, into the sea.

"Hobbsie said I could work with my brain. But not in The Bay."

"You can't leave The Bay, mate."

Jimmy completed rolling. He licked the gummed edge.

"Goldfinch'll be there tonight."

He pointedly poked a smoke ring.

"So will Nerys Ferris."

Jimmy had recently mastered the production of doughnut-sized rings which rolled through the air, and which he could catch on his finger like a quoit, or something more salacious which he pretended to know about. At home, with his mother, he was exploring the viability of deep-frying doughnuts on a widow's pension supplemented by the fruits of occasional relationships. Ron's mother had still not discerned that her son's puppyish belly evidenced his best mate's experiments with flour, oil and sugar, dunked if not drowned in alcohol filched from the pub verandah or a coat pocket at The Pit.

"Nerys Ferris wants to do it with you. Tonight. She told me."

Ron snorted twin jets like a dragon, a counter to the loosening in his bowels.

"Queen of The Bay, mate. That'd make you King."

Jimmy turned away before Ron could examine his face for irony. A distant bell struggled against the wind and the sound of the sea.

"I'll go", said Jimmy.

He hopscotched a string of rockpools, windmill-skated patches of slime, hared up the slope and disappeared into the tussocks without breaking a bone.

Ron navigated the arcade of jetty piles to the edge of the rock platform. Waves slapped off the piles, and rock, rhythmically drenching him. Squashing cunjevoi with his feet, squirting seawater at seawater, he contemplated work prospects beyond the pit. A voice akin to Jimmy's new voice said "You can't leave the Bay, mate". A second voice reminded him that Nerys Ferris harboured ambitions beyond marrying a miner. A third asked "What can you do with your brain?" A fourth remarked that Jimmy remarked that Nerys Ferris remarked that she wanted to do it with him tonight. A fifth questioned whether Jimmy could be trusted. A sixth posed the tantalising notion: might Nerys Ferris's desire to *bung on* be sated by wedding a bank teller or postal officer working in, residing in, Swansea?

Jimmy returned with three residual beverages.

"False alarm. Swansea Fire Brigade on a practice run."

Ron continued in silent conversation about love and work, gaze fixed on the vanishing point of the convergent pilings, oblivious to the drenching sea spray. A voice asked "Where does a fireman stand on the Nerys Ferris scale of eligible occupations?" He turned and found Jimmy gone. His best mate was ever wary of the freak wave.

II

The moon in the day sky intimating that a golden light might be available after sundown, enhancing romantic prospects, saturday night proved as black as the witch's cat. Thick October fog settled on the western ridge. Wispish ribbons crept down the slope, negotiating ti-tree, paperbark and she-oak to slide into The Bay, passing kerosene lamp and candle-lit windows en route to the unlit

street and lowest point, the creek bed beneath the bridge, where the wisps melded in a blanket as impenetrable as the parent on the ridge. Ron and Jimmy sliced with sword-like hands as they crossed the bridge. Snips of fog curled up from below, to swim like hairtail around their ankles. Jimmy proposed waiting on the bridge, enveloped, for passing trade. Ron hurled an empty Red Mill flask into the murk, drew another, unopened, from his pocket. The cork squeaked. Female laughter deep within the fog saw Jimmy pull a pre-rolled cigarette from behind his ear, light up, and blow a prurient smoke ring. The laughter took on a subtext of ‘You’ve got to be joking’. Jimmy proffered the cigarette to the amusement within the fog.

“Smoke?”

His newfound volume still startled. Lubricated by an afternoon of purloined black, warmed by evening rum, boosted by the elevated self-confidence which accompanies the ability to blow lewd smoke rings, the chalky-boned provocateur’s new voice was strident with saturday night bravado, a theatrical confidence driven on by a certain fear behind the eyes. The new swagger not only gave Jimmy to believe he was attractive to the opposite sex, and so discover that cultivating relationships with females put less stress on his bones than time spent in male company, it also inured him to scorn. So it seemed to Ron, upon whom the arrival of puberty had had the opposite effect. Scorn surely awaited within the RSL War Memorial Hall. Whether or not the price was worth paying lay in the marble-white-and-strawberry-and-gold-freckled hands of Nerys Ferris. “So?” had no leverage when it came to Nerys Ferris.

III

Kay Caulfield, Bronwyn Jones, and Enid Davies emerged in home made dresses inherited from sisters or cousins, altered, hand-washed and flat-ironed to eradicate taint of hand-me-down, so representing dignity within modest means, not airs and graces. Enid Davies' long dark hair was tied in a green ribbon. Jimmy threw back his head to send a rapid sequence of smoke rings rolling upward into the night.

“Going to the dance?”

Kay, Bronwyn and Enid looked at each other and exploded into cackling before tumbling across the bridge into the fog, to the accompaniment of Enid Davies' latest ditty.

“Fatty and Skinny went to the dance.

The girls all said they had no chance

Skinny did the quickstep and broke both legs

The girls all pelted him with rotten eggs

Fatty fell in love with the Queen Of The Bay

He danced the foxtrot but the fox ran away..”

Nerys Ferris would claim to be the first to refer to Ron and Jimmy as Fatty and Skinny, thus linking them to comic legend, but the honour belonged to Enid Davies.

Una Meiklejohn and long-legged daughter Amy strode onto the bridge. Both wore cardigans.

“Why aren't you two at the Lodge meeting?”

It was rumoured the Meiklejohns had emigrated after Una had thrown a bomb at a bank, and that the cardigan was a disguise. Una saw herself as to

the political left of eldest son Hughie. Irrepressible fertility, in which she took a curiously conservative pride, had thus far curtailed her plans for major local activism. When Una looked in the mirror, which was infrequently, she liked to see Rosa Luxemburg looking back, in approval.

“What Lodge meeting?”

“What Lodge meeting?”, echoed Jimmy.

Una’s wire-framed spectacles focussed interrogation into a single scorching beam. Ron and Jimmy felt small and charred in their chests. As Una dragged her daughter into the fog, Amy looked back over her shoulder. Courting trouble from Amy’s brothers, Jimmy blew a smoke doughnut in her direction.

“What Lodge meeting?”, asked Ron.

Jimmy shrugged. An invisible horse, approaching fast, backed them against the bridge rail. Eleanor Morgan and ‘Moonlight’ galloped onto the bridge. Loose planks lifted on their spikes. Fay Thorpe clung on behind Eleanor, like a koala with a white handbag on its arm. Jimmy wolf-whistled. Unable to play sport, Jimmy had put spare years to good use in becoming proficient in wolf-whistling and the making of fart-noises with his underarms and various other parts of his body.

“Who’re you whistling at, face-ache?”

Nerys Ferris speared from the fog like the prow of a sailing ship, albeit more modestly clad and bearing under one arm a full-length mirror in french-polished rosewood frame.

“What’s that?”, asked Jimmy, expelling smoke.

Nerys Ferris sailed onward, in the opposite direction to the War Memorial Hall, without deigning to scorn. Of the girls of The Bay, only The Queen Of The Bay allowed herself airs and graces, the source of which was subject to much conjecture.

“The dance is thataway!”, yelled Jimmy, in riposte to air and grace.

Nerys Ferris disappeared.

“I’m not going if she’s not going”, said Ron

“She’s borrowed the mirror to make herself look good for you, mate.”

He dragged Ron to the crest of the hill.

“Catch the look Amy Meiklejohn gave me?”

The yellow-lit windows of the War Memorial Hall below appeared to float in foggy darkness. ‘Moonlight’ grazed scrappy grass outside.

III

Despite his recent death, a portrait of King George V astride a horse significantly taller than a pit pony still hung beside the Great War Honour Roll. A purple and gold banner read “Lest We Forget”. Una Meiklejohn, Mrs Hughie Meiklejohn, a trio of Mrs Jones’, Mrs Thorpe, Mrs Caulfield, Mrs Phillips, and Mrs C. Vella clustered in yellowy gloom, mid-floor, like a dominant faction. Other wives sat more singularly scattered, backed hard against the walls on pews borrowed from the church. Amy Meiklejohn and certain other girls with form were kept in close tow. Less troublesome daughters congregated in small groups which eyed each other. A keg sat astride coal-blackened saw-horses. Hovering in the doorway, Ron and Jimmy drew teacups from their pockets and braved the move to the keg. They found it as yet untapped.

Chocko Vella hurried in, swearing in Maltese, deploying a fishing knife on a piano accordion. He lowered his voice upon seeing Mrs Vella. Donny Caulfield ferried a gigantic ex-Scottish Marching Band bass drum and a snare which seemed a cake tin by comparison. Billy Burns arrived in the company of his personal pint glass. Mrs Burns, antipodean version, neither drank nor danced. Billy sprayed the band in tapping the keg. Testing the product, he pointedly blew the first outsized head in Jimmy's face.

"Didn't you two hear the bell?"

"We thought it was the fire brigade."

Chocko sliced open his hand in freeing the stuck key. Donny tested rusty paradiddles as his accordionist bled and cursed.

"What was the meeting about?"

Willy Goldfinch entered in a suit, not his best. The hall quietened. Willy nodded greeting. Women nodded reply. Collecting a glass from the servery, reflexively wiping the vessel while proceeding to the keg, Willy encountered Ron gunning two teacups of frothy lager.

"Are you allowed alcohol, lad?"

"Old enough to work, old enough to drink", said Billy Burns.

"Old enough to join dole queue", added Chocko.

"I'm just the undermanager, Chocko. We're all on the same side tonight. We all lost someone."

Froth was also over-represented in Willy Goldfinch's glass. He raised it without the usual certainty.

"The King."

“He’s dead.”

“The new King.”

“Chop off his head. Chop off all their heads.”

Willy resisted the urge to look the high-pitched republican in the eye.

“I were King of Friggin’ Wigan”, said Billy. “Abdicated to experience dignity of labour.”

Billy drained his pint in one, eyes locked on Goldfinch, now in retreat to the doorway, where Jimmy rolled smoke doughnuts while smiling at a distant Amy Meiklejohn.

“Your mother coming along, Jimmy?”

“She’s sick, Mr Goldfinch.”

“She’s been sick a lot lately.”

“She said to give you this.”

Goldfinch jammed the folded note in a pocket.

“Well. I just wanted to pay my respects. Good evening.”

Goldfinch left. He passed Nerys Ferris, arriving.

“Evening. Mr Goldfinch.”

“Good evening. Miss Ferris isn’t it?”

Nerys Ferris joined Ron and Jimmy without seeming to see them. Her floral-patterned cotton dress and bare feet were set off, Ron observed, by new Bluebird earrings and Bluebird bracelet. A Bluebird clip held her hair. Jimmy’s eyeballs urged him to seize the fire. After draining his beer, he kept the empty teacup to his mouth to give the appearance of not being able to speak at that moment. Nerys Ferris marched over to the band.

“Go on, mate. Ask her. She wants you to.”

He strode to the keg, head down. When he looked up Nerys Ferris was gone.

Donny and Chocko made a move on Cab Calloway's "Hidey Hidey Ho".

Chocko scatted the verses in Maltese Australian.

Ron wandered, pretending to enjoy himself, the pretence falling away on spying Nerys Ferris through the kitchen servery, jitterbugging, alone, dress spinning out to reveal milk-white thighs. The soles of her feet were black. She swigged from a flask which slipped in and out of a dress pocket like part of the dance. A voice suggested rum as a possible starting point for conversation.

"What are you waiting for?"

Ron pulled his pants from his crack and gazed into his teacup. He could do without Jimmy's pressure.

"She's waiting."

Shoved towards the kitchen entry, Ron detoured to the keg, sharply, as though bouncing off an invisible wall.

Wingnut Vella's short small-footed steps produced a clicking noise on all surfaces. An anxious red ragger, miner-short, minority catholic, he sported indoors and out a blue cloth hat of small brim, pulled low, so projecting forward his ears. Behind Wingnut's back, it was ventured that he wore the hat in bed. He entered clicking, trailed by a plump, dark-skinned teenage girl who, short, big-breasted, was not quite in proportion and knew it.

"Comrades."

Jimmy rolled a smoke ring at the Maltese bolshevik. The bolshevik slashed it to ribbons with his free hand. Wingnut was convinced it was Jimmy who had in

the sand dunes introduced his god-daughter Denise, aged eleven, to smoking.

The guilty party was Cedric. Surprised at not being blamed for a crime committed by Cedric, Ron attributed the mistake to Wingnut's Maltese heritage and to Jimmy looking like he lived in an ashtray.

"Mrs Vella is cooking and will dance later tonight."

That Jimmy had missed an important Lodge Meeting confirmed Wingnut's desire to break every chalky bone in the reprobate's body.

"How are the ponies, Mr Vella?"

Ron surprised both himself and Wingnut with the question. Wingnut was deputy pit ostler.

"Ponies they are perfect."

Wingnut positioned the plump teenage girl on an empty pew and hastened, clicking, arm cocked behind his back, to the keg.

Jimmy zeroed in like a blowfly with an overly loud voice.

"Jimmy. You and Wingnut - ?"

"I am Alberto's neice. I am Maria."

"Alberto? Is his name Alberto? Hey, Wingnut, is your name Alberto!?"

Wingnut thought better of spitting on the expanse of floor between himself and the foul purveyor of cigarettes to little children.

"What is it you call my uncle?"

"Wingnut. The Maltese Wingnut. Because his ears stick out. Because he never takes his hat off. Because he's got no hair. Before he got the tit for tat, he used to wear a thingo. A rug."

"A rug?"

"A mat. On his head? Only Ron's dog got it."

Maria's eyes were darker than any eyes Ron had seen before, seeming to darken further as she stared.

"Thought it was a small cat", he contributed, softly.

The spike in the night's possibilities quickened Jimmy's breathing, causing the rollie paper stuck to his lower lip to make a light fluttery noise, like the wings of a moth. He attempted an earnest adult voice.

"What sort of hooligan sets his dog on a man's hairpiece?"

The Donny and Chocko Combo launched into an attempt at swing. Repeated darting of Jimmy's eyes suggested Ron return to the keg or join Nerys Ferris jitterbugging in the kitchen or take her rolling in the dunes.

"Where d'you come from, Maria?", asked Jimmy.

"I am from Malta."

"Oh yeah. Where's that?"

"Malta is an island in the Mediterranean Sea. The capital is Valetta. Summer is hot and dry, winter is cool and wet. Natural resources are limestone, salt, and fish. Miners from Malta were imported to The Bay in 1915 because of a labour shortage in the war."

Ron found himself citing Hobbsie, surprising Jimmy and Maria and, again, himself. Hobbsie had succeeded in planting knowledge in his head without him knowing. Wingnut returned, smouldering over his beer.

"How come you didn't go back home after the war, Alberto?"

Jimmy disguised the snipe as an innocent question, for Maria's benefit.

"Your mother, Jimmy, I don't see. She is still walking out with Mr Undermanager Goldfinch?"

Wingnut handed his niece a cup of water.

“Stay where I can see you.”

He clicked in the direction of a plate of quartered sandwiches, white oozing red, on the servery counter.

Nerys Ferris approached, did not notice Ron, looked Maria up and down from an imagined height, and passed on. Jimmy affected to whisper but was still loud.

“Ron’s girlfriend. Nerys Ferris.”

“She’s not my girlfriend.”

“He’s been in love with Nerys Ferris ever since he saw her big blue undies in kindy.”

Ron felt the simultaneous bushfire in the face and need to toilet lower down.

He mimed drinking from the empty teacup as he stared at a wall.

“She’s still waiting.”

“Piss off, Jimmy.”

The riposte swirled inside the teacup.

“Get you a beer, Maria? Beer?”, asked Jimmy.

Noting her uncle, back turned, sandwich quarter in free hand, with Mediterranean excitement informing Faith and Jockey Caulfield of his descent from pirate stock, Maria nodded minimally. Jimmy swooped on the keg. The Donny and Chocko Combo lunged at an Ellington-ish jungle jump, finding common ground after several bars. Only Nerys Ferris heard the call of the wild. She loped back into the kitchen

“Why do you not dance with your girlfriend, Ron?”, asked Maria.

“She’s not my girlfriend.”

Jimmy delivered the beer. Maria's uncle had progressed to describing how his family had moved into the mining of limestone and become Marxist-Leninists after piracy became socially unacceptable.

Nerys Ferris had removed or lost the Bluebird clip and now flung her hair back and forth across her face as though whipping herself, while her swirling skirt moved up and down like the dome of a giant floral jellyfish. Ron felt unsteady on his feet. His face was hot. There was a ringing in his ears. He drained his beer. Jimmy relieved him of the teacup and slipped away.

"Dance?"

Nerys Ferris did not seem to hear him. He barely heard himself.

"Dance?"

The dome of the floral jellyfish collapsed to a skirt once more. He felt her breath on his ear as she gripped his arm and pulled him close as though to share a secret.

"What?", she yelled.

"Do you want to dance?"

She inspected his pupils for what seemed minutes before whispering in his ear, and resuming the jungle jump. He collected a fistful of tomato and relish sandwiches as he departed the kitchen. Jimmy rolled a grub-like cigarette.

"What'd she say?"

"Nothing."

"What'd she say?"

"Nothing!"

Jimmy lit the rollie and passed it to Ron.

Nerys Ferris smelt like a rose that night. Say someone's name and I remember their smell.

Eleanor Morgan smelt like her horse. Her horse smelt like her. Jimmy reckoned Amy

Meiklejohn smelt permanently on heat. Didn't do Jimmy any good. Donald and Daisy smelt

like Bryllcream and petrol. Mum smelt like a bluebag. Clean. Gramma Shipwater smelt like

she'd spent twenty years in a suitcase under the house. Dot smelt like Solvol. For hard-to-

budge stains. Once upon a time. Now she smells like Alpine King Size Menthols and Dettol.

Eve smelt like eucalyptus and goanna oil. Eve was always getting herself scratched and bitten

walking up and down the creek bed looking for whatever it was she was looking for. Nan

Baker smelt like the Bible with a whiff of cream bun. Most of the women in The Bay smelt

like flowers on saturday night. Rose and lavender were the favourites. During the week they

smelt of soap and food and beer and baby sick.

Anyway Nerys Ferris smelt like rose that night.

IV

The clomp of boots on the boards above overpowered drum and accordion.

The thud of heavy surf inveigled itself into the rhythm. Ron's head hung between his knees. His hands gripped an empty teacup. Maria sat cross-legged, securing her skirt. Jimmy blew smoke doughnuts as if tossing quoits or halos over Maria's head. Quartered panes of light slanted across the ground in front of them, curving up and over the back of "Moonlight", grazing. Seeking to further amuse, Jimmy poked a finger through a halo.

"Show you the sand dunes?"

He lifted a thick spiral of hair from her neck.

"I must stay with my uncle."

"Never seen hair this black before. Blacker than coal."

Maria looked to Ron but saw no sign of life. A twist of the head freed her hair.

“They’re just over there. The dunes.”

Jimmy lowered his arm.

“I have the wrong shoes.”

“Take them off.”

The crook of his elbow heated her neck to sweating. She clenched her hands deeper in her lap and stared at a darkened cottage across the road. Jimmy flicked his cigarette away, deliberately, to become a tiny glow at the heart of a nearby bush, a ruse designed to distract Maria as he gripped her shoulder and endeavoured to flatten her backwards, in surreptitious increments, so to lie together. Maria remained rigidly upright, on a low centre of gravity, like a pretty plump doorstep.

“Get off her! Get your hands off!”

Wingnut lifted Jimmy by the shirtfront. Clenched fists pounded Jimmy’s chest.

“I’ve. Got. Chalky. Bones!”

“Maria. Get home!”

“Moonlight” grazed as though nothing unusual was taking place.

“Your Papa warned me. ‘Do not let her out of your sight’ is what he said. You get home now!”

Maria fled downhill and plunged into a dollop of fog. Her uncle continued cursing and pounding the molester. Inquisitive silhouettes appeared in the panes of light slanting the ground outside. Donny and Chocko discontinued ‘The Darktown Strutters Ball’. Making himself thinner, Jimmy shimmied downwards, snaked free of his shirt and, Wingnut kicking and whipping him with what remained of the garment, crawled away. ‘Moonlight’ finally looked up.

“I’ll break every chalky bone in your chalky body, you filthy animal!”

“My leg! My leg! You broke my leg!”

Trailing the limb like a shot soldier, pursued by Maltese expletives, Jimmy dragged himself under the War Memorial Hall, bellied up the sloping site, bashed the back of his head on hardwood beams with increasing frequency as the space narrowed, turned over and, heeling, wedged himself as deeply in the gap as possible. His breath rebounded from the floorboards above. Dance steps traversed his face, coal dust fell from cracks. The leg throbbed. His nemesis seemed to lose vehemence as native cursing was corrupted by a variant of English. Followed by silence. In which, after a time, taking stock of his position, Jimmy imagined himself bravely mining a shallow but vital seam. The gallant shift was brought to an end by Donny and Chocko resuming with Strauss or thereabouts, and waltzing boots on floorboards. Jimmy slid out from under the far side of the hall, which had no windows, and hobbled into the darkness of the dunes.

Ron was woken by the hiss of burning leaves.

A cohort of shortish men crunched uphill, Lodge President Dickie Jones at the head. Lodge Secretary Hughie Meiklejohn propelled the pit wheelchair, designed and constructed by Jockey Caulfield, featuring timber frame and bicycle wheels but no braking system. A shabby blanket covered Tinsnips’ knees, another his shoulders. Ron attempted to slip out of the light of the burning bush. Flames picked out the colour of his hair.

“Dancing more important than Lodge meetings, is it?”

“I didn’t hear the bell, Mr Meiklejohn.”

Leonard Meiklejohn growled.

“I gave your dopey mate the word outside the pub.”

Bloody Jimmy.

The procession entered the hall. Ron trailed, inwardly interrogating Jimmy, outwardly appearing focussed on Lodge business, whatever that might be, before he veered to the keg. The band stopped playing. Lodge Treasurer Chocko Vella joined his fellow officials. A plate of sandwiches was passed. Tinsnips smiled and shook his head.

“Beer?”, asked Ron, from the keg.

Tinsnips smiled.

“Seven ounce. His plumbing’s tender.”

The pony, lost in two oversized hands, which shook, spilled down Tinsnips’ front. Short Owen Jones held the glass steady. Tinsnips spluttered more than he swallowed.

“Tinsnips’ll be with us in spirit.”

“Couldn’t keep you away, could we, boy?”

“The meeting was unanimous, Bluey. Are you with us?”

Hec Morgan was the only person ever to refer to him as Bluey. He never learned why. He frowned over his teacup.

“With you..what?”

He felt the men looking at him. Felt their wives and children looking at him. Felt himself looking anywhere The Bay wasn't looking at him. There was nowhere.

The meeting was unanimous. About what? Bloody Jimmy. Bloody Jimmy.

He thought to summon a look of wounded innocence but abandoned the gambit. The look, once young and genuine, had long been discredited. Protesting innocence now simply confirmed the reputation of red-haired troublemaker.

Jimmy's dirt-smeared face rose up in a window, mouthing "Ron! Ron!", hands waving wildly. The men followed Ron's eyeline over Dickie Jones' shoulder and saw nothing. When they turned back, Ron had vanished.

Jimmy's eyes were the size of tombolas. His breath heaved. An undercoat of dirt was overlain by a top coat of sand. He hobbled and hopped into the darkness.

"Quick!"

Ron stumbled after, beer splashing in his gut, demanding entry to an already overextended bladder. Behind him, the faces of Lodge men pressed against the windows of the War Memorial Hall.

They crawled up the sand in silence, low, like soldiers under wartime wire.

Jimmy signalled a halt below the crest. The south easterly was gusting. The fog

had vacated the dunes. Clouds moved in spurts, low overhead. Jimmy curved a finger up and over the dune. Ron bellied to the top, peered into the black valley below, saw nothing. He heard a faint grunting and rhythmic slapping, accompanied by the squeak of sand. Jimmy rested head on folded arms, dog-like, to wait. The scent on the breeze troubled Ron.

A cloud split in two. The moon sailed into the strait and lit the dunes white. Nerys Ferris's legs were bent at the knee, and spread. Her feet dug into the sand. Blue underwear trailed from an ankle, the hem of her dress was around her chest, strawberry blonde hair caught in her mouth. Her eyes, directed over Willy Goldfinch's shoulder, at the sky or anything else of interest, glimpsed moonlit red hair. Willy Goldfinch mistook panic for excitement. Nerys Ferris scrambled to her feet.

"You said you'd get off at Redfern."

Willy followed her gaze and saw nothing. He pulled up his suit pants and tucked in his shirt.

"It'll be all right. Do you like the perfume?"

Willy tipped sand from his shoes as clouds curtained the moon.

They raced back, up and over the dunes, and plunged into the cemetery. Jimmy danced among the dead, braying like an amused ass. Ron flopped atop an earthen grave. The ground was cold, and seemed to give under his weight. He rose, quickly, and kicked at the wooden cross marking the last repose of Gladys Jenkins. The arm of the cross flew off and speared Jimmy in the groin.

“You didn’t want to marry her, did you?”

V

The legion attending Tinsnips had trebled in size. Women and children formed an outer ring. Voices of beery determination accompanied the squeal of bicycle wheels rolling back and forth in industrial agitation. A voice, too late, suggested Ron veer quickly into the dark behind the hall. This voice was always too late. He froze in the Glaswegian glare. Tinsnips and the cohort turned as one in his direction. He closed his eyes. Saw Nerys Ferris, legs splayed beneath the under manager.

“Make up your mind, lad.”

“We’re going in. We’re staying in till we get what we want.”

He employed recollected moaning of Nerys Ferris in steeling his resolve.

“I’m done with The Pit.”

“You’ll leave The Pit feet first if you’re lucky.”

“You want your mother to starve, do you?”

“I’ll get a job somewhere. In a bank. Or a post office.”

Men laughed. Tinsnips grimaced with amusement and folded his arms to still the remains of his ribs. Women smiled and shook their heads, others went lemon-lipped. Leonard Meiklejohn whistled a snippet from a Strauss waltz, implying that Ron was bunging it on, la de da. Short Owen was first to realise that the clown was serious.

“You’ll still be working for the bosses, Ronnie.”

“The roof won’t fall on my head in a bank. I won’t get hit by a runaway skip in a post office.”

“They can still lay you off. Still cut your wages and conditions.”

“Don’t think they won’t put machines in banks as soon as they invent them.”

Eyes open, he saw Goldfinch ploughing Nerys Ferris.

“They’re planning to work machines in pillars. Here. In The Bay.”

“They’ll kill the lot of us.”

“Anyone left will be out of a job anyway.”

“Everlasting uncertainty, son. Everywhere. That’s what the Great Man said.

“Unless we stick together.”

One eye watched Goldfinch plough on as the other discerned Jimmy crouched behind the scorched callistemon.

“Your father and your grandfather would be with us.”

“Tinsnips. You’d be with us if you could, wouldn’t you, Tinsnips?”

He thought the Tinsnips smile looked stuck, somehow, as a soft sound slipped between the lips.

“Are you in?”

Staring at Tinsnips, he saw jiggling bluebirds, smelt rose perfume. He nodded.

“Good man. What about your skinny mate?”

“He has to look after his mother.”

“Isn’t Goldfinch doing that?”

Men roared. Women looked horrified, or smirked at their feet.

“Your mate will be the one who needs looking after when I catch up with him.”

Wingnut was reputed to have castrated a young billy goat with his teeth. No-one knew why.

Wingnut patrolled the perimeter of the hall, peering beneath with the aid of a safety lamp, unwilling to believe the niece molester had escaped. Inside, miners' wives and daughters turned down the wicks. The smell of burning cord and kerosene drifted out the door, to mingle with the nose of Ron's final beer for the evening, a foamy residue sucked from the dregs of the keg. He felt fat and dizzy. Musical instruments and piles of unwashed plates were ferried past him. A metal garbage bin slipped from Billy Burns' grasp. Ron leapt at the noise. A sharp pain shot through his bladder. Billy scooped dirt-encrusted sandwich quarters and older, fouler contents back into the bin as paper blew across the ground. Short Owen Jones locked up and handed the key to Mrs Jones. The keg was left on the stoop for Jumpy Bates. Ron's bladder, in near transcendent pain, threatened to explode in protest at his insistence on waddling a respectable distance into the dark, where he found the breeze blowing in a disadvantageous direction. Forced to relieve some pressure en route, arriving at the shelter of scrub, he was startled by a whisper from the dampening vegetation.

"Don't do it. You're coming up top. Goldfinch said."

