DINGO (MANUSCRIPT)
AND
GENTLEMEN AT HEART: BUSHRANGERS IN THE NOVEL

Submitted by
Aidan Windle
BA (Hons), Deakin University
Grad. Dip. Ed., The University of Melbourne

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School of Communication, Arts and Critical Enquiry
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

La Trobe University
Bundoora, Victoria 3086
Australia

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**SUMMARY**

*Dingo* (Manuscript) and *Gentlemen at Heart: Bushrangers in the Novel* is a PhD thesis comprising a novel and a related dissertation. Moss ‘Dingo’ Donohoe is a coldblooded killer, according to the police, Channel Nine and most of the Australian populace. He is Zara’s hero. She remembers the scrap metal alchemist, the dad who went to jail for her. When he escapes she is waiting, but neither of them is sure just whom she’ll meet. The Goddess Tran Hoa Kim is a genetic engineer too busy trying to save the world to save her own fugitive husband and daughter, Moss and Zara. The novel examines conflicts between the primal and the civilised, the innate and the genetically or socially engineered. Crime, Australiana and the grotesque combine in this compassionate black comedy about the making of an unlikely legend.

The accompanying dissertation situates *Dingo* within a tradition of novels dating from the 1840s, in which authors have responded creatively to the mythology of the gentlemanly bushranger. I show how this figure represented a departure from the unrepentantly rebellious convict bolter (escapee) of earlier Australian folklore. Novelists such as Rowcroft transplanted the familiar noble bandit character type into colonial settings. Nisbet, Hornung and others drew on centuries of European literary heritage, as well as conventions of adventure romance popular fiction, in their often whimsical characterisation of bushrangers. I argue that this body of literature reflected important shifts in perception after the end of convict transportation to the colonies and the ostensible close of the bushranging era post-1880, as bushrangers became historical novelties instead of present threats. The dissertation concludes by considering the cultural currency of the outlaw hero narrative through an analysis of versions and subversions of bushranger mythology in Australian novels since Federation.
STATEMENT OF AUTHORSHIP

Except where reference is made in the text of the thesis, this thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis or any other degree or diploma.

No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgment in the main text of the thesis.

This thesis has not been submitted for the award of any degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.

Signed:

Date:
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In my home town, thanks are due to Fiona Stevens for the ‘writer’s retreat’ and, along with Robyn Rogers, for childcare. Thanks also to Liz McDonald for ‘inside’ information.
1.

Rules

Moss wakes to taste the finest trace of earth in his mouth. A northerly scours concrete and steel and delivers a message in gasps under his cell door.

‘Today’s the day,’ he croaks. ‘Budgie, today’s the day.’

His cellmate rolls over and bangs his knee against the wall, a dimension away from this prison on the bare arse of the western suburbs. Moss smiles patiently in the false dawn. There it is, the buzz of being the only person in the world who knows what’s going to happen.

He almost pities the screws, who believe like children in rules. Almost. They’ve mastered the seven hundred inmates at Namatjira Prison the way people have mastered fire: in some measure, sometimes. Today he is grateful they will enforce the rules, in the face of a February heat wave, and send his community service team out for the morning.

Moss is alive and will prove it to his daughter.

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The prisoners’ morning minibus ride ends beside a murky creek at Clifden, where they have laboured on a boardwalk since before Moss’s transfer from remand six months ago.

At first the new recruit to the Nurturing Nature team tried to prolong the weekly
outings and win prisoners’ approval by telling officers that the boards would have to be ripped up. The safety tread was on the underside.

‘Thanks, dickhead,’ scolded Mac, a middle aged inmate with a boxer’s nose. He accentuated each honk with an open palmed whack to Moss’s head. ‘We were gonna finish all eight hundred metres of boards before we got someone to notice they were the wrong way up.’

The hot wind that woke Moss in the night has itself fully awoken and it thrashes the men mercilessly. Senior Officer Dover and her colleagues watch from under the bridge, while the six prisoners work listlessly, waiting for the call to down tools. Moss stares through streaming sweat, not at the boardwalk before him but at a map in his head. Clifden is a cluster of houses and a tennis court. No shops. The creek to his east runs into a lake further south, buffering suburbia. The forest, if the scrubby republic of rabbits qualifies as a forest, meets farmland to the west and north.

‘Are you gonna do it or not?’ Mac honks.

Moss’s heart pounds. Has Budgie brought Mac in on the plan?

‘Listen, Moss, we might be on a go-slow, but I’ve been holding this board steady so long, I reckon pricks will be getting out of jail for murders they haven’t even committed yet before you get around to drilling a bloody hole.’

‘Ha. Sorry Mac.’

‘Must be time for smoko.’

He signals to the officers, who nod. The prisoners wander to the shady sanctuary under the bridge. They sip from water bottles, drag lovingly on their cigarettes and listen to Mac’s story of a prisoner who attempted to pose as his cellmate for a conjugal visit by the cellmate’s wife.

Moss can see Budgie raising eyebrows so bushy that they could never ask a subtle question. Is today the day? A shrunken ogre, another inmate once called the man whose smells and snoring and sketches of mutilated corpses Moss has lived with for six months. He shrugs.

‘You’ve been quiet this morning, which makes you either shifty or dense,’ Budgie mutters. ‘And you, Mister Mega-Memory Artsy Fartsy Fuckin’ Donohoe, aren’t as dense as
you look.’

Leaden faced, Moss offers nothing.

Soon Dover sends the men back to work. Budgie offers to collect the water bottles in their crate and refill them from the flagon in the minibus, but the officer eyes him warily and sends Moss instead.

‘Miss Dover’s toy.’

The slanderer might be any of the prisoners trudging back to the boardwalk. Moss owes his place on the Nurturing Nature project to Dover, who is among the officers who believe Moss shouldn’t have been jailed in the first place.

As he bends to collect the empty plastic bottles from the ground, Moss is almost sick. The heat? It’s more than the heat. He walks unsteadily to the minibus. Only once in his thirty-one years has he done something, really done something that mattered, and he received a nine year sentence for it. Now, furtively reaching into his pocket, the same sense he had then returns: the familiar hand of another, at once delicate and insistent, braces his own.

◊

◊

◊

The heat is scrambling neurons. What little conversation the prisoners bother with turns to nonsense blasted wide in the gale. Mac, who refuses to wear the ‘old woman’s’ standard issue hat, seems to imagine he is at the beach.

‘Excuse me, porky, but how can you call it public indecency when I look this good naked?’

Moss is back from refilling the drinks, hacking at some blackberry bushes along the creek by the time the sounds of cracks and pops reach the men. Before they can smell smoke over sweat and sawdust, the fire grows into a roar that halts and rushes in time with gusts of wind. The men turn to see flames rising from the grass around the bus.

Dover rushes toward Moss, her finger pointed accusingly, and he throws up his hands.
‘Some boofhead must have dropped a ciggie at smoko.’

There’s no time for the officer to investigate. She phones for help while the fire feeds on the chaos of its enemy. Men run deliriously, some carting water and shovelling dirt on the fire front, others fleeing the intensifying blaze for the upwind safety of the roadside. The grassfire has already caught on to the boardwalk. A force-field of heat pushes Moss south by the creek, alongside Budgie, Mac and the youngest of the prison officers, Clive Strange. Smoke thickens the air until he can barely make out Dover, twenty metres away.

‘That’s it,’ declares Strange. ‘We’re leaving this to the fire brigade.’

‘Oath we are,’ Mac agrees.

Strange looks back over his shoulder at Moss and Budgie after two strides. Swinging the shovel Moss is already sorry, yet he knows that in another life he would do it again. The shovel crashes against the junior officer’s spine and he falls without a cry. He’s reaching clumsily for his gun when Budgie snatches it. Mac, now his chance has come, shakes his head like a kid gazing up at the Cliffhanger ride at the show, and then tears around the fire front towards Dover and the others. Groaning, Strange holds a hand over his eyes as though it protects him from the gun Budgie aims at his face.

‘Can’t leave this prick to raise the alarm.’

Moss nods. He drops the shovel, hauls Strange to his feet and pushes him across the shallow creek, away from the closing fire front. Budgie splashes with them to the cover of the long reeds on the far bank.

‘Oi Mossy, it’s true what they say about holding a gun. I am God.’

They slink low for a kilometre, past the lake, until they arrive at a gravel road which, if Moss has read the online maps accurately, goes all the way to Werribee. On foot beside the reedy end of the lake, they are closer to extended sentences than to freedom. The fire siren howls. No police yet, but it can’t be long.

Moss begins to strip Strange, who seems more like a baby than a screw, blubbering and incapable of undressing himself. Moss pulls off his own Nurturing Nature uniform. He could be anyone, naked as the Prime Minister in the shower; naked as the girl stripped by Napalm in that photo from the Vietnam War which haunted Moss’s childhood; naked as a
rain dancer, or a worm washed by a famished bushman. And so could Strange. Moss throws him his prisoner’s clothes and is about to put on the officer’s uniform when Budgie interrupts.

‘This is God speaking. I’ll take Mr Strange’s clothes, thanks. Make yourself useful and tie him up with yours.’ As Moss hesitates Budgie chides him, ‘Don’t be a little girl about it. You’d do the same if you were God.’

Under the gun Moss tears the cotton into strips and binds Strange’s hands and feet. ‘Blindfold him too,’ Budgie orders, as he slips on the officer’s uniform. He pulls a wallet from its pocket and lets out a whoop. While counting the cash inside, the distant rumble of a vehicle on the gravel road calls the escapees to attention. Budgie gestures towards the lake with the gun and Moss rushes to drag Strange by the arms out of sight in the thick of the reeds.

‘Here,’ Budgie says, letting a fifty dollar note catch the breeze. ‘Buy yourself something to wear.’

Before Moss can speak, Budgie steps onto the road in front of the ute. He grins at the elderly driver. Holding up Clive Strange’s identification card, and says something in close at the window about a search for a fugitive named Mostyn John Donohoe.

*A friend is a liability.* It’s the first of the principles of disappearance Budgie taught Moss on their long evenings sharing a cell. Nobody could accuse him of failing to live up to his principles.

Crouching among the reeds, Moss hears the driver tell Budgie, ‘Anything to help, officer.’

They rattle down the road in the ute, leaving Moss and Strange to chew on the grit the wheels have churned into the air. Principle number two: *Pity another and weaken yourself; pity yourself and you’re already back inside.* Moss concentrates on the positives of being abandoned in the reeds wearing muddy underwear with a man who hates you.

‘Nice day for it,’ he remarks to the bound officer at his feet. ‘No chance of freezing to death.’

Strange starts groaning again. No, they’re words. If he wasn’t the subject of a full-scale man hunt Moss would take him to hospital, honest to goodness. ‘Poor were tan
buggy,’ the parched captive seems to be saying, or, ‘War purse ran bungy.’

‘Listen, Mr Strange, don’t think me rude for winding up our little chat, but you understand,’ says Moss, crossing the road to pick up the fifty dollar note Budgie left for him. ‘I have to make tracks.’

Before beginning his journey to the shelter of the Brisbane Ranges, though, Moss sips water from the lake. Strange mumbles again, so he cups his hands and splashes some water into the officer’s mouth. Police sirens wail in sympathy with the fire engines at Clifden.

The fugitive gallops west, pursued by the accusation from Strange that is finally clear: ‘You’re worse than Budgie.’
If not for the Princess of Wales, Moss might have finished Year Twelve. He knew the only high school in town was no place for him, anyway, as soon as the kids discovered he was an oddball a hard enough kick could pop. The exploding teenager was Castlemaine’s new danger sport, so beloved that several students pleaded with Moss to stay on until the end of Year Twelve.

Instead he left the Donohoes’ cottage near the Old Gaol at eight-twenty each morning and rode his bike to the reservoir at Golden Point, where he fished with a rod he had hidden in the bush. Waiting for a bite, he moulded caricatures of Castlemaine locals in clay to stealthily place on their front porches. Some days, as the figures dried in the shade, he performed before thousands, playing all the parts in *The Tragedy of Donohoe* for an audience of bull ants. The play was about Moss’s great great great great grandfather, a bushranger, his Pop had told him when he handed him the tattered script before he died.

Moss confessed his skiving in the kitchen on a Friday night, between mouthfuls of fish and chips. It seemed an appropriate time.

‘Two and a half weeks and you never brung home a fish,’ blurted his father, Fluke, slamming his stubby and ruefully watching as the brew frothed and puddled on the table. ‘In the real world, you bring home the fish, or else you just stink for no good reason.’

Moss’s mother Shelley shrilled, ‘You can’t walk away, Mostyn.’

‘That’s what that kid with the goatee yelled, just before Moss tripped him on the basketball court and tore out a handful of goatee,’ chimed Krystal, Moss’s sister.

His glare didn’t halt her.

‘Youse have got no idea how embarrassing it is to have a psycho brother at the same school as you. Why else would I agree to hand in his “glandular fever” note at the office?’

Shelley shook her head like a gaping sideshow clown, searching Moss’s face, and he longed for her to see that he had to leave school. Tall and quick, Moss wasn’t afraid of the
pea-brained stirrers. He hid at the reservoir from what he couldn’t explain: the poisonous rage that flooded through him in a single second. The kid with the goatee and his mates were luckier than they could have imagined.

‘Mostyn, what could you possibly do with yourself?’ Shelley demanded.

The question wasn’t what could he do, but was there anything he couldn’t do? Hiding to watch the faces of policemen, teachers, dropouts, farmers and bacon factory workers as they recognised themselves in the clay caricatures he left on their doorsteps, Moss tingled all over. Their awe was for him, and they didn’t even know it.

Fluke didn’t wait for him to answer.

‘He’ll have to find work, Shell.’

Krystal stopped licking salt off her chubby fingers.

‘Ooh! Can I quit, too? Charlotte makes six bucks an hour at the fish and chip shop.’

Ignoring the fourteen-year-old, Moss asked, ‘What do these people have in common? Walt Disney, Florence Nightingale, Albert Einstein, Truman Capote, Claude Monet and Charles Dickens?’

Shelley shrugged.

‘They’re all dead,’ Fluke said, but Moss wasn’t listening.

‘What they have in common is that none finished school,’ he pronounced.

Shelley frowned as she rubbed a wet glass with her favourite tea towel. An almost life sized portrait of her heroine, Diana, Princess of Wales, was printed on one side, with a photograph from her wedding day with Prince Charles on the other.

‘And Princess Diana,’ Moss continued triumphantly, pleased to see his mother look up quickly. ‘Oh yes, Princess Di dropped out of school and you can hardly claim it has held her back, what with marrying princes and saving children from landmines and being a role model for the women of the world.’

Shelley sighed, settling her expansive derriere on the kitchen chair beside Moss’s.

‘Look, Mostyn, your father is right. If you want to leave school, it is your life, but –’

Fluke pointed a battered flake at Moss.

‘There’s no room for bludgers in this house.’

‘Deal,’ Moss said quickly.
His parents raised their eyebrows at one another and then nodded.

Moss spent Saturday morning asking around the shopkeepers for employment, since Fluke had told him there was nothing going for a dropout at the estate agent where he was a salesman, nor at the hospital kitchen where Shelley was a cook. The shopkeepers made the little clicky, sucking noises that portended rejection when he was unable to list any work experience other than two days, organised by the school, with the local police in Year Ten. He was forced to explain that the sergeant had dismissed him early for releasing a burglar who had convinced Moss he was a plainclothes policeman handcuffed as part of a practical joke.

Next Moss rode to the Saturday market to ask around the stallholders for work. A regular drifter between pot plants and beanies and honey pots and cassettes, Moss always set his shoulders a little higher for the goddess at the Asian fruit and vegetables stall. His vision of the bespectacled woman with the mole on her ear had grown fuzzier over the past few months, until he could hardly see her at all.

‘Gonna slip her a length, son?’

Moss, standing in front of an array of brightly painted garden gnomes, spun around to see the gnome seller smirking. Known to locals as the Commander, he was a ruddy man somewhere between forty-five and sixty. He wore a faded military uniform and had a voice to vulgarise The Lord’s Prayer.

‘I, I’m, nah,’ Moss mumbled, ‘just trying to line up a job.’

The Commander chuckled.

‘Fluke Donohoe’s boy, right?’

Moss nodded.

‘Well, you’ve fluked it. I could use another pair of hands. Strictly a trial, but.’

A minute later Moss became manager of a card table behind the gnomes with a margarine tub containing eight dollars thirty-five. It was practically employment in the arts industry. His wages were to come out of the Commander’s swear jar at his workshop, and Moss had a feeling he would be rich. He waved cheerfully as the Commander stormed a perilous path through the market goers to the highway.
Moss had won. He had a job and was sprinting into his future without breaking a sweat.


‘So, this is the Left Bank,’ Moss remarked as his saviour from school led him through his backyard and swung open the door to his gnome making workshop.

‘What?’

Yet another ignoramus, Moss thought. The job was a start, but he would leave soon for the city, any city of Culture. People would look at him differently there.

‘It’s the Left Bank of Barkers Creek, Castlemaine, anyway,’ he explained. ‘The Seine will have to wait.’

The Commander slammed the door and rounded on the novice.

‘I’ve been to Paris, smartarse. Your mummy told you about the Left Bank yesterday, I’ll bet.’

Moss turned pink.

‘The day before yesterday, Commandant.’

‘Lieutenant Commander! Commander, not Commandant.’

Moss puffed out his cheeks.

‘Don’t you dare fuckin’... oi! Don’t you giggle now, Moss. I earned my title, so you get it right.’

Then it was Moss looking at the old crank differently, because he was onto something. In the city Moss would make a name, if not earn a title (*who cared what as, what for, what in?*). He wouldn’t wallow here. In Castlemaine people knew who he was for no better reasons than having sold him his fishing tackle and scanned his library card and once bought a horse paddock from Fluke Donohoe. They’d seen Moss’s jocks hanging on the clothes line when they drove past the family’s cottage on the hill near the Old Gaol, or they’d sent soup with a hair in it back to Shelley Donohoe in the hospital kitchen while recovering from a severe bout of mediocrity.
The Commander began demonstrating gnome manufacture, pouring plaster into a mixer.

‘So, is that Tran Hoa Kim at the Saturday Market your sweetheart, sweetheart?’

Tran Hoa Kim. *Tran Hoa Kim*. As Moss rolled the name around in his mouth, the Commander snapped his plaster dusted fingers.

‘Well, Moss? You got your dick wet yet?’

‘Nup.’

The Commander poured water into the mixer and then, barely looking at his work, filled a mould with sloppy plaster.

‘Personally, I’d rather a good shit than a root. You’ll realise soon enough that women are like pine needles. Good kindling for a bloke, get your fire going, but have you ever clumped pine needles onto the wood and seen what happens next?’

Although he had gazed upon countless campfires in his seventeen years, Moss kept an uneasy silence.

‘They stay there, blocking your oxygen, an annoying remnant of the shape they were when you picked them up,’ concluded the Commander.

Watching him open another mould to reveal half a roughly formed gnome, Moss wondered whether the Commander’s wife was familiar with the pine needles theory.

‘Why are they hollow?’ Moss asked.

‘Generation after generation of housework and chick flicks, I’d reckon.’

The Commander punched Moss in the arm and grinned.

‘The hollow gnomes,’ Moss persisted, struggling to hide the pain, ‘they’ll be brittle as wafers.’

The Commander narrowed his eyes.

‘I could care less. They’re trucked interstate, mostly.’

‘You mean you couldn’t care less?’

‘What? I could care less about your fucking grammar.’

Moss was relieved; when the boss was like this he was no harder to fathom than any number of blokes. His financial prospects were strengthening by the sentence, too. If times ever got lean he could hide his boss’s car keys and watch the swear jar fill.
‘Cocky bugger, you are Moss. Go back where a kid like you belongs, in school.’

School? The place could burn to the ground.

‘I’ll take a pay cut, but p-lease, p-lease, I need this job.’

The Commander sighed.

‘You can do the market of a Saturday, so long as you turn some decent coin. And Moss, my command is your wish. Got it?’

‘Yes, Commander.’

When Moss arrived home on Wednesday to find Krystal cooking dinner for the family, he realised something terrible must have happened. Shelley was saline and mucous, Fluke a well dressed tissue beside her, as they emerged from their bedroom and sat at the kitchen table. So, the secret was out. Fluke had climbed onto the roof to disable the television aerial, hidden the portable radio and sworn his children to secrecy. Yet somehow, despite wallowing in bed with the flu, away from the hospital canteen chatter, Shelley had heard the news.

‘It’s Princess Di,’ she sobbed, as Moss eyed the untouched chicken on her plate.

‘They killed her. The paparazzi killed her in Paris … and nobody told me for three days.’

Fluke, Krystal and Moss ate noisily as Shelley’s reproachful gaze fell on each in turn. At least there would be no questions that night about Moss’s work, no need to mumble about steep learning curves, hard yakka, yeah fine, after another day back at his Golden Point hideout daydreaming about Tran Hoa Kim. Hurry up, he pleaded inwardly. Hurry up, market day, and the Saturdays beyond, Saturdays like arrows he would snatch out of the stale air and cling to for dear life.
Tran Hoa Kim did the briskest trade of all the Saturday market stalls, emptying her truck of Asian fruit and vegetables into the baskets of day-trippers and trendy tree changers for criminally high prices. The boy in the Nirvana tee-shirt stared from the gnomes stall, blinking only when tears filled his eyes. Her slender arms flashed in the sunlight; button nose bobbed; pony tail swished, and between checking the scales and calculating charges she lobbed her customers smiles which, unlike the bundles of curling bok choi, remained as enchanting as ever.

A hand reached from behind Moss and squeezed his balls.

‘Agghh!’

‘She’ll be a grandmother before you introduce yourself,’ the Commander teased, ‘and I’m conducting the official investigation into why.’

‘Rack off,’ bleated Moss, sending his boss into a fit of laughter.

‘No worries big feller. This is me racking off.’

After setting up the stall The Commander usually disappeared to attend to ‘business’, whatever shady activity that might have been. What could you do with goofy hollow gnomes? There were no customers at the stall, unless the toddler banging a bearded plaster face on the gravel could be counted. The Commander had made that one and Moss thought it deserved the slow death it was suffering.

‘Oi, little man, mind the stall, will you?’ he said.

The toddler didn’t look up from his destructive project.

Moss took a deep breath and wandered as casually as he could to the fruit and vegetables stall, where he waited in the queue of shoppers.

When he reached the front he asked, ‘I don’t suppose you’ve got change for a fifty, Tran?’

She peered through thick spectacles that suggested appalling eyesight, yet even she must have observed that there was nobody at the stall.

‘Bit of a rush on for quaint garden ornaments, then?’ she asked with a mischievous grin.

‘You never know.’

‘So, what’s your name?’
The queue grew steadily as Moss told her and she invited him to slip around the back of the stall next time he ran out of change. The man standing behind Moss cleared his throat and murmured, ‘It’s okay, little Libertine,’ to his corgi.

‘So, is this, um, organic fruit and veg.?’ Moss asked, his last words trailing off as their feebleness became increasingly obvious in light of a huge ‘Asian Fresh Organic Produce’ sign across the front of the stall.

The man behind Moss bent to speak to Libertine.

‘I know it isn’t fair.’ He listened to the dog’s breathing and answered, ‘Oh, I know, corgi worgi woo, but with luck they’ll deign to serve us before we faint in the sun.’

Ignoring him, Moss scratched desperately for conversation with Tran Hoa Kim.

‘The Commander says you come up from the city for this.’

‘Yeah, I work in Mum’s shop in Footscray and do the markets.’

The man behind Moss stepped forward and nudged him aside.

‘Be that as it may,’ the man said, ‘some of us have places to go –’

Moss leaned on the counter and whispered, ‘Places to go, people to see, antiques to “darrrirling me” over, claw-foot baths to get wrinklier in, little boys to fiddle with.’

Tran Hoa Kim began to titter and covered her mouth with the back of her hand.

‘I. Expect. Service,’ the man blustered, but she ignored him, even when his face turned beetroot.

To Moss she said, ‘I won’t be a grocer for long, you know. I’ll finish my biotechnology degree and save people from deadly diseases, or engineer parrots that can talk – wait, they can talk – or babies with x-ray vision, or something.’

She was so pretty up close that she seemed a mirage, and Moss yearned to touch her to check. Libertine the corgi and his fuming master bustled out of the queue.

‘Well, I’ll see you, Tran.’

‘Hooroo, Donohoe.’ She laughed at some private joke. ‘Come and chat again sometime, Donohoe.’

Moss returned to the gnomes stall without the change for fifty dollars he had claimed to seek. He tried dizzily to concentrate on keeping what was left of his job, beginning by sending the toddler whom he had left in charge of the stall back to his
grandmother in the tea room. Taking his sculpture of the Commander out of a backpack, Moss placed it in the middle of the table with a card:

Local Icon Series No. 12
‘The Commander’
Inquire to agent for terms of sale.

Locals scoffed, but the card was not for them. Before long a bed and breakfast weekender couple stopped at the stall to marvel at the sculpture and made Moss an offer he couldn’t refuse.

Later, as the market was closing, the Commander returned.

‘So?’ he asked, pulling up a camping chair, while Moss began loading the gnomes back into the ute.

‘She calls me Donohoe.’
‘Who does?’
‘Tran.’
‘You’re calling her by her surname, too, you nong.’
Moss cringed.

‘Tran Hoa Kim is Vietnamese, my young Moss, so she’s Kim, not Tran.’

Moss handed him the margarine container with thirty dollars more in it than there had been before, having pocketed the other sixty from the weekenders. The boss had no cause to doubt that the morning’s takings were from the sale of the missing gnomes, which the toddler had smashed and Moss had swept into a bin. He gave his employee a bruising pat on the back.

‘Congratulations. I’ll let you keep your Saturday job.’
Flight

Ninety-five percent of fugitives are recaptured because they commit further crimes, or so Budgie used to claim. Then again, over ninety-five percent have clothes. Moss could spend the fifty dollars he has tucked in his underpants, yet six foot-two of mud, soot and sweat might just attract the odd second glance on high street.

He is huffing hard when the cypress windbreak he has been following ends beside a farmhouse near the edge of the Brisbane Ranges. The garage is closed, so he can’t be sure there’s nobody home, but even the chorus of barks from the kelpies chained at their kennels brings no movement inside. He knocks on the door and waits, knocks and waits again. They’ll be in the fire brigade, probably manning hoses and delivering mock chicken sandwiches at Clifden. As long as they’re as trusting of the world as his own parents always were in Castlemaine, this is going to be effortless. Yes, the front door is unlocked.

After drinking straight from the kitchen tap, he wades through a rumpus room strewn with play dough and Lego, then along a shagpile hallway past a Jack Daniels embossed mirror and wallpaper of summer fruits. Details he sees, not the other pair of eyes through the crack in door by the framed Ladies Midweek Tennis pennants. In the master bedroom he takes only clothes that won’t be missed immediately. Stubby shorts and a faded AC/DC tee-shirt should do.

‘It’s a long way to the top if you wanna rock ‘n’ roll,’ Moss hums as he looks for the bathroom, to scrub his face. Behind the first door he finds a set of bunks with Thomas the Tank Engine bedspreads. Opening the second he almost trips over an ancient woman in a wheelchair.

‘Let’s rock and roll, sport,’ the woman screeches, sinking a knitting needle into his thigh.

Moss yelps and springs back in time to avoid a second thrust. ‘Take a Valium, would you? I’ve been fighting the fire at Clifden and I just need to – ’ He clenches his teeth and
jerks the needle out of his thigh. ‘Aghhhh, look, I’m bleeding on the carpet now. Just let me wash up.’

The spindly lady lowers her arm.

‘Did my son Gavin say you could come here?’

‘Yep, Gavin said go for it.’

‘Ha!’ She swings a knitting needle again and Moss backs all the way to the door. ‘I don’t have a son called Gavin, you pathetic, common thief.’

She wheels from the hallway to the kitchen bench and begins jabbing number buttons on the telephone.

Moss doesn’t stop running until he reaches the Brisbane Ranges. The trickle of blood from his thigh slows as he lies on the shale, deep in a rugged gorge where the only evidence of a world beyond is the darkening cloud crossing above grass tree fronds.

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Zara’s giant pink handbag is heavy with doubt. It is identical to last year’s Christmas present from Auntie Krystal. She threw that handbag out, and yet here she is parading the streets with a new one she bought on the recommendation of a girl in her class, Stacey. Fresh in Fairfield, Sydney, she had been surprised by an offer she couldn’t refuse: the blatantly hip Stacey would show her around the shops at lunchtime. For an hour she auditioned for a position among the confirmed cool of Year Eight.

Once, in Footscray, in Melbourne, in the life she lived with her mum and dad before he got locked up, she overheard a poser at the train station confide the secret of cool to a friend. Walk at all times like your favourite dance song is playing. Weaving through the arcades, hips swaying and black bob swishing to an imaginary beat, Zara discovered it worked. That was until Mrs Block caught her and Stacey walking back to school halfway through Period Five.

Zara began to apologise and plead a case of a missing watch and disorientation in
her new suburb. She bargained for forgiveness, offering to complete an extra assignment in Mrs Block’s science class. Too late she heard the laughter. Stacey told all her friends what a loser Zara had turned out to be, how she had flaked when busted wagging and how she had bought an el cheapo vinyl handbag that was possibly passable in about 2004 (the same one she had called ‘all that’ in the shop).

Mrs Block phoned Kim at work and informed her of her daughter’s ‘flagrant’ truancy. The predictable lecture that evening interrupted Southside High, so Zara had no idea what fans of the television show – basically her entire class – were talking about the next morning. She and her mum live in Great Uncle Phuoc’s and Great Auntie Sang’s flat, so of course the Greats stood behind Kim’s shoulders the whole time. They listened with the sour faces ticket inspectors wear when one of them catches a fare evader on the train.

That was a month ago. Zara still carries her giant pink handbag everywhere she goes. Nobody is going to bring her down. Trip trapping across the Horsley Drive pedestrian overpass outside her school at the end of another day of front row class work, she hears Stacey sniggering about her handbag like it’s an STD.

In the thick gaggle of students enclosed by a metal grill archway high above the traffic, Zara unzips a pocket of the bag. Her fingers rest on the cool razor blade and she smiles. There it is: the buzz of being the only person in the world who knows what she and her dad share: the secret sting that sets them apart, together. She hasn’t told a soul the real reason her mum made her come to Sydney. Her classmates don’t suspect anything other than the usual parental dictatorship.

She follows Horsley Drive to the central business district, where she heads straight for the public toilets in her usual shopping centre. A notice beside the syringe bin in the furthest cubicle asks her to report any conditions which are not to her satisfaction (let’s start with having to share a tiny bedroom with Kim at the Greats’ Flat...). Zara once more finds herself rereading the scrawl added to the bottom of the notice.

*A rose by any other name would smell as sweet.*

*ابذ عملی ام لک ام*

*All that glitters is not gold*
She tries to imagine the scribes. A doctor from the clinic in the shopping centre, perhaps, weary of pregnant Year Tens and mucous clogged throats, penning something her grandmother told her, while squirting out her kidney-filtered coffee. And the undecipherable letters? Maybe the words below in the same ink are translations. The woman in the leopard spotted headscarf at the Two Dollar shop sure looked like all that glittered had turned to shit for her, as she yanked on the leash attached to her toddler’s mini backpack and gave him a whack for giving his brother a whack. It made about as much sense as today’s addition to the toilet door jottings:

CANT YOU SPEEK ENGLISH LES BITCH

As far as she knows, her hazily Asian features have attracted no attention since she arrived in Fairfield, where Great Uncle Phuoc chats with half a dozen of his countrymen outside their shops in Ware Street, just out of earshot of the Middle Eastern pop music blaring from the Al-Iraqi restaurant. Then again, she can’t be sure what some of the girls are saying, let alone the foul-mouthed boys. Only this morning she heard Blake Mariner claim, during roll call at form group, ‘true love is screwing her anal’. It began a lengthy debate she hadn’t wanted to hear.

‘Don’t you agree, Zara?’ Blake had demanded. The guffawing seemed to take minutes to subside.