"I'll flaming kill flaming Goldfinch."

He unleashed an angry arc into the heart of the scrub. The scrub shrieked.

"You had to show me, didn't you?"

He homed in on the target.

"Mate! Mate. Forget bloody Nerys Ferris."

"I can't forget bloody Nerys Ferris!"

Around midnight person or persons unknown rolled the keg onto the road and let it loose down the hill. Ron was awoken by the shriek of rolling metal.

VII

Why was I joining the stay-in when I wanted to be replaced by a machine?

The night before we went down, I dreamed I touched Nerys Ferris's earlobes. From behind. Lightly. With the tips of my fingers. They were the softest things I'd ever touched. Never be beaten. They went bright pink the instant I touched them. And they felt hot. Hot! This was before Nerys Ferris got the Bluebirds. She spun round and belted me around the ears, over and over, as if Hobbsie had coached her. My ears were ringing when I woke up. They're still ringing.

You know what Nerys Ferris whispered to me at the dance?

The Sixth and Seventh Newtown Postcards detailed how Trotsky's murder had sent Cedric relapsing into a second, deeper downward spiral, so deep that to escape he had gone bush, landed a job delivering blocks of ice to young housewives with empty icechests, met the Iceworks Manager's daughter in the freezer on a hot day (no chicken coop), been told by the reactionary patriarchal Iceworks Manager that he wasn't good enough for his daughter, making the daughter like him even more, causing the reactionary patriarchal Iceworks Manager to demand that Cedric marry his daughter or cop an ice-axe to the head like his mate Trotsky, leading Cedric to swear blind on a stack of frozen Bibles that he was desperate to marry the Iceworks Manager's daughter and work for his father-in-law for the rest of his life, become engaged for six hours, steal the Iceworks Manager's son's bike and ride to Queensland that night. One Eye Goldfinch was just the first in a string of boss's daughters who fancied communists, and vice versa. The Iceworks Manager probably did have an ice-

axe in his hand at the time but I suspect Trotsky only rated a mention in the detailed version of events set down in the Eighth Newtown Postcard, third volume of The IceWorks Trilogy.

Hughie got over Hitler and Stalin being mates and was back to his old self, calling anyone who disagreed a fascist, bosses' lickspittle, and left phrase monger while his head filled with blood, punching class-compromising adventurist drinkers at the pub, and attending secret meetings. He was crawling out a toilet window during a police raid on a Cessnock cell when he saw the light. The war was an imperialist conflict just like the last one! Of course it was! That sly old fox Stalin was acting in self-defence, luring Hitler to his doom with fake united frontism, and biding time until revolutionary socialism came to Germany, which it inevitably would because Lenin, and Marx, in not so many words, or perhaps more, had said so. And the crypto-fascist Australian government was using the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact as leverage to cut back on wages and conditions. Hughie all but barricaded the pit with his body in trying to stop Donny Caulfield and Johnno Jones and everyone else from joining up. There was a bigger war to be won, he said.

After the stay-in, win or lose, I was getting the hell out of The Bay.

1941

I

On my sixteenth birthday, an unidentified source sighted a German U-boat surfacing off The Bay. The “Queen Elizabeth” was in Sydney to pick up troops, making a juicy target for torpedoes. A Wirraway flew out from Williamstown to investigate. The Bay sub got everyone hopping. The jetty crawled with heavily armed locals. Fizzer Phillips blew the head off a surfacing cormorant he took for periscope.

Hughie lost his old self for the third time when he got the news that Hitler was three hundred miles inside Russia and motoring. Another wrong turn, Adolf! Until it dawned on Hughie that he could now drop Hitler on his backstabbing fascist ear and go back to being plain Hughie Marx Meiklejohn again. Was his old self happy! Hughie just about shoved young men out the pit door. If he could have shipped boys out by machine, he would’ve. If he could have parachuted them into the Eastern Front, he would’ve. Cessnock police returned The Party’s roneo machine. Hughie took it home and ran it red hot. His leaflets left ink all over your hands but they made powerful reading. Mother Russia was bleeding purple.

Hobbsie sent Alec Meiklejohn a postcard from Singapore. The capital of Malaya. Malaya produces rubber, tin, and rice. Thankyou Hobbsie. Alec pinned the card on the pub noticeboard. It had a picture of an old hotel with women in long dresses drinking tea on a lawn, and said “Having a wonderful time, wish you were here”. I never found out why he sent a postcard to Alec.

They entered at seven am, waved in by wives and children, and marched the mile to the flat, junction of the skip haulage way, singing “On The Road To Victory”. Chocko Vella accompanied on piano accordion. Each man carried

his crib and a lamp capable of lasting ten hours. Only one lamp, at the head, was lit at any one time. Wingnut swung a kerosene tin tumid with Mrs Vella's rabbit ragout, still warm. She would also feed his ponies. Dougie Pratt and Fizzer Phillips bore home-made fruit cake. Youngest of the stay-in strikers, Ron swung a paper bag holding the remnant half of a Jimmy Blizzard prototype orange sponge cake with peppermint icing. The oldest, Arthur Pratt, sixty nine, barely able to walk because of his chest, was wheeled in, smuggling under his blanket a flask of medicinal blackjack of high alcohol content. Arthur would periodically belt his chest as if something was trying to get out, which never could.

A cramped headquarters was established on the flat. Dickie Jones briefed the Food Committee on liaising with the Ladies' Auxiliary, up top. An impromptu Bedding Committee assembled rough timber frames. Less specialised strikers tore brattice hessian from the walls to serve as blankets. Secretary Hughie Meiklejohn accessed the mine telephone to officially inform management of the strikers' intent to stay-in until their safety demands were met. Undermanager Goldfinch's new secretary had already given him the news, several hours before.

Word spread through the coalfields. Meetings were held, solidarity marches mooted. Police erected barricades. Workers at a regional pie factory donated pies. When a coal steamer docked at the jetty, Dickie Jones warned undermanager Goldfinch of serious consequences should the steamer be loaded. The steamer returned empty to Sydney. Management offered no

objection to food and clothing being brought in. Alcohol was deemed dangerous and not an “essential item” under accepted strike etiquette.

Determined to send packing images of the previous evening via embrace of a positive alternative, he threw himself into Jimmy’s sponge cake, supplementing the prototype confectionery with graphic projections of the promised hot pie, the black and Red Mill that would accompany industrial victory, and the cream buns, doughnuts, and flaky pastries which would surely accrue with subsequent employment in a bank or post office somewhere the hell out of The Bay. Concentration on sugar and alcohol-based imagery also rendered him deaf to Dickie Jones and Hughie Meiklejohn as they spoke of unity, sabotage, and vigilance. Initial disappointment at not cracking a tooth on a flask of rum concealed within the cake or failing that, Jimmy at least having emptied the contents into the mix, became, after consideration, righteous teetotalism in the cause of solidarity.

Miners played quoits, dominoes and cards. Mouth organs competed. The Pit was colder than usual. Allowance had not been made for the absence of work. It was claimed a hewer lost four to five pounds in weight per day due to sweating. A request for coats was relayed to the Ladies’ Auxiliary. Resident SP bookmaker Perce Finch, redolent of Californian Poppy, hair glowing yellow, did the rounds wheezing the odds. Before losing his arm to the floater, Perce had been medically assessed as twenty five per cent dusted, for which he could derive twenty five per cent compensation. Deeming the figure insufficient, Perce returned to the pit and lost the arm, following which he was elected

checkweighman. Perce stored SP turnover inside his folded coat sleeve and could count cash and write a ticket with the one hand. He wheezed sympathy to requests for credit, his clients being neighbours and workmates, all of whom considered welching worse than murder. Punters having entered the mine too early to obtain the day's form guide, a request for the newspapers and a portable radio was conveyed to the Ladies Auxiliary who, on this occasion agreeing to turn a blind eye to gambling, despatched Eleanor Morgan aboard 'Moonlight' to the Swansea newsagency.

His stomach growled.

"Are the pies hot yet?"

"You eat when we eat."

"How long is it now?"

"Three hours. Twenty seven minutes."

II

A flat steel sky fringed yellow where it slid behind the ridge. Trees above the drift mouth were still. Miners from sympathetic pits held banners high as supporters pressed against timber barricades more symbolic than practical. Upon the emergence of a skip, the crowd erupted. The police line took a step forward. A sole newspaperman circled behind the cheering mob, outsized camera angling overhead.

"What're your names, boys? How are you passing the time? Is it true the men are betting on the races?"

Ron and Donny grinned and gave the thumbs-up. Twilight stung their eyes.

The newspaperman took notes. He heard his mother call his name and waved

in the direction of the voice. Police ushered Mrs Hughie Meiklejohn, Mrs Lionel Thorpe and Mrs Owen Jones, lugging suitcases, lumpish sugar bags and kerosene tins, through the barricades. Ron and Donny rode shotgun on the loaded skip, waving, as the endless rope hauled them back into The Pit.

Suitcases and sugar bags spilled meat, fish, tinned goods, cakes, milk, fruit, sandwiches, newspapers, more tobacco than any miner had ever seen.

Kerosene tins held tea or stew. Only a single newspaper, afternoon edition, carried news of their struggle. The coverage was slight, unfavourable in tone. Goldfinch was quoted, prompting Hughie to deconstruct the Fourth Estate. Coal miners were whipping boys. Press Barons and Coal Barons were tight as fascist fishes' arseholes. The Meiklejohn rant not being a revelation, men coalesced around pink form guides. Groans greeted discovery that a radio had not been included in the delivery.

Rabbit stew – if that was what it was - sat heavy in his belly. He retired early. The warmth did not last. Like many, he was underdressed. He wrapped his allocation of brattice around himself, pulled it over his head, tucked his feet under, and shivered while observing his colleagues. Arthur Pratt had no shirt. He wore a holed woollen vest under a buttoned suit coat. Complexion near blue, he rattled, breathing in short bursts, which sounded as though about to stop. Fred Pratt proclaimed his father to be one of the strikers who had applied gelignite to the jetty in 1917. Arthur denied the claim but admitted to knowing the identity of the heroic party. His own father had died in the Busty Bank

seam explosion, back home in Durham. Arthur poured blackjack in his tea with milk and three sugars.

Blackjack was evil looking, evil smelling stuff. Arthur Pratt swore it kept him alive. You know what was in it? Licorice and metho. Arthur's cousin was a vet chemist who worked at the Wyong track. Arthur was dusted. "Lungs like concrete", some doctor said. Not the company doctor, of course. Arthur worked the Old Men's section when he had the strength. Management couldn't get rid of him. He had more seniority than Methuselah. Whoever Methuselah was. Wherever Methuselah hewed. We topped up Arthur's skip when he wasn't looking. Arthur laughed as he told us, every day, that his doctor reckoned blackjack was useless against lungs like concrete. When Arthur laughed you held your breath in case it killed him. He heaved and rattled and changed colour and belted his chest to get loose whatever was stuck. Then he spat. You should have seen what Arthur spat.

The honeyed tenor of Short Owen Jones contributed a thread of pitch and timbre to a communal "Don't Give Up The Ship" otherwise lacking melodic rigour. The Jones' vibrato seemed to burgeon in amplitude as it echoed through bords and pillars, to lose itself in the maze, falter, fade, find itself once again, and be sonorous and pitch perfect upon return to the flat, in the interim having outdistanced the tuneless choir. Short Owen claimed to know over a thousand popular songs, all of which proved less popular in the absence of alcohol. He and choir soon fell silent. Roof timber creaked as the earth above shrank with the cold. Water dripped slowly, somewhere.

Ron's eyes were closed but he was not asleep when Dickie Jones shook him for his cockatoo shift. Spies, police, maybe even scabs were abroad. Childhood

memories of Rothbury and the Basher Gangs displaced mirages of pastry. En route to his post, he passed Hughie Meiklejohn. The Scot did not look up but raised a tattered book.

“Read the Russians, comrade. Russians pray with their eyes open.”

The cheap brown pages looked as if they had been smoked.

Johnno Jones drank too much the night before we went in. And the night before that. And the night before that. If you catch my drift. He was still wearing the pyjama shorts and singlet he was wearing when Dickie and Short Owen dragged him out of bed. Not that Johnno didn't want to stay in. He wanted to stay in as long as possible because he was the Black Sheep Jones Boy who'd got Nell Finch up the duff and they were getting hitched after the Stay In. Which was why Perce Finch was keeping a close eye on Johnno. Perce and several mates with both arms had made Johnno see sense and promise to do the right thing by Nell. Nell popped out a baby girl called Janice the day after Johnno secretly joined the army. The baby grew up to be Moaning Janice Jones. Moaning Janice married Troy Meiklejohn. Angry Leonard's son. Can she moan. Never be beaten. She could moan for Australia. Johnno was blown to bits by a grenade in Borneo.

III

His head jolted up. How long had he been asleep? He bit his lip to stay awake, as he had done in school, daily, on occasion drawing blood. The sponge cake had been downed. What to think about? So far, even Hobbsie's buzzing fact-filled drone was more interesting than the stay-in, he thought. Don't think about the dunes, he thought. Don't think about her, don't think about The Bay, he thought. Plump Maria Vella came to mind for some reason, dark eyes impressed by Ron's recitation of Maltese facts. He asked himself: what else did he know? The longest river in the world. The Nile. Some claimed it was the

Amazon. It depended where you started the river and where you stopped it. The highest mountain. Mount Everest. No argument. Except maybe for an underwater mountain. The capital of Venezuela. Caracas. The Pygmy Bushmen of the Kalahari and the Blue Men of Morocco and the Yellow Peril of Asia. A lamp six inches distant flushed his eyelids pink. The lamp was warm.

“Anything?”

“Nothing How long is it now?”

Fizzer Phillips put on weight during the stay-in. The Fizz boasted he was eating better in the stay-in than he did on normal weekends because on normal weekends he drank himself senseless every friday, saturday and sunday nights and went home to cold tucker which he gave to the dog. The dog was so fat it couldn't sit. Its back legs shot out sideways. Not good.

Fizzer hoped the stay-in would last until Christmas. He was a prize galoot. His sister Faith was ok. She married Jockey Caulfield. Faith was Donny's mother. Donny was joining up as soon as the stay-in was over. Keen as mustard, he was. Germans, Japs, Italians, Spaniards, Russians, Eskimos, he didn't care who we ended up taking on. He was off to bag himself a few. As soon as the stay-in was over. And the Lodge confirmed that seniority was preserved in wartime. So The Pit would be waiting with open arms when Donny came marching home.

A soft sound. He lifted his head. A footfall on a skip rail. Not a miner's boot. Softer. And just one. Did he hear it? Or was a careful step taken inside his head while he was asleep? He waited. Spy? Police? Scab? He pulled the brattice about him more tightly. The back of his neck, stiff with stillness, ached as he listened. He rotated his head slowly. The neck clicked. Maybe the click was inside his head. He held his breath. There it was again. Further away. And again. Then nothing. Maybe it was all nothing. Maybe it was all in his head.

He dared not move in case other bones clicked. His caution went unrewarded. The silence was assaulted by yodelling. Alec Meiklejohn was a fan of American Jimmy Rogers, the Yodelling Brakeman. Bachelor Alec, the Yodelling Winding Engine Man, had a gramophone player and half a dozen imported seventy eight rpm recordings given him by a friendly American merchant seaman. As a young man Alec had yodelled quietly, more or less to himself, the insecurity of youth and confirmed bachelorhood putting a damper on overt glottal expression. He was also aware that some miners disliked yodelling to point of irrationality. Eldest brother Hughie was of the view that nothing good came out of America. Even yodelling depression hobos and railway brakemen were tainted. Now relaxed within middle-aged yodelling bachelorhood, Alec let fly, his interpretation of Jimmy Rogers' Blue Yodel Number 4 effortlessly outdecorating the original. The vocal arrangement was augmented by Maltese piano accordion and a host of mouth organs in assorted keys.

"You got me worried now but I won't be worried long,

Odelayeee – yayee – olayee.."

Ron nodded off again.

IV

They were there when he woke. Their backs wee turned. He didn't know how long they'd been there. He uttered the first thing that came into his head.

"How long is it now?"

The second thing that came into his head recommended he retract the first thing but it was too late. Hughie started as if he too had suddenly awoken.

"In a hurry to get somewhere, lad?"

Ron could not remember if he'd seen Hughie Meiklejohn laugh.

"Fifty nine hours, near enough. You're still solid, aren't you, young Ronnie?"

He'd seen Dickie Jones laugh.

"What's the record?"

Ron frowned at himself. Keep your mouth shut, he thought, and the voice can't escape.

"We're not interested in records."

"Thirty eight hours."

Chocko Vella revelled in annoying Hughie.

"We're not coming out till they nationalise the mines."

Hughie's sense of humour, in this instance founded on deepest desire, did not involve expenditure of a smile, let alone laughter, and was at the same time a bitter challenge because what was funny about wanting to nationalise the pits?

Ron came close to laughing but saved himself. Chocko snorted like a pit pony.

"Hughie's joking. He's had another shock. Adolf's on outskirts of Moscow."

"You think it's funny? You soft reffo bastard."

Hughie slammed the flippant reffo against the pillar wall. Chocko split the Glaswegian's grip with a two-handed wedge, shoved a hand in his face, and ran the older man backwards until his heels caught a skip rail and the giant crashed to the ground. The tattered book with smoked pages flew from his pocket. Chocko examined the damage to his shirt.

"Who are you calling soft, you haggis guzzling commo?"

Dickie Jones helped the fallen communist to his feet. A leg gave way. Hughie balanced on the other like a confused stork.

"Broken?"

Hughie completed a few hobbling steps, clutching his hip, glowering at Ron as if the past thirty seconds had not happened, or if they had, it was all Ron's fault.

"Fall asleep again you'll empty the shit cans till kingdom come."

The revelation that, rather than being asleep he was cockatoo-ing through his eyelids, almost slipped through Ron's lips. It was a close run thing. He retrieved Hughie's book.

"Read it. You might learn something", ordered Hughie.

The Lodge troika turned to leave, President supporting Secretary, Treasurer running through a Jimmy Rogers number, arranged for piano accordion, in his head.

"I think I heard someone. Before."

"Jesus!"

Hughie's head looked about to burst in several places. His lameness was cured.

"When? Why didn't you say? Jesus!"

"Spy?"

"Where?"

Dickie silently despatched Hughie and Chocko in different directions, before slipping away himself, into a third black hole.

The cover featured a foxed photo of someone named Joe Hill, a name not sounding particularly Russian, to Ron, if the names of prominent Russians cited by Hobbsie and Cedric the Red were anything to go on. Light from the carbide lamp intensified the smoked tonality of the pages. The type was tiny. The words seemed arranged like verse. Did Hughie Marx Meiklejohn read poetry? Hobbsie had not managed to implant poetry in Ron's head. Not as far

as he knew, anyway. To date, poetry had not escaped unintended from his mouth nor sounded in his mind. Yet he could recognise verse when he saw it. As he read he felt the skip track shiver under his feet. His grandfather came to mind.

V

Jimmy thrust the sprag into the rear wheels as the skip accelerated into the curve. The shower of sparks stung his legs before the hardwood disintegrated and flew at him. The skip left the tracks, hit the wall, flipped over, and careered deeper into the pit, taking several timber props along for the ride. Flattened against the wall, Ron felt his belly seared by the runaway as it passed, shrieking a note to disturb a dog, and banged away into the darkness leaving suitcases, kerosene tins, sugar bags, blankets and overcoats strewn in its wake. Jimmy materialised, suddenly, in his lamplight.

“Shite!”

He clamped Jimmy’s throat while simultaneously twisting a wrist in a one-handed Chinese Burn. Jimmy squeaked.

“Your Mum says hello and keep warm.”

Burned wrist flapping in high drama, Jimmy ferretted among the strewn items with his less theatrical hand, tossing objects aside in the manner of a fussy refugee. A sheet of newspaper skimmed the ground on ventilated air, like a stingray, before wrapping itself around a kerosene tin. Ron glimpsed a photo of himself and Donny giving the thumbs up. The headline read “Miners Underground Picnic!” He felt sick. A whisper insinuated that it was all his fault. The reference to a “Picnic!” was attributed to Pit Manager Willy

Goldfinch. The Nerys-Ferris-poking-bastard's promoted himself, thought Ron. He felt sicker upon re-picturing Nerys Ferris under poking. A sub-headline read "Economy Threatened: PM". A cartoon portrayed coal miners as the blackened wreckers of civilization. The Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact made an inside page, under much smaller headline. Jimmy returned bearing a blue cardboard suitcase.

"Cross fingers", he said.

The case contained tightly-folded coats and blankets. Cossetted within were two intact bottles of beer. Jimmy grinned. Three of his bottom teeth had lately gone missing.

"No beer. We're not allowed", said Ron.

Jimmy extracted a squashed paper bag from the pocket of an overcoat. The contents had oozed, colourfully if greasily. He danced the paper bag in front of Ron.

"Cream bun?"

"You did it?"

"I did it."

"Bloody hell, Jimmy. You little trimmer. You did it!"

"One chocolate. One blackberry. Real cream."

Real cream? Hadn't Betty Blizzard sold her cow? Was Goldfinch still seeing her? As well as her? He winced. Jimmy peeled the paper from what appeared Siamese cream buns, joined at the gash, and sat upon after birth. Separated, both survived. Neither would ever be perfect. Ron selected the blackberry twin.

"Good, Jimmy."

A soft hiss followed the click of the top. Jimmy held out the bottle. Vapour curled from within.

“Can’t. Can’t.”

He wolfed the bun, hoping the taste might displace the aroma of brown ale curling up his nose. Bun wolfed, he examined the cartoon depicting coalminers as demonic wreckers of civilization, then moved overleaf to von Ribbentrop and Molotov, trusting in the importance of these items as an antidote to the allure of beer. Jimmy balanced the bottle on a skip rail in Ron’s eyeline and cracked the second bottle.

“Cheers.”

He sought further distraction in contemplation of another man’s pain. What must poor Hughie Marx ex-Hitler Meiklejohn be feeling? What with the fascists double-crossing the reds barely eighteen months after public coupling. Like Goldfinch and Nerys Ferris. Goldfinch and Nerys Ferris. Nerys Ferris. He extinguished his lamp and poured beer down his throat. It pained him to admit the flavours of bun and beer melded in spectacular fashion.

“Are we really a mile down?”

Jimmy offered the chocolate bun.

“Don’t you want it?”

Ron flushed the bun with deep slugs of ale.

“Where’s everybody else?”

He belched.

“Flat.”

The word emerged hot and smelly.

“Was that you before? Half an hour ago. Sneaking round.”

Jimmy shook his head. Ron drained the bottle, yet again surprising himself with his easeful capacity.

“You want mine?”, said Jimmy.

He found Ron’s arm in the dark and pressed the second bottle into the hand.

“You seen that girl again?”, asked Ron.

“What girl?”

“With Wingnut. At the dance.”

Ron belched. Space was freed.

“S’Better.”

The second bottle went south.

“She’s back in Sydney. Mum’d have a fit if she saw me with a black girl.”

“Wasn’ black. Wasshe black? Wingnu’s not black. She wasn’ black.”

“Brown. Same difference.”

“Wha’s her name again?”

“Maria.”

He wobbled as he lowered himself to sit, and missed the rail.

“Whoa!”

The bottle, inverted and shaken vigorously, yielded its final drips. He panted as though short of breath.

“You know wha’ Nezz Fez said t’ me? Tha’ time a’ the dance? Nezz Fez..”

He staggered to his feet in discrete stages.

“Ne’mind. Forget Nezz Fez.”

Dropping the subject facilitated concentration on the accurate lowering of his rear to the rail, which he could swear was moving.

“She said you ‘n’ me were fairies. Mos’ly you. She said you’re so desp’rate to prove y’re not a Willie Woofter you’re chas’n’ wog birds!”

He roared with laughter, so releasing a loud fart, and missed the rail again.

“You like girls don’ you, Jim - ?”

“If you’re talking about that time down the creek again..”

“Nah. Nah. Un’erstan’. Acciden’.”

Memory of the accident by the creek spurred Jimmy to consideration of global political economy.

“What if we run out of coal?”

“Wha’?”

“The war. What if we run out of coal because of strikes? What if we lose the war because of strikes?”

“Learn Germ’n, mate. Hobbsie’ll teach us. Hobbsie knows Germ’n. Hobbsie knows ever’thing. Wha’s the capital of Germ’ny?”

“It’s not funny.”

“London. April Fool.”

“It’s not April.”

“I’s all shite then y’ die. My Dad said - ”

“SHIT!”

The expletive from the dark was succeeded by the clatter of a kicked can, followed by the thud of a large body hitting the ground. Debate was suspended.

“Jesus fooking Christ!”

Sour ale leapt up Ron’s throat. He forced it back down.

“What is this shite?!”

The roar of South Lanarkshire rendering him instantly sober, Ron thrust the empties into Jimmy's hands and shoved him towards the nearest darkness.

"Get rid of 'em. Quick. Shit. This way, this way. Shit."

Stumbling over suitcases and kero tins, booting sugar bags from his path, Hughie limped on both legs.

"They warned me about you."

Ron focussed on enunciation and standing steady. Cold sweat trickled down his back.

"Accident, Mr Meiklejohn. Skip."

"Skip? What fooking skip? Where is this fooking skip?"

Hughie's beam followed Ron's finger. Jimmy appeared, smiling, gap-toothed, in the light.

"Jesus! Jesus Mary and Joseph!"

Hughie took Jimmy by the throat. Both hands.

"Who the fook are yooou?"

"Jimmy Blizzard."

"Jimmy's in the Ladies Auxil'ry."

He bit his lip, avoiding laughter by the narrowest of margins. Hughie's eyes narrowed. His hands remained on Jimmy's neck. His face appeared darker than the surrounding darkness.

"Best be careful, Mr Meiklejohn. Jimmy's got a chalky neck."

Hughie could not punch him in the face while his hands were occupied with Jimmy's neck. Ron kept a personal best straight face under the circumstances.

"Mrs Meiklejohn says hello and keep warm", said Jimmy.

He blinked in the beam and smiled. Ron noted that the gaps in his friend's lower teeth were symmetrical. Hobbsie had introduced the concept of symmetry into a discussion of ancient Greek temples.

"Get this shit back in the skip. If the radio is broken you're both dead."

Hughie initiated a cairn of suitcases and sugar bags. Jimmy erected an unstable tower of misshapen kerosene cans. Blood with a high alcohol content rushed to Ron's head as he bent to collect pages of newspaper. He toppled into the back of Hughie's legs. The Scot buckled but did not fall. Ron waved the front page from a prone position.

"Readallaboudit! Ruling class lies an' propaganda!"

Hughie limped forward with intent to kick.

"Smart mouth'll get you a thick ear - "

He saw the headline.

"Picnic!? One hundred and fifty men laid off is a fooking picnic? Fooking bastards! Are their fooking families having a fooking picnic? Fooking bastards want to kill the rest of us!"

He shredded the page with geometric venom. Ron revisited Hobbsie's reaction to The Dictionary of Doggish.

"Clear these fooking tracks! Get on with it!"

His exit melded fury and limping. Foul oaths and the crash of a righted skip followed from the dark. Free to feel drunk, Ron sat heavily on a suitcase, fell backwards and demolished Jimmy's tower of cans. Hughie stormed back out of the dark, saw Ron lying half-buried under kerosene cans.

"Your father didn't like work either."

Ron felt a big lit bungler begin sparking away in his chest. The fuse was short but there was time to dampen it. He considered his position.

“He had red hair too.”

Hughie had begun to limp away as the bungler blew Ron over the edge of a second defining precipice.

“So?”

He spoke with impressive clarity, he thought, considering the beer.

“So did my grandfather. And my great grandfather. My father said I had the reddest hair of all. He said I was the culmination of the great and longstanding tradition of red-haired coal miners.”

Breakthrough number two, occurring in the context of post-pubertal, post-educational, industrial disputation, established “So?” as a base camp from which to ascend far greater heights. Transcending the purity of the lone monosyllable, he had now progressed to elaboration on the subject, with eloquence and in detail, to a more difficult audience, whilst prostrate under concertina’d kerosene cans. Danger had been contemplated. Danger had been weighed. Danger had been found pissweak and ignored. Significantly, The Great Heritage Of Red Hair Speech was alcohol-assisted, a harbinger of outrage and atrocity to come. Ron Shipwater was fully out of the chrysalis. Still wet, but on the move. Hughie did his best.

“Your father was a clown too. Wasn’t laughing when he got laid off. Took to the drink, if I remember.”