Here, sitting on the closed lid of the toilet, all is quiet. She rolls up the sleeve of her school dress and searches for a virgin field of skin. Dozens of thin red lines adorn her upper arm and she takes her time to admire their precision. She lifts the blade from her handbag and presses it lightly, silver meeting pale honey skin by the curve of her underarm. As always she watches (Stacey would have to look away) and gives only the faintest gasp as the blade becomes, for seconds that spin in slow motion, part of her. There is one more calendar notch for one more day her dad is in prison. She cannot know that at this moment he is lying faint beneath a grass tree.

On her way out she dabs her arm with a tissue and tosses it into the bin. How unaware the chatter of the crowd sounds. How childlike are the faces of distant continents
Kim holds a bundle of grass in front of Joey Nine’s unlocked cage and makes the clicking noises she remembers from childhood television reruns of *Skippy the Bush Kangaroo*. Joey Nine’s eyes are closed. He is a mess of pink skin stretched over gangling bones. The heavy metal doors of the cages, installed by the previous project leader, are useful only for keeping the odd little creatures out of sight. As he tries to scramble away from Kim, the roo’s legs buckle and he lies on the plastic sheet covering the laboratory floor. A malodorous puddle spreads around him. She ticks ‘no change’ beside Joey Nine in the ‘hind leg muscle mass’ column on her clipboard. After slipping on gloves and a mask, she picks up the weakling and returns him to his cage, just as she has done with Joeys One to Eight.

The Hopless Roo project is Kim’s baby. She has towed her human child, Zara, interstate for her job in the Future Livestock Division at Horizons of Plenty, the one company in Australia with the vision and courage for leading edge genetic engineering projects like Hopless Roo.

On her way out of the high-rise building, Kim nods to the night cleaner. *Good luck cleaning the night in this city.* She takes a double-decker train to Fairfield and alights bleary-eyed, elbow to hip with Sydney commuters. In sticky heat or storm, at six o’clock or nine, Kim rests a minute outside the library before facing the chores and her family. Her best friend is a cockatoo. It is a layer of paint on the library’s brick wall mural, taking flight in a forbidding, almost bare land, alone with her head held high, pure white against an outback sky. She doesn’t talk to her cockatoo, or give her a name, and she certainly doesn’t mention her to anybody.

Several women laden with shopping bags push past Kim. She can’t understand their Arabic, but she guesses they are disturbing her peace to complain about her blocking the footpath.
'Don’t waste your breath cursing me,’ she tells the indifferent backs of the women. ‘You’re too late.’

She crosses the road and finishes the walk home, which is what she reluctantly calls Flat Four of a triple-storey brick block just west of the Fairfield shops. Auntie Sang cooks, since Kim’s hours are changeable and Uncle Phuoc expects to be waited on. Zara, who delighted in baking gourmet banquets when the Donohoes lived in Victoria, has been on strike since ... since Moss was arrested.

Kim, Zara, Sang and Phuoc crowd the Phans’ kitchen to eat fish and let flow companionable gibberish. At least Zara is sparing her the silent treatment tonight.

Later, lying in bed, her heart slowing with Zara curled at arm’s length on the mattress on the floor, her mind is already back at the Horizons of Plenty lab in the city. Moss niggles her rarely, now that she is nine hundred kilometres away heading the Hopless Roo Project. Within the decade she expects kangaroos in paddocks by the millions, crawl-walking without the slightest inclination, nor the hind leg muscle mass, to hop over their fences. Everybody knows scientists have started genetically engineering sheep to burp less to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Kim is certain of success.

It’s bizarre how your average member of the public assumes the inconsequential moment of their birth to be the zenith of nature, rather than the passing fluke of genetics that it was. If kangaroos can stop hopping, men can stop fighting. David Jewell, Horizons of Plenty CEO, Canadian former child genius and Cleo Bachelor of the Year candidate, believes it. She is ‘the future of the company of the future, and damn fine company too’, Jewell has murmured into her ear. Or perhaps she merely wishes he has, standing behind her in the lab, his voice like maple syrup. Zara’s faint breath becomes David Jewell’s as Kim falls asleep.
The Art of Romance

Moss sucked on Kim’s nipples with the concentration of a chess champion, while her outstretched fingers rummaged through her handbag. She passed an object to him and he knelt above her, holding it up to the twilight that seeped in through his bedroom window. It was the size of a cucumber, with a vivid plastic green, bobbly casing as though it had been stuffed with ball bearings.

‘I don’t think I could go into one of those adult stores,’ said Moss. ‘What if my mates saw me?’

Kim specialised in meaningful silences.

‘Yeah, yeah,’ he said, ‘I suppose I haven’t exactly got mates. Well, what if my mother saw me walking out of a sex shop, goofy grin on my face. I’d die. I mean, don’t you worry about that?’

Kim confiscated the object.

‘I’ve never been into a sex shop, Moss. This is a khổ qua. You’ve probably heard of it as bitter melon.’

He tried to snatch the khổ qua back, unready to believe it was a humble fruit, but Kim leapt from the bed. His eyes possessed the sepia impression of her naked body in the dim room and, noticing, she swayed her hips in faint circles, drawing nearer the bed.

He groaned, ‘I want to take you like GI Joe.’

Abruptly she stood straight and still. ‘Ta-dah the khổ qua. I’m off.’

‘You’re kidding.’

Kim pulled on her dress and shoes and zipped up her handbag.

‘Come on, Kim. It’s every red-blooded Aussie bloke’s exotic fantasy, you trying all sorts of kinky stuff. The khổ qua, it’s brilliant.’

Kim slammed the bedroom door behind her. Several minutes later Moss was still sitting naked on the bed, wondering how he had breached the mysterious Women’s Sexual
Code (Twenty-somethings’ Sensitivities Article, Oriental Fantasies Clause), when the door opened. It was his mother.

‘Kim is a lovely girl,’ she remarked, blind to his nudity. Cheerfully she presented the warty green khổ qua. ‘She gave us this thing. Never seen one, might be good in a stir fry? Kim said you would know exactly what you could go and do with it.’

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At the Saturday market Moss told the Commander he loved Kim for her spirit; a woman incapable of spite would be a creature too pitiable for him to love. Kim’s honey skin would melt into his when she understood how dizzying was his love and how true his intentions. The Commander told him he’d give him a fucking hiding if he wasn’t back at school on Monday.

On Monday Moss caught the train to Melbourne to find Kim. How many Asian grocery stores could there be? After three hours of wandering around the inner western ethnic hub of Footscray, he had stuck his head into a dozen Asian grocery stores. Several belonged to families named Tran, but he had failed to trace Kim. He had, however, found a street preacher’s battery powered speakers and microphone in a hock shop window and spent the last of his earnings from the sale of the miniature Commander on them.

Finally, on a corner near Little Saigon, he found a shop on that matched Kim’s description of it. Green canvas awnings, printed with Thực Phẩm Á Châu / Asian Groceries, Đồ Biển Cá Sống / Live Seafood, flapped above stands of fruit and vegetables which colonised the footpath. Moss set up his amplifier, under the curious watch of the elderly Vietnamese men playing chequers outside a café across the road.

‘A Confession,’ he announced into the microphone, strategically omitting the fact it was not he but Charles Harpur who penned the poem.

She loves me! From her own bliss-breathing lips
The live confession came, like rich perfume
From crimson petals bursting into bloom!
And still my heart at the remembrance skips

Moss heard the sound of several people vomiting. The café chequers players motioned sticking their fingers down their throats, before bursting into laughter. Moss bowed as though greeting an ovation.

The face that appeared in the grocery store doorway was not the one he had hoped for. Grim and wrinkled, it belonged to Kim’s mother, Tran Thi Trinh, he realised. Trinh meant virginal girl, according to Kim. He was reflecting on just how inappropriate this was when he made sense of what she was demanding.

‘You have a brain?’

Moss nodded.

‘So, why do you say to a one, she loves you? She knows if she loves. A ‘confession’, say? Why does she need the whole street to hear her confession?’ Trinh stepped closer, apparently straining to detect signs of intelligence. ‘Kim does not come out today. Come back, young boy, when you see the world in self, not self in lucky world only.’

The problem seemed obvious to Moss: he had chosen the wrong poem.

‘I don’t suppose you could lend me a train fare to get back to Castlemaine, Mrs Tran?’

Later, resting against the window of the carriage as the fields whizzed by, he brainstormed thirteen uses for khổ qua, none of which involved cookery.

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On Saturdays Moss slipped Kim romantic poems at the market in Castlemaine. She worked diligently and he spoke little, lest he succumb to the urge to mention khổ qua. As spring turned to summer he pondered the Virgin Mother’s advice. Yes, he would command the respect of the Trans when he became worldly and educated. He wasn’t finishing school, though. He was going straight to Kim’s university.
He discovered he was free to spend his days strolling the corridors of Victoria University and attending creative arts lectures on ‘the morality of the image’ and ‘memory and the memorial’ as if he was an enrolled student.

Kim began to take him seriously the day she bumped into him in the library after a biotechnology tutorial. She invited him to the Trans’ crooked blue weatherboard house a few minutes’ walk away, where they talked until after the last train to Castlemaine had left.

‘Sculpt me, Moss. I’ve seen the ones you sell to weekenders at the market. Make me.’

He touched her nose, her pony tail, her ear. He couldn’t feel the downy mole on her ear, nor see it, although he knew the blemish was there.

‘Impossible. My work is ugly. Cretins, clowns, fiends and fools, but not you, Kim.’

‘Try. You’re an artist.’

Moss promised. She was the first to call him an artist, just as he accepted her description of herself as a biotechnologist, despite her faint odour, impervious to soap, of seafood from the Trans’ grocery store.

He bedded down on a mattress in the garage, on Trinh’s insistence, and courteously counted to a thousand before creeping into Kim’s room. Within weeks they were spending most nights entwined, willing the sun to sleep longer. When the breakfast frowns of the Virgin Mother grew into muttered oaths and scowls, they would go camping. At night, after they had worn each other out, Kim perfected hate thrashing at the mosquitoes in the tent while Moss grunted sleepily.

He might have avoided the Donohoes’ cottage near the Old Castlemaine Gaol on the hill altogether, if he didn’t need to wash his clothes and eat. Shelley’s copy of ‘Goodbye England’s Rose’, a tribute song to Princess Diana by another high school dropout, Elton John, was playing at high volume each time he returned home. His father would come in after work and massage her bison shoulders with baby oil at the kitchen table. The mourner gorged donut after family sized crisps pack after sausage roll, with Krystal scavenging from the side.

‘How’s Miss Saigon?’ Fluke would ask.

‘You want to bring back some more of those bitter melons from your girlfriend’s
shop,’ Shelley would tell him. ‘They taste god-awful but Thao in the takeaway place swears they’re nature’s vermicide – they’ll kill the worms that make your little sister squirm.’

Krystal would squirm even more and change the subject, demanding, ‘What do you do all day, Moss?’

All three of them would stare expectantly at him until he muttered something about finding his fortune where the train lines and the highways ended.

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The sky-writer tipped Moss’s bag of coins and small notes on the table and counted them. Gnome and caricature sculpture sales were never going to pay for the proposal Moss had in mind.

‘Hang on.’ The sky-writer scratched his head. ‘So you hocked your mum’s silverware to impress your Vietnamese girlfriend?’

‘Yes. I’ll replace it before she notices.’

How light in his arms Kim would be that afternoon, she and the miracle of multiplying cells inside her womb. They were three and it was the most natural thing in the world. It was strange Kim had sworn him to secrecy. Until closing time she would be cleaning the fish tanks in the Trans’ shop with her unsuspecting mother, but she was certain to wander down the street to Footscray Park for lunch at noon, when the pilot would write his message. Marry Me? she would read in the Autumn sky above Footscray and know it was him, and it always would be him.

He drove back to Castlemaine in his mother’s car, his new P-Plates like trophies behind the glass, to spend the day fulfilling his promise. He would sculpt Kim, as she wished. He would make her. When the Commander was out, his wife still let Moss use the gnomes workshop. Miniature Kim was nearly dry the previous week, when live Kim could no longer hide her morning sickness from him. He had remodelled her belly in anticipation and had only to perfect her with the final touches of paint.
With the job done, he gently nestled Miniature Kim in the boot of the car and once more followed the Calder Highway to Melbourne. Sweat and many-hued streaks gave him a manic appearance in the rear view mirror, which perhaps explained how he so easily cleared a passage through the usual delivery trucks, ruthless blinkered pensioners and drivers reversing through traffic, and why the would-be tut-tutters scurried away when he parked in a disabled space outside Little Saigon.

He ran to the Trans’ grocery store, where Kim looked up and gave a bright hello.

‘So?’ Moss couldn’t wait for her answer to his grand proposal.

‘I was going to ask you the same thing,’ Kim said, and he brimmed with joy until she added, ‘So what are you doing here?’

His face creased. Surely she had seen Marry Me? in the sky. It was a clear December day and she always took her lunchbreak in the park at noon.

‘I’m, I’m ... here to see you.

Kim glanced across to Trinh at the counter, who said something in Vietnamese and waved her hand. All that was left was to drive her home and hope. On the way Kim chatted about the rudeness of customers; the peculiar feeling that the baby was kicking inside her even though it must be too tiny for that; the perennial problem of pigeon overpopulation, and Moss’s mother’s likely choice of words when he returned her car with paint smeared on the driver’s seat. After all this, no answer!

‘Did you happen to see anything in the sky at lunchtime?’ he had to ask.

‘Oh, yes. Who or what is Mary Mo?’

Moss stared at Kim, forgetting the traffic.

‘This aeroplane wrote Mary Mo in the sky, with a question mark at the end. Maybe it’s a clothing label. A fast food franchise?’

A truck horn blared behind Moss, who had failed to notice the traffic lights turning green.

‘Useless amateur bastard,’ Moss muttered to the faraway sky-writer. He held his head in his hands.

Kim turned to the truck driver behind them and shouted in solidarity, ‘What’s the rush?’ When the truck driver again blasted his horn, she added, ‘You can’t always get what
you want, mister.'

This was getting even worse. She must have figured out that the words in the sky were Marry Me? mangled by the sky-writer, but she didn’t see any rush to give him her hand. It didn’t occur to him that she might have chosen not to piece together the truth.

Outside the Trans’ house, Moss parked the car, opened the passenger door for Kim and led her around to the boot. It sprang open and he watched her face as she met her miniature. She closed her eyes and opened them several times, as if to check the bulbous plaster statue was really there.

‘That’s me?’ It was so lifelike, apart from the bright yellow skin paint and ninth month pregnant belly, that there could surely be no doubt. ‘Mostyn Donohoe you are –’

‘The sky writing was for you.’

‘– a phenomenon.’

He was on one knee on the bitumen.

‘Marry me, Mary Mo?’

‘Get my name right and I’ll think about it.’

She laughed, but a week passed without word, then two. He fought the urge to visit and plead his case. At the Donohoes’ cottage Fluke asked, with an atrocious Vietnamese accent, ‘Miss Saigon no love you long time?’ Shelley railed against the police for failing to catch the cat burglars who must have broken into the cottage and stolen her silverware. She solicited Moss to help track the thieves down. Krystal said, ‘You’ve obviously lost your weekdays job, Moss. So why did a little birdie see you and the Commander’s wife at their place when he was out? Five times.’

That summer straight answers were hard to come by.

Kim trailed the Virgin Mother up the driveway to the Donohoes’ cottage. Inside, Shelley spied keenly through the lounge room window and Fluke demanded to know what on earth
was going on. If only Moss knew himself.

The unexpected guests accepted Shelley’s homemade lemonade and perched poker faced on the edge of the couch. Moss sat beside his beloved, uncertain whether she wanted to be there, but grateful to simply have her close again. His parents had barely arranged themselves on arm chairs when Trinh announced that she had heard Moss use a curious phrase at her house.

‘Up the duff. You know what is this.’

‘Well, well,’ Shelley exclaimed, turning to Kim. ‘You’ve got a bun in the oven, love.’

Kim examined her cuticles.

‘Moss says bun also,’ Trinh continued. ‘Then he stops visiting my house and I wonder what mean these things. My daughter tells.’

In the pause that fell, Fluke extracted an ice block from his lemonade and crunched it. Shelley sipped from her glass, followed by Moss.

Eventually Fluke said, ‘So.’

The Trans sipped in turn.

‘So,’ Fluke tried again, ‘I used to wonder why it was called a pregnant pause.’

Nobody laughed with him.

‘Thao at the takeaway place told me quite a lot about bitter melon,’ Shelley remarked. ‘Thao, Thao something. Do you know him?’

Trinh rolled her eyes.

‘Anyway,’ Shelley proceeded, as though discussing tea cake recipes, ‘it turns out bitter melon is not only a vermicide and laxative, but in great enough quantities also a traditional abortive.’

Kim looked fretfully from Shelley to Fluke as though she was about to speak, but only her mother found voice.

‘My husband dies this year and a half past and I think how easy it is to lose a life. So many ways to take one and only one way to make one.’

While the others dwelt on this, Fluke winked lewdly at Kim. She leant against Moss on the couch and squeezed his hand as she made her announcement.

‘Mostyn and I are planning to get married.’
Zara is sitting cross-legged on the carpet at the far end of the Phans’ Fairfield pawn shop, reading an encyclopaedia, when two suited men walk in. For some reason the customers shuffle to the exit without looking at them. Great Uncle Phuoc unfolds behind the counter.

‘Everything is perfectly legal here.’

‘I’m sure,’ replies the tall balding one, a sharpened pencil of a man. ‘Who could possibly object to a gentleman lending high interest cash to addicts and selling hot stereos?’

The stocky second suit places a hand on his partner’s shoulder.

‘Excuse my colleague. Phan Huu Phuoc? Right. I’m Detective Keyes and this is Detective Liston. We are here to inform you about an incident involving Mostyn Donohoe. His wife Kim and daughter Zara are currently residing at your address, correct?’

Unnoticed, Zara watches through arrayed guitars and wedding dresses, as Great Uncle Phuoc nods nervously.

‘Mostyn Donohoe has escaped from custody, Mr Phan.’

Phuoc holds his hands up.

‘Nothing to do with me.’

Liston sniggers and Keyes does the talking.

‘There is a high likelihood he will attempt to communicate with his immediate family and possibly come to Fairfield. We trust, should that eventuate, we will have your full cooperation in providing information that may lead to his arrest.’

Phuoc glances in Zara’s direction and she shakes her head.

‘Absolutely,’ he assures the detectives.

‘Good,’ Keyes says. ‘We’ll arrange for a liaison officer to visit and discuss security measures. Emails, texts and so on will continue to be monitored.’

Zara gasps. The police, and maybe her whole household, have been reading the messages she’s dashed off without a second thought to her old friends back in Footscray,
Sas and Melody, since her mum sentenced her to transportation to New South Wales.

I w%d rath r li undr a speedn truk thn liv her e 1 mor dA. FML. Everyone @ skool’s a btch 2 me, xpt Yenee (Bean Pole, th btchs call her). As 4 Mum, she ml t as wel B dead, she’s hRdly here.

‘The daughter, young Zara, is of most concern at this stage,’ says Detective Keyes. ‘It is probably a matter of time before Mostyn Donohoe seeks contact.’

Stuff it, they can read all the messages they like once she is back with her dad. She waits for the detectives to leave before rushing to her great uncle. She wants to squeal and shout and clap him on the shoulder, but his face is stonier than the detectives’.

‘You stay here until closing and I’ll walk home with you. We take no chances.’

Zara flinches at the fear in Phuoc’s voice. She wanders back to the ancient encyclopaedia at the back of the shop. It is open at E for Evolution, with a diagram of the progression from apes to Homo Erectus and eventually Homo Sapiens. One of the spear carriers in the middle of the diagram looks familiar. He could almost be Blake Mariner, the boy-man in her form group with the stubble of a sailor and the brain of a caterpillar. A smile sneaks back to her face. Dad is out, she whispers. Dad is out. Now let’s hear how you speak to Zara Donohoe, boys.

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Hide where the nobodies go, don’t hide where nobody goes.

Moss is following the third principle of disappearance that Budgie taught him inside, so why does his hand tremble holding the forkful of rice before his eyes as he sits on a plastic stool in the food court? He’s the ordinary looking bloke in a TRG Contracting shirt and tradesman’s trousers, amongst the gargantuan tracksuited waddlers, the dyed hair, pierced lips and satin waistlines of a commuter town mall. Reason and animal panic, forced to cohabit in his body, maintain a respectful distance. Two days after his escape, he is yet to draw an even breath, yet to sleep, yet to shake the invisible ball and chain from his leg.
How long can the human adrenal gland endure before, before what? Before... whatever it is that is surely going to happen any second now, he concludes, as he chews his stale rice at a bench overlooking the escalators.

The woman at the next stool seems to be observing Moss as she talks on her mobile phone about the Clifden bushfire. The fire behaved as Budgie promised it would, smouldering to a halt where the wind drove it against the creek on the eastern side and the lake to the south. The fire brigade arrived to find the prisoners and officers of the Nurturing Nature project huddling beside the road, smoke from their cigarettes drifting into the black cloud that rose from the tyres of their minibus nearby. Officer Strange and the driver who picked up Budgie are alive and blabbing. Curiously, there is no mention of Moss’s octogenarian assailant.

The fourth principle of disappearance: ask yourself what is obvious and do the opposite.

The obvious disguise would be a full beard, so he rules it out. Acid burns and plastic surgery are all very well in the movies, but he wouldn’t know where to go, and an invalid’s knitting needle jab in the thigh is quite painful enough already. He shovels in the last of his meal and walks with his best impression of a leisurely gait toward a pharmacy on the same storey of the mall. Already he has bought sunglasses and his tradesman’s outfit from the unsuspecting ducks at the Hospital Auxiliary Opportunity Shop. Now from the pharmacy racks he collects antiseptic for the knitting needle prick, makeup foundation and a hand mirror. He searches for pigmented cosmetic silicone, while tracking the woman talking on her mobile phone back at the food court. She is staring at a couple with their fried chicken tongues in each other’s mouths now. Just a gawker, after all.

‘Can I help you?’

The saleswoman has Kim’s shrewd face.

‘Yep. My daughter is too embarrassed to come in, but she’s after some of that skin coloured silicon stuff, you know, to cover her chicken pox scars.’

The saleswoman fetches a tube and, passing it to Moss, pats the air above his hand.

‘No need to be embarrassed.’

She studies his face and the scar under his eye from Clive Strange’s baton. Strange
gave him a ‘welcoming party’ on his first night in C-Section of Namatjira Prison, before Officer Dover spread the word that Moss had earned some space. He should have been paid a bounty, Dover told the others, for what he did to a rockspider – a paedo creep who didn’t deserve to live.

The pharmacy sales assistant says, ‘Rub a bit of this on and you’ll look like new.’

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From the open doorway of his shearing shed hideout on the fringe of the Brisbane Ranges, Moss can make out Clifden surrounded by charcoal scrub. Somewhere in the Western Plains haze is Namatjira Prison, and beyond the sky scrapers rise where the train lines and highways begin.

Inside he sits on the floorboards and props the hand mirror against the wall, reluctantly facing the red-rimmed eyes, the baton scar, a film of ash and dust shading Celtic pallor. He squeezes some of the pigmented silicone onto his nose and gives it a more prominent bridge. Next he moulds a layer over his scar and sculpts higher cheekbones, until only his family would look at him twice in the street. With regret he smudges makeup foundation over the thwarted beginning of a ZARA prison tatt on his neck. Now that he is ready to reclaim a life, he is for the first time unsure it will be his.

Resting his throbbing head a moment, he considers a night raid on the laden raspberry bushes on the nearby farm (it is ‘pick-your-own’, after all, and his cash is running out). Instead he walks a pilgrim’s walk, eyes downcast over nine hundred kilometres of sunbaked bitumen. He reaches Sydney but doesn’t know the way to Fairfield, so he spends hour upon hour knocking on each door, asking where to find a girl called Zara Donohoe and her mother Kim. People squint as though he is barely visible and they can’t hear him.

Finally Moss arrives at a block of flats where, through the second storey window, he can see Zara dancing in a brightly lit room. She is smiling, yet her smile is painted on a wistful face that is powder white, not her half-Vietnamese tone. He climbs a drainpipe and taps on the window. Zara’s eyes fill with tears and she opens the window for him. Inside,
he lifts her off the ground and holds her tight against his chest.

Kim, the bulbous yellow Kim he made when he was eighteen, twirls into the room. As he releases Zara to kiss his wife there is a cracking noise. His daughter looks in confusion at her foot, which lies in a white pile of rubble. Kim rushes to support her, but as her own feet strike the floor they crumble. Moss watches helplessly as together they fall, plaster limbs and necks snapping until all that remain are scattered splinters of his family. Not so much as a sigh has passed their lips. Moss throws himself on the floor, understanding he may never rise.

His silicon buffed cheek bears the painful pattern of a piece of wire on the floorboards where he has chanced to lie. The mirror is still in his hand and a resolution has calcified in his head. For a few days or a week he will hibernate here, while the man-hunters huff and run out of puff. Yet crawling to a pile of wool scraps, his whole body aching to sleep, Moss can think only of finding Zara. Even if both of them will be smashed to dust.
6.

Callings

Kim soon grew into the likeness Moss had sculpted, nigh on cylindrical, so short and full-wombed was she. When contractions began Moss confidently reassured her labour was a natural process and Trinh told her of the South East Asian Hmong women who slunk alone into the forest when the time was right and returned with babes in arms. With doctors and midwives and hospitals and a husband to hold her hand, what was there to worry about? Kim practised her deep breathing.

In hospital Moss knelt on the lino at her side and saw the obstetricians’ faces turn grimmer as her on again, off again labour dragged into a second day. The words ‘obstructed’ and ‘distress’ entered the conversation. He might lose Kim and the baby for whom they had made a life, the baby they were to carry to a future of delights they didn’t yet dare to fully imagine, lest the infinite possibilities close like so many oyster shells. She must have sensed it, too, when her face screamed and only a hiss passed her cracking lips.

They burst her open like a blood blister. What happened next was routine; it was astonishing. They pulled out a mangle of sodden limbs and ears and toes and belly and hair and button nose called Zara.

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Zara was born in the winter when Moss first heard of children slaughtered, raped and tortured. Perhaps the reports had been in the news all his life and he’d only then begun listening, possessed by the terror that he had created a life he was powerless to protect. After the wedding he’d moved in with the Trans, where he was relieved the Virgin Mother no longer banished him to the shed to sleep. Kim was usually out of bed anyway when he
trudged in after working through the wee hours at the wholesale flower market in West Melbourne. He would switch the radio on and sleepily chew the last night’s reheated dinner while the others had breakfast, including the noisy suckler Zara.

‘Barry Drummond, 25, of Keilor, today lost an appeal against his conviction for the murder of his daughter Chloe in 2009,’ a report began one morning. ‘Supreme Court Justice Clarence Hart ruled that Mr Drummond wilfully murdered the two-year-old during an access visit. In what he initially told police was an accident, he dropped Chloe over safety barriers on the Westgate Bridge.’ Moss sighed and looked from Kim to Trinh, who gave no sign they had heard. ‘She was blindfolded, when found by a woman walking her dog on a path below the bridge. Sketches of the bridge, along with a ladder, were found in Mr Drummond’s utility. He had lost custody of his daughter the month before the incident.’

Moss turned off the radio.
‘I’d kill that man if I got close enough.’
‘How was work?’ Kim asked.
‘I’d kill him with my bare hands.’
‘Who?’
‘All of them. The daughter off the bridge man, the toilet block rape man, the burnt boy in the box man.’

The Trans looked confused and Zara started to wail as her mouth slipped off the nipple.
‘I didn’t hear about them,’ Kim said.
‘You make Zara cry,’ scolded Trinh. She pointed her mug of tea at him and added, ‘My friend George rings me to say I send him a coach.’

George was the flower wholesaler Trinh had convinced to employ her son-in-law.
‘A coach?’ Kim queried.
‘Yes, slow one.’

How Moss had tried to forklift, sort and pack flowers faster. Some of those blokes at the market whizzed around like they’d been born there on a pallet of roses that pricked them into permanent fast forward.

‘Yeah, well, then tell your mate George to harness another horse,’ he said.
Trinh nodded.
‘He will, if you keep to go to market half asleep.’

Night shifts and day sleeps were fine in theory, a bit like forever staving off tomorrow by flying rapidly around the world ahead of the sunset horizon. Zara fed at two and six in the morning but otherwise slept through, as Kim revelled in telling everybody. In the day, when Kim left her behind for uni, she cried and gawped and pooed her way through babyhood. Her wakefulness was a sign of intelligence, Trinh claimed.

In the afternoons Zara lolled on the old mattress in the shed, while he chiselled and hammered sculptures into shape. He’d been to a junk sculpture exhibition at the Dancing Dog Café and begun rendering scrap wood and metal into gargoyles, which he put to service in gothic puppet shows that always had Zara beaming. By the time the Trans arrived home he was sure to have her back in the house in the bouncinette. Then he’d slink off to bed and dream of sleep, dimly aware something about it was amiss.

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3 floor pedals
1 lever to raise and lower the mast
1 lever to tilt the mast
1 lever to move the load right
1 lever to move the load left
Rotating beacon
Reversing beeper
Rear wheel steering

It was not possible to fall asleep driving a forklift. That was what George at the Flower Market said, and so did Fluke and Shelley and Kim and the Virgin Mother when they heard Moss had done it. When he awoke, the forklift was crashing through a pellet of grevilleas and into the flower market canteen, where the market manager was sipping a six a.m.
coffee. Nobody had been killed, which point somehow failed to lower the decibels of the manager’s tirade.

Gargoyle production hit a record level when Moss lost his job. Something would turn up, he murmured often, noticing the faint creases at the edges of Kim’s eyes deepening. He noticed her mole more these days, too. At least he wasn’t one of the monster dads he kept hearing about in the news. His own dad missed the cut for his Favourite Thousand People list, but as Kim reminded him, Fluke had held his real estate job for decades and he must have some tips to offer. Maybe it was time to visit the Donohoes’ cottage on the hill near the Old Castlemaine Gaol.

Fluke didn’t offer his son the bong. It sat between them in the lounge room, white smoke gently lapping at the inside of the glass chamber as its master ruminated.

‘You must’ve been completely fuckin’ lost to crawl home to me for advice. I got the arse from work, too. Don’t you hate those ponces who bask in telling the world they followed their calling? The round-the-world yachtsmen, the charity doctors in Africa and shit, the priests, the opera singers. You know, as if it’s as simple as picking your nose.’

‘Well? You won the Vietnam birthday ballot, or lost it, if you like, and got to the war zone, right? Maybe that was your calling.’

Eyes narrowed, Fluke blew smoke toward the open window before speaking.

‘My problem was, I needed a bloody answering machine to record all the callings and listen back to them, there were that many. Whoever did the calling probably blamed me for a sore throat.’

‘Or came down with tall poppy syndrome, perhaps, and pruned the promise of youth.’

‘See, that’s your problem. Too much of a smartarse to get anything done.’

Fluke packed a cone and lit it like a man who had been repeating the same actions around the clock. Several months earlier he’d been sacked, Moss eventually learned, after
twenty years at the real estate agency in Castlemaine. A client complained about a dirty email on Fluke’s computer screen, apparently, and the sales manager who fired him deemed irrelevant the fact that he was the same colleague who had circulated the email.

‘I followed my calling,’ Moss said.
Fluke snorted.
‘Course you did, mate, followed it all the way to the scrap metal pile at the tip.’
Moss shook his head. He should have visited the Commander instead.
‘No one understands my sculptures.’
‘Boo-hoo. Put it in your letter to Santa.’ Fluke chuckled. ‘Dear Santa, I’ve been a good boy this year. Give me a free ride, eh?’
Moss stood but Fluke gripped his wrist and stared up at him beseechingly.
‘Woe is me, Santa. I’ve got a wife that pays my way and a bright little bub in perfect health. Yours sincerely, Mostyn J. Donohoe.’
Moss wrenched his wrist free. As he stormed out the door, his father bellowed, ‘P.S. I’ll leave some brandy out for you. P.P.S. Can you do something about my old man? Ha! Ha. Come back. Moss!’

Are you bright and bubbly? Hunched over the Trans’ kitchen table each morning, circling employment adverts in the newspaper, Moss couldn’t fake it. He hadn’t phoned any employers for months, but his wife’s and mother-in-law’s gaze fell softer on his shoulders when there were red circles of hope on the page. Finally he found an intriguing ad wedged between call centre jobs and franchise ‘business opportunities’.