The recent news from Europe had clearly unsettled Hughie beyond his default state of unsettlement. Jimmy sought to negotiate peace.

“Ron can see through his eyelids.”

The closed eyes did seem to stare at Hughie. Stare hard. Having not before encountered this mode of belligerence, Hughie’s fragile and unsettled state was steamrolled by desire to tear head and limbs from Ron’s body, to do the same to Jimmy Blizzard, to heap up the body parts and to set fooking fire to the fooking lot. Dismemberment and burning of body parts was postponed by the sound of stumbling. Dickie and Chocko emerged, escorting Undermanager Goldfinch.

“Look what we found. The Nottingham Toecutter.”

“You can’t keep me here.”

Significantly taller than the seam, Goldfinch’s neck and knees were bent.

“Don’t you like picnics, Mr Goldfinch?”

Willy scanned the strewn objects.

“What happened here?”

“We’ve been looking for the radio.”

Hughie’s unexpected wit elicited a beery laugh and belch from Ron, still prostrate amid the rubble of the kero can tower.

“Where is our fooking radio?”, asked Hughie.

“A radio is not an essential item”, replied Willy.

Chocko rammed his giant face within a fraction of Goldfinch’s.

“Pig’s arse. We’re running this pit now. A radio is a bloody essential item.”

“Men become unpredictable when they can’t bet on Saturday”, added Dickie, matter-of-factly.

Willy Goldfinch had confronted irony before and was not cowed.

“Violence or vandalism will see the police sent in, Richard. None of us want that.”

“Bosses shipping in scabs, are they?”

“I’ve heard nothing about scabs, Hugh.”

“They’ll have to dig us out first. Tell your bosses we’re here till Christmas.”

“Easter if we see hide or hair of a scab.”

“Come in again, Mr Goldfinch, you stay in.”

Ron thought to add a coda concerning Mrs Goldfinch, specifically in regard to whether or not she was aware of her husband’s philandering, making particular reference to the liaison with his new fifteen year old secretary, appended with the suggestion that here was the reason both her children were cursed with poor eyesight, but this time, because of a painful accompanying image of trysting in the dunes, the words would not come. Dickie returned Goldfinch’s torch.

“Know your way?”

Bent-backed, Willy vanished.

The sound of breaking glass wiped away the Lodge Officers’ grins. Ron darted a look at Jimmy. Jimmy looked blank and massaged his throat, as if to make a point. Goldfinch reappeared with a broken beer bottle.

“Have you got beer down here?”

Ron and Jimmy found themselves pinned in the intersection of three beams, like bombers in wartime, before the beams returned to Goldfinch and beer bottle.

“Not unless you planted it, Mr Goldfinch.”

Dickie's riposte was not quite quick enough. Willy shook his head, sagely.

"This is not good, Richard. People could form the impression you're having a picnic down here."

He disappeared into the tunnel once more. Three beams of light again intersected on the faces of Ron and Jimmy.

"The papers'll love this."

A second bottle shattered in the darkness.

"Jesus! Jesus!"

Dickie threw his arms in the air. Chocko squeezed his temples with his palms.

Hughie hurled Jimmy against a wall.

"Which of you stupid bastards brought in beer?"

"We said no beer!"

Jimmy uncrumpled like a string puppet as he was lifted from the floor, to be pinned, legs dangling, against the wall.

"How much did Goldfinch pay you?"

Warm tobacco and stew, breathed in his face, added to Jimmy's discomfort.

"Goldfinch is mummy's boyfriend, yes? Mummy plays jigajig with Mr Under Manager, yes?"

"No!"

So as to avoid distressing imagery, a voice – his own - recommended he refrain from correcting Hughie with the revelation that Goldfinch was now playing jigajig with Nerys Ferris. Only for the thought that Goldfinch might be playing jigajig with both women - rather, the widow and the sixteen year old girl – to produce an even more alarming pornography.

"I'm going to break your chalky neck, scab."

Jimmy screamed. Ron clambered to his feet.

“I asked him to bring it in. The beer. ”

Whose voice was that? Jimmy crumpled down the wall. Hughie sniffed Ron’s breath, lifted him by the neck like a suit on a hangar, and flung him against the opposite wall.

“Close your eyes. What do you see?”

The fist resembled a blackened cauliflower.

“So?”

Dickie put a hand on Hughie’s arm.

“He’s only a boy. Hughie. No.”

Hughie stepped back, shaking. Fingers twitched by his side.

“Why can’t we have beer?”

He swan-dove off yet another, higher precipice.

“We’re off work. Why can’t we have beer? I bet the bosses have beer when they’re off work.”

“The working man is supposed to have higher standards, boyo.”

“It’s all one big joke to you, isn’t it? One big drunken joke.”

Hughie’s rage had frozen at boiling temperature.

“Your grandfather was drunk when the skip hit him. Did you know that? I’m betting your father was drunk when he walked off the jetty, too.”

He said nothing. Hughie seemed disappointed.

“You’ve let us down badly, Ronnie. The men won’t be happy. I think you’d better go. Go now”, said Dickie.

Hughie stabbed a forefinger in his face.

“Aye, it’s all a joke to you. What the old timers fought for, what they lived on nothing to get. All a fooking joke. Fook me. You’d just throw it all away. Fook me. You’re a fooking disgrace, lad.”

Hughie limped away. Chocko followed.

“Go.”

Dickie disappeared, shaking his head.

“Did Goldfinch pay you?”, asked Ron.

VI

Flanked by she-oaks whose roots could find water in all but the most savage drought, grassed by needlepoint reed, paspalum, and kikuyu, the creekbed wound down a shallow inconsistent slope. A flattened trail indicated the short cut to the pub, a desire not to be seen, Eve’s daily search. After heavy rain, the bed became a chain of pools, visited by immigrant birds. Reeds thickened and greened. Kikuyu yellowed under water but continued to grow. Frogs attached frothy clutches to reeds and croaked territorial warnings or mating calls at night. In an exceptional year, the creek flowed black.

Sodden marsh-like patches persisted under bright sunlight. He went in like a panicked horse, high stepping, eyes rolling. He was naked. The water, ankle deep, was surface warm, the spongy muck beneath cold and frightening for what it might contain. His feet sank in the slop. Sharp stones and chitter jabbed his soles. Jimmy screamed as Wingnut took his arms, Leonard his legs.

“In you go, scab!”

They counted to three and hurled. Jimmy twisted in the air like cat, a rare breed lacking spatial awareness, and hit the water face first. Blinded by muck,

he flailed with an extravagance at odds with chalky bones, before rising to his knees, coughing and spitting mud, coal, small stones.

“Lie down, scabs!”

Wingnut, Leonard, and two cousins from ‘B’ tunnel jabbed with sharpened bamboo poles. Fred Pratt lashed buttocks, expertly, with a bullwhip. Fred had found work on a dairy farm when cavilled out. The lacerations burned more upon contact with swampwater. A thin swirl of blood rose to the surface.

“Lie down, scabs!”

The bulk of Ron’s flesh remained above the waterline, a coal-stained, lumpish archipelago. Tepid water trickled over his neck, ran between his legs. Jimmy’s face and genitals appeared to float on the surface, the balance submerged.

Wingnut, Leonard, Fred and the cousins rolled smokes and nattered about the war and the possibility of the forty hour week, and women, while they waited.

He felt the opening sting on the inside of an ankle, a tender location often favoured by mosquitos. The next assault occurred behind the knee. The next in the crack of his bum. Sitting up to scratch, he was straightaway jabbed and whipped back down. He scraped himself on the bed, seeking sharps, rubbed his ankles together. Relief eluded him. His hand stole south, fighting its way through knotted curls. They liked warm crevices. He spread his legs. The leech was impressively plump, difficult to grasp. He slipped a finger within the loop and pulled. The predator relinquished one end and slimed from his grasp. Jimmy watched a yellow and black striped creature inch across his chest like a beckoning finger, and slip into an armpit. He shrieked. The men on the bank laughed.

Multitudinous leeches dangled from their bodies as they were pursued up the hill, naked, like sinners in mediaeval hell, past church and pub, to the end of the road where The Bay petered out in dusty scrub.

VII

We won. The nation needed coal and didn't want trouble. The NSW government banned mechanical extraction of pillars. The aged pension for miners was introduced. Arthur Pratt retired. The Old Men's Section disappeared. The Retired Miners Association was started up to keep an eye on retired miners' pay and conditions. A Bay branch was established in a militant corner of the pub. Meetings were held all day every day.

Dickie Jones visited him at home. Having known Charlie and Malcolm, the Lodge President was certain scabbing “was not in the blood” and that Jimmy was the true and only beer-smuggling blackleg. If Ron admitted to covering for his mate, Dickie had the numbers to see him voted back into The Lodge. Sarah begged him to name Jimmy as the culprit. He refused. Dickie Jones next visited Jimmy, who backed up his mate, swearing blind that Ron was not covering for him.

1942

I

Congratulations, Ron. The Swansea Branch of the Rural Bank is pleased to offer you a position in which you can use your brain.

Dear Ron. Your application for employment in the Swansea Post Office has been successful despite the fact that you are not of the Roman Catholic faith.

Mrs Pleasant replaced Hobbsie. She had thick eyebrows, wore a raffia hat and sandals, didn't eat meat and sat on the verandah in the nude reading D.H. Lawrence.

Jimmy and me couldn't get the dole. Being fed to leeches and run out of town didn't count as sacking. It was involuntary quitting.

The Japs were swarming into New Guinea. Japs always swarmed, wherever they went. They bombed the crap out of Darwin. There was talk of giving them everything north of Brisbane. One look at the Gold Coast and they wouldn't stop at Brisbane. Cedric's battalion was resisting their advance over the Owen Stanleys. Dot was up in Queensland, a trained nurse, all set to look after Cedric if he got himself wounded.

Curtin brought in industrial conscription and shipped coalminers back home. Fred Pratt and Hamish Murdoch came back to The Bay. Workers got compulsory unionism and price control in return for the wage freeze. The bosses provoked disputes. Stirring up coalminers, getting the press frothing about red-raggers, was the traditional way to bugger Labor governments.

Adolf took yet another wrong turn, to Stalingrad, and ran out of petrol.

Nothing and no-one could bugger Hughie after Stalingrad. He was unstoppable. He admired sacrifice. That's what Russians did, all through history, Hughie said. Sacrifice and suffer. Thanks to the glorious October Revolution, that historical stage was almost over, he said. In Russia anyway. The Bay had not reached the full sacrifice and suffer stage, in Hughie's view. But he was determined to see it through.

We got behind in the lay-bys on Dad's plot. He still hadn't turned up. When I went in to discuss the arrears, Stan Smith was at the council chambers, joining up. Thanks Stan. I lied about having extensive experience with pick and shovel. It was only until I could save enough to get the hell out of The Bay.

II

The cemetery lay in the western lee of the dunes. An ear to marble or stone, in a light easterly, could hear the sprinkle of sand. On wild days, the roar of surf drowned out eulogy. Gulls shrieked all day, in all weathers. Ron tidied the verges of Grampa and Gramma Shipwater's shared grave with a shovel. Dead lichen filled the runnels of Charlie's epitaph. Gramma's share of stone was yet to be engraved. A bottle of beer rested in the shade of the headstone, accompanied by a second hand shotgun for deployment against the Japs when they landed. Jimmy daily scanned the Pacific Ocean from atop the dunes. Additional bottles kept cool in the creek under the white bridge, in recognition of the need to avoid the pub for a day or two. Spitfire and an assortment of mongrels chased each other between headstones and timber crosses, Ron's new occupation having gained him the attention of dogs whose owners worked deeper underground. Weeds subdued, he draped his shirt over his

grandparents' marker, leant on the shovel, and rubbed a hand in proud circles on his preternatural portliness. Fresh to overground employment, his upper body was as yet a ghostly veal in base colour, this expanding universe sprinkled with myriad galaxies of red freckles. Once, in school, he had endeavoured to join the freckles with pen and ink, recruiting Cedric and Jimmy to complete areas he could not reach. The result made him appear to wear a blue onion bag.

"Short Owen Jones said Grampa Charlie could get sweet peas to grow up a shovel stuck in a slack heap."

He kept the plot reserved for Malcolm scrupulously weed-free as continued sightings proved false dawns. Most recently his father had been reported boarding a troop ship bound for the United Kingdom. According to legend, when in his cups, Grampa Charlie had more than once asserted that rumour had it his great great grandfather was the bastard son of a Midlothian Laird, said to possess castle and fortune, and who had violently exercised his extinct *droit de seigneur* on a pretty young Shipwater farm girl. Or perhaps the Shipwater lass had been a pretty young coal trammer with half her hair missing at the front, scrubbed up on a sunday. And perhaps, recent addition to the legend had it, Malcolm had vanished in order to claim his birthright. Ron was loathe to believe his father would want to keep castle and money for himself. When *in memoriam* forcing himself to fish from the end of the jetty, he would stare down into the water as though his father might suddenly pop to the surface, wearing the rubbery smile. On the occasions when Malcolm did rise from the ocean, he sat beside Ron saying nothing, disappearing when his

son got a bite. Ron did not have his father's fishing knack, but now and then caught something big enough for the family to eat. He preferred sweeter fare.

III

After delivering tribute of jam tarts to his fellow exile - who deemed it *guilt pastry* - Jimmy draped his shirt on the handle of a new model push lawnmower. Jimmy's chest bones were all but on the outside, his skin translucent grey. The mower blades glinted in their cylinder. In motion, the swirling curves reminded Ron of swords mounted on the wheels of an Egyptian chariot he had seen in a black and white film, the only film he had seen. Early in his tenure at The Bay, Hobbsie had bussed the class, at his expense, to the worker-owned School of Arts cinema in Kurri Kurri. The film's reception ensured that he did so only the once.

Wartime jam was thin of fruit. Undeterred – the jam still glowed red - he devoured the tarts, complimenting Jimmy on his pastry which, he avowed, was improving in consistency with every batch. Jimmy announced his intention to open a lawn mowing business, quickly putting Ron at ease with the rider that mowing would be a mere sideline to the bakery he planned to open next door to the pub. Jimmy carried out a test mow through the low density Roman Catholic section. Grass and insects flew. Spitfire and pack ran. Ron whistled. The dogs did not return before nightfall.

“Do that paspalum on Jockey's old man.”

Jimmy mowed the hump capping Albert Caulfield. Albert had allowed room for Ma Caulfield to join him but Ma - an institution in the Ladies Auxiliary

and Ladies Lounge - was showing no haste in doing so. Una Meiklejohn was experiencing hot flushes and Ma Caulfield at last savouring unconditional victory in the coalminer-bearing stakes. Ma's coalminers themselves fathering coalminers, Ma now had grandcoalminers.

"Better than The Pit, isn't it?", said Jimmy.

Ron hurled shovel and pick into a fresh Presbyterian hole and clambered in after, taking the bottle of beer with him. An upper layer of grey sand, dirt and chitter gave way to orange-red clay, yellow lower down, in the grave profile. A shovelful of clay flew out.

"We're *scabs*."

Jimmy raised a technical point. Scabs *wanted* to work in The Pit. Therefore, he and Ron were not scabs. Ron revised their category to "class traitors", "strike breakers" and "blacklegs", spitting the expressions at Jimmy until placated by a wild blackberry tart, not thin of blackberries.

"The machines are coming", said Jimmy. "You and me just got out ahead of the pack, mate. We've got jobs for life. There'll always be graves. There'll always be grass. People die. Grass grows."

Ron's head appeared, mouth full of tart. He stared at his mate then closed his eyes.

"I see a machine for digging graves."

The red head disappeared. Clay flew from the grave-in-progress.

"I'm getting a motor fitted to the mower. Might get busy here. Do they send dead soldiers home?"

A blade snapped on a fragment of marble wing fallen from an angel supervising the rest of Elsie Murdoch.

“Didn’t Goldfinch supply spare blades?”

Jimmy sat on Minnie Jones’s brick-bordered and bathroom-tiled grave and fiddled with the broken blade for several minutes. Repair would be a small job for the pit blacksmith but the Ironworkers Union was tight with the Miners’ Federation. He mowed on. Methodist Lane became an avenue of fitful tufts. Non Denom was reduced to dust.

Mum and Gramma never liked each other. Even more after Short Owen Jones took Mum to “The Wizard Of Oz”. Short Owen loaned me the money for the gun. His wife died giving birth to Neville Jones who became a firebug.

1943

I

My eighteenth birthday. You wouldn't know there was a war on. Hitler had done a u-turn, the Japs had stalled and Jimmy baked every day. Up to his armpits in blackmarket flour and sugar, whipping blackmarket milk into blackmarket cream, stewing blackmarket fruit into blackmarket jam, separating blackmarket eggs. Mrs Blizzard had night work in Swansea. She always knew someone who knew someone. Jimmy tested everything he baked on me. I never saw him eat. He lived on tobacco. He could blow smoke, chew tobacco and break his arm at the same time.

The sea breeze dropped. The sound of The Dead March drifted over the hill.
Ron hurled pick and shovel from the grave.

“Ladder. Quick.”

The Bay Brass Band rose over the crest. Smaller than other northern coalfields' bands but capable of a tidy sound, instrumentation had been further reduced by war. The tight percussion of Donny Caulfield was particularly missed. Behind the band, miners marched two abreast, in hats and dark suits. Dickie Jones, Short Owen Jones, Hughie Meiklejohn, and Lionel Thorpe bore Tinsnips' coffin. Trailing women wore hats or subdued hair with scarves. Tinsnips had lingered for eighteen months. His mother had not been found. Ron retrieved the shotgun and with Jimmy retreated into a stand of ti-tree to watch the mourning party cross the white bridge.

The procession wound its way to the freshly-dug slot in the Presbyterian section. If the remnants of jam tart and beer bottle on the grave floor were

noticed, they were not remarked upon. The band completed The Dead March. The Presbyterian minister, Sefton, spoke of the passing of Geoffrey Clutten and the promise of his life hereafter. Tinsnips' religious persuasion, if he had one, was not known but the Presbyterian Section was considered a reasonable guess and convenient. Short Owen Jones sang. The casket was lowered. Handfuls of clay thumped on the coffin lid. The band played with less rigour as mourners wandered back up the hill, beyond which lay the pub. The women went home.

Ron patted down the mound, draining black between strokes.

Lightning flared below the horizon as they followed the rail track home. Thunder followed, faintly. They glimpsed a ship out to sea and hoped it was friendly. War lay just over the horizon. Several times Ron looked over his shoulder as if something might be coming up behind. He tripped over a sleeper.

"Don't dwell on things, mate", advised Jimmy. "Rule number one when you work in the bone orchard: don't dwell on things."

He laughed at his own joke. Jimmy had developed the post-pubertal habit of saying 'mate' at the end of every second sentence. Ron tossed an empty bottle into the eastern dark where it landed with a short sharp 'chok', in sand. He thought heard something else. Down on all fours, his ear stuck to the ice-cold rail. Track fill dug into his knees

"Wind in the white bridge?"

The sound, whatever it was, was obliged to battle the buzz in his beer-warmed head. Voices, he determined. Loud male voices. In chorus. Rising with the wind, then falling, to disappear within the sound of surf. The chorus rose again. Jimmy tested wind direction with a damp finger.

“Choir practice in Cessnock.”

It was funny to Jimmy.

“It’s the wake.”

Ron peered into the ink ahead.

“What’s that? Jesus - !”

He backed into Jimmy. The demonic shriek silenced the surrounding night as it approached. Coming for them.

“Run!”

The demon, claws tearing, bounded out of the dark. Its prey screamed in cardiac arrest. Nerys Ferris, bent double, clutched her ribcage and wailed with laughter.

“I’ve wet myself.”

It was too dark to see if she was telling the truth.

“What’re you two scabs doing out here?”

The wind brought the keening of the wake. Jimmy mustered a defiant tone

“What’re you doing here yourself?”

“Mum kicked me out. I’m getting married.”

Ron felt sick. He tried to smile.

“Congratulate me.”

“Congratulations.”

“I’m moving to Snob Hill. See you.”

Nerys Ferris surged off in the direction of the houserows.

“She’s got one in the oven. Bad luck, mate”, said Jimmy.

He was tempted to stab his mate with the notion that his mate’s mother might also have a Goldfinch bun in her oven. If not now, sometime. Despite working nights in Swansea. He opted not to be cruel to his best friend.

II

I buried Arthur Pratt with a goodly supply of blackjack in his coat pocket. He spent three years in retirement with nothing to do but drink. Beer with a blackjack chaser. I buried Billy Burns. Billy was dusted too. Only one of Billy’s families made it to the funeral. I buried Lionel Thorpe. Lionel claimed to be my real father every April Fools Day until the old Bengal Lancer – courtesy of colonial sunshine - finally got him. I buried Jockey Caulfield, dad’s best mate. They were trappers together. Grampa Charlie and Jockey’s old man Arthur were also best mates and trappers together. Arthur helped carry the body up top. The Caulfields hold the record for most family down at one time, with Jockey plus three brothers plus old man Arthur on the coal. Never be broken. They also hold the record for most pit men populating the bone orchard. Never be broken. The Meiklejohns run second, in both categories. Three brothers plus Da Meiklejohn. The war cruelled everyone else’s chances. The Jones’s buried the most women.

Question for Hobbsie: what’s The World Record For Most Family Down?

Be a tyke family. In the southern coalfields. When they got off the boat, the prots went north and the tykes went south. More or less.

Johnno Jones died in Borneo. Donny Caulfield died in Burma. The bodies weren’t shipped home. I fell headfirst into the empty hole waiting for Perce Finch and did my back. Perce was

taking his time to lie down in it. It turned out Perce was a whole lot more than twenty five per cent dusted. He'd worked at Metropolitan on the southern field where they called twenty five per cent just a good start but the assessing quack was management-appointed. And a Pom. So Perce was a goner but hanging on like buggery, laying bets from his bed, and his hole stayed vacant. They didn't find me for eighteen hours. Red Mill eased the pain.

III

The passing hobnails of the dogwatch woke him, asleep on the verandah stoop. He medicated his back, walked over the ridge to the lake, rowed to Swansea in a borrowed boat, held his breath and passed the medical. He left Jimmy in charge of the cemetery.

Jimmy had been medically unfit since birth.

1944

I

On my nineteenth birthday, Alec Meiklejohn received a postcard from Hobbsie in Changi. Having a wonderful time, wish you were here. He got another with a colourful scene from the Burma Railroad.

He trained in tropical Queensland, ate pineapples and bananas for the first time, and lost weight. On weekend leave before sailing to combat, bussing to the Gold Coast, he sat over the rear axle for three hundred miles and his back flared. He spent the weekend horizontally self-medicating. Aggravating the injury on the bus back north, overdosing on OP and Bex powders, carried off bodily and thrown in the brig, he was unconscious when a doctor acting under orders declared him medically unfit after all.

Dot traced Cedric to a hospital bed in Brisbane. Bayoneted while close up Owen—gunning a Japanese soldier in half, heavily sedated, he did not appear to recognise the nurse who was more than regularly flicking his drip feed. Ron had several times warned his sister of Cedric's tendency toward a romantic diaspora. Dot didn't care. She knew, but had been in love with Cedric since the chicken coop. Ron was not looking forward to his mate's emergence from morphine haze. Cedric was his mate, but if his mate gave his sister a hard time, especially if he got her into trouble, it was Ron's job to sort him out. Ron hoped Cedric would meet an army doctor's daughter as soon as possible.

II

He returned to a cemetery in disarray. The wrought iron fence enclosing the nineteenth century crypt of James and Janet O'Donnell and stillborn baby Mary had gone missing, perhaps removed for conversion to armaments, following which Spitfire and pack had concluded that there were bones to be had if they dug deep enough. Graves had been left incomplete, abandoned, seemingly, in half-dug - or half-filled - states. Wingnut, Chocko and other bereaved Vellas had found it necessary themselves to complete excavation for Wingnut's wife Nadia, during which time the deceased was returned home to lie at rest in the front room for longer than was usual. Suspecting sabotage on the part of the family enemy, Wingnut was on a reinvigorated warpath. Jimmy claimed to have mislaid Nadia's booking. Following the delayed lowering, he claimed to have forgotten to fill the grave with earth. Ron's spinal condition made it difficult to re-establish order in haste. He was gratified Jimmy had obtained replacement blades from a mower spares supplier known to Betty Blizzard. Graves may have been in disarray but the grassy verges were in neat order.

That Ron was a now returned soldier, injured in service of his country, earned him restitution to the pub where pit drinkers were willing to engage in conversation if he was unaccompanied. Jimmy never shook the malodour of scabdom.

Nerys Ferris had a baby girl and moved in with Goldfinch. What happened to his wife was a big mystery. Buried in the bush. Chopped up and fed to the fish. Under a goaf collapse. When

the Goldfinches had visitors they made Nerys Ferris eat by herself in the kitchen. One Eye got her revenge.

1945

I

On my twentieth birthday, Jimmy came good with a giant chocolate cake, stiff with rum. Betty Blizzard knew someone in the liquor trade. The double-layered sponge was plastered in liquorice icing and topped with a green marzipan “20”. As the huge crowd of well-wishers sang ‘Happy Birthday’ and I raised the knife to cut the cake, Nerys Ferris leapt out in her school undies, smeared everywhere else with licorice and chocolate. She looked just like a coalminer’s girlfriend.

Hughie rode his T-52 tank into the heart of Berlin, single-handedly defeated fascism, danced to a Cossack beat on the grave, then set his sights on nationalisation of the Australian coal industry. Leonard Meiklejohn took out his anger on wife Jeannie, got three years in Bathurst, and came out even more angry. Jeannie was long gone, inland, with a postal worker from Charmhaven. I didn’t tell Leonard I’d applied for the vacant postal position. Which I didn’t get. Not tyke enough, they said. A Ninth Newtown Postcard - from Melbourne - said Cedric was back in Sydney or vice versa. Wherever, he was safe from Dot. For now. She was stepping out with an airman from Boise, Idaho. The Yanks dropped their A-bombs. Stan Smith came home from Sarawak with a mechanical claw, didn’t want his old job back, took the TPI pension and kept pigeons. Built himself a hut one-handed, in the bush on the far side of the lake. On the back road to Cessnock. You never saw Stan but you knew where he was from the circling pigeons. Hobbsie died in Changi. Alec heard, later, that he was laid to rest in the war cemetery. I would’ve liked to bury Hobbsie myself. It was the least I could do.

He turned twenty on the day U.S. forces landed on the island of Okinawa. A congratulatory Tenth Newtown Postcard arrived, very creased, featuring a black and white photograph of a Papuan longhouse, subtitled “Greetings from Goroka”, postmarked Cairns, three months before. Relief lay in recognition

that the morphine haze had lifted but Dot remained, as far as he knew, intact.

Cedric wrote that he was in fact nowhere near Cairns, but on no account to inform Dot of the fact. He did not say where he was, or might be. Nor whether or not he was leading astray yet another petty bourgeois employer's daughter.

Familiar with every man, woman and child he interred, The Bay gravedigger did not limit himself to digging and filling their graves. He pulled weeds from unsealed mounds. He re-arranged dead flowers scattered by wind from the sea or trampled by dogs. He cleaned dirty jam jars which vased flowers. He re-painted timber crosses. Corrected spelling. Straightened headstones worked loose in sandy soil. Restored fallen statuary. Polished plaques. Swept sand. Collected dogshit. Tasks he saw not as gestures of fondness for, nor of gratitude to, but rather as acts of solidarity with the inhabitants of The Bay in spite of everything that had happened between them, before leaving the village, a departure which remained imminent. Solidarity and a desire for all to be in order upon his leaving. Only a paucity of job offers from outside, offers wherein he could use his brain, was keeping him in The Bay. As he shovelled in anticipation of Una Meiklejohn's demise – looming, but premature, in that fascism, although on the run, was not yet defeated - it occurred to Ron that were he to continue digging beyond the traditional six feet, his excavation would sooner or later connect with a branchline of The Pit. Extemporising on the notion, he saw clearly and without displeasure, that he remained a miner of sorts. At the very least, he was digging – *hewing* - in sympathy with pit mates. And always would be. Relieved to be out of the pit, desperate to be out of The Bay, he would never see himself as anything other than a pit man, a winner of coal, gone wrong. The Bay was a pit village and he, forever the acknowledged misfit of the village, would forever be solid. He kept abreast

of pit life, pit-yacked at the pub as though he still on the coal, embraced the politics, struck in sympathy, was forgiven and humoured in the absence of Jimmy, all the while intent on exiting The Bay the instant opportunity presented itself, in preparation for which he quarried Una Meiklejohn's future as far as possible from Ma Caulfield's future and ordered a memorial headstone for his father, for posterity settling on Malcolm's name, date of birth, blank date of decease, and the legend "He loved to fish".