Coastal Lifestyle
Soak up the sun and surf of Victoria’s favourite holiday destination, Lorne, while earning $$ cleaning and maintaining apartments.
He rang the owner of the holiday apartments and drove to the Surf Coast the same day for an interview. Kim was planting tomato seedlings in the back garden when he arrived home, while baby Zara crawled on the lawn.

‘I told the boss I’d have to check with you, but I should be right to start next week.’

‘So I’ll be quitting uni to be a cleaner’s wife?’

‘Glamour is a poison.’

‘Hmph. But cleaning, Moss? You’ve never washed the car and sometimes you go three days without a shower.’

He picked up Zara, who was chewing on a dandelion, and noisily kissed her plump belly.

‘We could go to the beach every day,’ he told her in an elevated stage voice. He turned to Kim. ‘We could let the sea-spray wash the car; live on fish and chips; shower under waterfalls in the forest and –’

‘Yes,’ Kim said simply. She stood and wrapped her arms around Moss and Zara, pressing garden dirt onto the only shirt he owned with buttons and a collar.

A week later, sitting in the one bedroom fibro cement shack the owner of the holiday apartments had agreed to rent to them, Moss and Kim clung to their vision of Lorne. They were eating fish and chips, which seemed a promising start. Kim held an Eve magazine open in one hand and in the other she cradled Zara, who gurgled contentedly at her breast. Moss fed Kim chips. Neither had energy left to speak after loading everything they owned into the Trans’ groceries truck in Footscray and unloading it at their new house halfway up the hill behind the Lorne shops. By dusk they collapsed into bed, where they hardly felt Zara’s kicks, and her happy whoops merged into the calls of seabirds.

The following morning Moss met the boss at the appointed apartment. He introduced him to the other employee, Arc, a swarthy, stocky man who looked Moss in the eye.

‘Where are you from?’ Arc asked.

‘Castlemaine.’

‘The Wild Colonial Boy, eh? Jack Doolan was his name. Of poor but honest parents he was born in Castlemaine.’
‘That’s the one.’

Moss warmed to a companion of about his own age who was so frank and free. From the balcony of the plush apartment they watched as the owner of the apartments drove away.

‘This is how it is, Jack Doolan,’ said Arc, who was in charge of training the newcomer. ‘I’m not gonna teach you to suck eggs, or how to clean them off the floor where some Pinot-pissed chick dropped them. There’s a bucket and mop and spare dunny rolls in the ute and everything else you need is under the sink and in the corner cupboard. Six apartments. Clean the ones vacated on any given day. I’m going for a surf – no need to mention it to the boss, eh. Good luck, Jack.’

Moss scrubbed and swept and folded hospital corners in the bed sheets for all he was worth. When the owner of the holiday apartments called past at two o’clock to tell him he’d better hurry because guests would be arriving soon, Moss wondered how the hours had escaped.

‘Arc has nicked off, then, has he?’ the owner inquired.

Moss hesitated.

‘No, he ducked out for lunch a minute ago.’

After Moss invited Arc to the Donohoes’ house to share a brew, he soon became a regular visitor. The baby was indifferent to her new surroundings, the salty air and the dripping ceiling in the lounge room when it rained, but she babbled happily at the sight of Arc. She would pull at his trousers until he picked her up. He kept her entertained for hours playing tickle, singing and competing with Moss to sculpt the fiercest play-dough monsters for her to dismember.

Kim, too, seemed satisfied in those early days. Pleased to befriend a local, Kim welcomed Arc to their fibro cement rental. Other afternoons, if it wasn’t raining, the Donohoes lazed on the beach, or sought out treefern groves in the Otway Ranges behind Lorne. Moss and Kim would leave Zara propped in her bouncinette and roll entwined on the damp earth.

One Tuesday after the Queen’s Birthday long weekend, Moss was frantically scrubbing a fat-spattered oven clean and still had another two apartments to clean by
himself as daylight faded.

‘Shitkickers’ work, isn’t it?’

Moss jerked his head against the top of the oven with a bang.

‘Arc.’ He rubbed the back of his head where it was beginning to swell. ‘I’d love a hand.’

Arc held his hand out to Moss, who scoffed and turned back to his labour.

‘Really,’ Arc said, chuckling.

Moss unfolded his friend’s fleshy fingers to find a key.

‘Know what that is, Jack Doolan?’

‘That, mate, is definitely a key. Now I’ve got to be scrub –’

‘That’s me giving you a hand. You know the apartment way up the hill, the one that’s always last booked? I hereby present you with a copy of its door key.’

Moss hesitated.

‘Go on, take it, you Wild Colonial Boy you. Get out of the asbestos cell you’re renting off the boss. Show the wife and littlie the good life. Just don’t rock up when people are renting the apartment and don’t let the boss catch you.’

Kim shrilled, ‘A spa, a spa. Bring me the champagne, butler. I’m hopping in.’

Moss had called their free accommodation in the rarely booked apartment a perk of his job. They spent most nights of the week there, by the Angahook Lorne State Park, making way for paying guests only on the weekends. Maybe it would be a matter of time before the owner happened to drive past, noticed the lights on and snatched the good life away again. So what? Already people were warning that civilisation would come crashing down within a couple of years, when the Y2K Millennium Computer Bug struck. If they survived it, cults predicted, they would have nuclear doomsday or the Antichrist to contend with.

Until then they would keep on watching rubbish sitcoms just to enjoy the huge
television screen and bedding down *king sized* on a mattress without any wires poking them in the ribs, while Zara roamed the polished floorboards or lay *giggling* between them. When she fell asleep they would tiptoe out to the balcony and lean against the rail, talking the kind of nonsense they hadn’t shared since their first months together.

‘What are you smiling about, Moss?’

‘I thought of another use for *khỏ qua*.’

‘You look like all your Christmases have come at once.’

‘If all my Christmases came at once I’d be suicidally depressed. There’d never be another Christmas to look forward to.’

Arc had spare keys cut for all six holiday apartments. He had no home of his own and instead moved between vacant apartments and, when they were fully booked, slept in a tent between the bluegums at the old Allenvale Mill by the George River. These facts the boss dourly informed Moss one morning, before introducing Arc’s replacement. The new cleaner was a teenage girl too scared to speak to the tall scruffy-haired man with whom she was condemned to work, even when he began listing famous people who had left school at a young age.

The boss slapped Moss on the back and said, ‘Show her the ropes. You know, the way Arc did for you.’

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Arc threw Zara almost to the ceiling. She giggled as he caught her and dangled her by her ankles, even though when Moss and Kim had done the same the toddler howled in protest. It was a year since the Donohoes had moved to Lorne. Arc, who had left town after being fired, was the first come back and visit them at their bright new brick veneer rental one block from the beach.

‘How’s my ragdoll?’ he asked.

‘Put her down and watch her walk,’ said Kim. ‘She’s nobody’s ragdoll. Barbie, perhaps.’
‘But everybody knows Barbie’s got no bits.’ Arc opened a beer bottle with his teeth, giving no sign he noticed his hosts’ frowns. ‘She’s sexless.’

Only Zara spoke as she paraded across the lounge room floor.

‘Sec-less.’

Arc laughed. ‘Jeez, how’s the strut she’s got going?’

Then they were touring the new house, listening to Arc’s stories of wild boars in the Northern Territory and floods in Queensland. He was a bushman straight out of the Henry Lawson stories Moss’s mother read him in bed when he was a kid. Losing the apartment cleaning job was the hundredth best thing that ever happened to him, he claimed, just ahead of winning ten grand at a warehouse cockfight in Melton and just behind the day he streaked on the Adelaide Oval.

Moss had kept cleaning apartments after Arc left. Staying in the luxurious spare apartment on the edge of the State Park was too risky, though, and without it the job and the fibro rental were hell. Sixty thousand dollars a year was big money, so when the council offered it to the person who would walk around town pinning infringement notices on illegally parked cars, Moss took his chance. The snobs visiting ‘Victoria’s premier holiday destination’ could afford a fine here and there. All they had to do to avoid penalty was follow the rules, which verities he enjoyed calmly repeating to irate infringers in the street. One bozo who overstayed a day and a half thought fisticuffs would help. In a way he was right, they helped Moss relieve tension by giving the bozo a pummelling. Unfortunately another tourist filmed the incident and he was obliged to smash the video camera.

‘The Wild Colonial Boy strikes again!’ Arc hooted when he heard the story over dinner. ‘I’m with you all the way, but mate, that sounds like a sackable offence.’

‘They couldn’t prove anything.’

Kim shushed her husband and said, ‘He’s got this strop, this storm that picks him up and it isn’t something to bignote about.’ She looked reproachfully at him. ‘He’s got a problem.’

Arc was tittering even before he interjected, ‘The bozo with the broken nose has got a problem.’

Moss couldn’t summon a chuckle, because Kim was right.
The next day, when Zara turned on the griller and charred some twenty-dollar notes she had taken from Arc’s wallet, he put his fist through the range hood. Arc cracked another beer and put his arm around the toddler. He stayed for a week before heading north again, leaving the house a little quieter and a little colder.

Kim pined noisily for Footscray, Trinh, her netball team, her uni chums and the career which, she reminded Moss, he had denied her. Before long he gave her every wish. His only regret was that he lost his parking inspector job on a slow news day. Everybody who knew him, and thousands who didn’t, heard how he had booked legally parked vehicles in the Waves Resort car park. Naturally the council spokesperson told reporters it was an innocent case of a misread sign.

‘They deserved fines,’ Moss pleaded at home with Kim. ‘You’ve seen the way some of those “peers of the realm” sneer at us.’

She blinked.

‘No, actually. We are – we were – making decent money. You, my lost caveman, need a cause. You’re thrashing at fresh air.’
'Where do the joeys go?'

Kim’s lost count of the number of times David Jewell and the other Horizons of Plenty directors have reminded her that even the title of the Hopless Roo project is supposed to be confidential. Zara had better keep her mouth shut. She shouldn’t have been sifting through the files on her mum’s memory stick in the first place. Now of course she wants to know everything, hasn’t stopped asking questions since last night. But how is Kim supposed to know where the joeys go when she’s finished testing them? The company pays people to deal with that. Their methods are sure to be a quick and humane. She shouldn’t even be talking about Hopless Roo, especially not on the Sunday ferry from Parramatta to the city.

‘Pipefish, that’s like a seahorse, right? Come off it, Mum. You can’t cross a fish with a kangaroo.’

‘It’s not that simple.’

The Hopless Roo team supervises the microinjection of a gene from the pipefish, a weak swimmer that has no ventral fins, into recipient cells in a kangaroo embryo. The joey, all two hairless grams of it with stumps for front legs, climbs from the birth canal to the doe’s pouch at just thirty-three days. That’s when, instead of hanging off Mum’s teats for six months, the joey gets its chance to contribute to scientific advancement. The team rears it in climate controlled comfort to a hundred and fifty days. By then they will have collected the hind leg muscle mass data essential to track progress towards the kangaroo that the project is about, one content to graze in paddocks with sheep-height fences. Zara doesn’t get it. Few people do. What happens to Joeys One to Thirty-Five doesn’t matter in the end.

‘In America you can buy a pet GloFish brand zebra fish in three different fluoro colours,’ she says.

Zara’s frown slackens.
‘Cool.’

‘Yeah. They inserted jellyfish genes. It’s just the beginning. They’re milking transgenic cows in China and Argentina that make human breast milk, with the lactoferrin and lysozymes that protect babies from infections.’ Kim’s voice rises above the churning river. ‘True! Then there’s Golden Rice with Vitamin A in India. We’ve got the gene technology to engineer livestock and crops that will end poverty within your lifetime, Zara. Nothing in nature is fixed.’

‘Not even humans?’

‘Especially not humans. We’ve grown a foot taller in the last few generations.’

‘So Dad could still become more … settled, or less – ’

This is meant to be a fun trip sightseeing, the kind of quality time with her daughter which Auntie Sang has been nagging her to make. Yet even here, with the Sydney Harbour Bridge looming ahead of the ferry, it’s somehow about Moss. Ah, Zara’s not the only one struggling to concentrate on anything or anyone else since his escape.

‘No, Zara, it doesn’t work like that. Do you want me to buy us ice-creams when we get to Circular Quay? Yes you do. Why do I bother? Yes you do. You do.’

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‘Let’s run through this one more time,’ says Lily, the police liaison officer.

Zara nods glumly. She has been forced to rehearse How to Rat Out Your Fugitive Parent so many times that she could almost take the show on tour.

‘Okay Zara, the phone rings.’

‘Hello.’

‘G’day, it’s me, your dad.’ Lily plays Moss like a troll with a sore throat. ‘What’s your address so I can come for a little visit?’

Pathetic, lady. Unbelievably, the others follow the show, their faces tight with eagerness to catch the baddy. ‘He’s the same bloke you married,’ Zara wants to shout into her mum’s face, ‘the same bloke who rode in the back of the ambulance with me after my
redback spider bite when I was seven, and told the story of *The Mosquito and the Lion*. You were at work, *of course*, and when you got to the hospital and heard me talking about it you asked, as if it mattered, “What’s that story got to do with spiders?” She would remind Great Auntie Sang that Moss is the one she maddened the rest of the family with, by giggling on and on when they were crowded around the bed where Ba Trinh was convinced she was dying. As for Great Uncle Phuoc, the keenest actor in this sick police show, he didn’t like Moss to begin with.

If her Dad really does call, she’ll stick it up them all. She trembles picturing the pair of them speeding in the getaway car. If only she could be in two places at once and stay behind to see the looks on everybody’s faces. For now, though, what choice is there but to play along?

“Oh, hi Dad,” Zara says in the casual voice the liaison officer has instructed her to use. “Where are you calling from?”

“I’m at Fairfield train station,” replies Lily in her phoney gruff tones. “I can’t talk – too many people around. Wait there, Dad, and I’ll meet you on platform one in fifteen minutes.”

Lily, the Greats and her mum actually fucking applaud. Phuong directs the encore. “Now what do you do?”

Zara robotically mimes dialling a number.

“Police? Yes, this is Zara Donohoe. Mostyn John Donohoe has phoned from the…” she breaks off.

Even faking this, her cheeks flush pink. Mistaking her shame for a nervous girlish tizz (*yeah, right*), the liaison officer tilts her head. She’s got the same lippy smile that she tried on when she met the family and said, ‘You can call me Lily.’ *What the hell kind of cop name is Lily?*

Time to get this over and done with. Zara picks up the imaginary phone again and finishes telling the police what they want to know.

“You were very brave,” the adults coo over the top of one another.

It’s a relief when Lily leaves at last, but then Zara’s mum reminds her about the ‘protective arrangements’. Sang is to drive her to school just before nine and pick her up
again straight after the last class of each day, since Kim will be in the city laboratory and Phuoc will be at the pawn shop. It’s a wonder they haven’t brought in the air force for a stealth bomber escort. Zara stares through the window at the identical brick block of flats next door. Cells for the free. She is the girl with no life, Stacey keeps telling the cool girls in her class, and Zara wants to tear the bitch’s nine earrings out one at a time. Now Stacey really will be right.
How to Find Your Fortune

Moss, Kim and Zara lived beside a Greek Orthodox church on a side street north of Little Saigon. The gutters were bluestone and most of the houses, like theirs, were geriatric weatherboard. Kim was twenty-six, working in the Victorian Government’s Biological Research Centre, as she had since moving back from the coast to Footscray and finishing her degree. If you asked her and not Moss, she not only paid the rent and the bills, but also somehow found time to raise Zara.

He was around more than he could be said to be truly there – around the house, around the city and the country, around the preschooler without actually letting her get in the way. She had witnessed self-congratulatory males before. These blokes sacrificed half an hour to teach their youngsters how to blow a flute note on the top of an empty beer bottle, or jump a Pee Wee 50 motorbike, and then took credit for their successes in life.

Moss spent most of his time sculpting junk, or scrounging through tips and skips for the perfect materials. Junk was junk, as far as Kim was concerned. Trying to find just the right kind was like trying to find just the right kind of neo-Nazi to babysit your interracial child. His latest rusty monstrosity had taken the place in the garage where Kim usually parked her car. He was probably talented; talent had never been his deficiency. If he would condescend to turn out a few stylised iron kookaburras or miniature Sunshine Harvesters he would probably make a decent dollar. Before driving to work she stopped there, against her better judgement, for a full and proper explanation.

Moss stood to his full height and took a deep breath before speaking, the way she noticed he often did when battling for composure.

‘What I create is the sum of all I can’t put into words, all that I spare you because you deserve this one mercy that I can tender.’

Just like that, as though it was how men across the wide brown land spoke to their wives.
That night, collecting witches’ hats at the end of netball training, her friend Peri had said she admired her for keeping her marriage vows with a man who didn’t work, really work.

‘An artiste’s true love is himself, no?’

While Peri ran a Turkish fashion boutique, her ex-husband, a one-time singer of renown, had become a forlorn fixture at the Nicholson Street café tables.

‘You know, I didn’t divorce the Infidel because of his affairs,’ Peri confided with a grin. ‘I got sick of him spending my profits.’

Kim squinted uncertainly at the wing attack player who refused to speak her ex-husband’s name. Hadn’t she herself fallen for a romantic who recited poetry?

As the friends finished packing equipment into the clubrooms and wandered to the car park, she said, ‘Don’t laugh, Peri, but there’s a sort of glamour about a man who’s completely, unashamedly reckless.’

Peri flashed her bright teeth under the streetlight.

‘Glamour? It’s about as useful as a vibrator with dead batteries.’

Kim and Peri always ended up giggling the way they had together as girls through their misnamed ‘sleepovers’.

‘Useful as a meal voucher for the International Space Station,’ Kim said.

‘Cordial at a hen’s night.’ Peri opened her car door and added, ‘If you work all day while your husband plays, Kim, I suppose the only thing to do is laugh.’

The funny thing was, Kim couldn’t remember the last time she had laughed so freely at home.

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When Moss awoke all he could see was the strip of bitumen lit by the headlights of Arc’s speeding ute. He checked the time on his mobile phone: 9:35pm. They should have been back in Footscray from their Otway Ranges camping retreat an hour ago.

‘Lake Eyre’s flooded.’
Moss yawned.

‘Lake Eyre’s flooded. So what, Arc?’

‘So, it happens about as often as the Roos win the Premiership. So, change of plans,’ Arc announced. ‘A mate of mine called while you were asleep. He’s in the Lake Eyre Yacht Club and he’s heading out from Adelaide tomorrow with room for a couple more in the Landrover. God knows you need your beauty sleep, so I said right off, “We’re in”.’

Moss was sitting up straight now, wide awake. The existence of a yacht club at a desert lake that was almost dry most of the time was the least disconcerting revelation Arc had made. He pictured Kim’s and Zara’s wounded glares upon his arrival home sandy and sunburnt from the outback.

‘Wait. Turn the ute around,’ Moss said. ‘Lake Eyre’s what, way over a thousand kilometres away.’

‘Melbourne will wait like old Sticky’s shih tzu waits for him outside the pub – for however long it bloody takes.’ Arc looked across at Moss and slapped his knee, grinning. ‘I know, I know, Kim’s bite is definitely worse than her bark. Mate, I’ve got a serious proposal: try being a man for a change.’

By the age of twenty, the boy from Castlemaine had tried to remake himself in the city and again on the Surf Coast. Now going on twenty-four, renting a house a few blocks from Tran Thi Trinh’s, he was still trying. Arc sailed with the wind. Here was Moss’s chance to savour, just once, the sensation of a life like his.

◊ ◊ ◊

‘I want labioplasty but my mum won’t sign the forms.’

‘I fantasise constantly about Santa Claus. Is this normal?’

Kim’s and Peri’s reading of the ‘Dear Lola’ letters in Eve magazine was growing raucous when the phone rang. Moss was crossing the border into South Australia, he said. Then he mumbled something about Lake Eyre and suggested she ask her mother to pick up Zara from school the next day. Their daughter was a big Grade Prep now, anyway, and
supposedly didn’t need much looking after.

Listening in, Peri hissed, ‘Ask if he fancies sleeping on the couch for the rest of his life.’

‘Shhh.’

‘You know, Kim, when Mahavira was my age he left his wife and daughter to spend twelve and a half years travelling about in search of enlightenment,’ Moss remarked casually.

‘Mahavira?  The Indian who founded Jainism?’ Kim asked.

Peri threw up her hands.

‘Mahavira made Jainism popular, yeah,’ said Moss.  ‘The Buddha pulled the same trick, left his wife and kid behind in his twenties.’

Kim had to laugh.  The fact she was the daughter of two ex-Buddhists was no impediment to him holding forth on the topic.  Whoever printed the man a library card had a lot to answer for.

‘Didn’t the Buddha walk around naked and starving?’ Kim inquired.

‘Not the point.’

Kim was familiar with the point.  She ought to be grateful for his devotion, or his inertia, whatever it was that bound him everlastingly to her and Zara.

‘Get stuffed, Moss.’

The closest Arc came to living with a woman, other than his mother, was a week with a girlfriend in the Wombat State Forest.  He met Demi one November at the mineral springs in nearby Blackwood, in the Victorian midlands, where they bonded over the outrage of having to pay two dollars fifty to the camping ground owner for the privilege of parking their cars.  She took him back to the converted train carriage that was her home.  That first night, on top of her, he looked down and she was bleeding.  He asked if he’d made her bleed and, gazing into his lamplit eyes, she nodded.  He’d never come so hard.  Afterwards,
when he saw her put a tampon in and understood, he was sure he loved her.

‘Why’d I go and lose a chick like that?’ he asked mournfully.

Moss sighed.

‘Because she was a figment.’

‘No. No bull.’

Arc was prone to discomfiting fits of candour when sober. As he only drank two cans an hour while driving, Moss was tempted to take the wheel and let him at the slab on the passenger side floor. That way they might exchange sour nothings on the long drive home from Adelaide. At three-thirty that morning they had arrived at Arc’s mate’s house to find it empty. The yachtsman had already left Adelaide for Lake Eyre.

Each day when Demi drove to her job at a servo in Bacchus Marsh, Arc recounted, he explored the rises and ravines of the Wombat and Lerderderg forests. He left the marked tracks and climbed through dense bush where it was possible to imagine that the cities and highways and power stations and ocean liners belonged to a fable he’d heard as a child. At sundown he would return to Demi’s train carriage and listen to her talk of the catalogue of human folly that passed for the day’s customers at the servo – the ten-year-old who tried to buy cigarettes and settled for stealing a lollypop, the lady who tried to fill her LPG tank with petrol and the man who lit a pipe while she was doing it. Later Demi would strip and wait for Arc on the bed. After a week, though, she stopped bleeding and Arc began to wish she had a television.

The following day at sundown, Arc was sitting on a boulder in Lerderderg Gorge, far beyond coo-ee, watching a feral goat kid frolic on the rocks across the river. He considered retracing his steps northward to Demi’s train carriage, where she would be cooking the shepherd’s pie she’d promised. Nah. She was damaged before he met her. Had to be, to get off the way she had that first week.

She’d told him she was raised by the Children of the Second Holy Ascent in a forgotten climb of the Great Dividing Range where they hadn’t heard of microwave ovens or computers or nuclear families. The Children lived in some kind of compound called Masada. Nobody was allowed in or out unless the black-robed grand poobah approved – the whole cultish caboodle. Demi called herself a ‘fugee since she snuck away at sixteen on the floor
of Septic Simon’s stinking truck.

Arc stayed away from Demi’s train carriage for three nights, sheltering in an abandoned goldmine tunneled into a wall of Lerderderg Gorge. He was a bushy able to live through a season or four as a lone hunter gatherer, especially with goats and rabbits in abundance. It had been a wet beginning to spring and the river flowed with water to which he bowed, like any other creature, to drink. On the morning of the fourth day a helicopter droned nearby, an unwelcome reminder of the land of the children’s fable, and he spied it passing overhead several times during the day. Guilt nagged at him until he decided Demi deserved a goodbye.

He was nearly back at the train carriage, picking wildflowers along the way to soften Demi’s blow, when a State Emergency Services four-wheel-drive tooted at him.

‘Are you José Arcadio Buendía?’ called the driver, drawing to a halt beside Arc.

He nodded.

‘Then you’d better have a better explanation than picking flowers for bringing out half of Victoria’s emergency search and rescue personnel.’

Arc climbed into the back seat, as commanded. At the Trentham Police Station, he tried to explain that he wasn’t lost at all. SES, police, Parks Victoria and volunteer searchers took turns informing him that SES, police, Parks Victoria and volunteer searchers had expended tens of thousands of dollars and countless hours trying to save him from, as it turned out, his own stupidity.

Several news camera men filmed the moment when Demi arrived at the station. She squeezed herself against Arc like his lifelong soul mate, without reproach for his disappearance into rugged bush where so many hikers had been lost before.

Gently he peeled her arms off and held up the wildflowers.

‘Oh, Arc, these are beautiful.’

He shrugged. How was a bloke supposed to put it, under the flashing cameras? ‘I’m off to see a man about a dog. In Darwin.’
Moss was home alone, polishing scrap iron with a steel brush, when his mum rang to announce that she had news. She wouldn’t say what it was, though, and insisted he pick up Zara early from school and drive to Castlemaine. He was to bring Krystal, too. Of all the suburbs in all the cities, his sister had moved to Footscray.

Outside Krystal’s house Moss tooted the horn of the elderly Datsun that he had bought to tow his sculpture supplies.

‘So,’ Krystal said dryly, after defeating the jammed passenger side door, ‘We return to the provinces after all.’

Recently she had taken out a thirty year mortgage on a renovator’s delight near the Western Oval. At her housewarming party she vowed never again to return to wallow in the Goldfields now that she had taken her place in a ‘city of Culture’. It sounded annoyingly familiar. She had howled him down as a snob for asking what her job as a Jenny Craig diet consultant had to do with Culture. Nor was she any more likely than was he, who had forsaken Castlemaine five years in advance of her, to concede that its biennial arts festival was thriving and that, these days, its cafés thronged with literati, musicians and painters. Best to stymie the conversation on the sane side of their ninety minute drive.

‘Our parents are getting D-I-V-O-R-C-E-D,’ he spelled quickly.

Krystal fell silent, but Zara did not.

‘D-I,’ she spelt. ‘Divorced!’ She’d be outwitting him before she finished Grade Two, at this rate. ‘Isn’t that when you run away from your husband?’

When they arrived at the cottage on the hill near the Old Castlemaine Gaol, Zara read aloud the sign on the gate: ‘For Sale’.

‘See, Krystal, they’re dividing the assets,’ said Moss.

Fluke and Shelley came out arm in arm, however, and hugged the visitors happily. Shelley had been diagnosed with diabetes nearly two years ago and Moss hadn’t seen her grin like that since. She made them sit in the lounge room and passed around a photo album featuring a dark rocky seam across rubbly earth.

‘It’s gold,’ she and Fluke gushed in unison. ‘Gold!’

They laughed, until Fluke opened the filing cabinet and produced a receipt.

‘Read it and weep. Totally legal and legit, hours of paperwork.’
‘A hundred and twenty-nine thousand dollars,’ declared Shelley.

Fluke’s pride was a Gold Rush mineshaft in the backyard, which he had dug clear of a century and a half of rubble, fenced and furnished with a four-metre ladder. They lived on what had been the richest alluvial goldfields in the world, after all, and from time to time prospectors still found gold missed by the miners of the 1850s. Moss had wasted a sizeable slice of his youth alone at the bottom of the shaft, hacking at the quartz until the pick slipped from his throbbing jarred hands.

Moss could scarcely credit his parents’ lucky strike, yet there were the photos and the proof of sale.

‘Where’s the real thing, then?’ he asked.

‘Gone to the trader, probably melted down by now,’ Fluke replied. ‘Who gives a flying? A hundred and twenty-nine grand!’

Krystal embraced her parents and congratulated them and Zara copied her, while Moss wandered outside. Peering down into the shaft, he remembered his dad setting to work on it after locals began calling him Fluke instead of Luke. Every time Fluke won a raffle he exclaimed, ‘I can’t believe it. I’ve never won anything in my life!’ The Lions Club had formally banned him from buying tickets in their fundraisers.

By the time he returned to the house, the golden oldies had worked themselves into a rave duet.

‘The day your father hit the seam, I arrived home from the afternoon shift and he was gone and I was frantic – ’ Shelley said.

‘She was frantic –’

‘Eventually I found him, still at the bottom of the shaft, digging.’

‘I’d already found it by then, see.’

‘He’d already found it by then and he shouted up, “There could be another one, Shell. How can I stop now?”’

‘How could I stop like that poor digger before me stopped?’

While Zara raided the ANZAC biscuit tin unnoticed by her grandparents, Moss hovered darkly in the doorway. Krystal appeared mesmerised in an armchair. Then again, she usually did.
‘Just imagine,’ said Shelley, “how many others gave up, never knowing the seam was one more swing of the pick below their feet?’

Below Moss’s feet. He tried to slam one of the unslammable cottage doors. He checked the car radiator, which had almost boiled over on the drive to Castlemaine. Soon he leant on the horn until Krystal came out scowling to join him, followed by Zara. Fluke and Shelley waved so joyously that Moss almost listened when Krystal reproached his temper.

‘Dad’s on the dole how long? And it’s beyond you to act civilised when he gets lucky.’

Zara dozed during the drive back to Melbourne and Krystal only spoke again when they arrived at her house.

‘They won’t share a cent with you now, Mostyn John Sour Puss.’

The car boiled over in traffic between and Moss abandoned it outside Little Saigon. Kim had arrived home from work before he trudged past the Greek Orthodox Church and into their house carrying sleepy Zara like a swag.

‘Don’t cook tea for the breadwinner or anything,’ she said, chopping vegetables, though she kissed Moss and Zara warmly enough.

Zara yawned.

‘Mummy, Pop found gold.’

‘That’s lovely, darling.’

‘What’s the news of your day?’ Moss asked.

‘Nothing much. Yours?’

‘Nothing much.’

Moss only truly believed his father had discovered gold in the backyard when his parents arrived in Footscray in their Winnebago ‘Pleasure Seeker’ to say goodbye. They climbed down from the motorhome like royalty, with gracious waves from the elbow. They were off
to confetti the great southern land with the coins of their combined riches, and perhaps to prospect for more.

‘The cottage was the best sale I ever made,’ the sacked real estate agent boasted.

‘I’m not much chop these days, if you believe the doctors,’ said Shelley.

‘And my old ticker doesn’t keep good time.’

‘So we’re off to see the sights before we drop off the perch.’

That night Krystal phoned Moss in tears.

‘How many appointments did I go to with Mum when she first got diabetes? I hate blood, everyone knows I faint, but did I complain about helping her with her blood sugar finger-prick tests? How many times did I supervise her Slim and Terrific meals and confiscate her ice-cream when she was backsliding? And this is how I get repaid?’

‘You are alone felicitate in their dear highnesses’ love, Regan.’

‘What?’

‘King Lear.’

‘God, I can’t talk with you.’

‘Try praying.’

‘Urrrrh!’

‘Precisely.’
Moss hesitates at the gate outside Krystal’s house near the Western Oval. Famished, grubby and bone tired after the hike from his shearing shed hideout to the station and the train ride to Melbourne, he is counting on what’s left of his sister’s blood loyalty. He hasn’t counted on the dingoes, though.

Four flame-orange eyes glower through the paling gate. The last time he visited the renovator’s delight was to meet the adorable dingo pups which Krystal’s new boarder, Shane, had bought. Those bundles of ginger fluff are now fully grown and pacing a two-metre high cyclone wire fence-line, pausing each time they reach the gate to show Moss their canine teeth. The garden beds are razed, the yard empty except for half a chewed ornamental wooden wheelbarrow.

Nobody comes out of the house, and attracting attention by hollering for his sister is out of the question. It’s a weekday. Krystal is probably out flogging Slim and Terrific freezer meal packs to the obese sorority. The motley central Footscray shopping precinct is the safest place he can think of. He detours past the place he lived for nine years and finds new units where once his home curtseyed between the Greek Orthodox church and a townhouse.

The local favourite, a Vietnam War veteran called Sticky, cruises at ten kilometres per hour on the open road on his motorized wheelchair. His shih tzu rides in a basket attached to the front, apparently navigating for its master. Sticky waves to Moss. With this disguise! The fugitive breaks into a sprint and remembers only when he stops in the shopping precinct throng that Sticky waves to all comers.

In the pedestrian mall a bent old struggler tweaks his naked nipples and occasionally pinches at dropped cigarettes to collect tobacco titbits. Laughing teenagers who have skipped class spill through a gap in a road works barrier and somehow evade the Irving Street traffic. Long live chaos!
He rounds a street corner and bumps into a policeman. No point running now.
‘Sorry mate.’

The officer scowls, but returns his attention to a teenage girl who sways on the road. She points dreamily at the pigeons on the electrical wires and improvises nonsense verse through lips which are surrounded by a rainbow of spray paint. It might be pretty, except the colours have smudged there from the plastic bag in her dangling hand. A delivery truck bears down. While the policeman lunges for her, Moss slips into the maze of the indoor market building.

He finds himself surrounded by khô qua, bitter melons. Reeling, he draws eye to eye with a rooster Arc once brought as a gift when he came to stay with the Donohoes. Perhaps it’s some other rooster perching dead dead dead with its blue-green wing feathers gleaming on a butcher’s counter. Tasting nausea, Moss crosses into a dark shop, where shapes hang from the roof and others rise from the floor, like stalactites and stalagmites. A caveman, Kim called him more than once before his arrest. Well then, this is where he belongs.

His eyes adjust and settle on the proprietor, a bald man of about his age who was probably already testy enough, after the losses of electric light from his shop and hair from his head, before some scruffy mongrel bumbled in. He makes the kind of sound a gallery security guard makes to a kid climbing a Henry Moore sculpture (oh yes, he remembers). Moss blunders through the hanging leather bags and lines of trolleys and out of the market.

Across the road, in the safety behind the shops near the railway bridge, he leans against the brick wall and takes a water bottle from his backpack.
‘Oi, here we go.’ The voice is loaded. ‘Oi, oi! The morning crew is calling.’
It’s two o’clock in the afternoon. Half a dozen wasted buddy-buddies loiter behind an African hair salon. Moss keeps his head down and walks past.
‘Wait!’
He spins around and immediately regrets it. The beckoning grins, the tilted heads and the paper bags peeled back to bottle-top level are calling Moss. Their message is friendly; it is terrifying. A red-eyed woman pats the steel fence at the top of the railway cutting invitingly.
‘New around here, mate?’
‘Just passing through.’

Judging from the hilarity of the morning crew, he could turn professional as a stand-up comedian.

‘We all are just passing through,’ remarks a waif in skin-tight jeans. ‘We all are.’

The waif slings an empty bottle over his shoulder and listens for the delayed crash on the tracks far below. He opens his next bottle by hitting the top against the fence rail and begins to drain it down his stretched wide gullet.

The red-eyed woman holds her paper bag toward Moss.

‘You look like you could use something stronger than water.’

He waves the morning crew goodbye and ignores the jagged laughter that catches at his heels.

Inside the Dancing Dog Café, he sits with a green tea, to write in peace.

March 4

Dear Zara,

I miss you and I lo

The Sentimental Bloke, eat your heart out. Moss scrunches the page. He doesn’t have Zara’s address, anyway. A visit to the Virgin Mother to ask for it would be a gamble on her uncertain loyalties. Krystal will have to ask her for him. He wishes he had bothered to be a brother to her. Take Two:

Dear Zara,

I’m still in Victoria, planning to stop off at your aunties place for a bit and then come to see you and your mu

Moron. He tears the page into strips and slops them into the dregs of his tea.
A big head is easy to shoot.

The fifth principle of disappearance is tougher to follow than you’d think. Waiting for Krystal to finish work for the day, Moss finds himself drawn to the Internet café down the street. No matter how well he knows notoriety is the fugitive’s curse, he types his name into a news search engine. It’s due diligence, he tells himself, to find out what the police make of his case. There’s no point floundering in ignorance and being recaptured. He reads the most recent headline:

Disappearing Artist’s Crime Pays
Newsnow.com.au – Mar 5

Junk is the last thing a landlord usually wishes tenants to fill the backyard with. The junk sculpture left at a Footscray residence by the prison escapee Mostyn ‘Dingo’ Donohoe, however, has proven a boon for landlord Giles Stone. Acting as agent for the family, Mr Stone said he was delighted when an untitled Donohoe original, a fusion of bicycle chains suggestive of a human figure, sold for $11,000 at auction yesterday. He attributed the demand for the artwork to a ‘cult of idolatry in this country for the man who thumbs his nose at authority’. ‘We witnessed a similar phenomenon in the case of ‘Chopper’ Read, the former underworld criminal whose paintings became sought after,’ Mr Stone said.

It’s better than a kick in the teeth, although his ex-landlord and next door neighbour always hated the sculptures and now he’s no doubt taking a rude percentage of the windfall. Years ago Giles Stone financed the Trans’ grocery store. He grew so fond of Trinh, over countless mugs of green tea, that he agreed to let her student daughter and unemployed son-in-law rent a house he owned. The sculpture he has auctioned has nothing to do with a human figure, but is rather the mane to be fitted to a seven-metre high creature at Fiends’ Gap. Only Zara and Kim know about that. And what’s this about ‘Dingo’? He returns to the headlines screen.
Dingo’s Howl
The Times – Mar 3

Poetry believed to have been penned by enigmatic fugitive Mostyn ‘Dingo’ Donohoe offers new insights into his state of mind. Two extracts obtained from sources close to the prison escapee are published exclusively in The Times today. Police have been confounded by unconfirmed sightings of the thirty-one-year old, dubbed ‘Dingo’ for his attack and hide tactics, in several states. He and another inmate fled amid a bushfire at Clifden on February 25.

Who’s been rifling through his possessions? Surely not Kim. Definitely not Zara. Giles Stone is the prime suspect.

The only poems Moss ever wrote were for Kim, although strictly speaking he adapted them from a Charles Harpur anthology. He scrolls through the report:

Hark! Hark! I hear his death-cry
Yet lengthening up the blast!
But no – when that we should fly,
On the roaring pyre flung bleeding–
I saw thy father die!

The selected lines admittedly encourage a certain disturbed image of him, despite the fact the poem is not his. It is a fragment of An Aboriginal Mother’s Lament. If Moss recalls correctly, which he usually does, Charles Harpur wrote the poem about an 1842 frontier massacre. Moss copied it around the time he met Kim, although even in his cringing Harpur phase he had sense enough not to woo her with that one.

‘Enigmatic,’ The Times called him. Certainly more palatable than ‘dangerous’ or the predictable ‘hardened’. Dingo, the hacks seem to have decided to call him. Now that is an epithet he can live with. He titters at the thought of Mac, Laurie, Jimmy, Choc and the rest of them at Namatjira Prison bragging to new chums, ‘Yep, I did time with Dingo’.
Moss leaves a righteous coin on the counter for his quarter of an hour of Internet and sets off for Krystal’s house weightless, almost untouchable. The shoppers and students he passes harmlessly on the Barkly Street footpath are blissfully ignorant of the identity of the tall man in tradesman’s clothes.

‘If you ever get out, keep your head down,’ Budgie counselled when they shared a cell, ‘and for Christ’s sake don’t do the pigs any favours.’

Walking through Footscray, Moss harbours doubts about whose side Christ is on.
The Gift of Sanctuary

Since the weekend tent love-ins of their first months together, Moss had rarely succeeded in persuading Kim to submit to the dictatorship of mosquitoes and march flies, creaking poles, meals raw or burnt and the showerless grime of camping trips. She earned enough at the Biological Research Centre to pay for an annual motel holiday at Noosa, like her friends took. It was a fact she had mentioned with calculated airiness, although they both knew the difference between saving for Queensland and just getting by was sitting in the backyard: several tonnes of scrap metal Moss had purchased piece by piece for his sculpture projects.

Lying beside Moss at two in the morning, Kim remarked, ‘I wish they sprayed for mosquitoes in Australia, like they do in Vietnam.’

Moss rolled over in their bed, still half asleep, to see her slapping at the air in the glow of the street light that seeped through their window. Repellent kept the mosquitoes off most of the time, but it did nothing to stop them hovering and whining.

‘You want the government to spray some scary chemical cocktail from an aeroplane? No thanks.’ The day before, Moss had donkey-voted in the Federal Election. ‘They couldn’t get away with it in a democracy, especially now Howard’s out. Go to sleep for pity’s sake.’

‘Listen,’ Kim said. ‘You hear that high pitched whining? I’d rather die than listen to that all night.’

Moss knew just how she felt, although the mosquitoes didn’t bother him.

One morning in December of the year Kim finally declared she wouldn’t spend her annual leave camping, Moss borrowed the Trans’ groceries truck from the Virgin Mother and visited the hardware store. There he spent a month of household income on six-metre high steel poles, one for each corner of the Donohoes’ yard. Next he drove along Ballarat Road until he found a machinery hire depot and asked for a post digger. He had a vision, not a plan, so he found himself rushing around the suburbs gathering materials as he
realised he needed them. When he finished digging the holes he sought sand, cement and gravel. With the poles concreted in place, near enough to vertical, he retired for the day.

Zara, who was nine at the time, assumed the poles formed some kind of artwork. All she said was, ‘Am I allowed to climb on them?’

It was dusk when Kim’s car turned in to the driveway. In her netball training tracksuit she stood staring at the giant poles for several minutes before stepping inside. Moss sat at the table, reading the newspaper, while Zara perched on the side of an armchair, eating peach Melba. Kim looked from one to the other as though she didn’t know where to start.

‘Hi Mum, I cooked moussaka,’ Zara boasted.

‘It’s yet another triumph,’ confirmed Moss. He let the newspaper fall and reached for his wife’s hand. ‘Did you win the netball?’

‘It was training. Zara, you know you aren’t allowed to eat on the leather armchairs. Tell her, Moss.’

Moss gave Zara his mock ferocious look and she burst out laughing.

‘You aren’t allowed to eat on the leather armchairs.’

‘But Dad, I made this peach Melba. It’s not fair.’

‘No,’ Kim concurred. ‘I’d like to know why you have to do the cooking. You’re our daughter, not the maid.’ She withdrew her hand from Moss’s and headed for the bench, where a plate of moussaka waited.

‘It’s her pleasure,’ said Moss.

‘It is my pleasure, Mum.’

‘And when you see the maid,’ Moss chimed, ‘tell her to shine my shoes.’

Kim returned to the table and ate her meal lukewarm. Eventually she asked, ‘What on earth have you been up to out in the yard?’

‘A surprise.’

‘Yeah, well, it was a surprise when the Space Shuttle Columbia exploded and it was a surprise when we all came down with gastro last month.’

‘It’s a gift, Kim, for you. You’ll just have to wait and see.’

Kim narrowed her eyes at Moss, who retrieved the newspaper and sheltered behind
‘Zara,’ she said, ‘I told you, get off the armchair with that dessert.’

‘Finished, Mum.’

‘Oh, look at this,’ Moss said, shaking the broadsheet. ‘Residents and holiday makers in seaside municipalities are enjoying a beginning to summer free of the usual seasonal invasion of mosquitoes. Councils are taking credit, following their program of extensive aerial and ground level spraying of the larvicides Bacillus thuringiensis israelensis (B.T.I.) and s-Methoprene. ‘Might as well go and live in Vietnam, after all, Kim.’

‘No!’ Zara squeaked.

‘Relax, relax, relax,’ said Kim. ‘B.T.I. and methoprene are harmless to humans.’

‘Anyhow, we’re doing okay here, aren’t we?’ Moss asked.

‘Yep.’ Zara didn’t hesitate.

Kim clanged her dish onto the sink.

‘My father used to say, “Is the water buffalo pleased when the field has been ploughed?” All I know is, it’s Wednesday and already I’m drained like a goon bag at a backyard sixteenth. I get home thirteen hours after I kissed your sleeping forehead, but oh! Spare a thought for the healthy young white middle-class male artiste.’

Moss snuck up to her at the sink and slapped her backside. She spun around, alarm melting as she returned his gaze.

‘Did I dream the feminist movement?’ she asked.

‘You too? Were the women naked and pleading for – ’

The front door slammed and Moss and Kim followed the sound. Zara was gone.

‘Thanks for the moussaka,’ Kim called after her.

She draped a hand on Moss’s shoulder and asked, ‘Where does she go when she nicks off like that?’

He shrugged, but she looked so appalled that he blurted, ‘The playground. The playground, definitely. I’ll fetch her in ten. Happy?’

Kim cocked her head, but this time she replied, ‘Close enough.’
Moss bought the entire stock of mosquito netting from army disposals stores at the three nearest shopping complexes. He was determined to finish the job he started before Kim received the statement for their joint credit account. Back at the house he worked at a furious pace through the heat of a cloudless summer day.

Zara’s eyes widened when she arrived home from school. She slipped inside the house and returned to the front yard with several spare zips, scissors, thread and a needle from her mum’s sewing box. Soon the last touches on Moss’s gift to Kim were complete and he went inside with Zara to watch with pride as the neighbours filed past to inspect their work.

Moss couldn’t tell whether Kim cried for misery or joy when she arrived home from work to behold a giant net, which was strung between the four posts Moss had concreted in the corners of the yard the day before. It enveloped the property, with only the rooftop television aerial protruding above. She unzipped the net door sewn into the structure at the end of the path and walked, with tears streaming, past the expectant faces of her family. Wandering down the side of the house, into the backyard, she looked up at the net over the grapefruit tree, the vegetable patch, the garage, the clothes line, Moss’s outdoor junk sculptures and the red gables of their rental house. Moss and Zara followed close behind.

‘How do we drive our cars in with this bloody net in the way?’ Kim asked. Moss couldn’t believe it. What happened to, “It’s the thought that counts”? ‘Now the mozzies can’t get us,’ Zara explained. ‘I was the one who sewed the zip door.’

Kim bent her knees and wrapped her arms around Zara. ‘You’re a sweetheart,’ she said. She lifted her head to face Moss, who was fiddling with a life-sized soldier he had half-finished fashioning of barbed wire before the mosquito net project intervened.

‘And you, Mostyn Donohoe,’ she said again, ‘you’re a phenomenon.’ At the time he smiled and began to prattle about how he’d gone about building the giant mosquito net. Recalling Kim’s words later, they sounded more and more like an accusation.
The Datsun wobbled its heavy trailer load around a bend in a track off a track off a track. Against all predictions, the old car survived still. After two hours Zara and her dad were somewhere near Castlemaine, she estimated, as they drew to a halt above a wooded gully.

‘The fiends are down the hill,’ her dad said, as he untied the tarpaulin.

Among the ironbarks she found the scrap metal about which her mum had mumbled in confusion when it had crowded the backyard and the garage. Here her dad had joined the pieces into creatures the height of double-storey buildings with claws and pointed ears and teeth and tails ready to slice you in two. She gasped but refused to scream as she zigzagged between a dozen towering fiends, each like no other. Some had wings, some had forked tongues, some were rust-red and others painted black or silver or gold. The limbs of several fiends were twisted as if their iron bones had snapped fleeing another somehow more horrifying being. They were frozen in stampede, straining ever forward at angles that made Zara shiver as she passed under their countless tonnes.

Moss unloaded his latest work from the trailer, dragged it to the scaffolding he had erected beside an unfinished fiend and pulley-roped it up. It was a claw, Zara realised, the final piece of the fiend.

‘If you tell anyone about this place, I’ll have to set the fiends on you,’ Moss said.

Zara gave the nearest sculpture a defiant kick.

‘Don’t be dumb, you can’t bring them to life.’

‘I hope you never see me do it, but don’t ever doubt that I can.’
Running in Circles

The dawdling sun says it must be about five-thirty as the fugitive faces the dingoes for the second time today. They drool on the cyclone wire, looking as hungry as Moss was until he looked at them. Fear is inexhaustible. He breaks a stick off the paperbark tree on the nature strip and throws it onto the tin roof of Krystal’s house. Sure enough, she cautiously opens the door to investigate.

‘Krystal,’ he calls cagily.
She squints.
‘Krystal Verity Donohoe, let me in.’
The two dingoes stand guard at her sides as she ventures closer.
‘You can’t be...’
Moss laughs nervously and, eyes closed, his sister nods.
‘Can you tell Shane to keep his pets back?’ he asks.
‘Fraid not. They only listen when they feel like it. Relax, they won’t eat you – you’re not a baby.’
She opens the gate and beckons him. The dingoes are content to watch him all the way to the front door. Safely inside, he follows Krystal to a lounge room smaller than a cell. She examines his face and reaches out to touch the silicone moulding on his cheeks and nose.

‘What’s the plan?’
He shrugs. Noticing somebody’s glass of water on the coffee table, he quaffs it.
‘Been away from civilization, then, Moss?’
‘Observing the sixth principle of disappearance: If in doubt, hibernate.’
Krystal leaves him alone, returning minutes later with a microwaved dish of unidentifiable crumbed blobs. Chicken nuggets, perhaps. Usually he would be unable to resist making some jibe about the diet consultant who serves greasy mush, but he quickly
stuffs his mouth full. She’s alright. They sit on armchairs and watch a game show on television for the harmless racket of banter and buzzers and applause.

‘Oh, I’ve got a letter here for Zara,’ he says casually. ‘Can you grab her new address? The Virgin Mother will have it.’

She phones Trinh and the elder of the women seems to do most of the talking. Moss doesn’t like the pause after Krystal hangs up.

‘Well?’
‘I’ll post the letter for you.’
‘What’s the address?’ Moss returns testily.
‘I said, I’ll post it for you.’
‘You told Trinh – ’
‘No. But she made me promise not to give you the address if you ever came for it.’

The crafty witch. But which is the witch? Moss has given up trying to write something true to Zara. The envelope he hands his sister is empty, but it is contact.

The front door swings open suddenly and crunches against the hallway wall, out of sight. Ready to run, Moss catches his sister’s eye.

Apparently unrattled, she comments, ‘I’ve told him a million times not to bang the door like that.’

The boarder, dingo keeper and suspected lover of Krystal bounds into the room and shakes Moss’s hand.

‘Hello Shane, this is the plumber,’ Krystal improvises weakly. ‘He’s fixing the hot water system.’

Shane gives Moss a wink.
‘You’d know a bit about getting into hot water.’

Shane isn’t as dim as Moss has supposed. He is battling through his thirties in a body racked by all the poisons he has been able to afford between stints on the production line at the sugar refinery in Yarraville. His pasty head, shorn to camouflage a bald patch, has never been lit by such bright eyes as those he now fixes on the visitor.

‘Spot on, eh, coming to Melbourne,’ Shane enthuses. ‘Out bush every bored old timer would be trying to figure out who you were, just for the sport. “Oh, that’s gotta be
Charlie What’s-His-Name’s mistress’s daughter’s ex back from Afghanistan.” David Everett hid happily in the suburbs of Perth for a while there.’

‘Who?’

‘Ex-SAS fighter. Skipped bail, blew up a munitions depot, committed armed robberies and all sorts of madness.’ Shane notoriously limits his conversational output to “Aw, yeah”, under normal circumstances. Unless the dingo keeper is high, he’s strangely ecstatic to have a wanted criminal for a guest. ‘I like the tradesman look you’ve got going, by the way, with the hi-vis shirt.’ He’s raving faster and faster. ‘Would’ve fooled me, except I was expecting you. Is that…? That’s not just B.O. You smell sheepy.’

‘The less you know the better.’

‘Listen bam we take out Giles Stone’s leadlight window it’s three a.m. and the ponce rubs his eyes can’t believe he’s staring down a double barrel shotty yeah shits himself coughs up the cash he’s been hording it’s your art he’s selling mate we’d be taking back money that’s yours.’

It’s not a bad idea. That is, if he is completely suicidal.

‘Shotgun?’ Krystal asks incredulously. ‘Sit down, Shane. As if you’d have a clue where to go for a shotgun. I’ll bring out some more chicken nuggets.’

While she is in the kitchen, Shane again winks at Moss.

‘Reckon I might have to prove her wrong. Back in a tick.’

Before Moss can protest, he strides from the room. A choral singer from Elsternwick has won ten thousand dollars, on the screen that takes up most of a wall. Moss has won a second helping of chicken nuggets and a dilemma. He can’t stay here, can’t leave without money unless he is ready to steal it.

‘Umm, Moss,’ Krystal begins nervously on her return, ‘I heard a report on the radio the other day about brain damage and prisoners.’

What would it be like to hold a gun to Giles Stone’s head?

‘Moss, are you listening? I started thinking…’

Stone pleads for mercy. Finding none in the holes of the looming balaclava, the old landlord pisses in his pyjamas.

‘Moss!’
‘Oh yeah, some researchers came to Namatjira Prison to do a survey on head trauma.’
‘Eighty-five percent had suffered a brain injury, the report said.’
‘Eighty-five percent? Makes you wonder how they got through uni and got jobs as researchers.’
‘The prisoners, Moss.’
‘Joking. I’ve still got a few neurons working.’
‘And a hundred percent of death row prisoners in an American study had brain injuries.’
What does Krystal expect him to say?
‘Have you ever thought...’ she continues tentatively. ‘Can you remember anything like that, Moss?’
‘Statistics? I remember plenty of those.’ He ignores Krystal’s loud sigh. ‘Here’s one for the diet consultant: in the year I was born, women weighed an average of four point eight kilograms less than women did when Zara was born.’
Zara. He has to keep moving, take what he came for and deny Shane his pathetic glory. If he begins to trust those who call him mate, Moss’s prospects are no brighter than Ben Hall’s were, or Johnny Gilbert’s, or Matthew Brady’s or Bold Jack Donohoe’s. Sleep tight, Mr Stone.

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The Children of the Second Holy Ascent watch in horror as two police cars spin up the red dust of the long driveway to Masada. The score of adult Children and their brood living in the hilltop compound in North East Victoria have learnt well what happens to the prophets and the faithful who spurn the infidels. Their leader, the Shepherd of the Children of the Second Holy Ascent, speaks often of David Koresh and the Branch Davidians, Hóng Xiūquán, The Nation of Yaweh, John Nichols Thom, Ariffin Mohammed and the Sky Kingdom.

The Shepherd calls his followers to attention and silences their sobs with a serene
‘It appears the day we knew would come has arrived at last,’ he pronounces. ‘He who is Christlike will be crucified. You know what the vials we wear are for. Remember, should you empty that bitter vessel and ride the faster to paradise eternal, that love casteth out fear. Goodbye Children.’

Several of the women begin wailing as their leader steps out of the heavy metal door. He walks down the stone steps with his eyes almost closed, trancelike. The Children press their faces to a row of slits in the wall and observe as the Shepherd reaches the driveway and waits with his head held high and both hands extended, ready to be handcuffed. The police cars ease to a halt and a single stocky detective steps forward.

‘Good afternoon, I’m Detective Keyes. There is a man I need a word with who, I believe, resides at this address: José Arcadio Buendía.’

The Shepherd withdraws his hands and opens his eyes.

Keyes adds, ‘He goes by the name Arc.’

The Shepherd’s shoulders slump and he gestures vaguely to the Deuteronomy Room behind him. Watching from inside, Arc knows exactly why the police have come to interview him. The Children, who have no television, no internet and no newspapers, have not heard of Moss’s prison break, and they would never suspect Brother Arc of keeping a mobile phone hidden under his mattress.

He arrived on foot at Masada last year, earnest and determined as a true pilgrim, after telling Moss he was going to work on the Bass Strait Ferry. Had to be bloody determined, to follow the sketchy descriptions of the compound’s location he’d picked up years ago from his one-week girlfriend, Demi, in her train carriage home in the Wombat State Forest. The Children fed him soup by an open fire and cooed listening to his bullshit about dreaming of this place since he was a boy.

Arc steps outside, warmed by the Children’s innocent adulation. The Shepherd leads him and the four police to a spare room in the Genesis Wing and hovers in the doorway.

‘What is your relationship with Mostyn John Donohoe?’ Keyes begins.

Sitting opposite the detectives at a wooden workbench designed for preschoolers, Arc yawns. Keyes grimaces and writes something in his notebook before speaking again.
Finally Arc catches the Shepherd’s steely eye as Keyes repeats, ‘What is your relationship with –’

‘Mates. Used to be.’

‘When did you last see him?’

‘I don’t remember.’

‘Hmmm. Your file is fascinating, by the way.’ Keyes fingers through some pages in a folder. ‘You certainly lived it up in Darwin a few years ago. Suspected narcotics? Hmm, and then there is the matter of unpaid restitution of expenses for four days of wasted police search and rescue operations for a missing bushwalker in the Lerderderg State Park, a bright spark by the name of, surprise surprise, José Arcadio Buendía. Let’s see: seventy-three thousand dollars. No way, José! I remember seeing your ugly mug on the news. Ooh, and what’s this? Penetration of a child under sixteen, reported at Marree, South Australia, victim said she was pregnant, charges dropped. Sowed a few wild oats, have we Arc? Justice, like time, runs not in a line, but a circle. Don’t you agree?’

A second detective opens his mouth for the first time since their arrival, to make a sound like rocks landing on a roof, which Arc can only suppose is laughter.

‘Look, I’ll be up front with you,’ Arc tells them. ‘I did get a telephone call from... he didn’t say his name (he’s not stupid, I suppose you realise that by now) but the voice wasn’t hard to pick.’

He’s been out of touch with Moss since before he was arrested, but he’s always found that his fibs have a life of their own. The Shepherd would disapprove, of course. There’s something about confinement within four walls for a police interrogation, however, that causes a person revert to type.

‘Where did Donohoe say he was calling from?’

For all he knows The Wild Colonial Boy could be on the Moon. The Tran clan could take the heat off. It’s not as though the cops will throw granny Trinh in jail.

‘All he said was, he could count on an old refugee who still seems to think uniformed men with guns are the bloody Viet Cong.’

Keyes crosses his arms and regards Arc with undisguised loathing.

‘If you’re having us on, Mr Buendía, I will personally see you and all the other freaks
in this little colony certified insane. You’ll be sucking semen out of Ned the seven-foot night nurse for extra ciggies before you can say “I wish I hadn’t crossed Detective Keyes”.

The Shepherd rushes into the room, shaking a forbidding forefinger.
‘Out! Heathens out! Heathens out, out, out!’

He waves his arms about, ignoring the snorts and sniggers of the police as they make their way unhurriedly back to their cars.

When they are alone, the Shepherd leans against Arc, gripping his shoulders. With eyes closed he mumbles, ‘Pray for us: for we trust we have a good conscience, in all things willing to live honestly.’

Not for the first time since his ‘conversion’ to the Children of the Second Holy Ascent, Arc is utterly bewildered. He disgusts himself and yet the Shepherd defends him. That girl he knocked up in Marree was gagging for it, Arc holds, but the detectives’ file on him is incomplete. There was the other girl, the precious bud he nurtured for years and came so close to nipping that the shame banished him to Masada. The Shepherd pats him tenderly and leads him back to the Deuteronomy Room. They enter arm in arm, to the spontaneous cheers of the Children.

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Jailbird? *Jailbird.* Zara Donohoe the Jailbird. Really, *that’s* all the bitches and boy-men can think of. So Stacey knows this girl whose cousin is Sas’s friend on Facebook and Sas put a pic on her page of Zara and Melody and her from ages ago in Footscray. Now the whole school, her new school in Fairfield, is screeching ‘Jailbird.’ Except Yenee, Beanpole. She’s better than nobody, even though it’s hard to actually talk to her. ‘Understand,’ she had said. ‘My uncle bad bad in Ethiopia.’

Yenee’s trying to teach the librarian ‘put down the book or I’ll shoot’ in Amharic, while Zara flicks through a book about Joan of Arc. It’s even got a picture of her at the stake, and the head of the man lighting the bonfire is cleft in two by his smile.

The bell sounds and they have to face the bitches and boy-men again. Let’s see if
they’ve thought of anything more original yet. Nothing, nothing at the lockers. Not even ‘jailbird’ as they line up outside Science. Mrs Block is eyeing her sideways and the others are turning away like she’s road-kill.

‘They look pictures, old news on Internet,’ Yenee whispers. ‘Says Stacey, she read on it too at lunch.’

They know slightly more than stuff-all, then. Mostyn John Donohoe is her dad and he’s busted out and he’s killed a man before and he nearly had to do it again and the cops had better watch out and he’s going to get her out of here and all the bitches and the boy-men and the teachers and the Phans and her mum will be able to think of when the reporters stick microphones in their faces is: ‘She seemed so quiet.’

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When Moss has eaten his fill he stands to leave Krystal’s house in Footscray.

‘Places to go, people to see.’

‘Where?’ she wants to know.

Moss fidgets with his backpack, eager to leave before Shane returns with a weapon to play Robin Hood.

‘Who, then, Moss?’

Again he has no answer. Krystal stares hard at him now.

‘If I thought you were going to find Kim and Zara in Sydney, then I couldn’t just let you...’

A chuckle escapes Moss, to hear his own little sister laying down the law. So much for loyalty.

‘What’s your new name?’ she asks.

Moss shrugs.

‘Where are you going to get a tax file number and a driver’s licence and a birth certificate and a bank account and a Medicare card from?’

‘You don’t happen to know someone, Krystal?’
‘No,’ she snaps. ‘And how are you going to earn money? What will you eat? Where will you live? How will you get around?’

It’s not that he has failed to consider all of this, but rather that he has found no solutions.

‘Um, could I borrow your car for a while?’

‘I need it for work.’

‘Well, once I sort out a few things, would you mind if I listed you as a referee on my résumé?’

Krystal threw up her hands.

‘What on earth would I say I employed you to do?’

‘Plumbing.’

‘Plumbing! You haven’t got your plumbers’ ticket. Oh, for goodness sake, Moss, have you even got a change of clothes?’

Moss marches out of the house with a cursory, ‘See you’.

After a minute, in which he stands at the front gate and counts out the one dollar and sixty-five cents from his pocket, he knocks on the door again. Krystal will provide Moss nothing until he promises not to go straight to Sydney. His word is true, because before finding Zara and Kim, he has another call to make.

He leaves at sundown carrying a full wallet and a full stomach. Bidding farewell from the front gate, Krystal waves with the overwrought kindliness of a traitor.
The kids at the oval in West Footscray congregated behind the big sticks, hoping to mark the football and kick it back to the umpire after a goal. It was one of those late June afternoons when there was no point unlocking your eyes beyond a squint; the rude burst of light would soon retreat to protracted night. Moss was playing his first season of Aussie Rules at twenty-eight and, although he had never learnt to mark overhead or handpass, he tackled like a fiend. As an opposition rover kicked the ball on the run, Moss pounced and heard the wind rush out of his quarry’s crushed torso. The rover’s snap wobbled through the goals anyway and out of the corner of his eye Moss noticed a swarthy man beyond the fence bump several children aside and clutch the ball to his chest. Arc, the shameless thirty-year-old.

After the match Arc talked his way into the change rooms and clapped his friend on his bare back.

‘Far. Out. You are a danger to society, my Wild Colonial Boy.’

‘It’s footy, not bowls.’

‘It’s the reserves in division four of a suburban league and you just about snuff the life out of every poor bastard who strays near you. The boys behind the goals reckon you’ve put three players in hospital and knocked out your own captain.’

‘He looked like a bunyip in the mud. How was I to know which team he was on?’

Football was Kim’s idea. He’d been muttering things he wouldn’t dare say to her face, punching walls and sweating in midwinter trying to hold the frustration in. The worst of it was that he had no more idea than she did exactly what he was frustrated about. He couldn’t blame Kim, who sponsored his lifestyle as a sculptor. He couldn’t blame Zara, who at ten mostly stayed out of his way. When she appeared it was often to surprise him with snacks, or useful pieces of scrap metal she had picked up from building sites. Whatever was feeding on him, Kim had said, he should exorcise it in a good old fashioned melee. Football,
then.

‘Attempting to solve the mysteries of the universe in there somewhere, are you?’ Arc asked.

‘One. What are you doing here?’

The last he heard, Arc was working on a cattle station in outback South Australia.

‘I’m visiting my main man. Kim pointed me here.’

There was always another reason and another round of drama in Arc’s life. There was no need to press him for revelations, as they invariably bobbed out before long. He was broke after going on retreat to seek enlightenment, or he needed a steady friend to help him stop drinking (*ha! the worst laid plan and the best bender*...), or he had to hide from his ex-girlfriend’s homicidal brothers.