On Anzac Day, when Mum happened to mention Uncle Bill, M.M, who survived the mural on the classroom wall but was gassed on the Somme, I noticed Gramma look over her knitting like a mantis looks over its forelegs at the butterfly it is about to kill. Only the butterfly was Eve. Who was reading The Epistle To The Tasmanians at the time. When Eve clocked Gramma's look, she dropped The Bible, flew outside and wandered up and down the creekbed, like she was doing laps, until after dark.

Gramma retreated to the bedroom and spent the rest of Anzac Day with the curtains drawn, hissing at the ghost of Uncle Bill. Telling him over and over that he was a cowardly bastard and how she was going to scratch his name off The Honour Roll with her fingernails if she had to. She didn't stop giving him hell until the sun went down. When I went in to call her for dinner, she was sitting on the edge of the bed with her knitting in her hands, staring at the window like Uncle Bill was outside, looking in. I tapped her on the shoulder and her head flopped.

Eve got the bed to herself. She read The Bible to the vegetables. They stopped dying. Eve had red hair too.

1946

I

On my twenty first birthday, I shared a roast suckling pig, disguised as rabbit to fool the rationing, with Mum, Auntie Eve, Short Owen Jones and Jimmy. Betty Blizzard came up with the apples for the sauce. She knew a man who knew an applegrower. Jimmy furnished the dessert, wild lemon cake with toilet-roof passionfruit icing, topped by a giant wooden key which I thought I'd seen before, maybe several times. Sarah and Short Owen took the festive opportunity to announce their engagement and that Sarah had applied to have Dad declared legally dead.

After forty six years underground, Short Owen Jones retired. He and bride-to-be talked of moving to Swansea – Wales - taking the pension with them, so rendering Eve's future unclear, wandering the creek bed aside. A letter from Dot arrived, a year late, having detoured to several Bays in several states and one in New Zealand, war having had unintended consequences for postal service. Wartime censorship prevented her specifying where she was or what she was doing but did permit specification of Cedric as a waste of time and space of which she was now well rid, the discovery of stains in the hospital bed leading to uncovering of his overstating the effects of morphine, being the last straw. Exposed as a malingerer and lover of the Head Nurse, Cedric had professed to be trying to let Dot down lightly. Dot had let him down heavily with a metal meal tray.

Regular self-medication allied with the products of Jimmy's home patisserie, dispelling Ron's pain in the short term, aggravated it in the long, whilst contributing to accelerating weight gain. He made irregular payments of board when his mother found him asleep with money in his pocket.

Pop Baker had warned him: pocket-scouring was in the blood.

II

Hughie Meiklejohn, Karl Marx, Willy Goldfinch and the Coal Barons were in agreement: machines were historically inevitable. It was inevitable Goldfinch got Samson arc-wall and Jeffrey B35 short wall crawler-mounted cutters which cut twenty three foot arcs to a depth of nine feet in the bord face. In four minutes. Or two arcs in eight minutes. It was inevitable he got electric borers to hole nine feet in, between the cuts. Inevitably, he got cushioned blasting. He got crawler mounted Joy loaders to fill the skips. He got every tunnel in his section of The Pit fully mechanised. With not a single man nor boy cavilled out. I'm exaggerating there. Horses still hauled the skips to the turntable. Goldfinch offered the nags voluntary redundancy but they didn't take it. They loved the darkness. Because machines were new, there was no seniority. Management selected the men they wanted. Guess who didn't get selected. The chosen men were transported underground by battery-powered loco. All inevitable.

Ron found his workload considerably increased as mechanisation of The Pit was accompanied by the mechanisation of injury. Every cemetery on the coalfields experienced accelerated growth in occupancy rates. Tommy Sim fell into the cogs of a machine. Ron buried Tommy. Gareth Davies lost his legs beneath caterpillar tracks. Ron buried Gareth six months later. Power cutters and perforators produced more dust, of a finer nature, than previously. Fred Pratt, eldest son of Blackjack Arthur, died of dusted lungs. Early recall from the battlefield to render war service in The Pit had accelerated Fred's demise, his lungs turning to concrete in the manner of his father. It was said that the Pratt family had the wrong lungs for coal. Ron buried Fred. He buried Old Davey Owen, crushed between a machine and a wall. New machines had not been designed to fit old shafts and were found to knock down roof timbering.

The Federation drew a line in the sand and refused to accept mechanical extraction of pillars. As productivity increased and employment decreased, even in the absence of machine-derived misadventure, rock and coal kept falling as it always had. Ron buried Walter Baxter, caught under a grey back fault.

The spike in cemetery productivity attending pit mechanisation proved comparatively brief in The Bay, being succeeded by a sharp downward trend as escalation of duties aggravated the gravedigger's spinal condition. In consequence of the ensuing confinement and medication, a bankup of bodies awaited resting places yet to be dug, some of the Sadly Missed lingering above ground in the Swansea parlour, others remaining laid out in front rooms or sheds. Exigency saw several of the Fondly Remembered find themselves beneath a back yard. The raising of a petition by the swelling numbers of bereaved militated the return of Stan Smith and mechanical claw to his former position. Within a week, pigeons circled the new tin shed in a corner of the under-utilised Catholic section which served as both residence and aviary. Stan erecting a small cross on the roof and calling it The Chapel allowed the municipal council to turn a blind eye to its construction.

Stan's pigeons shat a circle clear around the cemetery. After he died the circle of shit got smaller every day. His grave was the bullseye. I came out of voluntary redundancy or retrenchment without pay or early retirement to bury Stan. In the end, I buried all the leftovers from the pick and contract days, all the militant old bastards who trotted up to gawk and say the same thing each time Dad sat me on the bar. Tell a lie. Fizzer Phillips is still parked in

Retired Miners Corner like a stick insect with a beer. You've got to watch for a long, long time to see The Fizz move. But they reckon it happens.

1947

I

On my twenty second birthday Jimmy landed a job at the Royal Easter Show, in sideshow alley, as “Jimmy The Human X-Ray! You can see right through him!!” I was appointed Head Barman, with unlimited liquid fringe benefits, in the Tooth’s Brewery Tasting Tent. Tooth’s now owned Resch’s so it was a plum job.

Jimmy worked on the Ghost Train. Inside the blacked-out building, wearing a skeleton suit, jumping out and scaring the shit out of punters, or not, having milkshakes and pies thrown at him and copping punches on the chalky snout from heroes. When he took off the skeleton suit you couldn’t see the difference. Cedric worked the Dodgem Cars, hanging off the electric pole at the back, flirting with bosses’ daughters. I sold pluto pups, polly waffles and fairy floss from a caravan or shopped them around the circuit in a wooden tray, wearing a white dustcoat and a pink and white cap. It was only two weeks work but it was the hell out of The Bay. Cedric was convinced it would lead to year-round employment on the country circuit because the sideshows had lost a lot of workers in the war. Also in our favour, the union had come out strongly against employing underage schoolkids to fill the gaps. We chloroformed Jimmy, tied him up and blindfolded him to get him out of The Bay. The Bellevue Private Hotel For Single Men Only was within wafting distance of Tooth’s brewery on Broadway. Delicious.

Cedric knocked off a Chinese girl from Parramatta, Sandra Hong, whose old man, an old, old man named Harry Hong, had a head like a hairy parsnip. Before the war, Harry Hong had made a name for himself in giant vegetables, grown for the Royal Agricultural Society’s Giant Vegetables Competition. No-one ever found out what the Old Parramatta Chinaman fed his produce, but every year he streeted the competition in his category. There was talk, and

suspicion, and threats, but he was smart, Harry Hong. Just when the competition and the royal agricultural authorities thought they were closing in on his secret, say, for producing giant marrowes, Harry would switch to producing giant cucumbers. Or some other vegetable which ballooned to improbable dimensions under his care and found itself draped in championship ribbons. When The Old Parramatta Chinaman wasn't giant gardening he was reproducing. He had four daughters who worked at the show every Easter school holidays. Normal-sized daughters. Who were all underage but Harry had swing in the market gardeners' union. I think Cedric only knocked off one daughter. In the Giant Vegetables Pavilion. Behind a Grand Champion Pumpkin. He would've mentioned knocking off more than one daughter. And he would've been dead. The Old Parramatta Chinaman was very protective. Anyway. Sandra Hong sold tickets to the Mirror Maze and gave out Maze Master Medals from inside a booth stuffed full of school books. She was studying for the Leaving Certificate. The Leaving Certificate wasn't big in The Bay. Everyone left before the Leaving. Sandra and Cedric didn't last. Knock me down with a feather. She caught him showing his bayonet hole to The Pearl King's daughter aboard a stalled carriage on the Ferris Wheel. Sandra, her three sisters and the Old Parramatta Chinaman pulled out knives the size of machetes and chased Cedric clear across the showground, right through the woodchopping and the pony trap event. Cedric quit the Dodgems without notice and steered well clear of the Easter Show and Parramatta after that.

Jimmy and me got in half price to see Rikki and Tikki the Siamese Twins, Davy the Pinhead, Rita the Two Headed Woman, Perry the Human Lungfish, Prince Yuri the Three Legged Cossack, The Bearded Lady, The Spider Woman, The Half Man Half Woman, and Serpentina the Snake Woman who had no bones except in her head. The Half Man Half Woman asked Jimmy to share his caravan. Jimmy was Halfway To Central Railway in his skeleton suit before I caught up with him.

Question for Hobbsie: Why is it called Ferris Wheel?

I thought I'd forgotten her until I saw that bloody wheel.

“Fairy Floss! Polly Waffles! Hot Pluto Pups!

The delicacies carried daily on his tray had proven difficult for the vendor to resist. On a warning, he moved through the crowd, rural smells tangling with fat and fairy floss in his nostrils, belt sawing into his neck. Steel balls clattered in rows of wooden amusement machines nearby. Overhead, rainbow coloured lights glowed in lines and loops, flashed, and whirled in giant circles. Rain had fallen, on and off, all day. The circuit was mud, his dustcoat spattered and soaked at the hem, the Pluto Pups cold and damp. No-one was buying. He swigged beer from a milkshake container while about him mechanical rides whirled and rumbled, cranked up and plunged down. Passengers screamed and threw arms into the air. Girls hid in boys’ jumpers. He hardly noticed. Forbidden while working to consume cold wet Pups, the promise of leftovers at day’s end held him in its sway. A distant static-splintered voice exhorted the fearless to “Ride The Ghost Train! Ride The Ghost Train!”

He slipped between tents to the rear of the haunted transport system. Jimmy sat on a cordial box, in sodden skeleton suit, smoking, while screams accompanied metallic rumbling inside the ride.

“The half-man half-woman is looking for you”, said Ron.

“It chased me into the mirror maze and tried to kiss me!”

“Which half tried to kiss you?”

“I’m going home.”

A thin black door flew open. A head poked from the gloom inside. Wartime gaunt, crow-black hair, brilliantined, matching moustache and cigarette.

“In.”

Jimmy ground the life from his cigarette then peeled sticky jersey from his chest with both hands.

“I’m going home.”

He disappeared inside. The thin door slammed. Ron heard Jimmy’s skeletal howl.

II

Sandra invited us to a Chinese restaurant down from Central Railway. It was a trap. They were going to chop Cedric into small pieces and cook him. Cedric wasn’t that dumb. There were cats everywhere. The streets smelt like cabbage. I ate rice for the first time. Couldn’t taste a thing. It floated in my beer and got all over the floor. I just about took Sandra’s eye out with a chopstick. Short soup, long soup, middle-sized soup, I couldn’t taste a thing. Jimmy stabbed the yolk of his fried egg and gave his lamb chop a swim. He slipped me the tail. Too much chop fat is never enough. A Chinese restaurant opened at the north end of Swansea. I never made it past the cake shop. They came out for the gold. The Chinese. Stayed for the giant vegetables. They never made it to The Bay. Around the Hong girls I kept quiet about Cedric’s new job, on Sydenham station, sweeping cigarette butts into a half kero tin nailed on the end of a broomstick, introducing schoolgirls to smoking and communism and showing them his bayonet hole. He reckoned the only blokes who got more girls than station attendants were bus drivers because bus drivers could let the prettiest schoolgirl warm her undies on the engine cowling, up front in the old Leylands. Station attendants couldn’t compete with that. But they did have platform toilets as locations for rendezvous. And not all the pretty ones caught buses.

Cedric took us to this lane in East Sydney where women propped up the doorways. We just looked. Jimmy whinged the whole two weeks.

Distorted Artie Shaw blared. Puddles shimmered on an outdoor dance floor.

“Fairy Floss! Polly Waffles! Hot Pluto Pups!

A lone pair of girls stomped to Artie’s rhythm and laughed as water flew. An oily droplet clung to Ron’s eyebrow. The shorter, plumper girl stopped jitterbugging.

“Ron?”

Maria spoke more clearly than he remembered. She was training to be a receptionist.

“Learning to cross our legs and walk with books on our heads until we get married.”

Maria’s parents, on this particular night, were under the impression their daughter was attending a coaching class in touch typing.

“How is Nerys Ferris?”

“Getting married. To the mine under manager.”

Resisting the temptation to add that Nerys Ferris had never learned to cross her legs, he purchased two sticks of pink fairy floss encased in cellophane.

The brilliantined attendant slammed down the safety bar. The carriage crashed through the double doors into a gullet of darkness riddled with screams. He had seen darker, heard worse screams. Maria clutched his arm. They jolted forward as the carriage came to a sudden halt, sideways as it span ninety degrees on the spot, backward as it crashed through another set of

doors to face a rotting human head, gnawed by rats, laced in spider webs, grinning from a glowing grotto. Maria's grip tightened. He could smell her hair. Not rose. Not lavender. Something he had never smelt before, from far away. They passed a green, headless corpse. Dangling bats brushed their heads. Blood dripped from a dusty book beside a creepy candlestick. Ultraviolet light turned teeth, the whites of eyes, the buttons on Maria's dress, fluorescent.

A luminous skeleton leapt from concealment. Ron hooted as his heart shot out of his body. Maria buried her face in his chest. The scent of her hair seemed to whisper "Hold me". He felt the texture of girlish cashmere for the first time. Underneath, girlish flesh. The skeleton, recognising fluorescent teeth, whites of eyes, and dress buttons, stupefied, was almost run down by a trailing carriage. Ron and Maria shot into the dark. Scurrying in pursuit, carriage nipping at his heels, Jimmy ran face-first into a closed set of doors.

He resisted attending the First Aid Station in case what he had deduced was happening, was not happening, in which case, heart rate down to normal, he would make a fresh move on the girl, or if it really was happening, for some reason to subject himself to the agony of witnessing his best friend, his fat best friend, steal a girl whom he, Jimmy, had seen first. He fashioned a sling from a crusty handkerchief before rolling a cigarette one-handed to still the rising in his throat.

"You've lost weight", said Maria.

Skeleton Jimmy did not get the joke as quickly as his mate. Pink sugar smeared Maria's lips as she smiled and slipped her hand into Ron's.

In Jimmy's eyes, neither party had evinced adequate concern for his black, flattened nose and probable broken collarbone. They left him playing an amusement machine based on the game of golf. The eighteen hole machine - fairways, bunkers, water hazards, greens, hand-painted on timber, under glass - hung vertical on a wall. Jimmy fired an angry ball-bearing up the fairway. The missile thudded off the top and hurtled downwards, ricocheting wildly off projecting pins, battering the glass, before dropping into a hole marked 'Double Bogey'. Skill lay in violently shaking the machine without attracting the attention of an attendant. Jimmy cracked the glass, one handed. He determined to visit a street in East Sydney.

III

The ground floor room was furnished with a stained basin and two single beds shrouded in faded blue chenille. A rectangle of darker floorboarding, fossil of an extinct mat, presented between the beds. A window, nailed shut, without curtains, looked out on moss-stained bricks and a drainpipe. At night, the alley outside flickered in the light of a faulty sign featuring the image of a white business shirt and thin black tie, over the manufacturer's name. Ron hung a blanket over the window. He offered Maria her choice of confectionery from a sample bag as they sat on the edge of his bed. Her lips tasted of fairy floss and lanolin.

"I must go home soon."

They lifted their legs onto the bed and entwined like puppies. The bed squeaked. Ron disentangled himself, rose, and yanked on the string several times before the light went out.

“Do you have to go back to The Bay tomorrow?”

“Work.”

The blanket fell from the window. Maria dragged the bedspread over their heads. The metal edge of the bed dug into his hip.

“I’ve got you.”

The bed squeaked.

A shaft of light slanted across the room, briefly. Jimmy lay down without a sound. An illuminated shirt and tie reflected in his eyes. The blue chenille mound spoke softly.

“Papa needs help in the shop.”

“What if he doesn’t like me?”

“Papa is not like his brother.”

Jimmy foraged inside a sample bag. The chenille mound stilled. Ron smelled mint.

“Jimmy?”

“Yeah?”

“It’s Jimmy.”

“Hello, Jimmy.”

“OK if I turn on the light?”

The string broke. Jimmy leapt at the remnant several times before achieving illumination. He dragged a suitcase from under the bed.

“Train leaves at six, mate”.

His good hand swept clothes into the suitcase. Ron’s head disengaged from the bedspread.

“I’m not going back”.

Maria sensed now was not the time to emerge.

“I’ve got work here.”

Jimmy tossed a sock in the suitcase, ransacked bedclothes for its partner.

“What about your Mum?”

“She’s marrying Short Owen.”

“Eve?”

“I’ll send money.”

The errant sock joined its twin. Jimmy emptied the sample bag on the floor.

“Want a lolly, Maria?”

Maria blew hair from her face as she surfaced, pulling down her dress under the bedspread. Jimmy gnawed the yellow layer of a liquorice allsort like a rat.

“How about a beer, mate?”, he said.

“Now?”

“Mightn’t see you for a while, might I?”

It seemed to Maria that every time Jimmy grinned the grin was punctuated by additional holes through which smoke and beer could freely pass.

“Pubs are shut”, said Ron.

“I saw some bottles in the ice chest out the back.”

The rattish incisors peeled the next layer, liquorice, from the allsort.

“Come on, mate. They won’t notice. Place is full of blow-ins. Can’t say no to a goodbye beer, mate.”

Maria threw back the bedspread.

“I must go home.”

“One beer? Mightn’t see you again, Maria. Just one beer.”

“I do not like beer.”

“There’s lemonade in the ice chest too.”

Jimmy raised the crusty sling.

“Only got one arm, mate.”

Socks on for stealth, Ron smiled at Maria and, lighter on the wings of love, darkened the room with a single leap. The doorlatch slid into the mortice without a sound.

“Don’t forget the opener”, said Jimmy.

The hall was dark bar a sliver of shirt factory sign insinuating itself under the front door where floorboards had been worn into a dip. He slipped along the hall, hand outstretched. The door to the rear was not locked.

Jimmy tossed Ron’s shoes, clothes, into the suitcase.

“He won’t leave The Bay”, he said.

He clicked the latches shut.

“You will still be mates, Jimmy”, said Maria.

Jimmy sat beside her. His good arm curled around her shoulders. The other crept from the sling to stroke any flesh it could find. He winced a smile.

“Jimmy?”

Maria shrugged her shoulders like a dog dismissing water. Jimmy's hands became clamps. She twisted.

"Ron said it was all right with him."

He bashed his mouth into hers. Maria tasted liquorice. Foul teeth. She jerked her head away.

"Get off - !"

"It's all right! Ron said."

He pursued her mouth. Their teeth clashed.

"Get off me -!"

Maria's fingers found collarbone. Jimmy reeled, mouth in the shape of a scream, but soundless. Nausea set him down on the bed opposite.

"Wake up, bitch", he hissed.

His eyes were yellow.

"He's in love with Nerys Ferris. He won't leave The Bay."

Maria kept him in view while she collected her shoes. Her handbag lay near the bed. Jimmy placed a foot on it.

"You're a test run."

"Please give me my bag."

"Kiss? Help you forget him."

"Please give me my bag."

Jimmy kicked the bag at the door. Maria fled the room.

The slam of a door interrupted his search for the opener. He held his breath.

No-one came downstairs. The bottles clinked under his arm.

IV

Jimmy's face was pale in the yellow light, and streaming tears. He shook.

"She's gone, mate."

Ron scrabbled under the bed, seeking shoes.

"I kicked her out."

The back of his head smashed into the metal frame.

The sodden towel stank. He dragged it from his face. Jimmy's face floated at close range, above. Before receding, blurry, beer bottle to lips. He sat up. The back of his head pulsed. The bottle trembled in Jimmy's hand as he offered it.

"Maria?"

He might have said the word or he might not.

"I kicked her out."

A voice recommended he smash the bottle and jam the shard in Jimmy's face.

"You don't want to know, mate. Have a drink."

A more methodical voice suggested he find Maria first, then kill Jimmy. He stumbled to the door.

"She put the hard word on me."

The first voice demanded priority: "Glass Jimmy."

"Bullshit."

He noted blood on the white china doorknob. The egg on the back of his head felt emu-sized.

"She put the word on me. God's truth, mate."

"BULLSHIT! BULL-SHIT!"

Boards creaked overhead. Jimmy leapt to close the door. Ron's foot was quicker. Muscle memory saw his body follow, wedge itself in the gap. Jimmy secured the wedge with his good shoulder.

"You have to hear it all, do you? She said you a dud. A dud root. With me? A dud root."

Ron felt the urge to savage Jimmy's face with his teeth, like a shark.

"She's no good, mate. All she wanted was free rides and to meet flaming freaks."

Ron shook his head like a baffled animal. Jimmy flew backwards across the room.

He ran to Central Railway in his socks. He ignored the ticket barrier. Scouring suburban platforms, pursued by station attendants, he was defeated by sheer number of platforms and sets of stairs. Train after train departed unchecked as he stumbled sick and breathless onto the platform. A voice suggested she might live handy to a bus route. The conductor threw him off the last 339 to Clovelly. His socks were shredded. His feet bled. He had been sliced down the middle and everything inside had fallen out. He did not know where she lived. Apprehended, heaving tears, in Eddy Avenue, a station attendant took pity on him.

Brandy was waiting in the room on his return. She told Ron she was nineteen and had bumped into his friend in East Sydney. She smelt of musk and rum.

V

Wingnut appeared in musty longjohns and hat. The smell of foreign food swept past him, from inside. He snorted on seeing the scab and slammed the door.

“Just give me her address!”

“No good. Do you no good!”

Ron pounded on the door.

“Piss off!”

He continued pounding. The door opened.

“Piss OFF, scab!”

“Give this to her? Please?”

There was blood on the envelope. He had sliced his tongue as he sealed it.

“No letters. No messages. No nothing. She said.”

“It’s not a letter.”

Wingnut awaited more detail.

“It’s a list.”

“No lists.”

The door slammed again. The list returned to his pocket. Nerys Ferris and daughter passed in the back seat of an American car. Nerys Ferris saw him but did not wave. Her daughter stared.

The inventory of things he loved about Maria boiled to nothing in the Shipwater copper.

1948

I

On my twenty third birthday the term 'rationalisation' was created to denote the newly-enacted government-guaranteed right to a job for life, appended by more-than-decent wages and conditions, indexed, for every worker. Hughie Meiklejohn coined the expression after finding conventional industrial terminology inadequate to illustrate the golden future of coalmining. The first recorded usage of the term was on the front page of the April 1948 issue of Common Cause, the miners' advocate, under the headline "The Struggle Is Over!!", alongside a photo of Hughie, draped in the Australian flag, standing by the Prime Minister, in front of a photo of The Queen, giving a two-handed overhead V for Victory sign and smiling like Stalin's father-in-law on the big day.

Six weeks after receiving a Eleventh Newtown Postcard from Mount Hagen in the New Guinea highlands, depicting local headhunters who had converted to Methodism, and recommending a former waterside workmate of Cedric's tight with a second watersider who knew a doctor dependent on particular material off the docks, Ron was awarded a partial invalid pension. Fortnightly cheque not fully covering consumption, he undertook odd jobs around The Bay, spine permitting, for supplementary cash. Not long after, lured by the beauty of simplicity, he made the transition to a barter system. A bottle of beer, plate of food, sweet, for consumption on the pub verandah, became currency. Nerys Ferris awarded herself the honour of being the first to employ him purely in exchange for alcohol - no sugary accompaniments - after availing herself of his services in clearing the Goldfinch gully trap of a plump flying fox embalmed in fat, grease, and tangled human hair. Removal of the mummified mammal saw

Ron rewarded in leftover moselle of lurid colour and uncertain age in a strange-shaped bottle, an abandoned tipple of aspirational wine buff Willy. Ron embraced the nectary German drop and subsequently any fluid resembling it, while traditional staples, beer and OP rum, retained acceptance. In time of emergency, when white wine was unavailable, he recognised red. The arrival of a crate of Lambrusco destined for an Italian mechanic's wedding in Lake Macquarie but taking a wrong turn and falling off the truck in The Bay, broadened his taste. Payment solely in alcohol soon approached universal tender, with cake and pastry accorded the status of a tip, except when Jimmy was the baker. The Blizzard bakery was, however, to Ron's dismay, an industry witnessing grave post-war decline.

The dream of a "Patisserie By The Pub" had been consigned to the dustbin of history by a grander narrative, that of "Jimmy Blizzard: Lawnmower Baron of the Northern Coalfields". That The Bay boasted a single lawn, a manicured moat to the Goldfinch residence, proved no disincentive. By freakish happenstance, Willy Goldfinch read American home improvement magazines, subsequently stacked in the garage where, perusing the glossy journals during smokos, mower man Jimmy, smoking long and hard, envisioned The Post-War Rise Of The Lawn in The Bay and greater surrounding region. He kept to himself the knowledge that proliferation of lawn was but a matter of time and that he, Jimmy Blizzard, chalky-boned scab, "Skinny", would be ready with a fleet of mowers when that time arrived.

I stopped thinking about Maria. I saw Nerys Ferris maybe once a year. She named her daughter Dimity. Dimity Dilys Ferris-Goldfinch. Hand it to Nerys Ferris. She could bung it on. Dimity had stirrups on her legs. Clicked as she walked. Like Wingnut, only louder. She didn't look anything like Goldfinch. Nothing like him. I'm not saying who she looks like. By the time Dimity was four she had bluebirds to match her mother's.

1949

I

On my twenty fourth birthday, the rewards the workers had been promised in return for wartime sacrifices came through in spades. April Fool. What came through was the government and newspapers and the RSL frothing at the mouth about Reds manipulating workers and white-anting the Australian way of life. And what came through to those bastards in return was a big bloody coalfields strike. The government tried to block strike pay and shop credit by seizing union funds. The Federation hid the money. The government threw Federation officials in gaol. They still didn't find the money. Chifley used the navy to unload Indian coal and sent the army into Muswellbrook, Minmi, and Ben Bullen. Open cut mines. He didn't dare send scabs underground after the mess they made at Rothbury. Word was, the soldiers were armed. No-one was shot, this time.

The Bay was connected to water and electricity. Sewerage was next. Footpaths. Gutters. Streetlights. Telephones. Hospital. High School. Bank. Department Store. Swimming pool. Golf Club. Performing Arts Centre. April Fool.

Under the strict regime of working only when he felt like it, most commonly when he felt like a drink, with the proviso that if he could contrive to drink without the precursor of work, so much the better, his back made significant improvement and he stuck to the regimen with rigour. His spine was not alone in responding. His humour burgeoned. His social confidence grew. He discovered entertainment rather than perturbation in the global lack of sense. He became louder, progressively making less and less distinction between shouting and conversation. His skin colour spent increasing time in shades at

the red end of the spectrum, wherein freckles – which he never liked – found camouflage. He expanded in every direction. Coined years before, by Enid Davies, in wishful malice, the nickname ‘Fatty’ became acute foresight, if not understatement, and stuck. Another prescient reputation finally fitting, the overcoat of monster complementing the suit of clown. His christening came with a corollary: fretful, hard-smoking, meal-skipping, incurably chalk-boned Jimmy became forever ‘Skinny’.

Ever the subject of incomprehension, having at first simply *endured* scorn, before embracing the petulant rebellion of “So?”, Ron’s approach to The Bay matured into a transcendant flaunting of unfathomability, alongside a fondness for atrocity. As the scion of the Shipwater line crossed over from a world which made no sense to another, his own, which did, completely, The Bay found itself unable to follow and gave up trying.