Moss took a shower and, as he waited, Arc told him about the cattle station. He flew a helicopter to spot stock, despite never having flown before. The cocky’s daughter was drowning in a hot Artesian Basin spring until Arc dived in and wrenched her feet out of the mud, and what a shame she was pushing fifty and married. Betting on a game of poker he won a camel named Woodrow, which he took to riding to and from the pub. If a biography was written of Arc it would be subtitled, ‘Based on an Untrue Story’, and Moss would buy it anyway.

Later, home from the football, examining some of Moss’s sculptures in the garage, he said, ‘Kim isn’t sick of being your patron?’

‘Nup.’

‘Course not, mate.’ He opened a can and drained it thoughtfully before making his offer. ‘If you like, I could put you onto some easy cash.’

For a bloke whose worldly possessions fitted in the boot of his car and who went bush whenever he felt like it, Arc was remarkably talented at grafting a livelihood.

‘It’s this muscle enhancer called Get Ripped Quick,’ he said.

‘Get Ripped Off Quick, you mean.’

‘The dickheads that buy the powder, yeah, but not you. You flex your muscles and get paid fifty bucks. They even write the testimonial blog for you. “I can't believe I wasted so many years busting my American ass at the gym and drinking protein shakes”, that kind
of thing. “I’ve been taking this amazing new product for four weeks and am totally ripped. You should see the chicks I am scoring with now!”

‘Do I have to get naked?’

‘All you do is rock up at the photography studio and stand still for about a minute.’

Moss pulled his tee-shirt off and pointed to the place pectoral muscles failed to project. His arms were hardened by metal work, but the rest of his pale, lean body was unremarkable.

‘Come on Arc. I’m the feller they’re trying to sell the snake oil to.’

‘Fine, ride on Kim’s back all the way. Just don’t kid yourself she’ll respect you forever.’

The ‘studio’ was a leaning wooden shed with a white sheet tacked to the wall. Arc introduced Moss to the photographer, who was an information systems consultant on weekdays.

‘Moss here took some convincing to do this, would you believe it? He was worried he’d have to be naked.’

The photographer didn’t laugh.

‘We can do that, too. A hundred bucks instead of fifty. Think about it.’

‘What about me?’ Arc asked.

‘You? The sweaty, carpeted type? Sorry, Mr Buendía.’

Arc turned up his nose and waited in the car during Moss’s Get Ripped Quick shoot. In the Before set, Moss followed the instructions to hang his head slightly, dangle his arms straight and look like a toddler lost in the supermarket. The photographer prepared Moss for the Four Weeks Later set with a spray on tan and a comb through the model’s short and haphazardly coiled hair. He repositioned the light above Moss and told him to hold his head high, bend his elbows and flex his muscles. Snap, sign here and Moss had a fifty dollar note in his hand. He walked up the driveway grinning.
‘Put a bloody shirt on, Hercules,’ said Arc.

He dashed down the driveway of the photographer’s house to find him standing in the open doorway of the shed with the shirt in his hand. Before returning it, he said, ‘Don’t forget, you know how to make a hundred bucks.’

Arc stayed with the Donohoes for six weeks, on and off. He was given to straying and returning without explanation, but they didn’t complain. Nobody else offered unconditional fun. He surfed and fished and camped with Moss. He took Zara to the movies and let her buy more popcorn than half a dozen girls her size could finish. Kim was happy they were happy. Just as she began to grumble while clearing his empty beer cans away each morning and airing the spare room, he spent the day preparing a six course banquet for the family, with his trusty assistant Zara.

It was on the night of the banquet, when Kim had gone to bed and Zara had slunk off to type online messages to her friends, that Arc finally revealed the reason for his visit. He and Moss were playing cards, betting with matchsticks.

‘What would you do if you knocked up a chick you could barely remember rooting because you were smashed?’ Arc asked, dealing the cards.

So there it was, bobbing out as Moss knew it would.

‘I’d meet her again, figure out if she’s half decent. You are — half decent, that is. She could be your perfect match.’

‘What if that was legally sort of iffy?’

Moss narrowed his eyes as he took up his hand of cards.

‘Then I’d go somewhere I wouldn’t be judged.’

Arc slapped him on the shoulder and flashed a grin. Moss couldn’t concentrate on the poker game.

‘What happened to Woodrow?’

‘The camel I won? Some mongrel untied him from the post outside the pub in
Marree and rode off on him. Took me four hours to walk from the pub back to the station that night.’

Hand after hand, Arc’s pile of matchsticks steadily filled his side of the kitchen table. The man was unreadable. Moss pleaded exhaustion and lay awake for hours beside Kim. He heard the fridge door open and the crisp ‘chh’ of a fresh can every twenty minutes. There were voices too, Arc’s and Zara’s, and her laughter through the walls and Kim’s steady breathing against his cheek. And he wondered, is half decent enough?

Moss coat-hangered the opposition full forward in the third last game of the football season. Almost before his victim’s head thudded against the ground, the melee which Kim had advertised was on. Opposition players dragged Moss down from behind. Their ruckman drove his knees into his chest and then fists began hammering him deeper into the mud of the goal square.

When he awoke he was on the massage table in the change rooms.
‘Moss the murderer, glad you could join us.’
He turned his aching head slowly and, through puffy eyes, made out the club president, Gravy.
‘He didn’t die, did he, the full forward?’
He heard the sniggers of two men.
‘No, son,’ said Gravy. ‘Some poor bastard will, though, if you keep playing a contact sport.’

‘Did we win?’
‘“Did we win?” aped Gravy. He and the second man sniggered again. ‘They’re still out there, down by twelve goals. But you don’t care about winning. Do you, eh?’
Moss strained to sit up. He frowned, or tried to, as his lips were almost glued together with half dried sludge and blood.
‘We’re revoking your membership,’ said Gravy. ‘There’s no room for thugs at our
Fine. Moss was sick of their bum slaps and smut and earnest pep-talks. Boxing, then? He drove home aching all over. Arc had recently vacated the Donohoes’ spare room to join the crew of the ferry to and from Tasmania. Kim and Zara were home, though, and seeing them recoil from his contorted face, he thought twice about taking up boxing.

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Zara sat on an armchair she had hoisted with pulleys up to the roof of the garage one bright October morning. She realised she should have been in trouble when her dad found her there at eight-thirty, except that she was attempting to read *Crime and Punishment*. She still had three sleeps to go before she turned eleven and he was too impressed, as predicted, to growl.

‘Don’t worry about school today, Zara. Hop in the car.’
‘Where are we going?’
She knew, but she thrilled to hear him say it.
‘Fiends’ Gap.’
Fiends’ Gap was the kind of secret that made her skin tingle. When she got out of bed that morning, she could tell by her dad’s frantic last touches to the tangle of scrap metal in the backyard that he was almost ready to take the long drive from Melbourne to add a piece to one of his towering creations.

The car and trailer churned dust into the air as they entered the final leg of the journey. She began to tremble each time they neared the forgotten Central Victorian gully that sheltered the sculptures.

They parked bang in the middle of the track and she ran off at once, leaving her dad to his work. There were the frightened fiends, frozen in stampede. She had found nothing like them in picture story books or movies. She was tiny in this place that her dad dared to imagine, where time slid sideways. Even after dozens of secret trips here, she still hid now
and then behind the ironbarks. Perhaps that was what she loved about the fiends: the kick of coming out from the trees, looking them in their hollow eyes and murmuring in the most soothing voice she could, ‘Don’t be afraid, Fiend.’

It was five o’clock when Zara’s dad called her name through the bush. She was glad she had brought the Dostoyevsky, which she finished reading mid-afternoon. He’d surprised her by the forethought of packing gherkin and camembert sandwiches for lunch (her favourite), so she was content to roam Fiends’ Gap, read and explore the surrounding bush all day. She hoped her dad had a convincing explanation for her mum when they arrived home, though.

How dreary the drive back to the Calder Freeway and on towards Melbourne was, after a day in the midst of extraordinary beings. Then Moss stopped to pick up a hitchhiker. Picking up hitchhikers was one of his policies, like his no branded clothing policy and his no wall mirrors in the house policy (Kim and Zara joined forces to overrule that one). The hitchhiker could have been twenty or twice that age. It was difficult to tell because his cinnamon beard was as thick as the bristles of a doormat. He acted like a doormat too, at first, slouching low in the back seat, and he flinched when her dad spoke to introduce them. After half an hour or so he confided he was a cheat. He’d set out to walk from his last abode in Brisbane to Warrnambool, where his ex-girlfriend lived. She reckoned he had ‘commitment issues’, so he was walking through sun and rain to her door. Only now he was cheating by sitting on his bum with his backpack on the seat beside him.

Hiking must have been tough, carrying a pot belly like his and all that gear.

He remarked, ‘Everything I own is in that canvas bundle,’ and broke into a gurgle accompanied by a whistling in his nose.

Zara and Moss nodded, impressed as much by his bizarre version of laughter as they were by his ability to live without modern comforts.

‘The weight is killing me,’ the hitchhiker said.

He reached into the backpack and pulled out a book. Zara read the title: *True History of the Kelly Gang*.

‘You want it, Zara? Unburden me. It’s by some clown who doesn’t know where to put full stops and commas.’
‘Hang on,’ said Moss. ‘Isn’t True History of the Kelly Gang full of cross-dressing? She’s in Grade Four, mate.’

‘Nah, it’s probably got nothing she hasn’t seen on telly. I don’t want it. Here.’

Zara wasn’t exactly sure what cross-dressing was, but dressing up was one of her favourite activities. As she reached out, however, the hitchhiker hugged the book to his potbelly.

‘Just kidding, you can’t have it. Not yet.’

She exchanged frowns with her dad.

‘I’ll post it to you when I’m finished,’ the hitchhiker assured her.

He fished in his backpack again and, after some time, took up a supermarket receipt and pen. Zara wrote the Donohoes’ address. He got out at the Diggers Rest exit and, speeding south, she couldn’t help giggling.

‘What a freak.’

‘He’s what’s called a harmless eccentric.’

It was six-thirty when Zara and her dad arrived home from Fiends’ Gap, their stomachs rumbling. Her mum must have heard the drone of the dying Datsun, because she was waiting for them on the inside of the giant mosquito net, hands on hips. The predictable interrogation began about where he had taken their daughter to get so filthy, and no school uniform in sight (What’s more important than school? Oh, that’s right, you didn’t even finish school). Rah rah rah. Moss just went into his huff and puff routine. He had smashed a hole in the bathroom wall a while back, but he had never hit Kim.

Some day, when Fiends’ Gap was finished, her mum would walk in the shadow of the fiends and shudder to learn how lucky she was. Zara grabbed some crackers and Vegemite from the kitchen cupboard and slipped out of the kitchen past her parents. The last words she heard before closing her bedroom door were, ‘Don’t tell me to relax. My armchair is on the fucking garage roof.’

◊  ◊  ◊
Moss and Kim careered along the hallway to the study when they heard the shriek. At first they couldn’t see what the matter was. No snake slithering through the gap beneath the skirting board in this old place, no creep leering through the window, no frayed electrical cord. Zara merely pointed to the computer screen before her, which displayed her email folders. In a pop-up box in the top right corner were two photographs of Moss naked from the waist up.

Kim’s shriek echoed her daughter’s.

‘Wait, wait,’ Moss said as calmly as he could. ‘It’s a harmless advertisement for Get Ripped Quick.’

‘O.M.G., Dad. O.M.G.’

‘But Moss,’ Kim exclaimed, ‘you aren’t any kind of bodybuilder.’

He gestured to the screen. The Before photograph was dark and grainy, but in the sharp light of the Four Weeks Later picture Moss was a statue chiselled so rigid and mean that no pigeon would dare to sit on his shoulder.

‘I can’t go to school tomorrow, Dad,’ Zara moaned.

‘Oh, crap,’ said Kim. ‘How am I going to show my face at work?’

‘Relax, everything will be fine.’

In truth Moss felt sick. Sick as when he was eleven and he stole his dad’s air rifle and, when he denied it, Krystal took a hiding. Several weeks after the first Get Ripped Quick photo session, Moss had returned to the photographer’s garage for the hundred dollar full body shoot. The man’s words were still haunting him: ‘No need to feel inadequate. We’ll Photoshop the, err, details.’ Lord knew where those photographs were going to show up.

‘“Relax,”’ Kim mimicked, ‘“everything will be fine.” That’s what you always say, Moss, except when you’re the one flying off the handle. I bloody hope you made a bundle on your secret modelling job.’

‘Fifty bucks for that session.’

Kim laughed.

‘Let me guess, it went on the slab you and Arc took camping.’

If only, now and again, she would be wrong.

‘The glands on my neck are swollen,’ Zara complained. ‘Must be the start of the flu.’
‘Mine too,’ Kim said lightly.
‘Come off it, you two. You’re going to school and work and getting on with life.’
Kim scoffed.
‘And where will you be going, my dearest bodybuilder?’ She waited before adding,
‘Exactly. All hail the emperor of the garage.’
Moss stormed out to hammer a tractor gear stick into an arc. It was already nine o’clock. Giles Stone and Reverend Liakos would shout over their fences at him to stop the racket and he couldn’t wait to shout back.
Unthinkable

‘Disgusting. There’s a floater over here.’

Two men in shirts and slacks peer into the tanks that line the left wall of Trinh’s grocery store.

‘Live seafood ought to be illegal,’ the rounder of the two men remarks, still studying the swampy water in which several fish wallow.

His companion taps on the glass.

‘It’s a legal grey area,’ he says. ‘I mean, the seafood isn’t “live” when someone eats it, is it?’

Trinh is about to interrupt, from behind the counter, when the rounder man replies, ‘Right, but if someone hits a man with a brick and he dies, it’s straightforward murder.’

‘Or it might be called manslaughter, with a marshmallow judge and a plea bargain,’ the leaner suit adds.

‘Indeed. And if the killer escapes lawful custody, there’s no legal grey area about aiding and abetting him.’

‘Serious jail time, my friend.’

Both men turn their attention from the live seafood tanks to Trinh for the first time. The chubby one steps towards her and holds out his hand.

‘Detective Keyes.’

The second visitor introduces himself as Detective Liston, while Trinh’s customers watch intently.

‘I have special squid, if you come out back,’ she suggests, and the detectives nod and follow.

Unsteady on her legs, she sits on a crate in the storeroom. The detectives stand over her, arms crossed.

‘We know you’ve been sheltering Moss Donohoe,’ Detective Keyes says.
‘How you know?’ Trinh asks.

Keyes’s eyes boggle. Too easy.

‘Don’t you worry about how. Where is he now?’

‘No, no. I mean, how can you know I do something, if I do not do it?’

The day after her son-in-law’s escape, Trinh hid in a cupboard as some low ranking goons made a mess of her house. Upon discovery she refused to utter a word, but then she had none to utter. If Krystal wanted to write to Zara, she could have asked for her new address in Sydney any time before the phone call last evening. Curious.

‘Did Moss Donohoe mention during his visit where he was heading?’ Liston demands.

‘No, he does not mention.’

‘So he did come to you,’ Liston states.

‘No.’

The detectives sigh loudly.

‘He cannot mention,’ Trinh explains, ‘if he does not come to me.’

‘Listen, Mrs Tran,’ Liston growls, ‘forget the games and fast-forward to the part when you tell us you remember, after all, where Moss Donohoe is hiding.’

The refugee clicks her tongue irritably. Good luck to Moss.

‘Imagine, Mrs Tran, the shame of being locked up at your age,’ says Liston. ‘Stripped and showered with the junkies and gangsters’ slags. No hope of moving to Sydney and living with Kim and Zara. Is the killer worth that?’

Trinh grumbles, ‘Customers are waiting.’

Detective Keyes pats his colleague on the back and whispers something to him, before turning gravely to Trinh.

‘You asked how we knew Moss Donohoe would come to you. You win, here it is: these maddened fathers have a habit of tracking down the family that left them, and you are the only person in this state Moss could ask for Kim’s and Zara’s Fairfield address.’

‘I am not.’

‘Detective Liston, place Mrs Tran under arrest for obstructing a lawful investigation. She is the only one with the Fairfield address.’
‘No!’ Trinh shrieks, as Liston grips her arm. ‘Zara’s friends of school have it, of course, and her auntie.’

Too late she bites her tongue. Liston slackens his grip and the detectives exchange triumphant grins.

Almost tenderly, Keyes asks, ‘You mean Krystal Donohoe? Now that is fascinating, Mrs Tran. You gave your own daughter’s and granddaughter’s address to a killer.’

Moss is a fool, a clever, loving fool, but any fool can see he would die before hurting Kim or Zara. How can she explain to these men?

‘I tell you more, okay. Drive to Clifden, where the fire is when Moss escapes, and follow the creek.’

‘Yes,’ the detectives prompt eagerly.

‘Find the way through tall reeds where the creek is wider, wider until the lake.’

Trinh waits as her interrogators confer and nod.

‘And then, Mrs Tran?’

‘Go and jump in it.’

The white interview room reminds Krystal of a dental surgery. They don’t let the paint flake or the visitors settle too comfortably. Her legal aid lawyer looks pleased enough with himself, though, in the twilight of his uninspired career suddenly landing a cameo in the Dingo Donohoe saga. For her part, Krystal will stonewall the cops, who probably have not even a whiff of a case against her or Shane.

‘According to phone records from Namatjira, most of Moss Donohoe’s calls were to his daughter, your niece Zara,’ Detective Liston says, across a table from the fugitive’s alleged aider and abetter.

Krystal can’t believe Trinh sold Moss to these bastards, but that’s what they say. They arrested her in the middle of a training session she was giving to the new diet
consultant recruits at *Jenny Craig* this morning. On the drive to the police station Detective Liston complained that Moss could be hiding in any number of her rolls of blubber. At least the other detective, the chubby one, didn’t laugh.

‘Zara was also Moss’s most frequent visitor in prison,’ continues Liston. ‘Have you got any idea what this kind of man –’

‘A man who has taken life before,’ Keyes adds.

‘Do you know what this kind of man does when his wife leaves him and takes his child?’

Krystal could hardly have missed every one of the news reports over the years, however fast she turned away. There have been so many pixelated faces (the father of the boys driven into the dam; of the toddler bleeding to death while he posted Facebook updates with the knife in his hand; of a girl who had survived cancer, only to be sliced and scattered to rot; of yet another in the Yarra with still eyes upturned, blind to the Westgate Bridge, or the father of the bloodless children cold on the carpet in a suburb like this). They have blurred into one mystifying tale of the abandoned man who commits the unthinkable. No, Krystal thinks, it mustn’t be as unthinkable as the police and the quoted neighbours always declare. Otherwise between thought and lethal force the father’s hands would fail him and spare his child. But they don’t and they don’t and they don’t.

‘Psychologists call this kind of man “the family annihilator”,’ Keyes says.

Liston allows a pause before he asks, ‘Do you believe Zara deserves to die?’

Krystal is woozy, staring past the detectives to walls that warp. She is fifty metres beneath the Westgate Bridge, falling, yet alive in the last millisecond before impact, gaping up a pylon that bends with the rushing clouds.

‘Krystal.’ Keyes is at her side, a steadying hand on her shoulder. ‘We can do this without Detective Liston. He’s… plain rude, sometimes.’

She nods vaguely and Detective Liston saunters from the room, sending in his stead a constable who stands impassively by the door.

‘Krystal, I can tell you love your niece,’ Keyes soothes.

She won’t cry. She won’t. The detective switches the interview recorder off and passes Krystal a tissue.
‘I understand she used to stay with you sometimes, her favourite auntie,’ he continues, looking into her puffy eyes. ‘I have a daughter Zara’s age. If I were in your place...’

The lawyer ruffles his papers impressively.

‘My client will not proceed with an unrecorded interview.’

Oh rack off. Keyes shakes his head like he’s thinking the same thing. Correct procedures hardly fucking matter anymore. The man in the great mystifying tale of child murder, in the news grabs, is surely somebody’s brother. Years ago he was a lad who could scarcely believe the providence of his lover’s caress. He was a parent who reached into a cot in the middle of a torn night and might have shaken his restless baby, had he not caught her helpless, faithful gaze. Hers, his, its is a life beyond the father’s fathoming, whose death, when it comes before too long – no, too soon – is equally bewildering to him.

She has dared empathy and there is no denying any longer that the man in this forever repeating story of rejection and revenge could be Moss.

‘I made him promise he wouldn’t go near Zara.’

Keyes brays doubtfully. ‘They always promise.’

She has stopped reeling, secure in the conviction of her place in the right. An innocent child deserves protection.

‘We don’t have to pursue charges,’ Keyes assures her. ‘It’s up to you.’

He is waiting for more, but in truth Krystal has little to offer.

‘He ate chicken nuggets.’

Keyes frowns and the lawyer shuffles his papers again.

‘Actually, I cooked them for him,’ she confesses.

The constable by the door titters.

‘He’s talking about posing as a plumber,’ Krystal offers.

‘That’s more like it, Ms Donohoe,’ returns Keyes.

‘Although I was the one who first pretended he was a plumber fixing the hot water service.’

Even the lawyer titters with the constable. Keyes shushes them and nods encouragingly. She takes a deep breath.
‘He made me give him Zara’s address.’

The detective smiles and rises again to pat her on the shoulder as though she’s a child who has opened wide in the dentist’s chair for a nasty filling.

‘What was he wearing?’

‘Hi-vis shirt like a tradie. VB cap. Carried a maroon backpack. His face... He’s had surgery or something, high cheekbones, bigger nose.’ She is blameless, purged clean.

‘Can’t help you any more than that.’

Liston steps back into the interview room.

‘That Shane rolled over like a puppy for a scratch, in the other room,’ he reports in a deliberately loud voice. ‘It nearly made me puke to watch. He reckons Donohoe planned to break into Giles Stone’s townhouse and rob him with a shotgun.’

Krystal’s face flushes hot as she watches Keyes’s smug smile, now that he’s finished with her.

‘Did you ever go cow pushing?’ he asks his chum.

‘As in get drunk at night in the countryside and tip dozing cows over? That’s a myth, can’t be done.’ Looking down on Krystal he titters. ‘Oh, I get it. Yes, oh yes. Ha!’

By her side Keyes says, ‘It’s no myth, my friend. This one went down with a boom.’

Once more the lawyer shuffles his papers helplessly and grumbles about procedural propriety.

Krystal lurches for the door and nobody stops her.
Zara was hanging upside down from the monkey bars at the playground when the last sunlight of the day fell on a silver rectangle at the top of the slide. She flipped onto the tan bark and clambered up the slide to investigate. There, tied with a curled ribbon, was a parcel in silver wrapping paper. Tucked under the ribbon was a little red card with her name on it. Fantastic, a late birthday present!

She looked around the park: an empty soccer field bordered by melaleucas and the paling fences of houses beyond, a public toilet, the swings and monkey bars of the playground and the wire safety fence along the train line. The pleasure is in the giving, her dad liked to say. Would somebody be watching, then, as she began to tear open the parcel? Silly. She had just turned eleven and she was no scaredy cat. Inside the parcel was a bundle of photos held together by a rubber band. Over the first, a photo of a pure blue sky, were words in texta:

To dearest Zara
Thinking of you always

The next photo was blurry, but she made out the back of somebody’s head. Black hair to just below the ears. The same length bob as hers. Railway fence in the background. Her hands were shaking as she thumbed to the photo behind it. There she was, no doubt at all this time, in her own street, walking past the Greek Orthodox Church with her schoolbag on her back. A poppy was pinned to the collar of her dress. Remembrance Day, then. A week ago.

She spun around, half expecting to spy the cinnamon beard of the hitchhiker between the melaleucas. He was spooky, the bloke they’d given a lift on their last Fiends’
Gap trip, with that odd laugh of his. And she had given him her address. Wrote it out on his grubby shopping receipt without thinking. He was a swagman, a hobo, a bum (her dad wouldn’t let her use those words but they were true). He had to be lying about walking all the way from Brisbane to his ex-girlfriend’s house in Warrnambool. She shivered to read that he was thinking of her. The creep must have been spying on her to take the photographs at the playground. At that moment he was probably peeking around the entrance of the public toilets. Her dad had warned her about men in public toilets. She ran the four blocks between the park and the Donohoes’ house without looking at any of the other photographs in the bundle clenched in her fist.

Her mum was out, probably at the netball club. A racket was coming from the garage, so she flung the door open.

‘Busy,’ her dad said, bent over his sculpture.

She stood in the doorway until he looked up and then quickly dropped his tools. He snatched the bundle of photos and flicked through them, eyes boggling. One fell and before he picked it up she glimpsed skin. All skin, hers and nobody else’s. She looked pleadingly at her dad, afraid he would be angry. He held her so tight that she could feel his heart pounding fast and she had to suck hard for air.

‘You can handle anything,’ he kept saying.

Long after he tucked her into bed that night, Zara strained to clutch fragments of her parents’ conversation. She heard an urgent low voice: *kill the creep...* Most of the time only Kim’s higher pitched echoes carried from their room down the hallway. *Didn’t get the hitchhiker’s name? Whistled? Don’t know? Don’t know! And finally, over and over, the deeper voice: She can handle anything.*

That was what Zara used to believe.

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The police promised to do everything possible to catch the stalker. In the meantime, Moss was to keep an eye on his daughter before and after school. They needn’t have worried.
about that. If the stalker came within coo-ee he was dead meat. He’d been waiting for the stalker all Zara’s life – no, longer still, probably since he was a boy, the exploding teenager of Castlemaine. The only problem was that there was nothing he could do to protect her from what happened next.

An online friend in America posted a close-up photo of Zara towelling herself dry in the bathroom of the Donohoes’ own home. ‘She’ had never met Zara. Moss ranted to nobody in particular and refused to rest until he had boarded up every window of the house. The next day the ‘American girl’ posted a close-up picture of Zara’s lips on her Facebook page. Again the police promised to do whatever they could.

‘Sweet FA, you mean,’ Kim told them at Footscray Police Station. They couldn’t deny it. Nobody had touched Zara, and the stalker was untraceable, since the ‘American girl’ swiftly closed her Facebook page.

‘Where were you when you met the hitchhiker you suspect is responsible?’ the sergeant wanted to know.

‘Calder Freeway, on our way home.’

‘Home from where?’

Fiends Gap wasn’t for the cops.

‘Mount Franklin. A pagan festival in the old volcano crater.’

The police muttered amongst themselves and sent the Donohoes home.

Kim wasn’t so easily fobbed. She asked Zara and found out about the place they had kept from her.

Kim wept. Her husband could have been famous, she saw at last. He had the power to create beauty and instead he welded nightmares in a forgotten bush gully. She kicked at the mullocky ground and the twists of bark, swatted at mosquitoes and refused to look up at the teeth and hollow eyes of the fiends. So this was where the money she had earned
rusted season by season, this was where the years (Moss’s hammering and bending and moods and obsession – their years) were wasted.

‘The scissor-neck here is my favourite,’ Zara said, and climbed up its spine grinning.

Kim opened her mouth to object and closed it again. Their daughter had evidently been on enough secret little trips to know whether the monstrosity was safe.

‘I would have told you, but after – ’ Moss began.

‘I know.’

He must have realised, then, how much she hated the sculpture of her he had made, with its bloated pregnant belly and bright yellow skin. It was lost moving house, Kim had told him years ago, after smashing it to plaster dust and pouring it into the surf off the Lorne jetty.

She sat in the car while Moss worked on the towering fiends and Zara ran among them, sometimes pausing to talk to one. The strain of the stalking must have been getting to her. Strange, though, how she only stopped smiling, or rather gaping, when Moss called her to the car to begin the long drive back to Footscray.

For three weeks more Kim researched fish disease at the Biological Research Centre, Moss toiled on his awful project, Zara went to school and routine worked its balm.

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Moss was sober and buzzing, high as a supernova on these truths he believed self-evident:

1. Thirty was not too old, not too young (for what, he couldn’t have told).
2. He was everybody’s friend. Just don’t ask him all of their names, since his wife invited most of them.
3. Kim was the Morning Star of all the joy he had known; the Evening Star was Zara. His daughter was the one who had told him they weren’t stars but Venus following the sun in the east and the west. She was eleven, shaming party goers who couldn’t remember where they put their tinnies with her party trick of mentally calculating whichever five-digit multiplication equation they cared to devise between gossip
and cheerful rah rah.

4. This was the best damned thirtieth birthday party in history.

The near riot for control of the stereo system was beneath the host’s concern. Abba and Duke Ellington, Pavarotti and Britney Spears all rocked his world. When the neighbours over the back fence threatened grisly death if the party didn’t simmer down, Moss invited them to climb over and join the celebrations. Latecomers were already having trouble bustling through the throng, between piles of scrap metal, to shake his hand. A rusted music stand protruded from his latest junk sculpture and consistently bumped guests in the head. They were the lucky ones, as others were branded by the searing mower blades at the end closest to the barbeque. Moss missed their yelps and the fussing and gossip, as he indulged in pelvic thrusts and fist pumping atop the brick wall that fronted the garage, with the giant mosquito net brushing his hair in the breeze.

Fluke switched off the stereo and called for attention.

‘Me and Shell haven’t seen our son much for the last six or seven years, since we hit the highway in the Winnebago and that, so hopefully Moss appreciates us being here tonight.’

Hearing his name, Moss belatedly ceased punching the air and listened to the speech from his perch on the brick wall.

‘He was always what you might call the talented one of our children.’

Krystal scowled and Shelley patted her on the back.

‘We just wish he had a talent for something in particular, or something useful, as I’m sure his long suffering wife Kim would agree.’

Moss could see Kim over by the grapefruit tree, clutching Zara to her and whispering, no doubt repeating her never swallowed explanation about the unfortunate effects of Pop’s various ‘medications’.

‘Zara is an achievement, don’t get me wrong,’ Fluke continued. ‘But let’s look at it: Moss has tried gnome seller, flower market forklift driver, holiday cabin cleaner, the dole. Oh yeah, and let’s not forget parking inspector.’

Moss was staggered, literally, atop the brick garage façade, to see Fluke pull an old newspaper clipping from his jeans pocket and put on his reading glasses.
‘This is from when Zara was little and they were living down the coast. H’mm. “A parking inspector has enraged locals and holiday makers by booking legally parked vehicles in the private car park of an exclusive Lorne resort”.’

Some of party guests tittered, while others groaned.

“The inspector (the editor who left out his name must have been a more merciful man than me) was seen on Wednesday slapping tickets on windscreens in the Waves Resort customer car park. Shore Shank Café owner Mildred St Clair witnessed the inspector ‘poking tickets with unconcealed glee on every car window.’ According to Ms St Clair, ‘The resort manager had to have stern words with this buffoon before he would leave.’ The inspector was soon forced to return and face the wrath of resort guests, however, to remove the tickets and apologise. A council spokeswoman said the parking inspector was new to the job and had misunderstood a sign.”’ Thank you. Have a big night.’

Moss clambered down from the wall to make a speech of his own.

‘Since we’re treating you to anecdotes, I’d like to take everybody back to my wedding day. It was just how Kim and I had imagined, with some of you who are here tonight joining us at St Monica’s. Kim wore a dress she’d made and I almost felt guilty for having her all to myself.’

He heard a familiar laughter from somewhere in the throng. There he was, a man he hadn’t met tonight but had definitely seen somewhere before. He stood near the barbeque in a No Fat Chicks tee-shirt stretched over his potbelly and his arm draped around Kim’s friend, Peri.

‘Thanks but no thanks, mate,’ he blurted.

He whistled through his nose and gurgled as if he might choke on his own hilarity, while Peri hissed into his ear and partygoers’ mutterings circulated around the backyard.

‘I had to polish my churchy credentials to get a foot in the door,’ Moss said, ‘and the Trans had to completely concoct their Catholicism. Father O’Connell isn’t here tonight, is he? Phew.’

The man in the No Fat Chicks tee-shirt remarked, quite accurately, ‘That one died in the arse.’

‘I’ll keep it brief,’ Moss mumbled. ‘My father was well gone at the reception and he
offered some advice. “Moss, you are aware of my opinions about Nips.” Regretfully I was aware. “An eighteen-year-old like you should be sniffing out every bit of fresh meat you can,” he said.

Kim begged Moss to stop.

‘He told me, “The thing is, I don’t reckon this bit’s so fresh, if you catch my drift. What in the bejesus were you thinking? Maybe I should have talked with you before the ceremony,” he said, “but there you have it.”’

The partygoers seemed unsure whether this was Moss’s warped humour or an ugly denunciation. Tee hees and tut tuts rose.