The men went back to work. Machines came onto pillars not long after. Productivity bonuses came in. The thirty five hour week didn’t come in. Twenty horses drowned in the Aberdare Extended pit. In 1917, when Dad pelted scabs with rocks and was bashed by the cops, Chifley was a striking railwayman. Chifley was put on a railways black list: “Never to be re-employed”.

The Pit coughed along for another 30 years before they put it out of its misery but, looking back, 1949 was the beginning of the end.

1950-1984

I

The drink. The drink. There's no getting round it, I enjoy a drink. So the story gets a bit foggy from here on. If it wasn't foggy already. I think I'm still pretty ok with what, and not too bad at where, but when has gone clear out the window. So? So I won't try to put a date on what happened next. Just play catchup. And as for why anything happened, don't ask. Why has been fogbound from day one. Nothing ever made sense.

There was another Stay-In at the pit. I gave it a miss. Or it gave me a miss. I held my own stay-in at the pub. The men broke the record again. Two hundred hours. Management broke their own record. Two hundred retrenchments. It wasn't everyone but it was a good start. They continued using horses to haul props. If you give a horse a name you'll never have the heart to retrench it.

Eve clocked her first nun. A close friend gave Betty Blizzard a leaky boat. Stay with me. I rowed, Jimmy bailed, as we ferried Eve across the lake for a bridesmaid's dress fitting - with Nan Baker - for Mum and Short Owen's hitching - and there, overloading Swansea pier, looking from a distance like a penguin colony on holiday, was what turned out to be a whole puntload and a half of nuns, clutching Gladstone bags and Globite school suitcases, beaming and whittering, red-cheeked with excitement at whatever it was they were doing and wherever it was they were going. Both of which remain a mystery to this day. There were so many the piles of the pier were bowing. Anyway, Nan Baker let drop that nuns called themselves Brides Of Christ. Well, shut the gate, that was it for Eve. The Vision On Swansea Pier was a sign: Eve was being called to be a Bride Of Christ. And she was hell bent on heeding the heavenly call. You never saw someone wear so many crucifixes. Especially someone christened Metho because the Presby man's horse was lame and the Pope was warned off the premises. Eve's

holy crosses were home-made, sticks of all sizes and species bound with string, hanging at various heights so she looked like some sort of bush witch. She rattled as she walked. Her room was filled with more crosses and glowing mail order pictures of Jesus and Mary. She signed up for correspondence lessons in the Catholic Approach to Salvation as a Persecuted Minority in a Protestant Pit Village. April Fool. Gramma Shipwater would've throttled her. Stripped her Popish crosses, torn down her Popish pictures, burnt her Popish bedroom to ash. Eve learnt the name of every saint off by heart. What they were patron saint of. Told me there was no Patron Saint of Fat Unemployed Drunks and/or Village Idiots. I thought becoming a Bride Of Christ was a smart move. If it didn't work out she could always work in the post office. Eve never graduated to fully-fledged Bride of Christdom but a convent in Sydney did take her in, let her wear the uniform, call herself Sister Evelyn, and teach her to drive a Torana. So she was like a class-A-licenced Bridesmaid Of Christ. Or a Chauffeur To The Brides of Christ. She used to visit The Bay in a GTS chock a block with Christ's harem, driving like a Holy Maniac. Heavy right foot. Heavy holy right foot.

I figured out what happened with Uncle Bill. You don't want to know. Gramma sorted it out with a knitting needle.

Dot forgot all about Cedric until she came across the Twelfth Newtown Postcard announcing he was back on the docks and living in Balmain, remembered him with great fondness and began stalking him again. It wasn't called stalking then. And she stalked him with great fondness. She also stalked his latest girlfriend, a nurse at Callen Park Mental Hospital called Jane. Then shirtfronted her in the carpark of the RSL, claiming she – this is Dot – married Cedric before the war and that he had bribed a mate to say he died of beri beri and/or dysentery and/or tropical ulcers and/or bayonet wounds and/or starvation on the Sandakan Death March, to avoid taking responsibility for Dot and their five children under six years of age. Or six children under five. She - Dot - boosted her credentials

with the exact size and location of Cedric's bayonet hole which she told Jane was actually an injury sustained during a passionate pre-war domestic after which they made up and conceived the twins. Even if Jane didn't believe her, she was convinced Dot was insane and probably dangerous. Which was also Cedric's position. Dot's problem was, she was insane and probably dangerous. For some reason she didn't drink to make it go away. Cedric finally did the honourable thing. Shacked up with Dot at a boarding house in Coogee, doctored her Bonox with a New Zealand Scotch Whiskey doing the rounds of the docks, and ran away while she was asleep.

She never stalked Cedric again. At least, not until it was too late. Operating from a red De Soto flatbed he sent a Thirteenth Newtown Postcard, featuring The Dog On The Tuckerbox, postmarked somewhere in South Australia, addressed to me via Retired Miners Corner, saying he was boarding a ship to South Africa once he reached Perth because he wanted to work with wild animals and black people in Marxist-leaning Mozambique. Or he might go to India because he'd converted to the non-violent philosophy of Mahatma Ghandi. He said – I'll read it – he says it right here on the Newtown Postcard – that if Trotsky and Ghandi had got together "their dialectic would have led to a fairer and more peaceful world". I still have the complete set of Newtown Postcards sticky-taped to my bedroom wall.

Mum and Short Owen's marriage didn't last six months. Mum hated Wales. Hated the Welsh. Hated the singing. Hated the leeks. Hated the cold. Hated Short Owen by the end. She died of pneumonia on the boat home. I buried her next to Dad's spot. Dad never turned up. Mum and Gramma squabbled on after death. At night, ear to the slab, you can hear Gramma saying "I told you so", over and over, about Short Owen. Dot and me had the house to ourselves. Dot started sleeping at the Caulfield's.

*Nan and Pop Baker never got over Mum's death. Nan had a nervous breakdown. They found her on a train, walking up and down like Eve on a creekbed, swearing at anyone who dared to look at her. Real swearing, f and c, you fn' c, like pit men when something goes haywire. Nan had never sworn before in her life. Now, she swore at Pop too. Called him a f***** c***!" and cursed him as The Devil. When he took her flowers or chocolates she'd hurl them back screaming "Get thee behind me, Satan, you f***** c***!" He visited Nan every day. While he stayed on in their house, shrinking, with his hair turning white. He only used two rooms. Piled the others to the ceiling with newspapers and boxes of beer bottles. Every morning, he read the paper, every afternoon he drank beer. In between he visited Nan. He'd been in the siege of Ladysmith. He told me Major Douglas Haig caught the last train out, leaving everyone else behind, so they promoted him to General. Pop bumped into Haig a few years later at this place called Wipers on the western front. "Don't be vague, blame General Haig", he'd say, before diving back into his newspaper. That was about all he said about the wars he was in. I once asked him how many Boers and Germans he killed. He said he only winged a few so they got to go home. He never marched on Anzac Day. Later he watched it on tv. He died buried under newspapers and beer bottles. He was smaller than Nan in the end. I convinced Stan Smith to squeeze them into the same bed.*

Dot's mental health improved after she took up smoking instead of eating. Cork tipped tailors. Two packs a day. Another at night. Dot and Jimmy, they were like scrawny heavy industries. When the doctor ordered her to quit – this was later – she switched to chaining menthols, one in her mouth, a reserve behind her ear, with a split second light-up between the two. Blink and you missed it. A million packs later she took up with a Vietnam vet named Crank. That was his name. Crank. Met him at the Long Jetty pub, where she worked inside a cloud of smoke. Crank rode an ex-NSW Police Triumph 500 motorbike with a fat kelpie bitch named Kay San sitting on the petrol tank. Crank and a bunch of other Viet vets with loud bikes got

together to buy this little ghost town somewhere out west. Just a pub, a dead service station and a couple of shacks, called something aboriginal with a lot of 'o's in it. The vets renamed it *The Da Nang Alamo*. A few years later *The Alamo* was busted by helicopter. A big operation, at night, half a dozen cars and vans plus a chopper with a searchlight, more loud hailers than you could poke a stick at, and a shoot-out. One vet got himself killed. Another got wounded. A cop got a slug in the arse. The chopper was holed by a shottie – Crank claimed it was his – and made a forced landing. Dot got a suspended sentence. She visited Crank in Long Bay for a while. A few years after he got out Crank came to The Bay with a hundred other bikies in sunglasses and bandanas, mostly on Harleys, in a funeral procession. They rode through The Bay, slowly, five or six abreast, both sides of the street, making an ear-splitting racket, forcing coaltrucks onto the footpath. The coffin, black, with a red skull going up in flames and hot snakes crawling out of the eyesockets, rode in a sidecar up front. Geoff Phillips was inside the box so I guess it was his skull that was full of burning snakes. Having Fizzer Phillips for your old man would do that to you. Geoff died overtaking a coal truck with faulty indicator near the power station where he worked after being cavilled out in 1958. After the cavil there was another record stay-in at The Pit. Two thirds of the men who broke the record came out to find themselves rationalised. For his part, Geoff was happy to be rationalised because it meant he didn't have to work beside a dangerous old goat any more. Fizzer was at the funeral looking petrified. The rest of The Bay watched from way inside the new bowling club. The bikies behaved themselves. One of them read a poem about freedom, another spoke about what a good mate Geoff was, another sang "Lost Highway". Dot made a point of saying hello to Crank. He was about forty but looked sixty. Teeth like an old graveyard. It was a still day so it took hours for the dust to settle after they left.

Disappointed communist Cedric came back to The Bay behind the wheel of a bronze Valiant AP6, with a woman named Ruby in the passenger seat, a plywood humpback named 'Ruby' on tow, and an

tinny named 'Ruby Too!' on the roof, all in various stages of restoration. Ex-Red Ced had replaced belief in the perfectibility of mankind with a love of driving, and was convinced that, had he lived, Trotsky would have done much the same thing. Ruby had lost both legs. "In a smoking accident", she said. Adding that Cedric had rescued her from the protective custody of timid offspring. Cedric knocked her up a pair of turned oak limbs on the pit carpenter's lathe, beautifully marine varnished, with stainless steel and leather fittings, but successful attachment to the ageing female trunk proved an ongoing problem.

Nerys Ferris came down from Snob Hill with Dimity in tow. Goldfinch went back to his wife. She wasn't chopped into fish food or under a goaf fall after all. She was in Snob Hill in Wollongong. It was as if Nerys Ferris had never been away. Plus, in a bonus to the community, she now had the gossip that Mrs La De Da Goldfinch resented poor little Four Eyes and One Eye Goldfinches because Mrs La De Da wanted to be an artist and not have to make school lunches, which was why she abandoned Willy and the sight-deprived Goldfinch kids and ran away to an artists' colony in Wollongong. Nerys Ferris also had the word from the southern coalfields artists' colony that Mrs Goldfinch was a crap artist, because she couldn't stand untidiness, which, Nerys Ferris said, was essential to being an artist, which explained why Mrs La De Da took Willy back. Or went back to him. Or met him halfway, on Hornsby station.

Eve took her first communion. Dot teamed up with Jane in the mental hospital. They still send each other Christmas cards. The Pit closed for good.

Arthur Scargill took on Margaret Thatcher. The strike began at the Cortonwood Pit, south of Barnsley. Gramma Shipwater was a Barnsley lass.

I'll leave it at that.

Part Two

THE LIST

1985

I

The few clouds shone like wool. Hydrangeas perished, brown and crisp, by taps which no longer dripped. Dust hung in the air long after trucks had vanished. Frogs died inside the tanks. Snakes came up to the houses. The Bay would not be drawn. Two years was a long time but not *that* long. Residents voted steadfastly against the connection of town water as it would increase council rates. And surely, added the wise, at the very moment of connection, would not the heavens open? And stay open? Offending snakes were attacked with spades and draped headless and broken-backed over fences, as a warning.

Surrender of the first rung asked to take his weight saw those below unable to inhibit acceleration to the bottom of the well. Folded knees to chest, arse immersed in shallow muck, the question arose: where was the dead greyhound? A curvilinear sensation in his buttock suggested that he had landed – only - on Mystery Man's tail. Or perhaps a limb of the former champion. Either outcome was a relief. Where then was the bulk of the animal? By process of elimination, difficult in certain regions of his body inaccessible for years, he located Mystery Man's trunk sandwiched between his shins and the wall of the well. Tumescence after ten days, reminiscent of wine cask bladders he had deployed as pillows, the inflated hound was under dangerous pressure.

He looked up. A circle of dogs looked down.

“Merlin! Fetch Jimmy! Fetch Jimmy! Merlin?! Where’s Jimmy? Jimmy?
 Shadow! Bandit! Fetch Jimmy. Candy!?! Where’s Jimmy? Go fetch Jimmy!
 Merlin!?! Go! Go! Go!”

The circle barked at length, twinkling eagerness to please, and remained unbroken. All but hurling his head from his neck in illustration of the request proved fruitless. The mutts of The Bay loved their obese mentor. Every day spent in his company was an adventure. Simply dozing on their backs in the sun, or screening empties behind the pub, could be expected to climax in the surprising and the spectacular. Who else could contrive to wedge himself with a deceased comrade at the bottom of Troy Meiklejohn’s backyard well? Who else gave off a scent within which they could identify themselves, individually and as a collective entity, mingling happily with Hunter Old and Red Mill Rum, myriad less personable ales, lagers and OP rums, bottle wine, flagon wine, cask wine, sachet wine, and - these last when Ron’s budgeting was awry or his pension cheque late - unlabelled liquid products traceable to Swansea Hardware? Augmented by balmy bodily side effects? Around Ron, there was always something to sniff.

Drying clay tightened on his hide. Currently tinted aubergine, deep against the yellow of the clay, Ron’s vast casing behaved as a litmus of his financial state, changing hue according to the currently affordable tipple. An eggplant tone indicated straitened circumstances, flushed scarlet the arrival of a cheque or successful completion of an odd job. He smiled. A red shift was imminent. Two schooners of black, the quote for removal and disposal of Mystery Man, hovered behind his eyelids. To be elbowed aside by a vision of the swollen

cadaver compressed between shins and wall. He was getting ahead of himself. Mystery Man was dead. Did The Man jump or was he pushed? The Man was smart enough not to fall unaided down a well. The hip problem had only made him more circumspect. Yet foul play could surely be ruled out. Surely. The Bay loved The Man. The Man chased and caught non-myxomatotic rabbits. The Man won several times at Wyong. The Man stopped mid-race to arch his back and crap in his only appearance at Wentworth Park. For a time, The Man was The Bay. Still and all, being a champion and crowd favourite, *could* foul play be ruled out? George the Greek of Belmont, gentlemen's barber and SP bookie, was known to detest The Man. On the other hand, under intense interrogation, George the Greek had held rigorously to the story that his was a purely professional detestation. And it was acknowledged in Retired Miners Corner that the late Perce Finch, The Bay's former SP representative, and good mate, had he not died prematurely of the dust, would also have detested the local dishlicker for the crime of being successful. At least until the Wentworth Park Incident and subsequent development of the hip problem. It was whispered the career-ending injury was the result of '*a swift kick in the kennels*', following which The Man became The Gimp. Gimpy. Gimpo. Ron had fattened up The Gimp on beer and painkillers. God help him now if The Gimp burst.

“RO-ON!?”

Nerys Ferris luxuriated in teak vocal chords. Endowing Ron's name with a minimum two syllables and ballistic upward inflection, she had mastered the unique screech a near half-century ago, when a lass who wished to be noticed.

"RO-ON!?" FAT-TY!!!?"

Her face joined the peering ring. Pale and powdered. Tresses of the day rose-pink. Nerys Ferris's hair, once strawberry blonde, now behaved like a hydrangea in oscillating from pink to blue and back again, the Ferris tint not pH dependent but rather the outcome of a dash of whimsy, or more commonly, in reaction to the tint of Dot Shipwater's coiffure. The hairdos of neighbours Nerys Ferris and Dot Shipwater bloomed in a perverse opposition.

"YOU SAID YOU'D SILVAFROST MY TANKS!"

The admonition boomed in the well. The canine circle howled and snapped at the noisy swirling air.

"FATTY! WHEN ARE YOU GOING TO SILVAFROST MY TANKS?"

Nerys Ferris possessed a trio of tanks, divorce presents from ex-husband Willy Goldfinch, all three bone dry and flaking rust, the tombs of dessicated frogs. It was very possible former mine undermanager Goldfinch, unseen for thirty years, was dead – and if so, it was the fervent hope of Nerys Ferris that his demise had been painful - but to the uninformed, thought Nerys Ferris, freshly silvafrosted tanks might well appear to be *brand new* tanks, the recent gifts of a remorseful ex husband wishing to resurrect a relationship. Or better still, the offerings of a well-to-do but eminently practical secret admirer.

"ARE YOU HIDING? YOU SAID YOU'D SILVAFROST MY TANKS! I SAID I'LL PAY YOU A FULL FLAGON. DID YOU HEAR ME? I SAID,

I'LL PAY YOU A FULL FLAGON! HAVE YOU PUT ON WEIGHT?
WHAT'S THAT AWFUL SMELL?"

II

Crouched on a clay footpath dotted with paspalum and white dog turds, Jimmy held conversation with a short, fragmenting shoelace. Such conversation had at one time remained within Jimmy's head but now not infrequently ventured out. When chatter did remain within, his lips could still be read, useful when discourse was held, as now, in competition with a throbbing lawnmower. Forward-leaning, hair swept back, jaw jutting, Jimmy appeared in permanent battle with a strong southerly. His right arm was encased in what appeared a heritage plaster cast. Adopting the highly enthused tone of a kindergarten teacher, he attempted to boost the confidence of the shoelace in being able to *do its job*, as he gently tightened the last chance of a knot. With laces tied tight, his feet still found considerable freedom of movement within the ancient miner's boots. He had trained his toes to cling on.

Nerys Ferris motored out the Meiklejohn front gate flanked by a scarred bull terrier answering to Henry or Neckless, and Prince the German Shepherd, regal head enclosed in a red plastic bucket. Neither animal belonged to Nerys Ferris but shared her gravitas and community involvement. Veering uphill, the triumvirate was menaced by an unmanned lawnmower advancing downhill, spitting dust and rocks. Nerys Ferris arrested the assailant and closed the throttle. The mower commenced extended spasm. Shuddering and banging

segued into a series of coughs, seconds apart, each accompanied by a low jump.

Serial bone fractures had bequeathed Jimmy a flailing, Cubist walk, creating the impression that at any second he might fly apart. Approaching at pace, his eyeballs approximated the pink of Nerys Ferris's hair, when it was pink.

"Gotta keep her running or she'll stop!", he said.

"She has stopped."

Jimmy conversed inside his head until interrupted.

"Your goat's out again", said Nerys Ferris.

"Not my goat."

"It'll get hit by a truck."

"Not my goat. My goat's tied up."

"I'm just passing on a message."

He yanked the starter cord. The mower declined to start. He repeated the action, several times, metronomically. The cord seemed to lengthen, his arm to shorten. He became more assertive.

"You've flooded her now, Skinny."

The deep blast of an air horn made them start. A follow-up blast, continuous, accompanied the coal truck's downhill hurtle in their direction. The vehicle slewed at Jimmy. Brakes hissed and screamed. He felt the heat of the engine.

"Get that fucking goat off the fucking road, Skinny!"

The truck juddered away with a further aggravated blast of the horn, reclining nudes on mudflaps glinting red, momentarily, in the sun. Prince the German Shepherd yowled reply, bucket acting as a loud hailer, tassels of slobber

swinging. Loose coal bounced on the road. The assault of the truck, the presence of Nerys Ferris, dissuaded Jimmy from trying to reason with the mower, but rather to show the machine who was boss, in a frenzy of oaths and wrenching. Nerys Ferris put her hands over her ears. Prince yowled and slobbered. Neckless Henry seized a mouthful of trouser leg, dug in low and yanked, downhill, in short sharp bursts. Jimmy continued wrenching as the bull terrier spread him like a wishbone. Nerys Ferris remembered her primary mission. Her hands remained over her ears.

SKINNY! FATTY'S DOWN TROY'S WELL! HE'S SUPPOSED TO BE SILVAFROSTING MY TANKS!"

The mower coughed as if dislodging an impediment, paused as though relieved, then returned to life with the rattle of an early model machine gun. Prince made show of savaging the machine in disapproval, bucket preventing actual contact between teeth and metal. Neckless Henry continued wishboning Jimmy.

"NOW HE'S STUCK! FATTY! HE'S STUCK!"

"HE CAN'T BE STUCK! I MEASURED HIM FIRST!"

Nerys Ferris hurled her hands to the sky, turned, stalked off, turned, glared at length, turned, and vanished inside her triple-tanked home. Jimmy's lips moved as he counted in his head. The current maximum count before Nerys Ferris reappeared to add weight to her point was five. Jimmy made it to three.

"DID YOU MEASURE HIM BEFORE OR AFTER LUNCH?"

The slam of the screen door was, as always, anticlimactic.

"Where's Ron? Ron? Ron! Ron!?", asked Jimmy.

Prince and Henry tore down the hill, Jimmy and mower bouncing after. A squeal of tyres followed by a loud thump, behind, arrested Jimmy's pursuit. Back up the hill, a late model sedan had halted, askew, in the middle of the road. A woman, head bowed, gripped the top of the steering wheel. Jimmy's lips moved upon recognising the stumpy figure alighting from the passengers' side. Wingnut Vella clicked to the rear of the vehicle. The woman emerged from the car, her face shielded by extra-large sunglasses and radiant lipstick, jet black hair restrained by a flame-orange scarf. An ivory pants suit was meticulously ironed. She turned on her heel as Wingnut reappeared bearing the body of a goat and laid the animal without delicacy on the roadside verge. Jimmy abandoned the mower and scuttled back up the hill. The miniscule knot gave way. His toes clung on.

"Jimmy?"

The untied boot made it to the meeting.

"It's me."

She removed her sunglasses. Coal-dark eyes blinked at the light. Jimmy's head jutted. He heard the word "Who?" but in the confusion his lips failed to respond.

"Maria."

"Who?"

His head jutted further forward. Two hundred yards down the hill, the lawnmower rattled past the RSL War Memorial Hall, spitting dust and rocks, grasshoppers leaping from its path.

"Maria?"

"I see you still wear the skeleton suit", she said.

She looked him up and down. The faded sideshow relic disappeared within equally aged trousers which seemed all but uninhabited and to run out of material prematurely. Below, she noted, paspalum seeds clung to leg hair in hope of transportation to less arid regions. She extended her hand.

“How is Ron?”

“Ron’s dead.”

Wingnut laughed.

“Gone across the white bridge, has he?”

Left arm permanently crooked behind his back, Wingnut yielded a frontal impression of being one-armed. Maria restored her sunglasses.

“I need to speak to him.”

The mower approached The Bay’s sole remaining store. Jimmy chose to pretend he had not made his previous statement.

“What about?”

“A private matter. Please let him know I am here.”

Maria returned to the car. Wingnut examined the front of the vehicle.

“Goat shouldn’t’ve been on the road.”

“Not my goat.”

The sedan sped away. Jimmy examined the deceased goat. Henry and Prince tore out of the Meiklejohn gate once more and hurtled up the hill, howling.

The mower cannoned into the defunct petrol bowser outside the store.

III

Ron cradled the bottle as though a baby fallen from the sky. While Frigate was not Red Mill, it was eminently drinkable. The cork squeaked. The dogs settled, heads on paws.

“Mate, no big deal, but you reckon you could ask before using the goat next time?”, said Jimmy.

Ron suckled the OP.

“Better than Troy’s two schooners eh?”, said Jimmy

“knOATHmaydnoReMillbuFriggedsokay!”

The affirmation resembled an expulsion of wet gravel. Syllables, occasionally whole words, regularly absented themselves from Ron’s sentences. Others received unusual stress and volume. Having known him for the better part of sixty years, Jimmy’s ear had adjusted in tandem with the maturation of his best mate’s tone and syntax.

“StigetheSCHOONrs?!?”

“Yeah. You’ll still get the schooners.”

The nourishing thought of Twin Schooners chasing the Frigate vapourised into alarm as Jimmy slid the aluminium ladder into the well.

“NA! NANANA! PUNCHaDOG!”

Jimmy’s face crinkled. He translated in his head.

“What dog?”

Ron managed to part his knees.

“MYSryMAN!”

Jimmy juttled.

“Is he dead?”

“Mi’XspLODE!”

The Frigate was drained, Ron and dogs loudly and busily asleep, by the time of Jimmy’s return with potato sack, length of jetty hawser, and pit pony aggrieved to have interrupted his sunday afternoon above ground. The knotted end of the heavyweight hawser twice hit Ron in the face before he came round. Clay glued his eyelids shut. He fished for the hawser.

“Hold on tight.”

He lost grip immediately. The hawser shot from the well as the pit pony took off. Jimmy trailed the runaway down the drive, out and up the road, sporadically attempting to lodge a foot on the knotted end. Hitting target near the crest of the hill, he cartwheeled backwards. The pony disappeared in the direction of his sunday paddock.

IV

Mentor and canine choir yowled “Haul away, haul away” in polyglot gusto as Jimmy, youthful Shane Pratt, middle-aged Neville Jones, and decrepit Fizzer Phillips hauled away, hauled away, promptly to conclude that Ron was not to be hauled, away nor anywhere else, in a hurry. Water for lubrication of the jammed behemoth was unavailable. Machine oil was considered but rejected as inimical to pouring down a well used for drinking. Instruction to breathe in caused the mass on the other end to expand. After comprehensive discussion, a meeting unanimously agreed that the answer lay with the winding engine from the pit, one problem being that it was Sunday, catalysing the haulage team to take a smoko during which Fizzer Phillips experienced an episode, lay down and beheld a vision of his dead mother calling him from behind an old timber

fence. Shards of The Bay anthem, “The Bay Boys Down By The Sea” boomed from the well. The pack threw back its head in harmony, leapt about, got in the way and was kicked in the ribs. Merlin bit Bandit. Dame Patty scraped her bum in a circle. Prince massaged his mange on a tap. Troy Meiklejohn, Moaning Janice and four sunburnt boys with rat-tail haircuts and cordial-stained chests returned from the beach. Sensing from the smoko that Mystery Man remained at the bottom of the well, Troy ordered the children inside. Fizzer Phillips sat up in defiance of the calling of his mother.

“Stuck.”

“The Bay Boys Down By The Sea” again boomed from the well and surrounds.

“Fatty’s stuck. You won’t budge him.”

Moaning Janice turned on her spouse.

“I told you not to get him. I told you.”

Troy was in no mood after a day in the sun with rat-tailed children.

“He was cheap.”

“He’s useless. Are you happy now?”

“Get out of it! Get those bloody dogs out of it!”

“Fatty’s stuck. You won’t budge him.”

“Fucking shut the fuck up, Fizzer!”

“The keg-on-legs is stuck.”

“Are you happy now, Troy? I told you not to get him. He’s a fat useless drunk.

Now he’s stuck in my well. On top of the bloody dog!”

“Shut it, Janice. Just fucking SHUT it. The kids.”

“I hope you’re happy now.”

Fury nourished by ten years cohabitation with Moaning Janice and accumulating offspring promoted the necessary leap of imagination in Troy. Unapproachable within a swarm of oaths, he attached the hawser to the bullbar.

Knees and vertebrae cracked as he unfolded. His shorts snagged on a sandstone floater and were vacated. Back and buttocks slid up the wall until the F100's clutch slipped, his legs, card-table slender, collapsed upon resumption of their inordinate load and he shot back down into the folded-and-jammed position. Laughter from the well, succeeded by deep-lunged wheezing with high-pitched overtone, expressed relief that although buffeted and compressed, Mystery Man had not blown up.

The V8 raised Ron to standing a second time. The tumid greyhound, bobbing in six inches of yellow muck, nudged his shins like an affectionate best friend. Jimmy extracted the bones of the timber ladder and deftly inserted the aluminium replacement. Balletic rotation, minimising chance of greyhound rupture, brought Ron face to face with the ladder and he climbed to freedom.

Thronged by congratulatory dogs, completing several rickettish steps before the joints involved gave way, landing atop crossed legs which, pinned under nineteen and a half stone of imperial measure, could not be uncrossed, he incarnated, in a fleeting moment of stillness, The Yellow Mud Buddha Of The Bay. The incarnation was lost on The Bay. His clay-caked eyelids forced themselves open. The eyes sought Troy Meiklejohn.

“YOU! TwoSCHOOnrs!”

“Get the fucking dog out first. And don’t let the fucking kids see you do it.”

The Meiklejohn children, fighting tooth and claw, continued to watch through the kitchen window.

“You look like you need a drink, mate”, said Jimmy.

The skin of The Yellow Mud Buddha crazed as he nodded.

“Fucking get the fucking dog out first, will you!?” , screeched Troy.

The haulage team departed.

Jimmy bagged Mystery Man’s body on a single breath, with the tact of a bomb disposal expert. Halfway back up the ladder, about to black out, he chanced inhalation. He reeled as though shot. The ladder lodged against the opposite wall, Jimmy dangling by his good arm, plastered other thrusting the potato sack shrouded greyhound as far away as possible. He closed his eyes, held his breath and, dangling, waited.

The sun set. A cold shadow fell on The Bay. The deceased lay in a rust-holed wheelbarrow catafalque. The pack sniffed the loved one, mourned in silence. Meiklejohn children scurried from kitchen to side window to verandah as the cortege bearing Mystery Man moved through the carport, down the drive, onto the main road, where a mine subsidence was negotiated before the procession wheeled in the direction of the Bowling Club. Halfway up the hill, the body of the deceased goat was added to the funerary vehicle. Jimmy fetched Ron a clean shirt. Street lights flickered.

“FATTY! YOU SAID YOU’D SILVAFROST MY TANKS! FATTY!?”

They ignored the shrieking cottage. Greyhound and goat secured parking in the space dedicated “Club President”. The mourning dogs tore onto the green.

V

Ron roared, happy as a pig. He stamped his feet. Flakes of clay showered the floor, to comingle with fragments of chicken-flavoured crisps. A robust collection of empties rattled on the table. Jimmy added the endangered glassware to an improbably tall tower curving over his shoulder, its arc matching the rearward sweep of his hair. When mowing was slow, Jimmy collected empties at club and pub. Dismantling the glass tower at the bar, he arranged a further schooner of black and a rum chaser for his best mate and an orange juice for himself.

Nerys Ferris crashed through the front door, noted Ron’s presence, strode into the office of the Club President, with whom she was currently walking out, and slammed the door behind her.

“The Pope’s going to belt the tripe out of you, Fatty.”

The assertion blew in from the seaward side of the room. Wayne Thorpe and Doug Pratt were taking turns with ‘Queen Of The Nile’, the club poker machine. Cleopatra was well ahead.

“Nobby needed that marijuana. Got a big family to feed.”

“Ate the whole crop.”

Sectarian debate was enacted from a table on the inland side of the room, occupied by Hughie Meiklejohn.

“Is The Pope a tyke?”

Ron oversaw the small sea of neutral space between the disputative parties.

“His grandfather weren’t a tyke. He were with The Kirk.”

“He were with the Weefrees.”

“The WeeFrees? No.”

“What about his missus?”

“Jones’s were Nonconformist.”

“Annie weren’t a Jones. Was she a Jones?”

“Short Owen Jones’s girl.”

“No.”

“Short Owen Jones. Sang with West Cessnock lads. Won Eisteddfod every year. Gone across the white bridge now.”

“Gone across the white bridge.”

“Yours truly’ll be gone across the white bridge soon.”

“You’ll be gone across flaming bloody slowly.”

A spume of ale shot forth from Ron, tickled by the premature sighting of Hughie Meiklejohn shunting his walking frame across the white bridge to a low-budget hole in the Marxist-Leninist (Moscow Aligned) Sector of The Bay’s bone orchard. The Scot elevated his whiskey and milk before bringing a fist down on the table.

“We should be out.”

“Too late.”

“Hunger scabs’re already going back.”

“Be fookin’ freezin’ there now.”

“She’s using our fooking coal to bury them. Our fooking coal! We should be out.”

“Fascist bitch thinks she’s the Queen.”

Ron negotiated his way to a standing position, chair toppling behind him, and raised his glass.

“WorktoDRINGnodringtoWORK!”

A thunderous belch underlined the point. The toast was ignored, both seaward and inland. Lowering to sit, he found the chair absent and crashed to the floor. Prone, he drained the black in one. Club President Alan Goode emerged from his office, closely trailed, shoved, by Nerys Ferris.

“I think he’s had enough.”

Forty-ish, squeaky clean, giving off no odour discernible to humans, in dark suit and elastic-sided boots, Anglo-Australian Alan had about him the aura of a clergyman who had sat too long upon cold ground.

“What’s that on his face?”

“Mud.”

“Clay.”

“I think you’ve had enough, Ron - ”

The Club President saw the pack lolling on the green. He strode to the door.

“Get off there, you mangey mongrels! Get! Get!”

The pack found his tone unconvincing.

“Get them off of there! NOW!”

Ron closed his eyes.

“I..see..I SEE..ME..IseeME..doDANCEOFLAMIN’ARSOLESONTTABLE!

FraSCHOOnr!”

Appropriating a proximate copy of The Greyhound Recorder, holding the rolled item aloft like an Olympic torch, he clambered onto the table with intent to light the journal, shove the unlit end up his fundament and arse-wiggle the eternal flame for as long as he could stand it, in return for continued bar service. The table collapsed. Members cheered. Neville Jones retrieved his Greyhound Recorder unsullied.

“Time to go home”, said Alan Goode.

Ron scanned the room.

“I..SEE..”

Club Membership scanned with him.

“CLUBCAT!”

Club Cat Minx was asleep on the sunny stool accompanying the public telephone.

“DOWN PANTS! NEWWORL'RECORDCOMRADES!”

Minx did not wake in time.

“Leave that cat alone! Put that poor cat down!”

Minx yowled and twisted. Spat.

“CAT DOWN PANTS! FrTWOOOOSchoonrs! THREEEE!”

“Put the cat down, Ron.”

A flailing hind leg found the assailant's face.

“FLAMIN'CA'!!

He held the muscular feline at arms length, by the scruff. Minx drooped.

FLAMIN'CA'! FLAMIN'CATONFIREDOWNPANZ! Godda MATCH,

GoodieCOMRADE? Godda MATCH?”

In a single fluid movement, retaining Minx, he downed shorts with his cat-free hand and mooned the Club President. Nerys Ferris screamed and turned from the sight.

“MyBUManYORFACE! PerfegMATCH! HAAA!”

The Membership howled consensus.

“An’ NOW...WAI’ FORID! WORL REC’R’D CAT DOWN PANZ!”

He thrust The Club Cat inside his shorts. Minx thrashed about, yowling, shredding, within the unusual confinement. Blood flowers bloomed on her captor’s shorts as he danced.

“Right, OUT! NOW!”

Member and enclosed Club Cat hurtled about the room, pursued by the Club President. Overturned tables rolled in their wake. Club carpet, already florid, turned a diaspora of breakables and ashtrays. Leonard Meiklejohn spilt Tia Maria and milk down the front of his whites.

“‘owLONG? ‘owLONGNOW?”

“RON! LET THAT POOR CAT GO!”

“‘OWLONG?!”

“In a hurry to be somewhere, are you, Fatty?”

“What is the club record, Hughie?”

“OUT! OUT OF THIS CLUB! RIGHT NOW!”

Minx’s head protruded from a leg of the shorts. Ron seized a handful of garment and pulled firmly, stemming further advance.

“‘owLONGNOW?”

“We don’t know pain,” averred Hughie. “Russians know pain. Russians pray with their eyes open.”

The pronouncement induced a seeming moment of clarity in which Minx accepted her fate. Stillness fell within Ron's attire.

“owLONG - ?

The *ruse de guerre* terminated in an explosive, lacerating squirm. Ron clutched reflexively, two handed, at his genitals. Minx burst from the shorts, sprinted down the leg and fled the club. The Club Cat was never seen again. Alan Goode frogmarched Ron to the door.

“RECOR! NEWORL'CADDOWNPANZRECOR”!

“OUT! Furthermore, if your wretched animals continue to do their business on the club green, I will be forced to take legal action.”

“He can have them put down, you know”, added Nerys Ferris.

Not for the first time, Nerys Ferris had crossed a line. Ron dropped down on all fours and, barking authentically, savaged the President's trouser leg. The occupants of the green leapt to their feet and tore up the steps, howling The Mentor on.

“That's it! That is IT!

The President deployed both legs in kicking the Member in the ribs.

“You are banned! You are banned for life!

Nerys Ferris dragged him off, kicking air.

“He is banned! You are banned. For life, do you hear!?”

Membership cheered. Whistled. Toasted The President's pronouncement.

“He is banned! For life! He is banned! For life!”

Nerys Ferris's powdered nose ran like a tap in the excitement. Seeking a tissue deep in a sleeve, her grip on Alan Goode relaxed, allowing the President to mount a second frenzied attack.

“And if one of your filthy dogs craps on my green again I’ll kill it! I’ll kill it! I’ll poison the whole bloody lot of them!”

The assailant was once more hauled off by his paramour. The victim rolled over, rumbled forward on hands and knees, and cocked a hind leg. Alan Goode hit a rare note.

“Get him out of this club! Get him out! I’m calling the police! I’m calling Sergeant Vella!”

“Mick’s retired.”

“They rationalised the station.”

“Try calling Swansea.”

“Don’t fancy your chances.”

“They’ve got an answering machine now.”

The President strode to the payphone. Nerys Ferris rode shotgun as he searched his pockets for change. Ron feinted to the left, rounded Nerys Ferris on the right, and resumed territorial marking of The President’s trousers, as Maria entered with her uncle. An inner voice, unheard in years, recommended he uncock the leg and cease baying scatological abuse in canine patois. Maria removed her sunglasses. Ron’s brow tightened. A vice closed around his head. Behind the bar, Jimmy sipped orange juice, unstacked another glass tower.

“m’RIA?”

“I was hoping I’d run into you.”

“Her’am. Runint’ME.”

Maria closed her eyes. Her eyelids were silver.

“SORRY..It.jus’cam’OUT.”

“Obviously I have made a mistake.”

He lurched after her.

“Don’t touch me. Don’t you touch me!”

She halted halfway down the concrete steps. Moths battered the lightbulb overhead, shadows criss-crossing her pants suit.

“Your son is in the country”, she said.

The glass tower shattered around Jimmy’s feet. Wingnut’s gaze scythed from his niece to Ron. The eyeballs were bloody and black on arrival.

“It was you, you filthy fat mongrel - !”

Wingnut seized twin handfuls of shirtfront and shook. His fists sank into the flab beneath. Bri-Nylon tore, buttons flew. Clay cracked and flaked.

“I will strongly advise him not to be so foolish as to try and make contact with you”, said Maria.

Her heels clacked down the remaining steps and along the path. The pants suit disappeared in the night.

“You stay away from her. Stay away or I’ll fix you. I’ll fix you good and proper, scab. You hear me, scab?”

“SON?”

Nineteen and a half stone, pied purple and ochre, disquieted, burst free of shirt, barrelled out the door and plunged down the steps. Mass and velocity conspired in failure to negotiate the bend at the bottom. He hurtled onto the green, slowed in the gloom, pirouetted, clutched at the Southern Cross and fell face first onto the playing surface where, believing himself struck by lightning, he wet himself profoundly. Wingnut scurried after his niece and did not notice the mound on the green. Alan Goode and Nerys Ferris returned to the office.

Members drank on. The Queen Of The Nile coughed up, begrudgingly.

Jimmy swept broken glass into a corner. The light over the clubhouse door cast a circle on the steps, across which flitted the shadows of moths.

VI

A seam of cloud brought the sky close. He heard a grinding deep beneath the green. The sea, chewing. Or the dogwatch working one of the old shafts undermining the town. It was a termite's nest down there. Did they still work those shafts? A ghost shift? There had been a fall and men trapped. There had been many falls. Tinsnips Clutten had been killed. Perhaps it was the grip and hum of wheels on the expressway to the west. It was possible to drive the expressway and remain unaware of The Bay's existence. The moon slid into a chink of clear sky and glinted on eyeballs shot bright red. His hair, the colour of a coal-fouled fox, fanned like an anemone.

He liked this time of night, when the hills of coal waste and stagnant inky pools guarding entrance to the town disappeared in darkness. The Membership would be coughing in their sleep as the black stuff settled - only the widows slept deeply - but the sounds from the houses were muffled by the night and could not make the journey through blankets and weatherboard, over the road and up the hill to where he lay. Only the occasional moan of the wharf or the hollow boom of something falling inside an empty ship sounded across the water to remind him that the coal loader was still there. He heard the sharp kee-kee-kee of a plover in the cemetery at the bottom of the hill, where the spurwings nested and feasted on well-fed worms. The cemetery was shrinking, disappearing as beach dunes advanced inland. The seaward fence lingered,

exhausted, in valleys of sand. The earliest graves were lost. Spinifex and bitou bush arrived with the sand. Ron remembered as a boy finding an egg, olive-green with dark blotches, whose parents shrieked when he hurled it at Nerys Ferris. Nerys Ferris passed a note in class requesting liaison in the bush behind the school. He did not keep the appointment. Good things happened when you were too young or too old to benefit, he thought.

The porchlight grew fainter. Ghosts drifted through the beam. At night the sea-mist folded up the cliff like milk up a saucepan, slowly drowning the town. It made walking home from watering holes a bruising affair. Wingnut had been run down by his wife. He closed his eyes. His eyelids, when not caked in clay, retained translucence. In good light, he could still discern moving figures such as Jimmy who, thinking he was asleep, would attempt to collect his glass before he had finished. He saw Maria, pink, held in the embrace of the light over the steps. Opening his eyes, he launched into "The Bay Boys Down By The Sea", loudly.

Merlin's rear slid out as he skidded to a halt, ears erect. The wallaby shot into the trees, not believing its luck.

VII

After assembly under a streetlamp for roll-call and briefing, united in common cause, the pack padded up to the club from which they too had been banned, fearless, yet fresh in the memory that one of their number had been put to sleep following an incident concerning club catering. Peering through fence pickets, they emitted soft whinings of inquiry, breathed puffs of mist. Smaller

terriers wriggled heads through gaps. Larger hounds rested paws on the top rail, heads tilted, brows furrowed at the sight of The Mentor, prostrate, floating on a low blanket of mist. They had a million questions. Why was he lying on the bowling green? Would he like an escort home? Why did he not respond to their inquiries? They knew The Mentor fell often and remained fallen, but this was a worrying and dangerous place to do so. The Club President might have him put to sleep. Anxiety increased. Whining turned shrill and mutated into yowl.

He opened his mouth. No sound emerged, bar shallow rattle of breath. He could not lift his head. Attempts to signal with his eyes shot pain rearward through the sockets. A voice tormented with what he wished to say:

“I appreciate your concern, fellows, but there’s nothing you can do for me. I’m nineteen and a half stone. I’m paralysed. I’m haunted by the memory of Maria. My shorts were shredded by Minx. I’d like to be alone. Home, Merlin! Home, Wally! Home, Prince! Home, Brandy! Home! Home! Home!”

He arched his back in last ditch endeavour to cry "Home!" The syllable jagged like a fishhook, low in the larynx, and the airway seized. Purple skin deepened to black plum as he juddered and hawked. Distressed, dogs threw back their heads and bawled, jumped about on hind legs, hurled bodies at the fence, and ran in frenzied circles. The fitting diminished via a series of flabby shudders. His brow throbbed. Had his head burst? He was lathered in sweat.

“I’ll just wait here, fellows, OK? Please go home”, he said, in his head.

The dogs stared for a further ten minutes.

“I’m really tired. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Exchanging glances, the pack dispersed into the night.

“I’ll feel better in the morning. I’ll go home and sit on the verandah in the sun with a beer. I’ll see you then. It’s not too bad lying here. The green’s soft. The night’s warm. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

The thought of a beer in the sun gave him to smile as he snuggled his back into the green. He saw the flying ant on the end of his nose, smelt the formic aroma, but could not feel the insect’s touch.

No-one in The Bay bothered to ask, let alone knew why the arrival of flying ants, or termites if that’s what they were, signalled the end of a dry spell. It was simply taken for granted that the longer the dry, the greater the population of insects crawling through rusted flywire to get in the sugar, soon after which clouds would darken, swell and rumble, and curtains move where there seemed no breeze. The first heavy spots carried a sweet dusty smell. An overhead crack! threw off blankets and tumbled out adults to close windows. The deluge rolled down the twin tracks of roofing. The Bay turned over and went back to sleep, content in the knowledge that the downpour would last all night. Overhead, water sheeted on iron, sounding like massed applause.

His limbs moved like oars on an ancient galley, making no headway through a storm. The downpour hammered his head onto the green and reverberated on the leather drum of his stomach. Under the houses, dogs rested chins on the dirt, eyes open, and waited.

No amount of heavy rolling ever levelled the fourth link. Many times it was thought the indent had been eradicated, only for a spirit level to confirm its persistence. Bowls behaved strangely on the link, to the point of travelling against the bias. Locals adjusted their game accordingly, luring Visitors onto the fourth to inflict heavy defeats. The correct line was marked by the patch of less healthy grass where Ron had relieved himself. The Club President himself came to see the competitive advantage. When the sun was low, a faint Ron-shaped shadow appeared on the link, reminding minority Roman Catholic bowlers of the Shroud Of Turin.

He lay down, sodden. Breakfast television flickered in the wardrobe mirror. The face of Alan Goode, wet-lipped with antipathy, appeared on the screen. Behind him, a string-lipped phantom, floated Nerys Ferris. Ron scrabbled blindly under the bed. Yes, it was still there.

VIII

Light steam rose from puddles on the road. The morning breeze was late. The ocean, a blue mirror, waited. Gulls trailed a coalship from the jetty. A pair of ravens inspected pickings along the high water mark, fluttering into the air each return of the tide. Galahs ambled behind a council backhoe, harvesting the wake as it traversed the cemetery. A wagtail flitted in the slipstream of Jimmy's mower. Whitey contorted in mid air upon hearing can opener teeth bite metal. Spastic-stepping a passage down the hall, spitting pre-emptive hiss at dogs asleep, shameless, on their backs, she was arched and jerking against Dot's calf before the can was open. Whitey's palsy was attributed to close

quarter exposure to flyspray. Dot fingered her prosthesis as though a treasured cameo choker.

"Where's Ron, Whitey?"

The sentence emerged from the device – overdue for service – as a croak within a wheeze inside a whistle. Such utterance, until recently, had been accented by a jet of cigarette smoke from the neck. Dot hated doctors.

"Yoo Hoo! Ron?! Yoo hoo! RON?!"

"Yoo hoo! Ron?! Yoo hoo! RON?!"

The mimic roosted on the verandah rail.

"Shut up, Neville."

"Shut up, Neville."

Near-featherless Neville had been christened in honour of Neville Jones, Captain, The Bay Volunteer Fire Brigade, whose 1970 Captain Cook Bicentennial Burnoff - "Black Sunday" – had resulted in the galah's lack of plumage. Adversity had bequeathed the bird a larynx of iron. Neville was defiantly unselfconscious.

A trail of eggshells led Dot from kitchen to bedroom. A splintered biro protruded from her brother's mouth, bobbing on the irregular tide of breath. His lips were blue. Rusty nails secured a bottle within his reach. Neville joined Dot at the door.

"Ron?"

"Ron?"

"Shut UP, Neville."

"Shut UP, Neville."

Dot shook off agitation like a sparrow in a dustbath. She mustered firmness, finger to throat lessening risk of the instrument being ejected, to fly across the room, when she shouted.

"RON! IT'S DOT!"

"RON! IT'S DOT!"

The biro bobbed on, undisturbed. Neville yanked a red hair from a leg. An eyelid stuttered open.

"Ron? It's Dot. What are you doing with that? It's not loaded, is it?"

The biro broke its mooring and rolled a dark blue trail down Ron's chest.

"It's not loaded, is it? Is it loaded?"

The eyelid fell shut as though someone inside had slammed it.

"It won't go off, will it? Don't eat so many eggs. You've got blue all round your mouth."

Dot crossed the road to make her bed.

IX

With a view to the future, the company had sold the miners their houses but not the land upon which the structures stood. Inconclusive ownership saw the four-room cottages remain largely original at heart, while for appearances outwardly sporting thickly personalised makeup whereby nineteenth century timber verandah posts had been replaced by modest Grecian columns in concrete (Neville Jones), tubular steel posts (Washery Foreman Don Finch), box-sections (Police Sergeant Mick Vella, transferred; of late, daughter Tracey), lightweight open-web joists (Doug Pratt), some featuring curling metal ivy (Moaning Janice Meiklejohn) and Moorish-influenced ferro-cement arching (Mine Accountant/Bowling Club President Allen Goode). Porticos

shaded aluminium fascia, mock brick sheeting, cement stucco, plasterboard, "crazy paving" with the temerity to ascend walls, enlarged sliding windows and slimline screen doors which corroded white in the salt air. Rich cream, milky lime, dark chocolate trim were the dominant colours by virtue of a Massive Once In A Lifetime Stocktake Sale at Swansea Hardware. Housefront symmetry was popular, creating a line of rectilinear faces with aluminium-rimmed eyes above flyscreened nose and mouth, the congruity offset by ten metre television aerials tucked jauntily behind one ear. A late trend – repositioning of the aerial at the midpoint of the roof ridge to attain absolute symmetry - had been initiated by the late Alec Meiklejohn. A proposal by new resident Nerida Humphries that the Progress Association seek heritage classification for The Bay as an historic mining village had given an unintended fillip to unhistoric home improvements. Original timber was, if not routed, now in rapid retreat. Wayne Thorpe had secreted his entire timber cottage, including verandah, within a box of cream aluminium cladding, sealed under a pyramidal blue and white terra cotta tiled lid. Two slit windows faced the road with apparent deep suspicion. Thorpes embraced darkness as though in fond remembrance of the gloom of Derby, left behind generations before. Within his aluminium shell, Wayne was systematically removing all trace of organic material for deployment as winter fuel. Only Nerida Humphries bucked the trend to modernity, stripping any feature she deemed inauthentic from the former home of Faith Caulfield. Faith – widow of Jockey - had sold up and moved to a nursing home close to Wyong railway station, making it easier for her now mostly unemployed middle-aged children and their families to visit. In 'Retired Miners Corner', Nerida Humphries' rigorous

attempt to experience the weight of working class history via restoration of the Caulfield cottage to its original condition earned her the sobriquets “Mrs Greenie”, “Mrs Fucking Greenie Blow-In” and “Mrs Stuck Up Flaming Greenie Bitch”. Extra ‘Fuckings’ and ‘Flamings’ frequently appended to the titles. Nerida’s best endeavours at authenticity resulted in the house appearing more fraudulent by the day. Alone, Ron’s home weathered and fell apart, unpainted, without addition or alteration. Attempts to shame him into imposing his considerable personality upon the residence had long been abandoned.

The twin houserows petered out toward the crest of the hill, yielding oceanside land to the former St Andrew’s Presbyterian. Abandoned if not deconsecrated, the tiny timber church, Australian Gothic, Swansea Hardware cream with dark chocolate trim, featured three hundred and sixty degree views encompassing Pacific Ocean, the cemetery behind the beach, the bowling club on the central headland and the pub atop the southern hill. A blow-in congregation of Indian Mynahs had in recent years commandeered the premises, the evicted pigeons, themselves non-indigenous, relocating to the RSL War Memorial Hall. Secular offers to purchase church and land had been received by the Presbyterian fathers. There was talk of a resort hotel. It was said that The Bay was about to “take off”, the possibility leading to a schism along theological lines within The Bay’s Progress Association.

He neared the top of the hill, windpipe scorched, heart down to a single cylinder, all but lost in the eye of a willy-willy of jaw-clacking dogs. Heralding

The Mentor's approach, warning of his power, laughing at his jokes, leaping upon his body, adoring him with tongue and eyes, barking at everything and nothing, the escort swelled with distance travelled, the breeds tearing out to join the swirl bearing no seeming relation to the personality of the houses from which they emerged.

He took the summit. Urged to press on, plunging down the other side, he heard the feathery whoosh before he felt the peck. The assailant dropped from the pine windbreak shielding Alan Goode's residence.

"G'OUTofit! G'OUTofit!"

He had neglected to don the plastic ice-cream container mandatory in late spring. Leaping canines perforated the air around him, teeth snapping sky, as the Mentor fled downhill, flailing at the whooshing overhead. Generations of magpie had scarred his crown, in earlier years vying for space with Hobbsie's chalk dusters. Today's assailant was a direct descendant of the notorious Fritz, he who annually had conducted forward defence of his family from the angophora between creekbed and schoolyard. Fritz's great great great granddaughter had, like the youthful Nerys Ferris, seized an opportunity to move uphill to a more salubrious neighbourhood, and breed. Her partner struck successfully, twice, before Ron found the safety of the beach lagoon, dedicated raven territory.

X

Steve Osman played hooker for Penrith when scrums were still a contest and was a keen if lumbering surfer. His grandfather fought on the victor's side at Gallipoli. His mother spread vegemite on turkish toast. Early into an end-of-

season pilgrimage to the Mecca that in november 1968 was Noosa Heads, he had swung the Impala into an overgrown hole in roadside bush, gateway to a hidden track rippling with corrugations which murdered suspensions and thus helped keep secret a mysterious surfing spot known as The Bay. It was Steve's first visit. On an overcast blustery morning, spinifex on the dunes bent double, silvery undersides of banksia exposed, The Bay seemed a ghost town. Dark and cold. A set from a black and white movie where residents peered from behind curtains and visitors disappeared without trace. The surf was also dark. Thick and all over the place. Steve and mates did not enter the water. The pub was deserted except for a fat drunk who barked and a skinny glassie with one arm in a sling, before the early shift from a nearby pit traipsed in, filthy and staring. Feeling out of place, Steve and mates quietly vacated the premises. Steve went on to become one of few league players from the Penrith district to have prospects beyond the ruination of his knees, thanks to a biggish win on Keno. The proliferation of coffee and tea-coloured children in his streets told Steve, via a mouthy halfback now in real estate, that his suburb was "taking off". Steve invested his winnings in property.

Old views seen through the Impala's tinted windows lingered years in Steve's head. The call grew louder as city surf became choked. Beaten for waves by foul-mouthed grommets, he found more time to reflect, in company. Everyone he knew, everyone he met waiting for a wave, or over a steak sandwich in a beer garden, everyone of an age, talked at some point of being a kid in the back seat of an old car chugging up or down the coast around Christmas. Talked of boiling radiators. Plunging a new bike through a flooded camping

ground. Deep fried food, the stench of stale oil. Drinking, underage and burnt, in a public bar. Cops cruising past. Meeting a girl in a terry-towelling jumpsuit with a zip up the front. Secret waves with country soul. Don't get me started, they all said.

The Bay held no memories of quiet holidays past. It had no caravan park, no motel, no holiday flats. No town water. The Bay had a creaking timber hotel frequented by a shrinking clientele of coal miners. A throwback, which had not long ago acquired a new proprietor. Steve Osman had realised The Dream. An old pub in a small town by the ocean. The mature wave hunter's antidote to choked surf. He determined to achieve a balance between raising the tone of his premises and preserving character. And he had had the word from mine management who surfed: The Pit was not long for this world. He could see it for himself. Anyone with an ounce of vision could see it. If global economics didn't kill King Coal, the Greenies would. The Bay was sitting pretty to "take off". Four-wheel drives with child-restraint seats in the back were already turning off the expressway to view the feature wall of antique tools and photos of gaunt men staring into the lens. Locals now preferred, on the weekend, to congregate at the bowling club. No amount of renovation would ever bring the clubhouse on the headland up to scratch.

XI

Glass tower parked over shoulder, Jimmy Blizzard was enjoying a smoko on the verandah. Wayne Thorpe and Doug Pratt were topping up, their matching coaltrucks angled out front, losing load on the easterly. Ron's hair stuck flat to

his skull, flame red hue rejuvenated by the overnight downpour and follow-up rinse in the lagoon. His shirt adhered to his body. He dripped.

"Aren't you banned?"

"You're banned, mate."

"What's that blue round your gob?"

Ron and pack entered the pub. Steve stepped from behind the bar.

"Out."

Neckless Henry's upper lip curled.

"OUT! OUT!"

The bull terrier's eyes became pink slits. Breeds not blessed with Henry's self-assurance looked to Ron for instruction. The Mentor nodded. Muttering low warnings, his charges retreated to the verandah. The Mentor excavated a lagoon-sodden wad from a pocket. Stumbling inappropriately close, he thrust the wad in the publican's face.

"NO'ceBOARD. NO'ceBOARD."

"Then out."