‘So charge your glasses, please, for a toast to the age of thirty, beyond which there is no excuse for ignorance.’

The frowns of the few were washed away by the beery grins of the many, as tinnies sloshed and two overenthusiastically united glasses smashed.

‘I would like to thank you all for coming, etcetera, etcetera,’ Moss finished.

The stereo blared again, the booze flowed and the breathy chatter of guests revived the party beyond its rightful lifespan. Moss couldn’t place Peri’s potbellied boyfriend and wasn’t inclined to suffer further rudeness talking to him. A few of Kim’s netball friends were dancing, but she and Krystal stood together, facing the rooster’s pen. They’d forget the speeches soon enough. A hit from the charts synthed into full volume, but he’d never felt less like dancing.

If Arc was there, instead of, what was his latest gig? Scrubbing the decks of The Spirit of Tasmania? Moss would be able to breathe, able to laugh with his best friend and shake off the suspicion that one of the party guests wasn’t there to celebrate. Don’t say it, don’t think, or there’s no going back.

Zara was tugging at his sleeve like a toddler. Zara, crying. She wasn’t a crier. They slipped into the house and he sat her like a doll on the couch. When the two locked gaze on that December night he was wider awake than in all his life with the realisation of what he was going to do.

‘Stay there.’ Moss listened to his own voice as though he was on the stereo.

Zara swallowed, looking up at him, her face tinted amber by the lampshade beside
her. She nodded and he was unleashed.

Out the back, Potbellied Joe was standing near the barbeque with several strangers Kim must have invited. He was bopping to Ice Cream without a worry in the world.

Ice-cream is gonna save the day

And over the song he laughed the laugh that condemned him.

Moss flew at him and they landed in a heap between the legs of the strangers. First contact could have been shoulder to shoulder or elbow to neck; he missed it, watching from too far outside of himself. Of all the party guests only Zara, inside the house, did not witness the host dragging Potbellied Joe by one leg along the driveway to the front yard.

‘Go to Hell,’ Moss shouted over and over. ‘Sick animal.’

Peri swatted at him and Kim pleaded from the second row of the tagging crowd, but Moss hardly noticed. The nerve of the hitchhiker, losing the beard and showing up to creep around their house, their own bathroom where Zara… Again! Potbellied Joe didn’t even argue his innocence. He kicked himself free and sprang to his feet.

As Moss’s ribs bent almost to snapping point against Potbellied Joe’s fist, he felt no fear. He was untrained, lightweight and domesticated, but none of that counted. Later he would be unable to recall with any certainty whether he had pitied the other man, who was going to die, or whether driving him away was ever going to be enough. Seizing a loose brick from the fence between the Donohoes’ place and Giles Stone’s townhouse, however, he was sorry already. He would feel the thud as though his own bone was cracking.

Ice-cream is gonna save the day

Ice-cream is gonna save the day again

The bass beat louder and the melody faded in the shrieks and bawling of the witnesses. They were so distant. They didn’t remember, as he remembered, Zara at two, three, four, out of the bath dripping and dropping her towel on the hallway floor as she streaked to her room and jumped on the bed. ‘Three life sentences for “mattresside”,’ he’d said.
He noted the pupils in the creep’s eyes widening, as though Potbellied Joe realised what it meant to end a girl’s childhood. No, a cur like him could never realise. He was simply afraid. His suddenly pathetic hands flapped in defence, while Moss’s limbs worked with fleet resolution. He struck and watched the creep sway from the trunk like a river red gum with a century to spare. And then drop in the time it took to spit.

By eleven-forty-nine, Potbellied Joe would be on life support in Sunshine Hospital.
Like sightings of the progeny of mascot pumas supposedly released in Australia by American soldiers at the end of World War Two, reports of Dingo’s whereabouts are notoriously unreliable. Several days ago a farmer who had been hunting rabbits swore on his mother’s grave that he had caught the fugitive in his spotlight near Colac. He had hesitated with his finger on the trigger of his rifle, the farmer told a respected television journalist, and no sooner had he spun the four-wheel-drive around than Moss Donohoe had performed his disappearing act. This morning a rival news network broadcast an interview with the farmer’s mightily offended mother, who was not only alive but suspicious of her wayward son’s monetary motive for the story.

A wheelchair-bound grandmother on another isolated property, between Clifden and the Brisbane Ranges, told police that Dingo had broken into her home. She had driven the near naked desperado away with a knitting needle. Her family explained that she was a dementia sufferer prone to flights of fancy.

Several homeless people and a volunteer at a city soup kitchen claimed Moss Donohoe had queued for a free meal, but they had no proof. The Hare Krishnas joined the chorus, telling reporters the fugitive had turned up for a free breakfast prasadam at the Melbourne Mahaprabhu Mandir. They had grown distrustful, they said, when he asked for the distinctive Hare Krishna semi-shaved haircut and new clothes, while displaying no interest in self-purification by the chanting of the Hare Krishna Maha Mantra.

Two days ago the moment Australia had been waiting for arrived. A berry grower came forward, not to the police but to Channel Nine, with an amateur video of a man matching the description of Moss Donohoe. While riding to town, owing to the suspension of his licence for drink driving, he had noticed someone pottering about at an old shearing shed near Bacchus Marsh. By the time the television station passed the footage on to the police and they went to investigate, Dingo had found the shadows again.
Shelley and Fluke take up seats in the campers’ kitchen at a caravan park near Port Arthur, Tasmania, facing the television in the corner. A dozen fellow travellers join them, having eagerly awaited the show since a Channel Nine crew tracked down Dingo’s parents. Veronica Ransom herself, the nightly current affairs host and face of the station, filmed an interview at the caravan park yesterday.

The *Killer on the Run* special opens with Bernard Herrmann’s soundtrack to the Hitchcock film *Psycho*, over a montage of stills. There is the dark figure in the prison van leaving court; the policeman looking into the distance; Fluke holding his hand up against the camera outside his motor home and a screen-filling close-up of fingers rubbing wet eyes, which could be Kim’s, or perhaps Peri’s. Veronica Ransom wears a low-cut dress in a shearing shed she calls Dingo’s Lair.

The berry grower’s footage opens with a distant figure reclining under a lone ironbark tree by a paddock fence. As the shaky mobile phone camera zooms closer he appears to be reading a newspaper. There is no further action for the remaining two minutes of footage, apart from a lazy scratch of his groin and a fleeting appearance by a low flying magpie.

Then it is Shelley’s time to shine. In the campers’ kitchen a ripple of respectful applause greets her recorded interview.

‘Do you believe in good and evil, Mrs Donohoe?’ the host of *Killer on the Run* snarls. Shelley had rehearsed her carefully worded answer and said, ‘They’re theoretical poles on a kind of, how do you say, conceptual spectrum, but it’s not for us to pin one or the other on individuals we don’t fully (and I can’t pretend to) understand.’

The editors have left out all but the laboured words, ‘I can’t pretend to understand.’ ‘Let me simplify this, then.’ ‘You’d better cut it out.’ Shelley had been referring to film of a coughing bout brought on by a fly she swallowed while answering a different question.

Veronica Ransom’s voice swells with passion.
‘This is a free country and we don’t surround our homes with storey-high security fences. That’s the way we like it. Moss Donohoe, and his example to criminals and extremists, threatens our way of life.’

The show cuts back to Shelley, appearing evasive as she shields her eyes from the sun.

‘I can’t accept, I will never believe my son is what they say…’

‘A cold blooded killer,’ Ransom inserts helpfully.

Watching in the campers’ kitchen, Fluke pats his wife’s leg.

‘Now you know why I told them I’d rather be stuck in a broken lift with a rabid dog than do an interview,’ he remarks. ‘I went, sinister as Ivan Milat and Bradley Murdoch and The Godfather all rolled into one, “Moss and I aren’t so different”. That shut them up.’

He laughs, but then his own face flashes onto the screen.

‘A rabid dog,’ says the recorded Fluke on television. ‘Moss and I aren’t so different.’

The other campers are subdued now. Some depart mumbling about checking on the kids at the tent or buying washing powder sachets before the caravan park office closes.

It is a policeman’s turn to say his piece on television. Out of uniform in a Hawaiian shirt, on stress leave, the greying officer speaks slowly.

‘We received a call from the then girlfriend of the deceased at approximately eleven-ten on the night of December eighth and proceeded to an address in Footscray. The sight I was confronted with…’ The officer chokes on his memory. He takes several deep breaths before continuing. ‘I’m sorry. The victim, he was lying on the driveway. A few spectators were hanging back, but his girlfriend was talking to him, you know, talking as if he was still there. In her hands she held his head and… this isn’t easy. The skull had caved in behind the ear. Like a rotten marrow.’ He wipes his nose on his forearm. ‘When I hear people talk about ‘Dingo’ I … Dingo! There’s no hero in this and it, it makes me want to bloody shake them.’ He resumes his professional voice. ‘A thirty-year-old male later identified as Mostyn John Donohoe was located at the premises and taken into custody.’

The handful of campers who have been watching make no protest as Fluke yanks the television cord out of the power point. Only an ancient Scottish tourist is willing to make eye contact with the Donohoes.
‘God bless you,’ she mouths before taking leave.

Wordlessly Shelley and Fluke return to their motor home. The air inside is stifling, yet they have no desire to sit on display on their camping chairs outside. They may as well raise a banner between the trees: ‘Come and see The Parents who Raised a Killer. Only $5 a minute.’ Shame is no stranger. There were the news reports after Moss’s arrest, the court case and the inevitable awkward encounters with friends.

They clamber down a bush track to the beach and follow it around the Tasman Peninsula. It’s pure chance they are in Port Arthur at the time of the *Killer on the Run* television special. Any prospect of giving up their nomadic life for a return to their home town has been long since dismissed. In Castlemaine it used to take twenty minutes to walk the central shopping drag, Mostyn Street, between conversations with the locals. When they stopped by recently everybody seemed to be in a hurry.

Shelley marches ahead on the beach, channelling her anger into harmless exertion. Fluke dawdles as they near the remains of the Port Arthur convict settlement, just out of view around the point. The place where men broke under lumber and the lash in the 1800s is no ordinary tourist attraction. There is a name that can’t be spoken. Not by locals and not by Fluke and Shelley. Driving from Hobart the name was far from their minds. Some rugged peninsula scenery and colonial history seemed perfectly safe diversions.

On their first visit to the site they had rather enjoyed rambling through the Penitentiary, Saint David’s Church, the Commandant’s House and the Hospital. Then they paused to read a sign at a memorial pond and the name that can’t be spoken gripped their throats. The waves of blond hair and glazed blue eyes returned, as vivid in their minds as the images they had watched, horrified, on the news in 1996. The man whose name can’t be spoken ate lunch there at what used to be the Broad Arrow Café, before opening fire with a semi-automatic rifle. A misfit more or less Moss’s age killed thirty-five people at random and wounded another twenty-five. And nobody knows why.

Fluke couldn’t say his name, but he couldn’t stop thinking it. *Martin Bryant, Martin Bryant, Martin Bryant, Martin Bryant.* Sitting helplessly on the cement wall of the memorial pond, Fluke had heard him laughing and calling to him. He covered his ears, but the voice rang inside his head.
‘I did what every man is made to do. Your son found his calling, too.’

Shelley had patted his back while he dry retched. It was easy for her, because it wouldn’t occur to her that a mass murderer had anything in common with their own son, let alone herself. She wasn’t simple; she was pure after fifty-eight years in a dirty world. How she found the might to do exactly what he hoped, to press her lips long on his neck and resist the temptation to ask questions, was a wonder to Fluke.

Now, trailing Shelley in the direction of the historic port, he flops down on the sand. *Martin Bryant, Martin Bryant, Martin Bryant, Martin Bryant, Martin Bryant, Martin Bryant.* If Fluke’s non-smoking wife wasn’t by his side, he’d be inclined to roll a joint the size of a grain silo. Then again, if she wasn’t there, he suspects he would do all sorts of crazy things. The HIV lottery of sex tourism in Thailand, perhaps, or pub fights in Glasgow, or *The Running of the Bulls.* Who wouldn’t?

Shelley finally turns, fifty metres further along the beach, and slowly walks back to sit in the sand with Fluke.

‘I hear they’re going to close Ayer’s Rock to climbers pretty soon,’ she says.

‘Ayer’s Rock? What are we waiting for, then?’

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The ticket clerk pauses while serving Shelley at the Bass Strait ferry terminal. Here we go. Since her interview in the *Killer on the Run* television special she has been recognised at the petrol station, the supermarket and in the street. Bring on the outback.

‘My son’s inside,’ murmurs the clerk, a woman in her fifties like Shelley. ‘He’s at Risdon.’

‘I’m very sorry.’

‘Each weekend I drive all the way down there to see him and back home to Devonport. You know how it is. Loyalty isn’t a choice you make. Without family, what would they have left?’

Shelley doesn’t know how it is. The last time she saw Moss was, goodness, a few
months after his sentencing hearing. Namatjira Prison was so depressing that each visit ground years off her probable lifespan, and she frankly didn’t have many to spare. The way the macho men kow-towed to the guards, it was pathetic. If Moss was innocent everything would be different. He’d be like Gerry and Giuseppe in the movie, In the Name of the Father, or that poor deaf fellow in Western Australia, Darryl Beamish, convicted of murder in the 1960s, whose name was cleared forty-four years later. Shelley defended her son on television because that’s what you do. He is guilty and it nauseates her.

She mutters to the ticket clerk, ‘I hope your son gets out soon,’ and the woman nods. It seems the right thing to say, natural bulldust. The woman’s son in Risdon Prison is probably a psychopath.

The only person in the world Shelley can talk to, really talk to, is Fluke. Who else would put up with her Type Two ‘classic apple shape’, as the doctors so sensitively call it, her never ending diabetic thirst and the ‘hush hush’ that is positively thriving after years of yoghurt and fluconazole tablets? And at her age? Don’t talk to Shelley Donohoe about loyalty. Don’t talk to Shelley Donohoe about what her son has left.
Kim had called it his holiday, here in prison. A working holiday, perhaps, since Moss had spent the first fortnight at Namatjira assembling chalk boards to be sold in department stores. Sawdust and heat slowed the dozen inmates of the Toys Team by eleven in the morning. They leant idly on benches while Officer Clive Strange patrolled the corridor and, from time to time, poked his angular head into the workshop.

Mac raised his blue cotton prison shirt to uncover his belly. Several inmates muttered approval of the cat tattooed over his sternum. If it signified the crime that earned him his stay at Her Majesty’s Hotel, Moss couldn’t help thinking any cat burglary by the lumbering stomper must have been a long time ago.

Budgie unbuttoned his shirt. Across his shoulder blades were gallows with several men hanging. A condemned prisoner remarked in a comic book style speech bubble, as the executioner fitted the noose around his neck, ‘I have to be off, mate.’ The next prisoner in line replied, ‘Well, good luck with everything.’

Laurie, another seasoned Namatjira resident, scratched his head, a head that had taken too many blows in his criminal career.

‘That’s the stupidest thing I seen since Choc conned his girlfriend into smuggling in bullets wrapped in carbon paper in her undies. She wore a G-string that day, real classy riding above her trackies, and she beat the metal detector but then the bullets clanged out onto the Visits Centre floor. Budgie, you boofhead, now why would someone say, “Good luck with everything,” when his mate is about to die?’

Jimmy, the prison’s renowned tattoo artist, hastened to defend his work.

‘Of all the sad mongrels in this joint, Laurie, I thought you would appreciate irony. Aren’t you the one that grew dope to raise cash to send your sick kid to specialists in America? And then the hydroponics started the house fire that killed him?’

Not for the first time, Moss flinched for an inmate who no longer knew how to
flinch. He edged back, making room for Laurie and Jimmy to swing fists, but Laurie appeared bereft of the pride to stir him to action.

Moss, who had never contemplated getting a tattoo, surprised himself by telling Budgie his was marvellous.

‘Oh, maarrvellous,’ Laurie taunted in a high society parody the men found hilarious.

Officer Strange materialised several metres away with his arms folded.

‘Your tattoo is so marvellous, Gerald Budge, that you will receive seventy-two hours in your cell when I file my report. You know the rules.’

Budgie buttoned his shirt as he grumbled, ‘But Mr Strange, I got that tatt when I was bloody twenty-one, half a lifetime ago, maybe younger than you, even.’

As the men watched, wide-eyed, Strange grabbed at Budgie’s shirt, sending buttons flying. He ran a fingernail across the tattoo. The prisoner showed no pain, but when the officer withdrew his finger it was tipped with blood. He proudly held up the evidence of a fresh tattoo for all to see.

Jimmy laughed and pulled Strange aside for a brief, inaudible conversation. A minute later the officer walked meekly to the doorway and hovered there like a bee whose hive has been stolen. Magic. Jimmy had somehow also managed to acquire a computer, an exemption from haircut rules for his dreadlocks on so-called religious grounds, a formidable pornography collection and two university degrees in prison.

When Strange let the men out to lunch a quarter of an hour early, Moss bailed Jimmy up for an explanation.

‘Young Moss,’ he began.

‘You’re three years younger than me.’

‘Young Moss, that dumb prick is walking around with Budgie’s blood under his fingernail. If he wants to play the hard screw, we’ve got twelve blokes who’ll swear to the same story about how the blood got there, and it won’t be what you thought you saw, if you follow my meaning.’

Moss grinned and asked Jimmy to give him a tattoo. He had just the design in mind already.
Zara closed her eyes against the red laser light. Two boys in the back seat of the bus had trained the light on her since she boarded the special Sunday service at Sunshine. First stop was the Dame Phyllis Frost women’s prison, then the Metropolitan Remand Centre where her dad had stewed for the year and a half that his trial took. Final stop was his final stop, Namatjira men’s prison. It was surprising that tourists hadn’t cottoned on to the budget safari.

Visiting her dad would have been a simple drive west from Footscray by car. Thanks a lot Mum, she thought. Thanks for being reliable when the shit hit the fan. Her mum said prison was a dangerous place for a twelve-year-old girl, but it wasn’t as if visitors were locked in overnight with the crims (the real crims, not blokes like her dad). *Come on.*

There was lots of stuff her mum didn’t give her credit for understanding, actually, such as her dad’s trial. Nobody would explain what the photos she found wrapped in silver paper at the park had to do with the man at Moss’s thirtieth birthday party and the fight in the driveway that started all the trouble. Trouble – ha! They didn’t need to explain, anyway, because Zara heard the man’s laugh that night. Her dad heard it too, the identical gurgle and nose whistle of the hitchhiker they picked up once on the way home from Fiends’ Gap. She hadn’t quite turned eleven then, but she remembered it well. It was less than a fortnight after they met the hitchhiker that the creepy photos turned up.

*God it’s hard to think straight with a red laser light on your face.*

The way the hitchhiker had flinched when they met, guilty as sin, he was no harmless eccentric. He had asked for her address and, like an idiot, she gave it to him. Then he had showed his face at the party, minus his thick cinnamon beard as if a shave was a master disguise, hoping to get up to some sort of seedy tricks. In a way it was her fault her dad got locked up. It was obvious, the more she thought about it. Wasn’t she the one who had sat on the couch crying at the party and told her dad everything without a word, who had let him, no, made him fight for her?

*Don’t give the backseat boys the satisfaction of a middle finger. Not even a frown.*

The bus finally burped to a halt outside the concrete walls of Namatjira and Zara hopped off in stubborn silence. A bottle blond caked in makeup stepped down behind her, followed by an elderly woman all in black and a girl who looked younger than some of the
Year Twelves at Zara’s school, carrying a baby and tugging a sleepy toddler by the hand.

Zara was the first of them to arrive at the reception desk, where she waited to begin the security clearance process. She had brought her dad his battered old smoker’s clay pipe, not that he’d want to smoke like Pop. No, it was an heirloom she took from her parents’ dressing table. The tobacco bowl was cast in the likeness of John ‘Bold Jack’ Donohoe, Zara’s outlaw ancestor shot dead by troopers in 1830. The inmates just had to be impressed by something like that. Moss reckoned his great-great-great-great John was the original Wild Colonial Boy, the one to blame for his temper. In return for the pipe he would probably try to give her the sort of bear hug that was becoming embarrassing in public before the police took him away, and this time she was going to let him.

The woman behind the reception desk smiled.

‘Do you have a hundred points of identification?’
Zara held out her cards.

Scanning them, the woman continued to smile, yet it was different now, the same smile the PE teacher gave her when she swung and missed the softball.

‘Minors aren’t permitted to visit unaccompanied.’

Minors, Zara almost spat back. She didn’t feel minor – more like a major cyclone about to strike dumb molls who didn’t know when to stop smiling. And there seemed no point calling somebody you don’t know ‘love’, especially when that somebody would think twice about whether to call triple zero if she saw your house on fire.

‘You’re under sixteen, love. Sorry.’

Her mum should have told her about this rule. Then again, she’d taken Zara’s word that she’d gone to the swimming pool with Sas and Melody.

Zara took the clay pipe out of a paper bag and held it up.

‘I have to deliver a present, actually.’

The receptionist shook her head.

‘Gifts are to be mailed, not passed by hand to prisoners.’

‘But he’s my dad and, and he asked me specifically to bring this.’

‘Most of them are somebody’s dad, love.’

It was going to take a hell of a lot more than this to hurt her. To wobble her bottom
lip and rub her eyes didn’t hurt a bit, though. Not even a grinning moll stood a chance against that.

‘Look,’ said the receptionist, ‘I’ll have the present sent to the prisoner if you like.’

Zara paused and sighed, ‘All right.’

After placing the clay pipe in a pigeon hole behind the desk, the receptionist raised her eyebrows at the next visitor in line, the elderly woman in black from the safari bus.

Zara raged on the ride back to Sunshine and in vain begged the driver to dump the laser light boys who seemed happy to spend their weekend on the back seat. Only the clickety rhythm of the train to Footscray began to soothe her. Her problem was simple, she realised. All she needed was an adult to accompany her on her next visit to Namatjira Prison. Her mum would give in eventually. Full of hope, she arrived home prepared with an anecdote about a boy who was kicked out of the swimming pool.

Her mum looked up from the shopping list she was writing in the kitchen.

‘How was the swim?’

‘The lifeguard caught some kid untying the girls’ bikinis...’

‘Oh, Zara. You weren’t one of them, then?’

‘Mum, do I wear a bikini?’

Kim chewed her lip. Typical, she didn’t even know.

‘So you wouldn’t mind if I wore a bikini, Mum. I’m getting one. Except, I’m short on cash.’

‘I gave you twenty bucks on Thursday.’

As Zara headed for her room she called, ‘I’ve been feeding coins to the plastic guide dog at the supermarket.’

No comeback. Excellent.

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Kim’s sympathetic manager had sent her home from work to wait for ‘the unfortunate situation’ to fade in everybody’s memory. There was one person, however, she had to visit:
the wing attack during netball season, clothing importer and designer and, oh yes, girlfriend of the man whose head Moss broke open.

She had waited three weeks after the sentencing hearing before showing her face at Peri’s Turkish fashion boutique. Her friend chatted with customers about the latest imports on sale, while Kim fidgeted among the scarves.

‘I tried to explain on the phone, Peri,’ she finally broke in. ‘If you knew the full story we could still be... You might understand.’

Peri beckoned her to follow her to a kitchen behind the shop, where she put the kettle on. As they sat watching the kettle boil, Kim chose her words cautiously.

‘You only met your boyfriend a week before Moss’s thirtieth birthday party, right?’ Kim said as Peri poured mugs of tea, ‘so you weren’t to know he was a paedo creep. He stalked Zara last year, even took photos of her upside down on the monkey bars with her dress over her face and left them wrapped like a present for her at the playground. I know it’s not easy to accept that he was using you to get close to Zara. We’re all sorry he died, but – ’

‘Your tea, Mrs Donohoe.’

‘Mrs?’

Kim sipped her tea and suddenly spat it onto the table. 

‘Peri! You put salt in my tea, not sugar.’

‘Oh, really, Mrs Donohoe,’ she replied with a courtly smile. ‘My mistake.’

Kim fetched a sponge from the sink and, shaking her head, wiped the spilt tea from the table.

‘The thing is, Peri, you’re like a sister and I... You once told me men were like photocopiers.’

She paused, but Peri refused to finish their old joke about the only thing women needed men for: reproduction. They stood face to face in the shop kitchen, which felt so small that they could hardly move.

‘Mrs Donohoe. Since you know everything, apparently, I suppose you realise what they used to do to Hittite soldiers who tried to harm the royal family?’

Kim shook her head.
‘They were executed (no surprise) and so were their wives and children. Interesting, isn’t it?’

Kim had only a vague notion of the ancient Hittites who inhabited Asia Minor. She tipped the remainder of her salted tea down the sink.

‘Listen,’ she pleaded, ‘I got banged up by a kid with demons I couldn’t have guessed at, and you wound up with a sicko. How do you like our luck? But we’re still here, you know?’

‘I am familiar with the transcript of the desperate, baseless defence your husband made in court,’ Peri said. ‘Francis (he had a name, you know), Francis was so much more than that murderer whose lies you choose to believe.’

Kim could only shake her head and walk out past Peri.

‘Won’t you stay for another cup of tea?’ the shopkeeper called after her.

Back at her house she bent to unzip the opening of the giant mosquito net. It had become a tattered and sorry grey eyesore, just as she knew it would when Moss ran up a five thousand dollar credit card debt to build it several years ago.

By the time Zara arrived home from school, Kim had cut the net down and left it lying in segments to be fed weekly into the Council wheelie bin.

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‘A lot of people are rotten to the core all their lives. They reside unnoticed in the suburbs and towns, no matter how big are their satellite dishes and four-wheel-drives and utes with map of Australia stickers overwritten: FUCK OFF WE’RE FULL. They take half hour showers during drought, vote for stooges who were born wearing suits, dodge taxes then complain of hopeless state schools and hospitals. They buy palm oil, watch teen porn, kick their dogs, hit their kids and wives, invest in the pillagers of the Pilbara, drink at the pub with the topless barmaids and piss into Mrs Garibaldi’s letter box on the stagger home.

‘Now, was there so much wrong condensed into the split second I was somebody else, when I let go, weary of not caring and overcome by a hate which no person alive can
honestly say they’ve never felt, that I deserve to wither behind bars? That the already rotten deserve the freedom to their unbearable complacency? That my daughter couldn’t be protected from the worst of them?’

That’s what Moss planned to say when his parents visited him at Namatjira Prison.
‘Well, what have you got to say for yourself?’ asked Fluke.
Moss gazed dumbly around the Visits Centre. It looked like a huge café, with a high counter, steel tables and windows opening to a playground.
‘Well?’ his father pressed.
His mother looked poised to vomit, and remained so as a clammy minute of silence swelled to ten. She stared at the split that Officer Clive Strange had made above his left eyebrow on Moss’s first night at Namatjira, a little ‘reception biff’ with his baton. No need to ask about it; what else could anybody expect in prison?
‘David Hicks had the sense, some little sense that it was, to run off and join the jihadis,’ Fluke finally said. ‘I’d shoot the mong myself, don’t get me wrong, but at least Hicks went to fight for a cause, to escape the grind the old fashioned way, the way our boys did at Gallipoli. Instead of going to war you fought some … some dickhead on your own driveway.’
Moss looked him in the eye.
‘The creep was after Zara.’
‘That’s not what the judge said.’
Shelley shook her head and spoke for the first time in the Visits Centre.
‘No, love, that is definitely not what the judge said in his summing up. “An act of barbarity,” I remember.’
‘Yeah, that was it, Shell: “barbarity”.’

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Jimmy’s tattoo art was highly regarded and Moss was forced to wait a month for an appointment. When his turn arrived, he greeted Jimmy in his cell and handed him the
agreed six decks of cigarettes.

‘Where’s your watchman?’ Jimmy asked.

‘Ah, I, I didn’t know it was BYO watchman.’

Jimmy’s cellmate, the Shaman, lay reading a porn magazine on his bed. He didn’t offer to watch the door for approaching guards, and if Jimmy wasn’t asking him, then there must be a good reason not to. One more mystery in this otherworld.

‘Stuff it, then,’ said Jimmy. ‘We’ll ink you quick without a watchman. And where are the draughts pieces I told you to bring?’

Moss fished a full set of black plastic draughts from his socks, placed them on Jimmy’s desk and grinned. A board game would be a welcome diversion while being tattooed.

‘I couldn’t get the board out of the Rec. Room, though. We could draw squares on the desk here.’

Jimmy and the Shaman burst into laughter. The tattooist collected the pieces and stepped into the adjoining bathroom. He melted them with a lighter and collected the soot, mixing it with water to form a thin black ink. His tattoo gun was made from the vibrating motor out of a video game console, he explained, powered by a battery and joined to a pen shaft that housed a sharpened guitar string.

‘Now Moss, I don’t draft shit up, so just tell me where and what you want and it’s on she goes.’

‘Right. On the side of my neck, please, and I want a quotation from Byron.’

‘Most blokes want a spider web on the shoulder, or Ned Kelly with a smoking gun,’ said Jimmy. ‘In struts Mostyn Donohoe, Esquire, expecting queer poetry.’

‘It’s from Major Mitchell’s portrait of Bold Jack Donohoe, the bushranger.’

Jimmy shrugged and the Shaman kept reading his magazine.

‘After the troopers shot Bold Jack, Mitchell sat by his corpse in the morgue,’ said Moss. ‘Under the sketch he made, he wrote this from Byron’s Mazeppa:

No matter; I have bared my brow
Fair in death’s face – before – and now.’
Jimmy, seated beside Moss, exchanged lunatic impressions with the Shaman on his bed. If anyone in the room was a loony it was the Shaman, a Ghanaian merchant seaman who was all over the news a few years ago for maiming his Australian girlfriend in what he told police was a voodoo ritual.

‘Bold Jack was my great-great-great-great grandfather, you see,’ Moss added.

‘Yeah, yeah, yeah,’ replied Jimmy. ‘You already proved it with that little clay pipe your girl sent you. Batman was my Pop – I’ve got his pickled nuts in a jar if you want to see them. Now listen, the Byron is too long for a neck job. I can do a word for you, that’s it. Plus you’re a tatt virgin, so go easy on yourself.’

There was only one word – one name – Moss could think of.

The makeshift machine began ploughing over the tangle of arteries, cartilage and muscle on the left side of his neck. The pain was immediate and relentless. He closed his eyes and, after what was surely half an hour, he asked if the tatt was finished. Jimmy chuckled and assured him it had only been five minutes.

The Shaman shook his magazine.

‘Just reading here. I wouldn’t rock the boat with one month left before I’m home free.’

Since the Shaman’s friends referred to him politely as ‘an individual’, it was unsurprising that he might address nobody in particular. Jimmy quickly switched off the tattoo gun, however, and Moss opened his eyes to see Officer Clive Strange smiling in the doorway.

‘What, no watchman today? Moss, Moss, here I was thinking you were a model prisoner. You’ve won second prize in the game of life. Again. I don’t give a shit if you are Senior Officer Dover’s pin-up boy, the caped crusader who took down a rockspider. Seventy-two hours in your cell. Now piss off.’

Moss was certain the tattoo artist was supposed to be in the most strife after a bust, but Strange wasn’t going to take on Jimmy.

Back in his own cell, Moss hoped Budgie, who sat facing the television, wouldn’t mention the aborted skin art.

Moss reluctantly lowered his collar. His cellmate stared at the tattoo for some time before spittle flew and he wound into an uproarious laughter that emanated from deep within him.

‘Well, Budgie, my daughter will appreciate it, even if you don’t.’

‘Mate, have you seen it?’

‘Not yet.’

Budgie led him to the bathroom mirror. There it was, bold and black: Z. Three days and nights was a long time to be locked in his cell for one letter.

‘Zorro left his mark or something, mate?’

Moss gritted his teeth and ignored Budgie.

‘Oi, Mossy, you got the proper Indian ink, right?’

He nodded.

‘Lucky. I heard when Jimmy can’t get the professional stuff in he uses some kind of soot paste. Only on dipshits, of course.’
Moss waits all morning in the shed in Castlemaine where he once made garden gnomes. About midday the door swings open and the Commander wanders in, a little wider and little grimier than he was when Moss worked for coins from his swear jar. He rubs his eyes and then slowly removes his hands.

‘Shit, I’m not dreaming. You’re still here –’

‘Charmed as ever.’

‘Like a skid mark. How’d you –’

‘The spare keys were under the doormat, would’ve foiled many a criminal mastermind,’ Moss replies, lounging in an armchair.

‘What do you want?’

‘A place to crash, mate.’

The Commander laughs sourly.

‘Aren’t I just the luckiest bloke in Australia, mates with Dingo fuckin’ Donohoe?’ He has strained every muscle into the shape of nonchalance and can’t hold the pose. ‘I, me? I can’t help. Seen you on the telly, for Christ’s sake. You’re Australia’s Most Wanted.’

‘Your wife doesn’t need to find out I’m here.’

‘The scrut left years ago. I just can’t do shit. They’ll fuckin’ take me, too, when they find you. See?’

Moss rises from his seat to stand over his old boss, and takes a wild gamble.

‘They’ll take you all right. I’ll make sure of it if you send me out half-starved with nowhere to sleep. The first thing I’ll do is phone the cops and let them know what your real business is. I’m not talking about garden gnomes, Commander.’

Moss has wondered, over the years, what the Commander filled his hollow gnomes with, the ones he trucked interstate. Something dodgy. Stock still, the old man manages to look like a child caught with his hand in the lolly jar.
‘Now, now, I...’

Moss watches the Commander weighing up his options and finding that they don’t even tip the scales.

‘I’ll bring you some food and a mattress,’ the Commander says.

‘I’ll need wheels, too, and some cash.’

‘Nah nah nah –’

‘You want to go down over a couple of friendly loans, do you?’

The Commander shakes his head woodenly and leaves Moss alone in the shed.

In the morning he brings him a newspaper dated March 7th, yesterday, open to page five. A headline screams, ‘“Dingo’ Attacks Again’.

New South Wales police are calling for witnesses to the latest in a string of brutal attacks in the Northern Rivers region, believed to have been committed by fugitive Mostyn John Donohoe.

The man confronted two sisters as they left a Ballina hotel early Friday morning and identified himself as the escaped killer. After robbing the young women of their possessions, the offender ordered them to remove their clothing, allegedly telling them if he couldn’t have his daughter, whose name cannot be used for legal reasons, he would '#*!~ing well have them’. When they refused he assaulted them with a wrecking bar, resulting in serious head injuries to a 19-year-old woman. The second victim escaped with minor injuries and raised the alarm.

Dubbed ‘Dingo’, Donohoe has baffled police by consistently evading detection between attacks since his escape from custody in February. He was serving a nine-year sentence in Victoria for manslaughter and is a suspect in the recent rape of a teenage girl near Byron Bay, as well as several bashings and robberies in the district.
Moss takes several minutes to calm down enough to think. Almost any rogue could hide behind his notorious name; Bold Jack Donohoe had impersonators too. There is one escapee, though, who waxed lyrical in prison about a haven in northern New South Wales. Budgie. He was near enough to a knockabout mate back then, before Namatjira darkened his grimace. Moss’s hate is blinding.

This is the suitor Kim took home. This is the stray she tended. This is the lover who heard her moan, whose fucking bog-ordinary socks she mended. ‘Dingo.’ The face on the computer screen in a sixth floor Sydney office. The rapist. The killer. The animal.

‘We can’t afford the kind of attention this will bring,’ David Jewell says across his desk, far, far away. ‘Your work on Hopless Roo has been outstanding, but at Horizons of Plenty we expect full disclosure by employees of information that … ’

Zara reckons it’s all crap, about Moss. How is a daughter supposed to believe her own father guilty of those crimes on the news reports, or that she would suffer worse than any victim yet if he hunted her down? It is true Kim’s mum phoned to say she believed Moss was in Melbourne with Krystal at the time when those sisters in Ballina were hurt. That still didn’t clear him of the other bashings and the Byron Bay rape.

The Horizons of Plenty CEO is still going: ‘…sensitive nature of our genetic engineering program…’

‘I have absolutely no association whatsoever with Mostyn Donohoe,’ Kim claims.

Jewell, sitting a metre from her, scans her face.

‘Cherie in reception believes she caught a glimpse of you on Killer on the Run the other night, the television special, and the article right here on my computer names his wife as Kim Donohoe.’

‘A coincidence.’

‘Please.’
'I’ll call my husband now and prove it.’

Jewell passes Kim his desk phone. She has to think fast. There is no hard evidence Moss is her husband. She dials Krystal’s house and Shane answers.

‘Yeah?’

‘My boss needs to speak to my husband. Can you grab Shane for me?’

She and Jewell can hear him put the phone down. The dingo keeper is sharper than he always seemed. Jewell takes the phone and listens as, after a pause, Shane speaks again.

‘Hi Kimmy.’

‘Shane?’ Jewell asks.

‘Yeah. Who’s this?’

Jewell whispers to Kim, with his hand over the receiver, ‘An experiment.’ Into the phone he says, ‘You’re a very lucky man, Shane. Kim is utterly delicious.’

Shane’s reply is loud enough for Kim to hear: ‘Now listen here, whoever you are, nobody talks about my wife like that.’

‘Good man. Bye-bye now.’

Jewell hangs up and chuckles.

‘You’ve passed another little Horizons of Plenty test.’

‘Of course. There are many Kims.’

‘I apologise. How about I take you out for a drink to make it up to you?’

Kim gapes like a shocked dutiful spouse.

‘A little jazz, a little relaxation,’ Jewell continues. ‘How about it?’

Yes yes yes yes yes.

‘I’m married to Shane. Sorry, we’ve been through all – ’

The CEO raises a hand and smiles.

‘You passed another little test right there.’

Jewell is quickly losing his lustre. After he and the others leave for the day, Kim and the cleaner will have the sixth floor to themselves, and she will take out insurance on her career. Joey Nine, the ridiculously expensive blastocyst microinjection equipment used in the transgenesis procedure and all the Hopless Roo data files should be a reasonable start. Think of it as a little test.
Zara waited with the other others, the prisoners’ others, in a small white room. It was as if they were vacuum wrapped and nobody dared poke a hole through the plastic to speak a sentence at normal volume. ‘What’s your husband in for?’ she was tempted to ask the crone standing beside her mum. ‘Don’t you want to firebomb this place and hope he’s one of the men who make it out of the ruins alive?’ Yet she stood as stiffly as the other twelve or so visitors who passed through the metal detector and had their irises scanned.

A prison officer unlocked the heavy door between the waiting room and a glass walled hall and led the way to the Visits Centre. Moss wasn’t among the prisoners hugging and pecking their families. Zara looked up anxiously at her mum, who mirrored her expression but pretended to read the menu behind the coffee bar. Only after a month-long campaign of disobedience had Kim agreed to the prison visit and Zara suspected, now, she wasn’t the one her mum had been trying to protect.

‘Mum,’ Zara begged.
‘He’ll be nine years. There’s no rush.’

They wandered to a table and sat leaning forward from opposite sides. Zara noticed her mum’s eyeliner was running.

‘Okay, you can be the prisoner and I’ll be the visitor,’ said Kim, and Zara tried to laugh. She sniffed, then asked, ‘What’s the food like?’

‘Brilliant. It’s like, all-you-can-eat pissaladière pastry tartlets and coeur à la crème,’ Zara replied.

‘And the inmates?’
‘All mates in here.’

A rangy man with cropped black hair sat down at their table, his mouth open, twitching as though about to say something. Giving up, he leant across the tiny square between them to hug Zara, who clung tight as he kissed Kim on all that she allowed, her
‘What’s the food like, Dad?’

‘Smells better than it tastes. Smells like squashed ants.’

Zara screwed up her nose.

‘How about we try out this playground?’ Moss suggested.

She hesitated. She was in Year Seven. Year Seven! Moss strode to the door and held it open like a porter in a five star hotel. She raised her eyebrows at her mum, who kept her elbows planted on the table, and followed her dad.

The playground was empty except for a prisoner gloomily pushing two toddlers on the swings.

‘I’m going headfirst,’ declared Moss in a preschooler’s voice.

At the bottom of the short plastic slide he landed in a heap, collar skew-whiff. There on his uncovered neck was a black Z.

Looking at her, touching the mark, he said, ‘It’s not finished. Still got to get the rest of your name inked.’

Weird. Was he worried he might forget her name if it wasn’t written on his skin?

‘Umm, thanks, Dad.’

She took her turn on the slide and as she landed on her head, a blade of tanbark scraped her eye. Moss lifted her to her feet. She jammed her injured eye shut tight to keep the sobs in.

‘Playground is for children under twelve,’ a prison officer warned.

Moss led her back inside.

‘Fabulous work, Moss,’ said Kim.

‘I’m alright, Mum.’

Zara’s nose was running and she could hardly see from her one open eye.

‘We’d better go to the doctor,’ her mum said. ‘Say goodbye to your father.’

Moss glared at Kim, but without protest he bent his knees to wrap his arms around Zara in farewell. His grin fractured and the best he could manage was a wave as Zara pulled herself away to join her mum, who was already nearing the door.

A few of the other prisoners and their visitors peered curiously in their direction as
an officer showed Zara and Kim back through the glass walled hallway, with its pointless row of daffodils in pots along the outside of the glass. Through the empty waiting room they passed like bogs in a pipe. Next were the security checks, the reception foyer beyond and the car park of the free.

‘How’s the eye now, Zar-Zar?’
‘Don’t call me that. I’m not three.’

Sitting in the hot car, Kim unhurriedly examined Zara’s eye.
‘You were pretty tough.’
‘It’s just a scratch. I’m alright, I said, and we’re not going to the doctor.’
‘I don’t mean your eye. You know, he’ll understand if you never want to come back. You’re right, it’s just a scratch after all.’

‘No, I’m coming every Sunday,’ Zara vowed.
‘You hated it.’
‘That’s why I have to come.’

Kim drove halfway home, rolling her tongue across her teeth, before concluding, ‘We’ll see.’

‘There are a hundred and sixty-eight hours in a week,’ Zara said, and Kim nodded her approval for her typically accurate arithmetic. ‘And we can’t spend half of one of those with Dad?’

Kim groaned and kept her eyes on the road.
‘We didn’t kill anybody, Zara.’
‘But we might, we could.’
‘That’s enough.’

Zara turned away from her and pressed her face against the window. Maybe she really would kill someone, she thought.

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High in her tree on the Footscray Park hillside, Zara tired of watching horses walk by
Flemington Racecourse along the Maribyrnong River trail. She gazed dizzily down to see a drop of blood fall from her fingertip and recalled something Moss once told her about aeroplanes. They had a landing weight limit, he’d said, so to make emergency landings they sometimes had to dump tens of thousands of dollars worth of aviation fuel. Appalled, Zara had wanted to know what happened when the fuel rained on people, but she’d learned it almost always evaporated mid-air.

Her blood was an aching ooze. Zara calculated that it travelled from the cut under the sleeve of her school dress to her drooping fingertip at ten centimetres per minute and took to the air at seventeen drips per hour. It was all force of habit, the neat cuts and the equations. She was acquainted with the upper branches of various cypresses and intimate with Footscray Park’s solitary fig tree. Her fondest host, though, was an unusually large river she-oak, indigenous to New South Wales and Queensland, a native that yet did not belong in the grove at the western end of the park.

Nobody knew where she was. It was nearly five o’clock and Kim would be at work, Ba Trinh would be wheeling in the vegetable stands from the footpath outside her shop and the entire city would be rushing, sighing, groaning. Zara’s aching arm wrung no sound from her, nor did the park life all around break her spell. Students from the neighbouring Victoria University campus occasionally made their way along the path metres from her tree, yet they didn’t notice her perched among the foliage. A full-hearted cheer rose from some Italians (elderly people she thought must have lived through loss enough times to know better) finishing their bocce game on the river flats.

The next drop of blood trembled and dived, only to snare on the thin leaves halfway to Earth. It didn’t have the grace to evaporate, though Zara felt she soon might.

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Kim hadn’t had a baby, nor fallen ill, so she was surprised to find Chessie Petrovic on the front porch with a casserole dish under her arm. Ah, yes. The Situation. Well, at least Chessie, her boss, hadn’t brought flowers for the loss of Kim’s might-as-well-be-dead
husband. It was nearly seven o’clock some Sunday eight or so weeks after Moss’s sentencing hearing, weeks which had become a blur of bickering with Zara, spring cleaning in winter and jogging by the Maribyrnong River. She supposed she should be grateful that the manager of the Biological Research Centre had driven seventy kilometres from Geelong to Footscray to break bread with a disgraced employee.

‘I brought you a little something, babe. Nothing, really.’ Chessie passed the casserole dish to Kim with a dimply smile. ‘You’ve eaten?’

‘Not yet.’

Zara had lost her enthusiasm for cooking and Kim had lost her enthusiasm for dining.

‘Chessie, thanks a million but you didn’t have to –’

The boss rolled her eyes. ‘Listen to us, like distant relos at a wake. It’s embarrassing, babe.’ She positioned her perfumed mass above an armchair and dropped into its embrace with a philosophical sigh. ‘Sometimes I wish my husband would take a long bloody spell, too.’

She broke into laughter and Kim heard herself joining in. Chessie had that effect. She reached from her settlement on the armchair to the coffee table and pulled a bottle of wine out of her handbag.

‘You carry one of them in there all the time, Chessie?’

‘One? This bottle is just for starters. Now dish up, dish up. Call that brainiac daughter of yours to dinner.’

They finished the first bottle of wine before the casserole was heated in the oven. Zara emerged from her room and sat on the armchair to next to Chessie’s with her plate on her lap, simpering at Kim as they broke her rule against eating on the leather upholstery.

‘Hello, Zara,’ Chessie said. ‘You look older every time I see you.’

Zara shot Kim a look that said, ‘And this is one of the state’s top scientific minds at work?’

‘Did you know,’ she asked their guest, ‘Mum cut down the mosquito net over the yard that Dad made for her?’

Chessie played an imaginary violin.

‘You mourned for the butterflies and birds caught in the net,’ Kim reminded her
daughter, while refilling the glasses from the second bottle of wine.

The girl flashed a counterfeit smile at Chessie. ‘So, is it true everyone at work calls you Chesty?’

Chessie’s face dropped fast.

‘Your room,’ Kim commanded. ‘Now!’

Zara gave a mock salute and marched from the lounge.

‘I don’t remember her being ... like that,’ Chessie said.

‘Me neither. Whatever I do, I’m the “traitor” or a ... C-word. She knows as well as I do he was out of the running for Father of the Year way before he was arrested. Stop me, Chessie. It’s the wine.’

Chessie leaned across to touch Kim’s arm and waited.

‘When she was younger she spent more time in Mum’s grocery shop than she spent with him. Now Zara’s scrubbed him ‘til he glistens like some peerless martyr.’

Chessie nodded. ‘Babe, I’ve heard of this. Some kids idolise their prisoner dad. They can’t handle what he’s done. It’s a kind of denial.’

‘Frankly, Chessie, there was so much more to admire about the boy Moss was when I first met him.’

‘I bet you wanted a man, though, then.’ Chessie was staring at the wedding photo on the phone table, the groom lifting the bride with a delirious smile in front of Saint Monica’s church. ‘I’d swap husbands with you.’

Kim laughed, mistaking the rhythm of wine and words. Chessie was rubbing her eyes.

‘Oh, don’t tell me. Chessie? He’s –’

A sob interrupted her. Chessie unbuttoned her blouse and slipped it down across her shoulder. The flesh over the joint was purple.

‘See, Kim? The Shit knows where to aim so no one will notice it.’

She tied her hair in a ponytail and turned around to expose yellow and maroon blotches on her neck. So, this was when Kim was supposed to say sorry and invite her to bleat through the wee hours. Chessie had sisters and friends from primary school better qualified to give her a hug and tell her to leave her husband. Surely. Kim patted Chessie on
the back and she tugged her shoulder blade clear in pain (there too!). The wine was vinegar then, the casserole lard in Kim’s belly.

‘I’m so sorry, Chessie.’

The words must have sounded as laboured as they felt, because Chessie gritted her teeth, rocked herself out of the armchair and walked stiffly to the door.

‘Bring my casserole dish to work, will you, when your leave expires?’

Kim nodded and watched her depart. *At last.*

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Looking from table to table in the Visits Centre, Moss’s heartbeat quickened. Where was she?

‘Mostyn.’ The voice came from the far corner, where three people sat, two of them middle-aged with shaved heads. It *couldn’t* be... ‘Mostyn. There you are at last,’ piped his mother.

Approaching, he recognised both parents sitting with Zara. They wouldn’t have visited again, he was certain, unless Zara had pleaded with them. Father and son shook hands as though they were two nations’ leaders at a press conference, awkward but unwilling to let go until the ritual was exhausted. Zara stood to hug Moss and mumbled against his Z tattoo, ‘I couldn’t make Mum come’.

When they were seated Shelley remarked, ‘They serve beautiful coffee here,’ before luxuriating in a sip.

‘And milkshakes,’ added Zara.

Fluke grinned.

‘It’s a wonder they don’t get more people in.’ Nobody knew whether to laugh.

‘We’ve been on a lucky streak collecting opals at Lightning Ridge, Moss. But no, here we are behind bars, so come on. I’m starting to wonder if the judge sentenced you to have your vocal chords ripped out.’
‘Okay, then, what on Earth happened to your hair?’ Moss asked.

Zara put her hands over her mouth to stifle a giggle. Shelley had sported waving locks to her waist and Fluke had defiantly kept a buffy mullet hairstyle for years, albeit with a bald patch in the middle. Now their shaved scalps were sunburnt a ridiculous scarlet, as though Moss was the offspring of two cupcakes with strawberries on top.

‘Got caught in a dust storm,’ Fluke said.

‘That desert dust gets into every nook and cranny and follicle,’ Shelley explained. ‘I could hardly run a brush through my grainy hair.’

‘We were going mad.’

‘It’s simpler to go hairless.’

‘Hairless all over.’

With the force of what would have been an appalled squeal, if she hadn’t been drinking through a straw, Zara spurted milkshake over everybody at the table. Shelley, licking a drop from her chin and laughing, was almost unrecognisable from the dour mother who had spoken a total of two sentences last time she visited. Zara could do that, when she wanted to, lift you like you were the child.

Fluke grabbed a napkin and wiped milkshake from his naked scalp, then repeated the process for his wife. Next he kissed Zara on her milky hand and licked his lips.

‘Delicious,’ he pronounced, and she beamed.

The wife of the prisoner at the next table wasn’t so delighted to find milkshake on her handbag, though of the Donohoes only Moss appeared to notice.

‘Shameless,’ said Moss, shaking his head but grinning despite himself. ‘You’re shameless, the lot of you.’

‘Look who’s talking,’ his father replied.

As quickly as Moss had begun to uncoil his leaden shame, its weight redoubled.

‘Pity you only showed up for the last ten minutes of visiting time,’ Fluke commented.

‘It’s not as though you got caught in traffic.’

Moss wasn’t about to tell his father he felt like a hand puppet villain after the arbitrary cavity search on the way to the Visits Centre (the prisoners were going to be strip searched on the way back to the cells anyway!). He mumbled his regret.
When the hugs and farewells were over, he set his mind to the task of surviving until Zara’s next visit. As for Kim, well, he loved her but she was keeping a safe distance. His parents would send a postcard.
19.

Voices from Afar

The study at the Greats’ flat in Fairfield is squishier than ever now that Joey Nine lives there too. It’s strictly a ‘temporary arrangement’. Kim says the clothes cupboard is like a warm, dark, laminated chipboard pouch and Nine doesn’t mind being shut inside. Zara has to share a bed with her mum, since the Horizons of Plenty lab gear takes up the strip of floor where her mattress used to lie. It’s another strictly temporary arrangement. Better be.

Her mum hogs the blanket and denies it in the morning. She’s stuck Nine’s feeding schedule on the inside of the study door and Zara is expected to cook this green porridge stuff in the microwave for him before she leaves for school and again at quarter to four each afternoon. Yesterday Great Auntie Sang asked to try it. She said it tasted grassy but might be alright with a pinch of salt.

‘You on some kind of diet?’ she wanted to know.

To become one of the Greats you don’t have to be Sherlock Holmes, you only have to breed people who breed people and stick around to meet them. Still, it can’t be long before the Great Phans sniff out Joey Nine. The little beggar isn’t toilet trained. He’s a stink bomb, a genetic failure, hopelessly hopless, floppy from the pipefish genes in him. And still he’s kind of cute, with these whopping ears and the finest of sooty grey down. Otherwise she wouldn’t have promised to help hide Nine from the Greats, who would probably want to throw him in the wheelie bin, or eat him or something. They’re impressed by her newfound spirituality, because she keeps lighting joss sticks at the family altar in the lounge room to disguise the joey’s pong. Nine gawks at Zara like she’s the only one in the universe he can trust. Then he looks at her mum the same way.
Martin Bryant shakes Fluke awake beside Shelley in their motor-home. He rolls over and
tries to get back to sleep, but the Port Arthur mass murderer slaps him on the cheek.

‘Don’t be ashamed of your boy, Fluke. Shame has got to be unhealthy for a feller
with a heart condition.’

A road train rumbles close by the rest stop where the Pleasure Seeker is parked.
Shelley squirms and her eyelids flicker.

Fluke hisses, ‘Will you shut up, psycho?’

‘Call me son,’ returns Bryant.

Tassie.’

‘If you know somebody well enough, you don’t have to be in the same place to
speak to them, nor to hear their voice.’

‘Shhhhh.’

Fluke opens the door and beckons for Bryant to follow. His companion seems
comfortable in the cloudless outback night in his blue tracksuit, with a semi-automatic rifle
under his arm. Fluke has seen the AR15 rifle many times in the past week, during these
unwelcome visitations since leaving Port Arthur. He is convinced it’s only the cold, not fear,
that makes him shiver in his Australian flag boxer shorts.

‘My wife’s trying to get some rest. We’re giving the climb a go tomorrow and
whoop-de-do to my dicky heart and her diabetes. Ayer’s Rock.’

‘Uluru.’

‘Even Aryan pinup psychos want the world to speak Boong now, eh?’

‘Call me Son, I said.’

Fluke sees three shooting stars in the clear moonless sky and makes the same wish
upon each of them. It mustn’t work, after all, he thinks, because Bryant is still standing in
front of him. Makes sense, really. The scattered inhabitants out here amongst the spinifex
grass and red sand, who probably think smog is a cat’s name and city lights are the beers
pissweak urban trendies drink, must see thousands of shooting stars in their lifetimes. To
Fluke they don’t look all that fuckin’ lucky.

‘Call me Son,’ Bryant repeats.
‘Where’s your own dad, for Christ’s sake?’

‘He killed himself.’

Tempting, Fluke thinks. Another road train will be along soon.

Bryant holds Fluke’s arm, as if to keep him away from the road.

‘Call me Son.’

Fluke tackles the lighter man onto the gravel.

‘That’s it, Dad.’

Fluke stomps on his chest and hears a rib crack.

‘Natural as eating and fucking, isn’t it, Dad?’ Bryant wheezes.

Shelley calls Fluke’s name and he turns to see her in the doorway.

‘Squashing a spider?’ she asks.

Fluke nods and goes back to bed, there to lie pulsing with forbidden pleasure until the March sun makes Hell of their motor-home.

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Zara tips tissues, hair and goo, assorted containers and leftover noodles onto the kitchen floor. Apparently The Greats haven’t heard of recycling, so here she is on hands and knees in their Fairfield flat, holding her breath against the bin fumes as she sifts for a certain letter by torchlight.

At tea Sang said the phone and electricity bills had arrived and she needed half the cash from Kim by the end of the week. She had on her big grin, pretty cheery about it considering most of the phone bill was for Zara’s long distance calls to Sas and Melody. Anyway, she went, ‘Nobody writes letters anymore, except if they want money. Maybe if we go and live in the bush, where there’s no mailman, we won’t get any bills to pay.’

‘There are bull ants and deadly snakes in the bush,’ Phuoc warned her. Perhaps they didn’t kid around much when he was growing up, because the only way he can tell someone’s joking is if they laugh really loudly. ‘Tell her about the whining mosquitoes, Kim.’
'So I couldn’t believe it,’ Sang continued, ‘when I found an envelope addressed to you, Zara.’

Zara knew one person who boycotted instant messaging for snail mail, who had also boycotted mirrors and steady employment and brand name clothes.

‘Give it to me,’ Zara demanded. ‘Please!’

Phuoc paused chewing to add, ‘They ride bulls in the bush, and this is where you would take Zara, Sang?’

‘Funny thing, Zara,’ Sang said. ‘The envelope was empty.’

‘You read my mail?’

Zara’s mum looked nervous.

‘We have to take precautions, Zar-Zar, like the police liaison was saying.’

‘In the bush they vomit rum and sleep together on the backs of utes,’ Phuoc put in.

‘Precautions? Precautions against Dad? Fuck precautions.’ Then Zara even had the old man’s attention. ‘I wouldn’t exist, Mum, if you’d taken precautions.’

Ah yes, there was a scene, but she’s pretty much used to that by now. Here a brat, there a slut, everywhere a tut tut. Her mum can’t scream too much, in case Zara lets the cat out of the bag – or the joey out of the cupboard. She thinks Moss lit a bushfire, bashed a warden, hijacked a car then stole another one, pinched money and what not on the run, put another couple of people in hospital, did stuff to girls up north, you name it. And and and, he’s supposed to have said, ‘If I can’t have Zara, I’ll have you’ (Sang and Phuoc and Kim are pretending they haven’t heard that, but Stacey won’t stop saying it in class). Maybe he was the one who got in the Bali bombers’ ears, too. Maybe he’s personally responsible for global warming.

Zara has had plenty of time to think about all this, banished to ‘her’ room, which cracks her up because her mum has started bringing her work home and most evenings she winds up equally damned in the Greats’ eight square metre study with Zara and Joey Nine.

Kim, Phuoc and Sang are all asleep by now, the heavy side of midnight, as Zara shines her torch on the rubbish. Nine isn’t sleepy, ’cause he’s pissed about being weaned off baby bottles of milk. There it is, between a sauce bottle and a banana peel: proof. She picks up a white envelope. The address is in unfamiliar blue handwriting, but her name in
black biro, all looping and slanted, has got to have been written by her dad. It has a Footscray postmark dated March seventh, which is about when everyone reckons he was mauling victims up north. Not that they’ll listen if she shows them the proof of his innocence. No, they’ll just go into denial and call the cops again.

When Zara’s gone she’s going to miss Joey Nine.
Bloodlust

Kim woke at four in the morning on her first day of work since Moss’s sentencing hearing. She hadn’t needed an alarm clock since Arc bought a gift of chooks for the Donohoes several years ago. He had arrived in Footscray without warning, as usual. He and Moss were knocking in posts and rolling out chicken wire behind the garage when Kim arrived home from work, while Zara sat cross-legged under the grapefruit tree, peering through a gap in the lid of the cardboard box in front of her.

‘Peek in here, Mum. Arc got us some roosters.’

Moss winced as he attempted to say, with two nails held between his teeth, ‘Zara’s somehow caught the notion they’re roosters.’

Arc downed tools to kiss Kim.

‘G’day gorgeous. Don’t worry, my grandfather was a poultry breeder back in Colombia,’ he assured her. ‘Those are point-of-lay hens, take it from me. A present.’

By the time he left, a week later, only one fowl strutted about the new enclosure behind the garage. The survivor of the birds’ battle to the death was called Alexander Pearce (Zara’s idea, after a school assignment on the Van Diemen’s Land convict cannibal). Alexander Pearce’s rooster comb and spurs grew full and sharp. From four in the morning he crowed with the joy, or the relief, of conquering his two rooster rivals.

So it was that Kim lay in the bed she used to share with Moss, rubbing her eyes and deciding whether to call in sick to the Biological Research Centre, where she was expected back in her office now that her ‘pity leave’ had expired. Best to stomach their mumbled sympathies and get on with her work, she decided. She was researching epizootic haematopoietic necrosis in fish and had come painfully close to establishing why rainbow trout were more resistant to the disease than were redfin perch.

Before getting ready, Kim ran along the Maribyrnong River path in the predawn chill like she had a stalker in pursuit. Her mind was blissfully blank as blood surged, her chest
heaved and burned, limbs reached mechanically and feet pounded the bitumen. For twelve kilometres she kept a pace nudging international athletic standards.

Back home she checked on Zara, who slept with a quilt twisted haphazardly around her soft middle and her arms splayed, like a toddler. She had the gift of slumber so deep even Alexander Pearce failed to rouse her. Kim plugged her MP4 player into the speaker port on the bedhead and selected Madonna’s version of *Don’t Cry for Me Argentina*.

‘Aghhhhh. Turn it off!’

‘See you tonight, Zara.’

Kim rode to work for the same reason she ran in the mornings. She would sink into the earth unless she kept moving, kept working without pausing to comb through her life with Moss. Seventy minutes of cycling later, Kim swiped her identity card and walked through a maze of vacant work stations to her desk at the Biological Research Centre, on the suburban fringe. She read a report on a German study of the ugly cousin of epizootic haematopoietic necrosis, the European catfish virus. After half an hour Chessie Petrovic rapped on the work station dividing wall.

‘Casserole dish.’

Kim passed her the dish, which she had left at the Donohoes’ house after her visit.

‘Chessie, it’s good to be... I can’t wait to...’

The manager nodded and left her alone. It was the last contact Kim had with a colleague all day. It was as though the lab was one enormous fish tank and she had a contagious case of terminal necrosis. She left early, certain she wouldn’t be missed at the place she had spent her prime.

At home, her daughter was nowhere to be seen. She had taken to disappearing, and for once Kim was glad. She walked straight to Alexander Pearce’s wood and wire palace behind the garage and unlatched the gate. Since the brute dispatched his rival so-called point-of-lay hens, she and Zara had kept a wary distance. Once, when they confessed to throwing food scraps over the wire fence for fear of the rooster, Moss had laughed and headed out to the enclosure. He had come back bloodied and quiet.

Now he was gone. Arc too, another rustle in the breeze, the man who couldn’t spot a cock. Where the fuck was he, when the Donohoes’ place was so empty, so quiet, too
quiet?

Crouching to the cannibal cockerel’s height, Kim waited for him to attack. His gleaming green wings, spurs and beak thrashed in a hurricane of hatred. This time, Kim was ready. She focused only on the top of the brute’s legs, which she swiftly seized. With her free hand she pulled his neck down and then quickly wrenched it upward. There was a pathetic click of breaking bone. She let Alexander Pearce go and he flapped aimlessly around the unswept manure crust of his enclosure. After a final reflexive flap he lay motionless.

She hung the rooster upside down from a branch of the grapefruit tree, placed a laundry bucket underneath and severed his jugular. The long neglected slaughterer’s arts, which Trinh taught her when she was young enough not to recoil, returned to Kim. After allowing the blood to drain, she took the rooster inside to the kitchen table and set about plucking his feathers. She cut around his anus and chopped his head off to lie beside her with his startled open beak and wide eyes. Fortified by years of specimen dissection in the lab, she pulled out the intestines, the heart, liver, lungs and unidentifiable mangle. Next, she cut off Alexander Pearce’s feet.

Zara mightn’t have been too keen on home grown roast rooster, so Kim hastily cleaned up the kitchen, washed her kill and wrapped him in foil, then put him in her bike basket. Moss’s sister could probably use some cheering up, like everybody else who called him family. Krystal loved chicken more than she loved any person on earth, as she seen fit to inform the Donohoe clan at Christmas lunch a few years before.

Kim hardly noticed the gale and the dirty rain of a wild spring afternoon as she rode through Footscray. Shane’s dingoes howled as though the approaching visitor smelt so delicious they must spread the word to their canine brethren. Kim told herself it was the rooster in her bike basket they were excited about. Arriving at Krystal’s house, she dismounted, clutched Alexander Pearce and unlatched the front gate. Krystal appeared on the front porch eating something from a plastic bag. Edging past the dingoes, Kim saw what was in the bag: Kentucky Fried Chicken.

‘It’s been a while and I thought –’
‘There’s nothing to stop us being friends,’ Krystal said.
She waved her guest inside, where they sat watching a romantic comedy movie. Shane wandered into the lounge room, only to hover awkwardly between armchairs.

‘Hi, Shane.’

‘Kim’s brought us a present.’

‘Aw, yeah?’ Shane still looked discomfited.

‘Oh, by the way, Kim, that’s his armchair,’ Krystal explained. ‘You don’t mind, do you?’