The paper, unfolded, proved not only soggy but considerably larger than the noticeboard. He pinned carefully and extensively. An inky scrawl, numerous less intentional markings, patterned the paper.

"SCHOOn'r?"

"Out."

He reddened with effort, offsetting a blue tongue, in concentrating his remaining powers of speech.

"GonnaSHOOTm'self."

"Good. Out."

"When?"

"BIRthd'y. SIXtyth BIRthd'y.

"You're going to shoot yourself, are you?"

"SHOOTself! SIXtyth BIRTHd'y! "

Jimmy beheaded his glass tower on the lintel as he squeezed between Wayne and Doug. Troy Meiklejohn shook Ron's hand with vigour.

"Good one, Ron."

Neville Jones initiated "For He's A Jolly Good Fellow", to be enjoined by mine foreman Peter Vella and Donald and Daisy the Caravan Lezzos. Daisy sang descant. Fizzer Phillips grinned broadly as though he understood what was happening. Wingnut Vella, about to spit on the floor, saw polished timber, thought again, and spat out the window.

"Scab", he opined.

Steve announced half-price middies. Then was alert enough to block Ron's progress to the bar and steer him towards the door. Jimmy's lips moved as he attempted to decipher the woolly biro trail wandering about the noticeboard. Sodden lettering deformed slowly before his eyes.

"What's this?"

"LISt. TakesmBASTAR'swi'me. LISt."

Drinkers laughed into half-priced beer.

"Ye're full o' shite, scab", averred Hughie Meiklejohn.

Ron withdrew a biro from a blued pocket and penned an adjustment to The List.

"Full o' shite."

"OUT!"

Whistles, applause, and laughter pursued the departing exile. Punters in good standing consulted The List.

“When is his birthday?”

“April first.”

“Scab’s full o’ shite.”

Jimmy averred that Ron did indeed possess a shotgun.

“Full o’ shite.”

Hughie sounded convinced. Upon return to the verandah Wayne and Doug found their schooner glasses emptied.

Ron retook Church Hill. Heaving past Alan Goode’s house, he observed that the easterly had turned the sea to a chop of ink and weed. Hearing the airy beat of a heron headed for the stream which overnight had reappeared between the western houserow and the ridge, he ducked.

XII

Inexact copies appeared on the bowling club noticeboard and in the window of the store. Handwriting and spelling betrayed a schooling spent in achievement of a duster-scarred head. That legibility suffered beneath a barrage of smudges, blots, trails, fingerprints and smeared corrections did not matter. Those on The List knew who they were and the crimes they had committed:

1. GOODE

Power Drunk Creeping Jesus. Seducer of abandoned women. (She knows who she is). Rib kicker. Dog kicker. Vote rigger. Bean counter. Savage magpie.

2. GOLDFINCH

Strike-breaker. Scab employer. Arse licker. Pommy bastard. Bribed fatherless boy. Seduced widowed mother. Seduced underage girl. (She knows who she is). Abandoned wife and family. Gave children poor eyesight.

3. COAL BARONS

Exploiters of workers. Union bashers. Scab employers. Wage slashers. Safety shortcutters. Rationalisers. Downsizers. Wreckers. Multinational parasites. Capitalist running dogs. Slum landlords.
The Workers united will never be defeated.

4. WINGNUT VELLA

Love nobbler. Blackballer. Torturer. Tree killer. Stupid house. Woggy columns. Fake gold doorknobs. Small feet. Clicking shoes. Hates red hair.

5. NERYS FERRIS

Queen Of The Bay. School dunny bait. Mine management bait. Bowling club bait. Cemetery bait. Shandy pisser. Scorn monger.

6. BOOFHEAD STEVE

Idiot. Goose. Galah. Banned me after I quit! Blow-in tourist-sucking crawler. Heritage vandal. Ripoff merchant. Hates coal.

7. HUGHIE MEIKLEJOHN

Commo nazi. Scotch Russian. Bully. Blackballer. Scorn monger. Whinger. Oversize head. Hates red hair.

8. LEONARD MEIKLEJOHN

Angry Ant. Blackballer. Torturer. Leech breeder. Scorn monger. Hates red hair.

9. FRED PRATT

Blackballer. Torturer. Leech breeder. Dangerous driver.

10. MRS GREENIE FUCKING BLOW-IN

Blow-in. Pant pissers. Hates coal.

11. NEVILLE JONES

Bird burner. Firebugger. Stupid house. Bad singer. Scorn monger.

12. WAYNE THORPE

Dangerous driver. Tin house. Scorn monger.

13. TROY MEIKLEJOHN

Puppy drowner. Goat hater. Bad singer. Scorn monger.

14. MOANING JANICE JONES.

Gold medal moaner. Dog hater. Flaming cow. Axe face. Etc. Married a

Meiklejohn. Scorn monger.

15. HERBERT HOBBS

Teacher's son. Teacher's pet. Dacker. Dobber. Square arsehole. Cube shitter.

Hates coal.

16. MICK VELLA

All coppers are bastards. Cat drowner. Scorn monger.

17. PETER VELLA.

Crawler. Brown nose. Dick Puller. Scorn monger.

18. Completely illegible.

19. SHORT OWEN JONES

Disappointed Mum.

20. ENID DAVIES.

Scorn monger.

21. KAY CAULFIELD.

Scorn monger.

22. BRONWYN JONES.

Scorn monger.

23. AMY MEIKLEJOHN

Scorn monger.

24. DENISE VELLA.

Scorn monger.

25. TRACEY VELLA

Scorn monger.

26. MARGARET THATCHER

Hates coal.

The List scrolled daily behind his eyelids, credits on the happy ending to come. He smiled as he read, the spotty biro trails of the original become glowing red ink aflow in copperplate veins, handwriting perfect, spelling correct, blots non-existent.

XIII

There were list believers. There were list skeptics. There were list scoffers. Willy Goldfinch, at number two, remained silent, having secured transfer to Helensburgh, one of few surviving pits on the southern coalfields, discarding Nerys Ferris along with other belongings upon departure, while Coal Barons, if extant, appeared not to feel the need to express opinion despite occupying the number three position. Fred Pratt was dead. Fred was not necessarily the sole deceased. Confusion resulted from The List's occasional conflation of fathers and sons and in one instance, grandfather and grandson. Bronwyn

Jones had not been sighted since hitchhiking out of The Bay in the mid seventies. Nerys Ferris, believer, at number five, living one door down, having particular history with The Listmaker, was sufficiently terrified to dye her hair a different colour every week. Nerys Ferris knew The Listmaker. Knew how utterly pickled he was. Knew – and flattered herself with the knowledge - that she herself had pretty much pickled him, named him “Little Dick”, “Tiny Teapot” and “Wee Wee Wee” pursuant to the school toilets incident, and subsequently overused if not coined the “Fatty” moniker which now stuck to him like shit on a blanket. Knew that she herself had witnessed him cleaning a shotgun in the backyard lean-to laundry and scoffed at parties who argued that shotguns were not cleaned in laundries.

“I’m number FIVE! It’s easy to scoff when you’re not even on The List. I’m number FIVE!”

Nerys Ferris addressed frequent hysterical messages to the answering machine in the Swansea Police Station, always articulating her terror of April 1 before the machine had begun recording. The Bay Police Station had been rationalised years before when Sergeant Mick Vella – number sixteen – saw his experience in dealing with wayward coal mining communities gain him transfer to Bulli.

In the months leading to Ron’s sixtieth birthday, during which time seemed to accelerate, names travelled up and down the list, jostling for position according to a dialectic of past events recalled and present attitudes exhibited. Denial, initially rife, turned to apology, entreaty, and with the coming of the new year, the giving of gifts. Few now believed The List was a grand April Fools Joke

announced in advance. Dot's declaration that her brother was already sixty one, possibly sixty two, failed to calm the community. Emissary Jimmy let it be known that his best mate would appreciate the lifting of lifetime bans on his attendance at the village's twin watering holes. With Honour Rolls prominent in the school and War Memorial Hall, the populace to date had not seen fit to erect an Anzac Obelisk, only for The List to install Ron as a close approximate, an implacable monument at the heart of The Bay, around which moved all traffic, be it respectful, scornful, speeding up, slowing down, or altogether dodging by travelling the creek bed. Enthroned on the verandah, shotgun straddled, bottle between nails, in company of Neville, Whitey, and a panoply of dozing dogs, canine overflow littering the footpath, Ron oversaw a skittish domain.

April loomed. Neville Jones, at number eleven, attempted to avoid eye contact yet not show fear as he picked his way between dogs on the footpath.

"Cocky burner!"

Neville hastened, trod on an overweight kelpie, and determined from then on to cross the road well before nearing Ron's residence. Hughie Meiklejohn, recalcitrant scoffer, at number seven, made a point of nudging his zimmer frame down the middle of the road at snail's pace or slower, oblivious to coal trucks roaring past. Near blind, completely deaf, Hughie knew The Listmaker was there on the verandah, armed and watching, and wanted the scab to know that he knew that he knew he was there, but that he, Hughie Marx Meiklejohn, Midlothian man, cared not a jot. He braked and leaned over his frame, head like a boulder, glowering.

“Ye’r full o’ shite, Fatty.”

He spat black phlegm onto the ground between himself and the dark fat shape he believed to be Ron, daring the scab to shoot earlier than April. Ron swigged, belched, and waited. Hughie found his audience terminated by reception of The Queen of the Bay, proffering a cardboard cask of riesling and half a dozen store-bought pineapple donuts.

“I thought you might be hungry. Alan sends his regards.”

“Al’nWHO?”

“Alan. You know Alan. Alan Goode. Alan from here. Alan from the club.”

“Al’nNUMb’rONE!”

“Alan says to tell you that you’re welcome back at the club any time.”

“Al’nBEANCOUNTerKICKmyDOG!”

“Alan is very ashamed of himself. Alan is really a dog lover. Alan loves all animals. Is Alan still number one? Alan donated the wine. Well, the club did. But Alan arranged it personally.”

“NEWlis’MORRow.”

Troy Meiklejohn’s F100, replete with rat-tailed offspring, slowed to give Ron the finger.

“PUPpy DROWN’R!”, roared Ron.

He aimed the shotgun. The children ducked. Nerys Ferris screamed and dropped the doughnuts. Troy burned rubber, showering Ron with gravel and chitta. Nerys Ferris dusted off any doughnuts unconsumed by dogs.

“They’re fresh, Ron. Am I still number five?”

Ron lowered the shotgun.

“SIXXX.”

Nerys Ferris smiled that smile.

“Mayb’SEV’N.”

Question for Hobbsie: Who invented the pineapple doughnut and in what year?

XIV

A proud, short man, Alan Goode embraced his paramour’s appeasement plan with reluctance. He scattered water-filled plastic bottles on the green before shutting himself and Nerys Ferris inside the office. Elsewhere in his fiefdom, bowlers drank, played darts, watched Skychannel without the usual conviction, to the overwrought clinking of Jimmy’s empties. Despite not featuring on The List, recent developments had seen Jimmy exceed his one drink limit and the heebie jeebies emerge from remission.

Clinking disturbed the hush which fell at the surprise appearance in the doorway. A dart missed the board completely. The prodigal, shirtless and shoeless, was unarmed, having taken his mate’s advice. The shotgun in the club would be overkill. Members and Guests welcomed him as though he was appropriately dressed and had not threatened to shoot most of them, before mustering the appearance of returning to drink, darts and sports television as he pinned the latest edition of The List on the noticeboard. Bird burner Neville Jones shouted him a schooner of Hunter Old - which did not taste the same as in the days when it was Black - and a Bundy OP chaser. He blamed the youth of today for the demise of Red Mill. The chaser went down first. Outside, dogs ignored the water-filled bottles.

Wingnut had argued violently against reinstatement. Seeking sublimation in the embrace of The Queen Of The Nile, he found himself ripping down her arm in mounting disquiet, aware that behind him the enemy was being shouted drinks by jellybacks. He rapidly lost five dollars in ten cent pieces.

Draining the schooner, monitoring over the rim, Ron recognised a familiar face in conversation with an unfamiliar woman, over small, weak-looking drinks. The woman drank through a straw. The man sifted the contents of an ashtray, as though searching for a thought.

“HOBBsie!”

Child-like terror spread across the familiar face.

“You’re DEAD!”, declared Ron.

Jimmy clinked past.

“It’s Herbert. He’s alive.”

Herbert Hobbs was the spitting image of his father, with the addition of a cricketer’s moustache and sandals. A regional bank manager, soon to retire, Herbert had recently bought back into The Bay and was renovating the cottage once home to Billy Burns’ antipodean family. Billy having died of black lung, his local widow had passed away following a particularly rich meal on a World Discovery Cruise funded from sale of the house. Billy’s other widow, Shirley, formerly of Wigan, now Rotherham, having crossed the Pennines to remarry in haste, got nothing. One of Shirley Burns’s sons by her second husband was injured at “The Battle of Orgreave” when mounted police charged miners’ picket lines. Although Herbert Hobbs was unaware of the personal connection, events in Britain had served, however, to further

convince him that fossil fuels were a thing of the past and that The Bay was set to “take off”.

“HERB’t! DACK’d ME! DOBB’d me!”

The whinnying reply, like a spooked horse, confirmed identification of the schoolyard assailant. Ron half-expected Hobbsie to recognise his son’s cry of alarm and throw open a window somewhere. After which Herbert would gallop inside and report to the office. Herbert gathered himself.

“It was difficult being the Headmaster’s son.”

“SQUARE ARSE’ole. YOU LAY CUBES!”

He stared at Herbert’s sandals before chugging unsteadily to the noticeboard and jabbing at The List.

“NUMBr FIFteen!”

Herbert’s unidentified female friend suggested they leave.

“Leave him alone, Fatty. Shove your list.”

Wingnut flew at the noticeboard, tore down The List, scrunched and slammed the paper ball into an industrial-sized tomato juice can half full of sand, folk art created for the use of smokers. The List settled against the butt of a freshly discarded Winfield Red and began to smoulder. For the first time, Ron saw the likeness of Maria in the brother of the mother. Short, rounded, oddly proportioned. Olivey skin. Dark eyes. Big, deep, dark eyes. The likeness grew until, through the cocktail of rum and cataracts, he saw her. The name flew from his mouth.

“Maria.”

“She’s in Malta. He’s in Malta. They’re both in Malta, you fat fool. They’re staying in Malta.”

The Listmaker excavated a reserve copy from his shorts. Jimmy produced a pencil. Ron aimed at The List but missed with his first attempt. Wingnut screeched.

“Shove your list! They’ve GONE BACK TO MALTA!”

“NEW list T’NIGHT!”, barked Ron.

His second attempt created a large rip.

“HE doesn’t want to know you. He never WILL want to know you. You’ll never see either of them again. EVER!”

He passed the pencil to Jimmy.

“Tell the truth, Fatty, I don’t reckon you’ll do it. You haven’t got the guts, scab.”

Eyes widened over beer glass rims, dared to twinkle. Alan Goode’s office door creaked as it opened a limited distance. Ron raised a trembling index finger. Tilting forward with the effort, he manifested the single digit to his assistant. Jimmy pencilled a long thick arrow on The List.

“WINGnut! Numb’rONE! WithaBULL’t!”

Membership toasted the scoffer’s elevation from Number Four to Number One. Wingnut revelled in the promotion.

“You’ll pike it, Fatty. And you know you’ll pike it.”

He addressed the membership.

“Fatty’ll pike it, comrades, don’t you reckon?”

Thought was given. Heads were nodded.

“I’m nae convinced. Nae convinced”, hacked Hughie, with bile.

Ron stabbed a fat finger at the ancient Scot, wobbled sideways, recovered with the help of a wall, and marshalled a thumbs down. Jimmy adjusted Hughie’s

position, upwards. The elevation was roundly applauded by onlookers. The improved chart position of Wingnut and Hughie – if improvement was what it was - inspired Membership to enter with vigour into the spirit of revised listing. Alan Goode's door opened fully.

“What about Donald and Daisy, the caravan lezzos?”

“Yeah. Why aren't they on The List?”

“Yeah. Why aren't we on The List?” shrieked two young women in mechanic's overalls, one pair blue, one pair white, sporting short dyed hair of opposing colours in unintended ironic mimicry of Nerys Ferris and Dot Shipwater. The question troubled. It seemed axiomatic that exclusion from The List, and death by shotgun blast on April Fools Day, would be seen as a desirable thing. He was now confronted by clamour to be included. Donald was of Italian descent. She had introduced Ron to grappa in exchange for his dumping several drums of oil, somewhere, she didn't mind where. He did not remember the exchange, where he had dumped the oil or, up until that moment, Donald and Daisy the caravan lezzos. He pointed at something only he could see, tilted forward to critical, recovered, and thumbed Donald and Daisy down. Membership cheered. Jimmy scribbled. Nomination continued.

“George the Greek! Fatty! What about George the Greek?”

“George the Greek murdered Perce Finch's business!”

“George the Greek murdered Perce Finch!”

SP bookie George the Greek operated a barber's shop in Belmont. Miners had their hair cut on saturday morning. Saturday was also race day. In the end, Perce Finch could not compete.

“Ikey Solomon? What about him, Fatty? He sold you double price metho!”

“The Leb boys from up north. Loud car and the haircuts? Blow in, hoon up and down Sundays?”

The flurry of scrawls, jabblings, arrows and crossings out, the substitution of dry red felt pen then green biro for broken pencil, transformed The List into an abstract on holed paper. Wingnut smiled with slim lips.

“April first, joke’s on you, comrade. You’re looking pretty ordinary.”

Jimmy piloted him, bowed by scorn, down the steps.

“I’d blow my own head off, if I were you, comrade!”

The metal-clad clubhouse rattled with laughter. Membership rushed windows to observe the retreat. The canine entourage left the bowling green littered with turds of all shapes and sizes.

“Wingnut’s a Maltese dipstick but he’s got a point”, said Jimmy. “What are you going to do? You need a plan.”

“GOTtaPLAN.”

He extracted his pants from a very damp crack.

“You’re not really going to do it?”

“AllSHITEantheny’DIEskinny.”

“Have you got enough ammo?”

Alberto Vella’s victory over the defiler of his virgin niece was celebrated until closing time after which the Club President, in rare defiance of the law, turned out the lights, allowing staff to continue service.

Rolling downhill in warm beery happiness, Wingnut felt like he glowed in the dark. He was disappointed not to find his enemy on the verandah, fat sitting duck for another serve. In sloppy Maltese he loudly dared the obese purple son of a filthy whore to show his face. The challenge was answered by a flash and an almighty BOOM! which blew him off his feet. Legless no longer, Wingnut ran like the wind. Nerys Ferris left a further hysterical message on the answering machine at Swansea Police Station. A police van drove slowly through The Bay, all but invisible in darkness and fog, three hours later. Male driver and female colleague did not notice the hole in the roof of the Shipwater house. Hughie Meiklejohn crossed the white bridge. Nerys Ferris received the news from Moaning Janice at sunrise, over the fence.

“Straight after the gunshot”, intoned Hughie’s daughter-in-law. “Just stiffened and died. Straight after the gunshot.”

Jimmy crossed Hughie off The List with appropriate circumspection.

Laid out in his box, Hughie Marx Meiklejohn looked even more like Lenin. It was his dying wish to have his forehead polished shiny, like Lenin. He turned the right dead Lenin waxy yellow colour. Maybe they laid out Hughie too close to the window. Maybe they laid out Lenin too close to the window too. Or maybe it was the low wattage bulb.

XV

I caught the bus to Malta first thing. Didn’t take the shottie. I had the old Leyland to myself. At every stop the old girls clocked me and decided the weekly shop could wait. The dogs thought a run to Malta was a top idea until the driver flattened it on the expressway. Monty and Fang got skittled on the curve. Malta was a tiny island. Thankyou Hobbsie. I’d find them easy. Maria and my son. I hadn’t had a drink since the night before. I was drying out so I could be in a fit state.

Pizza boxes skidded into the gutter. The publican was hosing out. He crossed the street to avoid the early opener. He could smell the carpet, calling. The Swansea Travel Agency had not yet commenced trading for the day but the Swansea Cake Shop, now under a French name and employing Vietnamese girls who chattered instead of serving, was open, enabling him to gorge on jam doughnuts while inspecting posters of Greek ruins and Barrier Reef island holidays fading in the travel agency window. He peered deep into the yellowy bowels of the agency, seeking a poster of Malta, without success. The poster glowing in his mind's eye buoyed him. Everything made sense now. He had a son. This was why men worked. To produce, then provide for an heir. He had someone to whom he could pass on the fruits of his experience. Someone to inherit his half of the house. To explore the box marked 'DANGER - EXPLOSIVES'. Had he attained this enlightenment earlier, he thought, he might not have become a drunken fool. There was not much time. It was his birthday tomorrow. What would Malta be like? Hobbsie had covertly put several Maltese facts at his fingertips, the recitation of which had initially impressed then got him into the pants of the mother of his son. He knew the Maltese people were hardy. His son would be hardy. He knew the Maltese had resisted the might of the Luftwaffe with three obsolete bi-planes named Faith, Hope and Chastity. His son would be proud of his heritage. He knew there were no coal mines on Malta. His son would not work in a pit. The Shipwater line of red-haired coal miners had ended in exile forty years before. He, Ronald Samuel Shipwater, had been the last. Had, despite being blackballed, alone borne the torch of the Shipwater pit man onward, nursed the flame, kept

it defiantly ablaze in the face of history. Dot had produced but a single offspring, a daughter, late gift from a rogue wandering Caulfield who kept wandering. Shelley was a blonde airline hostess whose original hair colour was a meek brown. He felt warm in the knowledge the flame would go out when he did. The travel agent opened her door. Jam squirted down his front.

Question for Hobbsie: Has anyone been killed by an exploding jam doughnut?

XVI

A sheet of corrugated iron had been blown off its nails. Flung onto the road it was now carried further downhill by every coal truck which crashed over it. Neville clung to the verandah rail, speechless and shivering. Whitey and the dogs were nowhere to be found. Jimmy observed the moon through the hole in the ceiling. He never wearied of gazing at the moon in the day sky, whatever the phase. Mottled white, waxing, it reminded him of a toadstool cap. If he watched long enough, in defiance of a neck which threatened to snap, the toadstool moved slowly across the sky. He heard a car pull up. Smearing a peephole in a pane opaque with dust, he recognised the vehicle which had run over his goat.

“Excuse me please?”

The inquirer was not Ron but appeared to wear Ron’s hair. Even to wear more of Ron’s hair than did Ron, a full and groomed mane akin to the coiffure of a popular television personality or a photograph in a hairdresser’s window, yet profoundly red. The middle-aged man beneath was slim with olive skin.

Jimmy's head jutted near horizontal from the bedroom doorway, his heart thumping like a jungle drum. His mouth hung open.

"I am looking for Ron?"

A shotgun cartridge, blue, impelled by Jimmy's advancing foot, rolled up the hallway to the front door. The red-haired visitor picked it up. Jimmy held out his hand.

"I am looking for Ron?"

Jimmy slipped the cartridge in his pocket.

"I am his son. My name is Dominic."

Jimmy looked as askance as possible.

"Ron doesn't have a son."

"It is a long story. You are Jimmy?"

Jimmy considered denial. Dominic's face told him he would not be believed.

Jimmy mustered a sad expression.

"You haven't heard."

He embellished the look.

"Ron's dead. Liver. The grog. He drank like a fish. Sorry. What's your name again?"

"Dominic. When did my father die?"

"Just after your mother came to visit. It wasn't her fault. I'm sorry, mate."

Jimmy tried to close the door.

"I would like to visit his grave."

"It's in Scotland. Family comes from there. Somewhere. We sent his ashes back. Funny he never mentioned you."

"We did not meet."

Jimmy nodded in grave understanding.

“You speak good English. Where you from anyway?”

“Malta.”

“Never heard of it.”

“It is an island in the Mediterranean Sea.”

“Have to look it up.”

Wingnut saw the sedan. He dropped the broom. Dust breezed back through the clubhouse as he bolted down the road.

“Dom!?”

“Uncle Alberto?”

“What what what are you doing here? Does does your mother know?”

Dominic lit a black cigarette with a gold filter. Jimmy and Wingnut eyed the foreign object. The foreign visitor exhaled smoke of different colour and scent to local durries, through his nostrils, before offering the pack, flat and black like a ladies’ compact.

“I came to see my father.”

Jimmy’s selected pink with gold filter, Wingnut lime green.

“I told him the sad news”, said Jimmy. “Ron’s dead.”

Wingnut nodded, emphatically bereaved, leaking scented smoke.

“Ron’s dead, Dom.”

“That is what mother said also.”

Malta proved an island too far for the Swansea Travel Agency. The agent suggested that, seeing as she knew next to nothing about it, Malta must surely be expensive and difficult to get to. Islands were like that, she said. Ron suspected she was trying to get rid of him. She spoke too fast, through lips like fishing line. As he left, she suggested New Zealand as an alternative.

One wouldn't hurt, he thought.

He was known at the hotel and so unable to obtain credit. Foraging for unfinished bottles at the rear of the establishment, he was chased away. He passed the morning on the unshaded bus stop, folding and unfolding pamphlets on European travel, sweating and talking aloud to himself about Plan B which was to get back to The Bay and get so drunk so quickly that he would forget all about Malta and everything and everyone else.

The plastic seat became hotter and more slippery with time. He stared out the window as he had stared from the schoolroom, endeavouring to induce the trance-like state which had once made time pass more quickly. A bullet-holed sign slid past: "Warning! Mine Subsidence". The bastards have extracted the pillars, he thought. By machine. Bastards. Tinsnips came to mind. He had hand-written the name on the grave. Geoffrey Clutten.

"BASTrds!"

The bus swerved. He noted the driver watching him and switched seats. The driver kept watching. He moved to the rear of the bus and stared at the uncurling ribbon of tar. Road gangs in day-glo jackets widened the ribbon

every year. He had at some point in life adopted a lime-green vest, found abandoned on the pub verandah. The fit was tight, but worn at night, the silver reflective edging made him easier to see. Bus time passed slower than school time. He made the mistake of envisioning the alcohol awaiting him in The Bay. A desire arose to punch out the “Emergency Exit” window, watch it careen away and shatter on the expressway. He lay down and tried to sleep. Sleep never came while he was sober. In bright sunlight, his eyelids were imperfect blinds. He kept seeing. An angular slot of blue sky stayed mostly the same. He sat up. Sliding right and left, he hurled pamphlets out windows and watched the wind scatter colourful images of Italy and Spain and France into the Australian bush. His shorts and shirt were soaked, his skin a stormy sunset hue, angering by the second, as the bus slewed into the turnoff, hurling him off the seat.

The driver rolled a Drum. The engine idled. The pub remained three stops - two hills - away. Too far to walk. He had no desire to witness the bus tootle past while he staggered up a hill. Being overtaken on the *first* hill would surely induce an infarction of sorts. He identified a languorous malice in the adherence to a generous timetable. The beer in his mind’s eye was killing him. His legs twitched. In desperation he studied a pair of workmen – young, uniformed, not local – wrangle solar heating panels atop Herbert Hobbs’ renovation of Billy Burns’ cottage. Herbert had painted the house white, inside and out, wore white shirts, drove a white car. His nameless white woman wore white dresses to the beach. It was clear Herbert believed coal had no future. Reports sourced to Nerys Ferris promoted the view that Herbert, more than

being in political league with Mrs Greenie Fucking Blow-In, was having an affair with The Bay's radical conservationist. They had been seen talking. Nerys Ferris swore on The Bible that she had heard the words fossil fuel, pollution, and condom, venturing to suggest that perhaps Herbert, Mrs Greenie Fucking Blow-In, and Herbert's white-dressed woman, constituted a green threesome.

The bus chugged at the first hill with trepidation. Cedric and Ruby's car, boat and caravan convoy had relocated to the vacant lot where Hec Morgan's house had stood - if stood was the right word - prior to demolition by the company following Hec's demise. Ruby sat in the tinny, afloat in long grass, squinting at generator-powered black and white TV while Cedric, half under the Valiant, nickied rust with bog. After forty seven years, Cedric was back in The Bay. For how long would depend on the confluence of Ruby and Dot. He added a rider to Plan B. As soon as he was drunk as a skunk, bus timetable permitting, he would pay Cedric and Ruby a visit. Cedric would know what to do about Malta.

Halfway up the hill, he witnessed *himself* getting into a car parked out front of *his* house. He yanked the cord. It snapped.

He tapped on the car window.

XVIII

"I was told that you were dead."

"MORRow. BIRTHday. SIXty!"

“Happy Birthday. For tomorrow.”

Dot barred the way indoors, eyes like the eggs of a small bird, poached. The finger on her throat, trembling, added uncommon vibrato to her tone.

“Don’t believe him. He’s sixty one tomorrow. He might even be sixty two.

He’s been sixty for years.”

“DEAD’morrow.”

“Don’t believe him. He’s been sixty for years.”

She cleared a space amongst the dogs, moved Neville to the far end of the railing, and carried Whitey, protesting, inside.

Dominic noticed that his father shivered in the heat. He loosened his cravat, damp inside the neck.

“My name is Dominic.”

“RON! SI down.”

The legs of the decaying cane chair splayed beneath him, Dominic sat tensed for complete collapse, clasping the wings of his sunglasses in his lap. A voice spoke in his head:

You’ve seen him. Now for God’s sake go. Go! Mama was right. He’s a drunk. He’s purple! You’ve seen him, now go. Go.

“I wished to meet you. I do not want anything.”

Dot served tea and Ron’s surviving doughnuts then departed to flutter in the front room. Dominic declined the doughnuts. He sipped tea in the hope it might still his heart. The beverage was warm and mostly milk. Dot threw open a window, melodramatically, as if to admit air, although air was already admitted via the roof.

“Jimmy said you were dead.”

“JIMm’saidDEAD?”

He can barely speak!

“JIMm’saidDEAD? JIMm?”

Dominic nodded, taking care not to editorialise.

This Jimmy seems a strange sort of friend. I think now I understand why Mama despises him. What is it they call each other? Mate. Why is my father staring at my hair? It is his hair!

He could not help himself. Red hair atop an olive complexion did not look right. Was it a rug? A red rug? The wearing of rugs ran on the Vella side of the family. If it was a red rug, he mused, it was a big boofy red rug. Encasing abundant air. It looked pumped up.

It is your hair! I got hell in school because of your hair!

The watery gaze of the father followed the legs of the son as they crossed and uncrossed in discomfort. The shiny cream linen pants made no sound.

“WORK?”

“I manage a nightclub. For Mama.”

Ron nodded several times, as though comprehending.

“BEER?”

“No. Thankyou.”

“BEER?”

“Not for me, thankyou. Please, you drink a beer if you wish. Please.”

It was a test of resolve Ron was determined to pass. He lifted his teacup. The saucer rose with it. The seal broke. The saucer fell, the cup flew. Tea rained on Dominic’s trousers. He leapt from the chair. Dogs spun in the air. Neville

shrieked for the first time since the shotgun blast. Dot was suddenly present with a tissue of souvenir Reptile Park teatowel, fussing, as if by magic.

“Let me. Let me. Let me.”

Kneeling, she clawed at Dominic’s stains. His immediate thought was to karate chop the creature across the neck. It was, he thought, like the attack of some bizarre flightless bird. Stepping back, he impaled himself on a pair of beer bottle nails. He concealed the pain.

“It is fine. I will have them dry-cleaned.”

“I’ll soak them. Let me soak them. Let me soak them.”

“I am not staying. But thankyou.”

“Would you like more tea? I’ll make a fresh pot. You two look like two peas in a pod.”

She vanished as if by magic. To be heard fussing, with volume, inside.

“I must go.”

Dominc rounded his father, avoiding eye contact and brush of skin on skin.

“YOUR’ouse.”

Dot was back, as if by magic.

“Ron your father says half this house will be yours when he pops off.”

“DEAD’morrow.”

“Don’t take any notice, Dominic. Not tomorrow. But one day. It will, won’t it, Ron? Half this house will be yours, Dominic. It will, won’t it, Ron?”

Mary Mother Of God. What would I do with this..this shanty at the arse-end of the world? Mary Mother Of God. And the other half of this foul shack is yours, is it, bird-monster-woman, whatever is your name? Which particular half of the residence is mine? The half

with the hole in the roof? Holy Mother Of Our Holy Saviour, help me please, I am lost in a bad dream. No, Dominic. No. Still your mind. This is real. Mama warned you. Accept. This man is your father. Accept. This woman is your aunt. Accept. You cannot change what has happened. I accept. I will not judge. I will be kind. I will show compassion.

“You’ll have all of it when I go. Plus all of our things. My Shelley’s moving to Ettalong. I won’t see my granddaughter again. She’s a Caulfield anyway. Her father’s a no-hoper. You’re the last of us, Dominic.”

Us?

“What do you think of that? The last of us.”

How far does blood flow? How thin before it is no longer blood?

“The last of the Shipwaters. Lucky last.”

I am lucky. I am so lucky. So gloriously gloriously gloriously lucky my mother possessed the wisdom to flee this antediluvian hell.

Praise be! Yes, yes, we are blood. So be it. But we are also worlds apart, thank God. Worlds apart! Long may it so remain. Oh thank God. What in hell is a Shipwater?

“KIZZ?”

What?

“KIZZ!”

This is my father. This is my father. Accept.

“Kids? Unless you’ve got kids?, he says. You’re the last unless you’ve got kids.

Have you got any kids, Dominic? Children?”

“I have two children. They are both girls.”

“Oh. That’s lovely. Dominic has two girls, Ron. Two lovely girls.”

“HAIrrrrrgh?”

“He says, what colour is their hair?”

“Black. The girls’ hair is black.”

“BLACK?”

“My daughters have my wife’s hair. Their hair is as black as coal.”

“How lovely. The girls’ hair is black as coal, Ron.”

That shut them up. I will not tell them. It will only encourage them. Maybe I will tell them one day. If his hair turns out to be red. If I do tell them, I will tell them in a letter. With no return address.

Nerys Ferris pretended not to notice the Shipwaters were entertaining and was face to face with Dominic upon raising her head.

“Oh!”

Holy Father. Another bird-monster-woman. This one is a different colour. Her hair is blue. The colour of the neon above Mama’s club.

“This is Dominic. Dominic, this is Nerys Ferris. Dominic is Ron’s long lost son.”

“Oh! My goodness! Are you here for Ron’s birthday party, are you, Dominic?”

“Dominic is going home to Malta tonight.”

“Oh. What a shame. I brought you some more iced doughnuts, Ron.

Chocolate and strawberry. We’re all very excited because it’s Ron’s sixtieth birthday tomorrow. They say life begins at sixty.”

Recovered from the initial shock of being Number Five, Nerys Ferris had assumed an aura in the vein of Mary McKillop Bearing Bakery Delights.

“I’m baking Ron a special birthday cake. We’ve known each other since school. Ron and me. I had a massive crush on Ron but fate had other plans for Nerys Ferris, alas.”

“PISSoffNEZFEZ!”

Our Holy Mother Of Bakery Delights scurried to the bowling club in the faint hope its sanctuary might be respected when the hour of retribution came. She joined Alan Goode, Wingnut Vella and Jimmy Blizzard in assembly at a window, close-monitoring proceedings at the Shipwater residence.

“I must go.”

“Already?”

Dominic edged towards the verandah gate. Dot elbowed her brother. Ron succeeded in falling from his chair into a standing position where he swayed like a colossal toffee apple, legs united in demanding a drink, promptly, or they would withdraw their labour, the remainder of his body prepared to go out in sympathy.

“Thankyou for the tea.”

Am I supposed to embrace him? He’s purple and slippery, for Heaven’s sake. Holy father help me.

Dominic thrust out a hand on the end of a very straight arm. Ron lurched forward.

My father has the grip of a puffy greasy priest.

“MaRIIIaaa.”

“I will convey your best wishes to mother.”

“ ‘ BLIEVE her. TELL M’RIA.”

What?

The visitor tripped over a reclining dachshund as he backed onto the footpath.

Frankie squealed. Her companions hurled abusive questions at the careless stranger with Ron's hair.

“GEEDOUTOFIT! POSTcarMALTa.”

“He says please send us a postcard from Malta, Dominic.”

Dominic tried not to look as though he was hurrying. Two small circles of blood resembling a snakebite disfigured the back of his shirt.

Nerys Ferris, Alan Goode, Wingnut Vella and Jimmy Blizzard observed Dominic hasten to the late-model imported sedan, Ron stumble after him and fall head-first into the passenger seat, Dot wave from the verandah, the vehicle execute a gravel-spitting U-turn, passenger door flying open and swinging shut several times during the manoeuvre, then rocket uphill, horn blaring ‘fuck youse all!’ as it passed the club. Nerys Ferris and Alan Goode retreated to the office. Wingnut scrambled to the payphone. A bread and butter knife, jammed in the coin slot, snapped off in his hand. He stabbed the phone with the remnant ex State Rail cutlery. Jimmy hunched behind the bar to pull a further trembling schooner. As the head settled, uneasily, he noted Wingnut kicking at Alan Goode's door, screaming that he knew they were in there and needed to make an urgent call. Dominic and Ron sped past, downhill, unmonitored.

They slewed to a halt, rear lifting off the shocks. Ron fell out onto the nature strip and on his back tore at the unco-operative cardboard protecting a slab of beer. Dominic ripped shut the door, executed a further violent U-turn and

sped uphill once more. Dot appeared clutching a toiletries bag. She waved her nephew's vehicle over the crest, at length. Her brother, having penetrated the cardboard fortress, lurched inside the house, draining a can without breathing as its twenty three companions spilled and rolled down the hall, primed to explode upon opening. Dot sealed the house and toddled across the road to the Caulfield's.

Jimmy returned to the club window, schooner slopping, durrie trembling. He noted the deserted Shipwater verandah. The closed front door. Tobacco fell in his beer. The notion that his best mate was at that moment riding in an air-conditioned vehicle, enjoying an exotic luridly-coloured tailor-made whilst being appraised of the pleasures of a future life in Malta, shared with his son and, reconciled, his son's mother, whom he, Jimmy, had fancied first, crossed and recrossed his mind, wearing a deep rut. A string of tobacco caught in his throat. He coughed, doubled up, unable to dislodge the irritant, until his shirt was drenched, then slipped away and cried over the sink in the Gents. The sun felt its way along the ridge to the dipping point and sank.

XIX

On the eve of my sixtieth birthday, four weeks after British strikers returned to the pits, defeated, Gramma Shipwater stopped spinning in her Kirk quarter grave and stalked out of the fog in her long black dress. The NUM defeat was the beginning of the end, she yowled, and strode off into The Bay to haunt Mrs Greenie Fucking Blow-In and Herbert Hobbs and anyone else opposed to coal and coal miners, to harry them forevermore (thankyou Hobbsie) on behalf of the boys who would now never work beside their fathers who worked beside their fathers who worked beside their fathers. Gramma Shipwater loved coal.

A tissue of stratus hid the stars. The border between land and sea was lost. He felt his way to the intersection of Anglican and Roman Catholic Lanes. The final resting place of Percy Finch, while not the equal of a pyramid of Egypt, remained an imposing edifice, which of all the crypts in The Bay Cemetery appeared most likely to deter tomb robbers. A massive slab of granite, quartz sparkling, surmounted by a polished black marble headstone featuring a novella of Gothic inscription, in gold, it was a sepulchre befitting the bones of an SP bookie acquainted with several trainers and jockeys and sadly missed by a large family. Ron sat back against the headstone. A can exploded in his face. He waited as it hissed to a drinkable state. His father had warned him that sitting on cold stone would give a man piles. As his father's father had warned him. And his father's father. None in the line of fathers had specified how long a man was required to sit on cold stone before the piles appeared.

Question for Hobbsie: Is getting – or not getting – piles, a knack?

He thought about Perce, down there, pinned under the great Lard Arse of the Fat Scab of The Bay. He could hear the much-loved bookie, squashed as he was, wheezing the odds. Another can exploded in his face. Something scuttled by the grave. A tail disappeared around a granite corner. A leathery wing flapped by his head. He ducked. Awaited the rise of his birthday over the dunes. Unseen in the night, dogs explored and urinated on the dead. They never tired of the cemetery.

I heard laughter from the hill. I shouted "I'm not dead yet, you bastards! My son Dominic came to see me! All the way from Malta. Dominic manages a night club. Where are all your sons? On the flaming dole! Or with the last lucky few down The Pit, collaborating with fucking machines!" I heard Gramma Shipwater shout in solidarity from the black heart of the fog.

Dominic had my hair. He was good-looking. He was well-mannered. He looked you in the eye when he spoke. Dot was impressed. He wasn't fussed about his trousers. Or his shirt. He could afford dry cleaning. He was a success. It stuck out like dog's balls. He flew halfway around the world to see me. His mother, his uncle, his whole family tried to stop him. He still came. Jimmy told him I was dead. Jimmy told her Maria I was dead. Jimmy got everything wrong. Malta sounded like a great little island.

Maria floated in front of me. I could smell her hair. I could feel her cashmere cardigan. I could squeeze the arm inside. Soft and round. I could smell and feel Maria long after she was gone. Staring at the streetlight turned the veins in my eyelids into fancy running writing, blue on pink, spelling out the word "Maria". It was the drink writing.

He lay on the slab, shotgun protecting genitals, and watched the sky in the hope of seeing the lights of their plane blinking overhead. A night breeze was rising. Cloud was moving. The dunes crept inland. Night workers widened the expressway. The Bay was disappearing. The few stars swam.

A voice said "Jimmy". What about him? Jimmy was a clot. Jimmy was a sook. Jimmy had a chalky skull. Did I tell you about the emus? Another get-rich-quick plan. Run emus. In The Bay. Jimmy reckoned all the livestock experts reckoned there wasn't a single part of an emu

that humans couldn't use. Eyeballs. Toenails. Everything. The whole fucking emu. So baking was out. Mowing was out. Jimmy was getting himself a herd of emus. Herd? A mob. Thankyou, Hobbsie. Running the birds where they used to run the pit ponies was my idea. Fix the fences first, I told him. Emus love to kick down fences. Hand it to Jimmy, he was way ahead of me. He'd figured out a way he wouldn't need fences at all. He was going to brand the emus. He didn't say where. Or tag them. Somewhere. Emus don't have ears. Wait, there's more. Free range emus was only Part One of his plan, which was a work of genius, even if he did say so himself. Part Two was even more genius. You know what he was going to feed J. Blizzard Premium Grade Free Range Emus? Agapanthus. Those flowers like purple and white toilet brushes you see all over the place. South African. Like bitou bush. Jimmy reckoned emus and agapanthus were a natural fit and it was only a miracle no-one had thought of it before. Agapanthus were growing like topsy everywhere. Out front of every home. Up every driveway. Wild in the bush. Throughout National Parks. On top of Ayers Rock. Everywhere. Jimmy planned to free range his emus in and around The Bay, fattening them up, then muster and drove the birds to market, tucking into agapanthus - with a side salad of bitou bush - if only emus ate lantana! - all the way to the killing floor. He was serious. You just wanted to punch him. He'd lost his marbles. He wasn't the only one. They gave him one of those credit cards.

XX

The club glassie yapped at breakneck speed about the past. Trysts with girls of slight acquaintance. Scrapes into which wild man Ron Shipwater had dragged him, against his better judgement. Adventures in pastry. Incidents involving rogue mowers. Malevolent lawns. Migrants. The danger and hilarity of a lifetime, disconnected and themeless, poured forth through holes in tobacco-stained teeth and lips wet with hysteria. Other club members attempting speech were overridden by gibberish. Jimmy preferred the full-blown heebie-

jeebies to taking on board the loss of his best mate to family life in Malta. The President's refusal of further service had no seeming effect. On his rounds, he drained any vessel left unattended or empty not scrupulously emptied.

Diminished motor control limited his harvest to a stump of glassware per circuit, fallen glass staying where it fell, before progression from real-world collection to foraging imaginary empties in strange locations saw him erect immense curling towers of virtual glassware which he juggled, babbling, loudly demanding right of way, back to the bar. Nerys Ferris strongly advised return home to his mother's care, in the face of which, remembering a skill taught him by his absent friend, he leaned backwards across the bar, pulled a schooner without looking, skulled without breathing and set the upturned empty atop his head before suddenly tearing from his shirt, in violation of club dress code, expletives assailing the resistant garment, and thrashing wildly as tiny bushfires, ignited by teeming microscopic demons deploying wee boxes of matches, raged across the tinderbox of his skin and through the dry grass of his hair. Nerys Ferris donated her last two mogodon. He bolted the pills in a rum chaser. Alan Goode escorted him to the door. Membership observed him strip naked on the green and run in the direction of home. Empties were no longer collected. The members, union men, were acquainted with demarcation.

He was deeply asleep, laid out under the tank tap, by the time the pounding of cold water brought the fires under control and the demons departed. He dreamt nothing. A passer-by heard water wasting and turned off the tap.

The blast of a shotgun sat the naked glassie bolt upright. He hit his forehead on the tap and knocked himself out. Elsewhere, lights were extinguished, curtains drawn, in List-affected homes The dog pack tore through the darkness in a state of panic, skittling smaller participants. Those bearing the blood of speedier breeds reached the lit street in advance of the peloton, only to realise that in open ground they were more exposed, split like a blasted nucleus, and keep running. The arriving peloton executed a confused figure of eight before dispersing to secret bunkers under darkened homes.

“Mother of God. Mother of God.”

Nerys Ferris cradled a birthday cake.

“Mother of God!”

Jimmy hid his nakedness. He scrambled to the clothes line and retrieved a pair of shorts.

“I thought you’d been shot”, said Nerys Ferris.

She pointed. Blood trickled from a circular wound on Jimmy’s forehead.

“It’s started. Alan is safe, thank god. Give this to him. Ron. Make sure you say it’s from me.”

She handed Jimmy the cake. He watched her clamber over the next-door fence and the next-door fence after that, before yelping a sudden thought:

“Is he here? Where is he? Im his cakemaker!”.

Nerys Ferris hurled her arms in the air, hurdled a third next-door fence, and vanished.

Jimmy edged down the side of the house. A shaft of streetlight illuminated sky blue icing with “*Happy Birthday Ron*” spelt out in small silver beads resembling tiny ball bearings. Were they tiny ball bearings? They couldn’t be tiny ball bearings, thought Jimmy. Ball bearings could choke someone. He thrust the cake beyond the corner of the house and waited several seconds. Crossed the street in a crouch, cake outstretched. A sliver of light split curtains in Wingnut’s front window. Accident or show of defiance? Wingnut was asking for it. A shotgun boomed, in a flash of red, beyond the white bridge.

XXI

The pinkish nova would not stay still. He squeezed the trigger again. The hammer clicked. The street light continued to offend. He opened his eyes and lay back to reload. Cartridges spilled and rolled about Perce’s granite and dropped into the surrounding dirt. He had more than enough ammunition. The birthday eve remained ink-dark in the east but the dune line could deceive. The exact time of birth – ten minutes before midday – was immaterial. As soon the sun was up. The top of the dunes would glow. Perce’s grave had warmed slightly under his body heat but was now moist. The dogs had abandoned the cemetery with the first blast. Even Merlin. They would miss each other, he concluded. Was Merlin thinking of him? Rowdy, Punchy, Rusty, Don, Shep, Gus, Spitfire, Phantom, Ringo, Shadow, Merlin. They were all good dogs.

Question for Hobbsie: Even when dogs aren’t laughing, they have big shit-eating grins. They can give you a real good sly look too. You know how dogs grin then give you a wink? What’s that about?

The stars – there were more now - still swam. A new star, red, flashing, tiny, moved slowly through the night, headed north. In Ron's dark, fluid incoherence where stars swam and thoughts tangled like eels and were gone before they could be identified, one clear notion stood still, shining brightly, for a moment.

Them.

Never having flown, he imagined international flight to be not unlike superior bus travel. He had once peered inside an air-conditioned coach ferrying a coalfields choir to the Sydney Eisteddfod.

"I could shoot down the plane."

He angered himself. The thought had appeared in his head without his agreement. He lay down the gun to be on the safe side and watched the flashing red light pass directly overhead.

"There they are. Up there. Flying home. My wonderful Dominic. My beautiful Maria. My son and his mother. And I have grandchildren in Malta. Grandchildren! Two lovely girls with coal black hair. The family night club is called "Maria's".

The image swam past of a faithless moustachio'd husband making time with a chorus girl in a dressing room while Maria hostessed out front. He shook his head.

"Maria did not mention a husband. Dominic did not mention a step-father."

Downward, through streaming wisps of cloud, she saw nothing bar the intermittent red edge of a wing. Droplets of condensation crawled across the window. She sat back in darkness to meditate, momentarily, before jerking forward to extricate a flat black box slipped deep in the magazine pouch. Dominic flicked through a catalogue of Australian indigenous art. Maria lit a coloured cigarette and observed. The resemblance was there. It was not just the hair.

“Have you chosen a name yet?”, she asked.

“Ronaldo.”

She snorted smoke. Dominic looked her in the eye for as long as he could before laughing.

“We don’t have a name yet.”

“You are trying to kill me. It is your fault I smoke too much.”

“Ronaldo is a fine name, Mama.”

Mama smiled smoke.

“I will disinherit you. You and all your red-haired descendants.”

She kissed his hand before directing smoke at streaming wisps of cloud.

“You still haven’t said how it went.”

“I wanted to meet him. I met him.”

“I tried to warn you.”

“You tried to warn me.”

“Well? What did you make of your father, Dominic?”

The bald spot occupying the seat in front tempted him to draw a smiley face on it. He had a day-glo felt pen in his onboard luggage. Smiley faces were becoming popular in the island’s newer dance clubs. Malta would never be

Ibiza but Dominic was not sure this was a bad thing. “Maria’s” attracted a more mature clientele, who went to bed earlier. He pictured his father lying on his back on the footpath tearing at a beer carton with both hands.

“He wasn’t dead.”

Maria’s gaze shot upwards, to something behind the silver lids, before returning to Dominic.

“He was different when I knew him.”

“I was hoping he was.”

“He was sweet. For a while. Did he say anything about me?”

“You’re all he talked about. He wants you back.”

“Not funny, Dom.”

“He is coming to Malta to re-woo you.”

“Did he mention creepy Jimmy?”

“Creepy Jimmy told me my father was dead, too.”

The perfume of her brand had once transported Maria. Now the scent lived in her clothes. Smoke insinuated its way into a sticky blonde mane seated in the line of fire.

“There is only a slight chance the boy will have my hair. It is a double recessive.”

His mother’s head moved from side to side like an Indian.

“I only told him about the girls.”

The plane hit turbulence. The seat belt warning sign illuminated. Maria picked open an ashtray containing several different coloured cigarettes, partly smoked, and jabbed. Dominic put his hand on her arm.

The flashing red light vanished over the curve of the earth. He pulled the trigger. The streetlight disintegrated.

Jimmy welcomed the loss of light. The majority of resting places, marked by white timber crosses featuring small engraved metal plaques or hand-painted names, offered scant protection against a shotgun. He scampered over the mounds, low, juggling the cake. Certain older graves were mere patches of disturbed earth, at best low bumps, rather than mounds. Several had become subsidences. He stepped over with respect when he could. Height was difficult to judge in the dark. A Fowlers Vacola preserving jar holding a spray of dead flowers flew from his foot and smashed against a neighbouring headstone. He ducked behind and sat backed hard against the inscription identifying a nineteenth century coal miner, his wife, and three month old daughter. The headstone gave way like a reclining aircraft seat.

The sound of shattering glass prompted Ron to a second attempt at sitting up. He resorted to reloading as he was, prone atop a dead SP bookie at rest beneath a black marble slab with gold lettering vaguely reminiscent of an exotic cigarette box.

Jimmy heard the barrels chock back into place.

“Happy birthday, mate!”

There was something of trench warfare in their proximity, guarded, calling in the dark. Armed only with a sponge cake, Jimmy was at a disadvantage.

“I’m DEAD!’MEMber?!DEAD!”

He fired from the hip, twice, in rapid succession, at a provocative star. Jimmy's headstone reclined further. Lead pellets sprinkled the sea somewhere to the east.

"Happy birthday! I baked you a cake! I filched a flask of OP to go with it!"

"HERE!"

"It's me, Jimmy. No-one else. Just me. Jimmy."

"HERE!"

"Where are you?"

"HERE!"

"Where?"

"HERE!"

"Where?"

"HERE! PERCE! PERCE!"

Everyone knew Perce Finch's grave. They had paid for it. Jimmy circled so as to approach from the rear, behind a shield of sponge cake and OP rum.

"Happy birthday, mate. Are you there?"

"CAN'gUP!"

"Ah, that's no good, mate. I'll help you up, mate. Better put the shotty down but. Put the shotty down?"

Stars shimmered faintly on the metal-blue of the barrels and breech. Jimmy kept one eye on the weapon, the other on the pudgy hands now clasped atop the mountainous belly, seeming placid, a manageable distance from the trigger, as he laid celebratory table - sky blue cake, amber flask, outsized candle in tin can, ex outdoor toilet - upon a next door grave housing the

remains of Lionel Thorpe. Lacking the waterproofing of the Finch tomb, the Thorpe burial mound had subsided to ankle height under the recent deluge, become more concave than convex. A tandem effort, Fatty and Skinny, idiots, laughing and swearing, just like old times, saw the weightier of the pair wrestled into a sitting position atop Perce Finch, to gaze down upon the trappings of anniversary atop Lionel Thorpe. Candlelight sparkled on Nerys Ferris's silver-beaded calligraphy. The cork squeaked.

"Happy birthday, mate."

More noise than wind was produced in the attempt to blow out the candle.

Distance proved difficult to estimate. The OP soothed his burnt lips. He barked at Jimmy.

"LISss."

A State Rail bread and butter knife suddenly floated, watery, shiny, before his eyes.

"Cut the cake, mate", said Jimmy.

"LISss!"

"I baked it myself. Nerys Ferris did the writing."

"LISssss!"

Jimmy delicately extracted the latest draft from the depths of a pocket. The document fell apart in the unfolding.

"Sorry, mate. Went through the wash."

Ron swayed, glowering. He had long been able to sway and experience life at the same time.

"NEW LISss'."

“Listen, mate. You don’t have to go through with it, you know. It’s April Fool’s Day? Just say it was a big joke, yeah? The biggest. And best. Mate. They will cack themselves. Absolutely. You’ll be a bloody legend.”

Ron stared at the orange glow now fringing the dune line, stared hard until he saw it creep, much as the hands of a clock or the moon in the sky can be seen to creep, if stared at hard enough. The glow would soon be warming the tops of the taller memorials.

“NEW LIssss!”

The OP found his pocket after several attempts. Deploying Perce Finch’s tomb as support, he lowered to his knees and scrabbled for cartridges in the dark.

“I don’t have a pen, mate”, said Jimmy. “Knock it up when we get you home eh? Get some birthday cake into you first. Can you spare a swig of that OP?”

Ron raised an unsteady finger atop a fist full of cartridges.

“NUMb’r ONE!”

He sought the shotgun.

“Righto, mate”, said Jimmy. “You’re the boss. Off you go. I’ll write it down later.”

He loaded slowly, swaying, fighting the shakes. His grip was greasy. Cartridges fell to earth.

“Off you go. Number One?”

A cartridge slid home.

“NUMb’r ONE!”

A second slid into place. He closed the breech. The sound, the fit of metal to metal, was reassuringly exact.

“JIMmyfucknBLIZZrd.”

Jimmy assessed the likelihood of his nomination being a secondary April Fool's Day jape before his hands shot into the air and he wet himself.

"Mate?"

"Yr'aFLAM'nSOOK SKINNY!"

Estimating the shotgun to be, at best, unreliably aimed, Jimmy considered it possible a blast might miss a thin, darting target. He mustered a grin and invoked mitigating circumstances as a cover to consideration of escape routes.

"Fair enough, mate. Fair enough. I am a flaming sook. But mate, being a sook's not a Number One, mate. No way a sook's Number One."

Jimmy's nose streamed, spreading to a delta upon crossing his lips.

"Chalky bones, mate. You don't know what it's like."

"LIAr. BACKstabb'nBAASTARd."

"No way, mate. No way. We're mates. I'm your mate."

Ron successfully located the pocketed OP and swigged.

"M'RIA."

"Maria? Ah, mate."

"M'RIA!"

Rum heat spread through his chest. His vision swam.

"Mate, that was a big big misunderstanding", said Jimmy. "That stuff I said, it just came out. It wasn't me. It was a voice. I hear voices too. I thought I didn't, but I do."

Ron tossed the flask aside. In a moment of forgetting, he felt sober.

"SCAB."

Jimmy noted the glow of the sun in his mate's eyes before they closed.

*On my sixtieth birthday, I shot Jimmy Blizzard. They dug his grave with a backhoe. A soul
won't rest in a hole dug by machine.*

THE END

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