Standing reluctantly, the visitor noticed little matching rugs on the two other armchairs, covered with ginger dingo hairs. Krystal shook her head with pursed lips, as though the seating regime was another fact of the universe, like seasons and comets, over which she had no control. Kim perched on an end of the couch.

‘Still working at Jenny Craig?’ she asked. ‘Good... good.’

Her sister-in-law was surveying the remains of her box of fast food.

‘So what’s the special occasion, Kim?’ asked Shane.

‘You could say it’s a celebration – ’

He raised his eyebrows and drawled, ‘Aw, yeah?’

‘Yes, it’s a celebration of the good nights of sleep I will be enjoying from now on.’

‘Jesus,’ Krystal gasped. ‘I had no idea you hated Mm... M... your husband so much that you’re happy with his jail sentence.’

‘You can say “Moss”. It’s alright. And no, I don’t hate him. I’m celebrating the end of Alexander Pearce.’

‘Aw, yeah?’

_Somebody gag the man._

‘You mean your mad rooster?’ Krystal asked.

‘Here he is.’

Kim handed her the foil package. She looked inside and dropped the carcass on the couch, her face screwed in disgust. Shane began a pub laugh, the one in which the laugher began energetically but seemed to forget what was so funny by the end.

‘Listen, I know you’re just finishing your fried chicken, but...’

‘What did the rooster die of?’ Krystal asked suspiciously.
’What? I slaughtered it, of course.’
’Oh,’ sighed Krystal. She took another peek inside the foil package and touched the carcass. ’It’s all pink and wet and, ooooh.’
Shane leant across.
’Give us a gander. Aw, yeah,’ he said, as if he had just comprehended string theory.
’I thought you’d like to cook it,’ Kim elaborated.
Krystal shook her head, perhaps involuntarily, then forced a tight smile. Finally she mumbled, ’Well, thanks. You can stay, watch the film, if you – ’
’I’d better get home to Zara.’
Krystal followed her out the front door.
’You should come around again, bring Zara too.’
Kim nodded without conviction. Beginning the ride home, she heard a whistle from Krystal’s backyard. She turned to see the dingoes running at their frightening full pace towards the crouched figure of Shane near the clothesline. He scrunched some aluminium foil in his fist and stepped back as the dingoes tore joyfully at their rooster feast. Apparently two of the householders knew gratitude, after all.
She pedalled furiously. Keep moving or sink. Halfway home she almost rode into a girl jaywalking across the highway.
’Mum!’
Kim swerved to the traffic island between the highway and the service road and squeezed the brakes, with Zara in pursuit.
’Mum, have you found him?’
’Soo that’s how you cross Geelong Road at peak hour? You could have been killed out there.’
’We have to keep looking for Alexander Pearce.’
Ignoring the squall, the exhaust fumes and the stares of the drivers whizzing past, Kim sat on her bike facing Zara on their narrow strip of grass.
’It was weird,’ Zara said, watching her. ’I couldn’t find any holes in his cage. Plus the gate was closed.’
The wind chilled Kim’s sweat, as Zara narrowed her eyes.
‘Are you trying to protect me, Mum? It was the McManisters from two doors up, wasn’t it? They’ve been going on about the noise ever since we got the roosters. Like, *derrh*, roosters are going to say cock-a-doodle-do. It’s nature.’

‘Zara, you were terrified of the bloody thing and suddenly he’s the holy cow – the holy cockerel – of Melbourne.’

‘The McManisters snuck into our backyard and murdered our pet rooster. Didn’t they? They’re eating him right now.’

‘For God’s sake, *our pet* is suddenly saintly because he’s out of sight. It’s like your dad all over ag...’

Zara shook her head, blinking hard.

‘Shit,’ Kim muttered. ‘Shit. Oh, shit.’

Her daughter backed onto the highway, swivelled and ran.

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The following Sunday, waiting again for the call to the Visits Centre, Moss washed his face and patted the irrepressible bristles of his prison haircut.

Budgie spat on his hand and rubbed his cellmate’s head.

‘Very spiffy, mate. I’d say you’re ready to hit the nightclubs.’

Moss merely closed his eyes and breathed deeply, yet his cellmate wasn’t discouraged.

‘Standing there like a fucking woman in the mirror... That nip of yours must be real pretty. Always had a thing for gooks, me.’

Moss had his pride, his poisonous rage too, but in prison so did everyone else, and he had learnt fast to hoard them.
Moss and Zara moseyed laps around the forbidden playground and he tried to follow her chatter about the new callisthenics routine he had no prospect of seeing performed. Soon she launched into an account of the preliminary rounds of the State Schools Mathematics Challenge, sparing no detail of the equations they had solved on the way to the upcoming final competition. He inserted ‘oh yes’ at appropriate intervals, but it wasn’t easy to concentrate when Kim was as cold as the stainless steel table where she sat, staring into a paper cup, on the other side of the immense glass wall of the Visits Centre.

Apparently Zara had shamed her into visiting, after Kim had compared him to Alexander Pearce. He had a feeling there was more to the story. At least his wife had come. There was nothing in the marriage vows, after ‘in sickness and in health’, about ‘in public disgrace and in gaol’. So Budgie’s wife had pointed out when she divorced him.

Zara waved her hand in front of Moss’s face and he couldn’t be sure how long she’d been doing it.

‘Good on you, Zara,’ he offered, hoping it attached acceptably to whatever her last sentence had been.

Zara folded her arms and asked, ‘Should I do it?’

Floundering, Moss refused to check what the question was.

‘It’s up to you,’ he tried.

‘Great, I’ll spend the fifty dollars Pop gave me at Christmas and borrow the rest from Mum’s wallet. Next time you see me we’ll be able to compare tatts.’

He was ready to roar, when suddenly she squealed with delight. Just as he realised he’d been tricked and began to laugh, Kim appeared beside him.

‘Well, Moss, I’m glad to see someone is happy with this… situation.’

He stopped pacing and faced his wife. The mole on her ear was darker than ever and for the first time he noticed fine tendrils growing from it.

Zara disappeared as though through a crack in time, leaving a life-sized plaster dummy of herself in her place, one that heard nothing.

‘You thought coming here for a holiday was the only price to be paid for what you did?’ Kim’s voice rasped raw as she waved a finger at Moss. ‘You, who lost the right, you laugh like a schoolboy with an effing whoopee cushion.’
What was the point of apologising again and again?

‘Zara hasn’t been coping, coming here.’

‘You mean you’re not coping, Kim.’

‘Anyway, I can’t promise we’ll be back.’

Moss gasped. He turned to Zara, but the plaster dummy was hollow.
Travelling North

The Commander’s five-year-old Ford Falcon sedan is perfectly unexceptional, Moss reflects as he cruises the back road from Bendigo to Lockington. With a decent map beside him, there seems no reason to blunder into the cops’ path on the predictable highway routes. They’ll be waiting for him in Albury-Wodonga and Echuca – Moss would wager a camel called Woodrow on it. The familiar gentle hills of Castlemaine are far behind him and he’s well into the flat north of Victoria, surrounded by the low acacia scrub and brave ironbarks of Kamarooka Park.

According to Budgie, prison escapees are amazingly easy to catch because they usually make the same stupid mistakes. Principle of disappearance number seven: You now have no family. Moss knows the police will be watching over Zara, jangling handcuffs impatiently, yet he is on his way to Sydney to find her. Principle eight: Don’t trust your mother. Don’t trust yourself. And God help anyone who trusts you.

He zigzags north and east through farmland to Diggora, where a sign outside a house advertises WORMS AND RABBITS. A dairy factory grows out of the horizon until he arrives in its shadow at Rochester. He pulls his cap low and drives over the Campaspe River on the Kyabram road. Names whir past the window – Timmering, Tongala, Wyuna – where complacent locals will never know Dingo was in their midst. Over the deep cutting of the Goulburn River to Nathalia, Waaia, Katunga and Strathmerton and onward he drives between wheat stubble and dairy pastures striped by irrigation canals that in Moss’s insomniacal mind appear as the weeping wounds of the sorry earth.

He needs so badly to sleep that he can hardly read the sign by the road: Don’t Be A Statistic. The only witness to his crash would be a gigantic blowfly that has kept him company all the way from the Commander’s house. Koonoomoo now, and is that a giant strawberry? Fruit several metres high has got to be a hallucination. The strawberry stands beside a café car park, awaiting tourists’ happy snaps. He slaps his cheeks to keep the blood
flowing.

At Tocumwal he crosses the Murray River and finds a sandy river bend with only the wood ducks on the beach and the chirruping cicadas in the red gums for company. Better still, there is a caravan without a vehicle, apparently parked there by regular visitors. It’s locked, but a little broken window isn’t going to make much difference to his charge sheet by the end of this trip. A cupboard in the caravan yields dry biscuits, a carton of long-life milk and a jar of Turkish delights. He scoffs the biscuits and milk and flops onto a dusty but luxuriously soft mattress, there to fall into a blessed sleep that no number of twilight water-skiers speeding past on the river can interrupt.

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‘Third left after the plantation road! What’s so difficult about that?’ Detective Keyes demands, driving up yet another hill on yet another dirt track in Central Victoria.

Detective Liston, his navigator in the passenger seat, busted open the Chaouk crime syndicate a while back. So why can’t he read a map?

‘There’s no third left after the plantation road,’ Liston complains. ‘I’m starting to think our informant is a practical joker.’

Their informant is an earnest young bureaucrat in the Department of Sustainability and Environment. Satellite mapping doesn’t miss much these days, as Mostyn John Donohoe, certified killer and wannabe sculpture artist, will soon learn. Keyes recalls Donohoe mentioning some kind of whacky sculpture garden when he interviewed him before the manslaughter trial. That’s right, he’s taken Donohoe down once and he’s going to do it again. In the interview the killer claimed that the man he fought was a stalker he’d first met on the way home from a place he called Fiends’ Gap.

‘Not a bad practical joke by that Environment Department bastard, I’ll admit,’ Liston continues bitterly. ‘Yeah, yeah, “monsters eight metres long”. Well of course! We’ll zigzag four hours for a look-see then, mate. You know?’

Keyes ignores him. He’ll track Dingo with or without assistance. All he needs is
evidence and, if he’s not mistaken, halfway up the next rise is the turnoff that will lead him to it. He won’t be surprised if he finds the tell-tale campfire ashes of the fugitive at his secret hideaway. At the very least Donohoe’s sculptures must offer clues to his state of mind.

Ten minutes later they glimpse some kind of metal constructions winking the late afternoon sunlight at them through the trees. Coming to a halt on the mullocky edge of the track, Keyes and Liston climb out and hesitate. A rocky gully of ironbarks falls away to the south, typical bush except for the strange shapes which loom out of the greyness. Hands hovering over their holsters, the Detectives step across the track and slowly begin the descent, Liston a step or two behind Keyes. Donohoe could be watching them from behind a tree or rocky outcrop with his finger on the trigger of a shotgun. The prospect is hardly more chilling than the sight before their eyes. A dozen colossal creatures streak uphill towards them, or they might streak except that they are petrified in their places amongst the ironbarks.

Liston’s head wobbles. He can’t seem to shake it from side to side.

‘The Fiends,’ Keyes explains. His voice has dropped to a whisper. ‘The mind of a sick fuck.’

Keyes gazes up at the sculptures the way a frog must gaze up at humans. One Fiend has scales, painstakingly tiled with tyre rubber. The head of another is thrown back as if in exhaustion or agony, and the recognition that its head is made from a battered car body scarcely slows Keyes’s heartbeat. A third towering Fiend extends a foreleg covered in a fur of oxidised garden stakes. He reaches out to touch and somehow can’t bring himself to do it. Shame spins him around and he sees Liston stumbling backwards uphill. His partner holds up his hands and continues retreating towards their four-wheel drive.

Keyes decides to keep his eyes on the ground as he explores the gully. Other than the fiends, some old scaffolding and the odd rusty screwdriver is the only evidence he can find that a human being has set foot on these rocky slopes before him. Yet how can the kind of being that devotes its best years to creating a place like this be called human?

Once the detectives begin the drive back to Melbourne, the fiends lose their power. Keyes laughs aloud. ‘Dingo’, they call Donohoe. Well, then, Keyes will track him like one.
‘We’ve been wasting our time. The dingo is a pack animal, right?’
‘Eh?’ Liston says, roused from his brooding in the passenger seat.
‘Dingo.’
‘Oh, you’ll see one alone, hanging back between the trees at the edge of a camp and so on, but generally he’ll head back to his pack sooner or later.’
Keyes smiles.
‘And that’s how we’ll catch him.’

Moss addresses the blowfly resting on the hair of his wrist.

‘Precautions, Louie, we have to take precautions.’

He unscrews the number plate from the caravan at Tocumwal where he’s spent the night. The blowfly buzzes by his side as he stalks around the next Murray River bend to another vacant van and unscrews a second plate.

Back at the Commander’s Falcon he sets about replacing its Victorian plates with the New South Wales ones, vaguely aware that conversations with insects are frowned upon in polite society.

‘The Commander doesn’t know the meaning of constancy. Not like you, Louie.’

The ninth principle of disappearance is the easiest for a paranoid fugitive to observe: *never sleep in*. By seven he is tacking northeast towards Sydney on the back roads again.
At school in Footscray Zara told Sas and Melody that her neighbours had killed her rooster. The girls were sitting with their backs to the gymnasium wall during PE class, having complained of vague ‘female problems’ to their dubious teacher. Those without an excuse practised the self-evidently essential life skill of throwing a ball using a lacrosse stick. Then there were those who thrived on the chance to show off their speed, strength and skill, the ones who didn’t require physical education at all. Caleb McManister was their chief. The alleged poultry assassin flung a lacrosse ball at Melody, clipping her ear.

‘I think he likes you,’ Sas said.

The victim, rubbing her reddening ear, grinned through the sting.

Caleb was the one who personally informed every last Year Seven student that Zara Donohoe’s dad was a psycho who had kept her on soup cooked with body parts of his victims. That was a couple of months ago, just after Moss’s sentencing hearing.

*Nine years in prison... seventy percent of Zara’s entire lifetime. Even with parole after six years, it was forty-seven percent of her lifetime.*

Thankfully Wade Glass had since taken the heat off her by coming out as a witch (completely different from a warlock, he kept insisting, and he threatened a hex on anybody who called him one). Then Pat Simpson and Hana Kouri in Year Nine eloped and had the Kouri brothers and uncles – forget the boys in blue – to hide from. And so the planet kept spinning.

‘Look at Caleb McManister acting like he hasn’t killed my pet rooster,’ Zara grumbled.

‘Once I saw him flexing his muscles and admiring his reflection in the geography classroom window,’ said Sas. ‘He caught me looking and he was like, “Do you want to touch?”’

Melody giggled.
‘What?’ demanded Zara.

‘I would have touched them. His guns.’

Melody and Sas chuckled as though the case of the missing rooster was inconsequential. Alexander Pearce was from the time before the days grew long, the time when Arc would bring gifts – who cared if they were hens or roosters? – and put down the fold-out couch in the study and take Zara to the movies. Spoilt her rotten, her dad said, but he would tread a little lighter and her mum would groan as though they couldn’t all tell she was happy too.

Zara imagined Caleb chasing Alexander Pearce around the cage, shrieking with glee as blood fountained out of the neck, where he had severed the proud bird’s head clean off. With a lacrosse stick, probably.

‘Listen, Zara,’ Sas said, ‘you didn’t seem to care when Alexander Pearce killed his friends and wolfed them down like pavlova.’

‘True,’ Melody chimed. ‘What’s the big deal?’

If it was anybody other than Sas and Melody talking, Zara might have stormed off and infected cyberspace with a viral smear: *Guess hu r Ccret lezzos? Or ThA both got chlamydia off Mr Spencer*. They played chess with her, though. Most summers Melody invited Zara to stay with her at her parents’ caravan at Torquay. Sas first took Zara to callisthenics. They still talked to her after Moss went to prison, through the teasing and the rumours, even Caleb’s psycho soup story. Yes, the ones we adore can get away with just about anything.

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Zara stumbled from her bedroom to the kitchen in a sleep-fog and tipped the empty cereal box upside down. Come on, Mum, she thought, keep it together. You didn’t just stop shopping because you were mad with your husband. Your daughter still had to eat, didn’t she? Catching herself, Zara cringed. What would her dad say? *Work it out for yourself*. It was how she’d grown up, after all. November. Juicy grapefruits, the last of the season.
Mmm, grapefruit packed and repacked with spoonfuls of sugar.

There were none left on the tree in the backyard, so she checked amongst the overgrown grass underneath for fallen fruit. A hanging string brushed her face and her bare foot bumped against something on the ground. Not a grapefruit, a bucket of blood. It all made sense. Caleb McManister and his family were innocent of murder.

She considered her next move long and hard, through breakfast, the walk to school and the morning loiter. A Picasso exhibition was on at the National Gallery of Victoria and old Mr Spencer had organised for the whole of Year Seven to go and see it. A hundred and twenty kids were wired, singing and shouting and wrestling on the train to the city, while Zara the avenger closed her eyes and plotted.

‘Do you have to be such a soggy tampon?’ Melody complained.
She shrugged.

Arriving at the Gallery, she found the exhibition was one massive cliché. A gazillion other artists she’d seen painted pieces just like the Picassos. She entertained herself trailing Caleb McManister, not so slyly after all, as Melody and Sas linked arms with her on either side.

‘I don’t know how he got those guns through security,’ Melody said.
Afterwards, picnicking near the Shrine of Remembrance, Zara wrote to him on a page torn from her diary. Nobody noticed her slipping the note into Caleb’s schoolbag, which was one of dozens heaped around the clock garden.

On the train back to Footscray, she heard him laughing with his mates about a weird unsigned message he’d found. Listening from several rows of seats in front of them, she was surprised none knew she had written it, after the foul glares she had thought were obvious since the rooster’s murder.

Caleb studied the handwriting and concluded, ‘This is definitely by a chick.’

‘Somebody too shy to write her name,’ his mate Nick speculated. He stood and cleared his throat. ‘Attention, attention.’

The hubbub dissipated and all eyes turned to Nick as he held up the note Zara had written to Caleb.

‘A girl – probably a girl in this carriage – wrote this love letter to Caleb:
Dear Caleb,
Sorry for all the greasies.

‘Does our princess have a name?’

A model material girl blushed convincingly and her friend slyly pointed her out to Caleb. Even the teacher, sleepy Spencer, looked up from his laptop computer to watch. Nick proposed forcing the girls to provide samples of handwriting to test for a match with the note. As debate raged Zara was sick with dread. Soon, however, she realised she was safe. The adolescent detectives didn’t want to find her.

Sas sat beside Zara with a book of brain teasers, having long since tired of the Year Sevens’ antics. Zara loved the way she ignored the ruckus, as though she was waiting calmly for the rest of the kids to grow up.

‘So,’ Sas wondered aloud. ‘If Caleb is innocent, who killed Alexander Pearce?’

Dead insects garnished the rooster’s blood. In the weeks since he was strung upside down from the grapefruit tree his blood had thickened to the consistency of margarine in the bottom of the bucket. Up close it smelt rotten. Zara carried the bucket inside to her mum’s bedroom, where she hesitated. She was ‘outstanding’, ‘gifted’, a ‘high achiever’ with ‘self-discipline’, as her teachers had chanted since kindergarten. Her mum loved her, but she deserved this: Zara lifted the blanket off Kim’s bed and tipped the bucket. Nothing came out and, for a moment, she was relieved. Then she pictured her mum in the act of pulling Alexander Pearce’s entrails out of his bum and later playing innocent.

Zara fetched a butter knife from the kitchen and scraped the congealed blood out in plops, which she painted in the rough shape of a rooster across the bed sheet. She pulled the blankets over her work, threw the bucket and knife in the wheelie bin outside and scrubbed her hands with a piece of her dad’s old pumice stone.
Kim’s scream hastened pulses up and down her street. Later she would have to blame a bluebottle sting or a boxthorn through the foot. How could you to explain to the neighbours that at the end of an exhausting day you lay in a bed smeared with blood, and that your vengeful daughter poured it there to remind you that you killed the family’s pet?

Kim rushed down the hallway and into Zara’s room, with the rotten smell keeping pace. The girl lay on top of her bedspread, earplugs in place, still wearing her school dress at ten o’clock. She kept her eyes closed, pretending she had heard nothing other than the chart toppers on her music player.

Kim stooped close and shouted, ‘Get up and wash my bloody sheet.’

Zara nodded her head again and again in time with the music, eyelids still shutting her mother out.

‘NOW!’ Kim hollered.

A faint smile spread across Zara’s face. Her slappable face. Kim ripped the ear plugs out, hoisted the bedroom window open and threw them into the daisy bushes.

Zara sat bolt upright and yelled, ‘This is your idea of mothering, is it? Kill their pets, chuck out their belongings…’

‘Shut up and clean my bed.’

Zara stood face to face with Kim, who was surprised, for the hundredth time, by her daughter’s height.

‘Poor, poor Mum,’ Zara spat. ‘Poor Mum, forced to put up with me since Dad’s locked up. But it takes a crazy bitch to handle one and I think you’ve got talent.’

She pushed past Kim and, instead of going to clean the bloodied bed, she walked outside. Kim ran out the front door and called, as Zara sauntered along the footpath, ‘Get! Back! Here!’

She heard Zara’s laughter from the other side of the honeysuckle hedge at the front of Giles Stone’s townhouse.

‘You’d have to catch me first,’ she barely managed to call between giggles. ‘Cunt!’

Kim’s rage swept her off the verandah and out of the front gate in an instant, still wearing her blood-blotched satin pyjamas. Cunt. She had been in training for the chase for
months, without knowing it. Zara dashed across the road and down a cobblestoned laneway. She was fast, but Kim was world class after her morning running regimen and she was gaining ground. They passed two loiterers in the laneway, who didn’t have enough time to form an expletive before the laughing girl and the woman smeared with blood sprinted beyond earshot. The light of an almost full moon illuminated the white checks of Zara’s school dress flying around the next corner in the direction of Footscray Park.

Kim drew almost close enough to seize her by the ear at the highway traffic lights, except that Zara didn’t stop for the seven lanes of vehicles careering past. The hunter was furious enough to hope, for a moment, that the van bearing down would put her daughter in hospital. She doubted the girl would drop too many C-bombs when she was bedridden with a broken hip and whiplash. Like a sparrow, Zara somehow emerged from virtually underneath the vehicle and continued on her merry way, chirping maddeningly. A posse of motorbikes blocked Kim’s crossing. By the time the livid chaser charged through the park entrance on the other side of the highway, her daughter had vanished.

Kim’s screech seemed to issue from some other, more powerful science fictional being: ‘GET HERE NOW.’

A man in a torn Dryzabone coat padded out of the shadows near the stone wall southern boundary of the park. He hung his head painfully low.

‘Sorry, Miss. I’m sorry.’

Kim suspected the stranger’s sins were mysteries best left unravelled. She scanned the dim trees and garden beds in vain for Zara.

‘Did you see which way the girl ran?’

The man shook his head miserably.

‘I’m so sorry, Miss.’

She waved the back of her hand at him.

‘Oh piss off.’

Zara could have been anywhere in the expansive hillside park, in the playground or a bush or up a tree. Or she could have been on the Maribyrnong River trail by now.

‘Please,’ she called to the night. ‘Come with me. Come home to bed.’

Someone out of sight replied, ‘Sure, baby,’ and bayed to the moon amid the sniggers
of his mates. Kim shouldn’t have been there, in her satin pyjamas. Neither should Zara, though there seemed little hope of finding her then and taking her home for a happy-happy la-di-da how-about-that-tiff hot cocoa.

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Resting on a sturdy bough of her favourite river she-oak in Footscray Park, Zara’s breathing gradually slowed. Her school dress stuck to her body and the brisk south-westerly made her shiver. She hadn’t heard her mum’s voice for at least ten minutes. It seemed safe to climb down, as safe as an inner suburban park at night could be for a thirteen-year-old girl all by herself.

Her mum didn’t deserve the satisfaction of seeing her slope back through the door for a lecture, Zara decided. Ba Trinh’s house was only a few blocks away and she couldn’t wait to tell her about Kim’s murderous fury. Let Mum sit up all night waiting, wondering whether her daughter had been raped and strangled in the park, Zara willed.

Although Ba Trinh’s house was a second home for Zara, the old lady frowned when she opened the door. It was late and Zara was empty-handed on a school night. She walked straight past her grandmother to the kitchen table and did her best to look shaken.

‘She went psycho, Ba,’ she explained when the inevitable questions began. ‘I was in bed when she burst into my room. I just wanted to listen to the end of a song, you know? She threw my earphones out and I thought, “She’s flipping. Time to get out of here.” The next thing I knew she was chasing me down the street and roaring like a wild animal. I’ve never been so scared in my life, Ba.’

Ba Trinh sat close to Zara and stroked her hair.

‘Bed is ready for you in the spare room.’

Zara wanted to stay up watching television. Wary of pushing her luck, she brushed her teeth, said goodnight and snuggled happily into bed. The adrenaline drained, she soon slid to the brink of sleep. Gradually she became aware of voices from the other end of the house. One was Ba Trinh’s, clearly, and the other voice dragged her to attention, although
she couldn’t make out the words. Listening to footsteps approaching the spare room, she hopped out of bed and slipped her shoes back on. She was opening the window when the door creaked open.

‘Follow me,’ commanded her mum, in the shaft of hallway light.

Thanks a million, Ba.

Ba Trinh opened the door wider and repeated Kim’s command. Zara followed her mum home in a silent march.

When they stepped back into their house Kim said, ‘You’ve got a count of three to start cleaning my bed.’

As if Zara was still five. She giggled; her mum hated that. She had her by the arm, trying to drag her to the reeking double bed. Zara snatched her arm free and wriggled it victoriously, cackling with the power or the fear, or both, and that was when her mum clutched the collar of her school dress and shook her. Her mum’s face came in and out of focus with the jolts and Zara saw that her eyes were open and still, as they must have been when she killed Alexander Pearce. Cotton ripped and yelps (hers? somebody’s? both of theirs?) filled the house.

Never had her dad hurt her like this. He had held back, through his tempers, and it only proved he loved her too much. Her mum would pay for this. As the grip on her dress collar slipped, Zara tried to laugh again but a sob rushed out instead.

Kim snarled, ‘Now clean my fucking bed.’

Zara walked instead to her own bedroom and turned to Kim, who stood watching, slouched now. She thought I was broken.

‘Get fucked.’

She slipped into her room and pushed her desk against the door, waiting for her mum’s hysterics to begin. The unending quiet troubled her. Shame her earphones were somewhere at the bottom of the daisy bushes outside.
'Mum killed Alexander Pearce,' Zara told Moss on the telephone.

‘She what?’

‘She strung him up from the grapefruit tree and drained his blood into a bucket.’

‘Are you sure it was her?’

‘Yep. When I had a go at her about it she went psycho and chased me out of the house and I thought, “I’m next!” She caught me (she’s been running, like, sixty thousand miles a day) and…’ Zara sobbed convincingly.

‘You poor thing.’

‘She shook my brains out, Dad. Dragged me around, wrecked my school dress. I was thinking, so this is what abuse is. It hurt so badly.’

Moss was quiet a moment.

‘Did you do something to deserve it?’

‘Nothing… much.’

He sighed.

‘We’ve got a little of the wild in us, we Donohoes. Have had ever since Bold Jack Donohoe went bush with a pistol. You can’t fight it. And as for the Tran side, we all know who won the Vietnam War.’ The line was silent a moment. ‘So take a few deep breaths and – ’

Zara finished for him: ‘And hold on.’

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Kim wafted like dust in and out of the Biological Research Centre. She skipped morning tea and ate lunch in her office to avoid the farcical routine of meaningless nods from colleagues who wouldn’t speak with her. Rarely did she let her mind idle and churn up The Situation. The Situation was Moss’s, after all.

Chessie Petrovic rolled her desk chair next to Kim’s on the first day of summer.

‘The Germans have done it,’ Chessie began, grinning as she delivered the news.

‘They’ve hit epizootic haematopoietic necrosis on the head with a sledgehammer.’
It was good news for fish, clearly, but not necessarily for somebody paid to research the disease.

‘That’s a highlyscientific explanation, Chessie,’ Kim quipped, but she found the manager’s grin gone.

Chessie sat on the desk and took a deep breath.

‘The upshot is, we’ll need to redeploy you to the Pest Program.’

It was the program pest employees were shunted into, according to the office joke. While feral cats and foxes continued breeding merrily, the pest employees were yet to come up with a better idea than sodium monofluoroacetate, or 1080, with which they had been poisoning carnivorous woodland animals more or less at random since the 1950s.

‘Chessie, come on. The only German study I’ve read says that further necrosis trials on perch are necessary. In fact I’ve got it here in my files.’

Chessie touched her arm ever so softly and Kim comprehended what nobody would say out loud: The Situation was hers.
A child’s trust is beautiful. Zara named her Sydney school on a phone call before Moss’s escape from prison and she must be amongst the students streaming out of Fairfield High. Moss, waiting at the next corner like an ordinary parent at the home time bell, is still unsure what to say when he sees Zara. ‘Let’s get out of here?’ She might be too shocked to simply pretend that following a fugitive and jumping into his getaway car is normal, even when the fugitive is her own dad. ‘Hi, love. How was your day?’ Much better, but then what?

Full of purpose, Zara walks between a tall African looking girl and a pimply boy. Moss could give chase. No, not in public view. Better to watch and wait for his opportunity. The students cross a road overpass and then, as the African girl walks south, Zara waves goodbye to her and heads for a green hatchback parked illegally on the far side of Horsley Drive. He observes a plump faced woman at the wheel. Recognizing Kim’s auntie, Zara’s great-auntie Phan Thi Sang, he ducks his head. Yet after riding his luck to be here, Moss cannot bring himself to stay down while his daughter climbs into Sang’s passenger seat and disappears out of his life again. He pulls his cap low and peeks as they take off.

Sang is a difficult woman to follow, because her driving appears to have changed little since she braved the daily Saigon crush on a motorbike, a feat she boasted of on the one occasion Moss had met her. The Virgin Mother, ill with pneumonia, had announced that she was dying. The Phans and her other relatives had converged on her house in Footscray to follow the tradition of beginning their mourning while she was still breathing. During the sad vigil Sang regaled Moss with tales of Vietnam and Sydney. She had rarely stopped smiling, even when numerous relatives snarled at her for breaking the solemn silence. Trinh recovered and the relatives left, speaking of their joy and yet somehow disenchanted with the unnatural turn of events.

Six years and innumerable unnatural turns of events later, Moss follows Sang’s gummy grin through red lights and across lanes. If the cops think this ‘school gate to home
gate’ escort is a safety measure, they haven’t counted on her driving. He concedes, though, they have worked out that he will visit his family.

Several schoolgirls, unharmed after almost being ploughed into the road by the swerving hatchback, cross themselves and look skyward in gratitude. The drive is mercifully brief. Moss watches as the car passes a library with a mural on its wall and turns west from the shopping precinct into Kenyon Street. Sang and Zara vanish in the car park beneath a block of flats. Tempting though it is to follow them, there is a safer way to find out which flat his daughter lives in.

He loops back to the library, where a vision of the outback covers the brick side wall facing the suburban street. A downy cockatoo takes flight for the distant ranges, it seems, on the updraft of her faith that what she doesn’t know can’t hurt her.

The telephone directory in the library lists hundreds of Phans, more than a dozen with addresses in Fairfield. The friendly librarian looks ready to offer to help. ‘Oh, thank you,’ Moss will say, and the notion appeals to him. ‘I’m on the run from the law and I’m having trouble locating my thirteen-year-old daughter so that I can whisk her away from her mother before the police shoot me dead. Any tips?’ At last an address for Phan P & S matches the place he saw Sang turn off Kenyon Street: flat four it is, then.

There will be no fool’s siege in the block of flats. Principle of Disappearance number ten: Each movement is a risk. He will bide his time, watch and wait.
Rehearsals had already begun for *Baby Face: The Carl Williams Story* when, after several months of good behaviour at Namatjira marred only by his Z tattoo, Moss was allowed to join the prison theatre group. Founded by outsiders, the group’s unlikely stars had played Hepatitis C and HIV sufferers and non-violent conflict resolvers since the Eighties. Now the director, a prisoner called Grey, had written a musical comedy about a local mob boss beaten to death while serving time for several underworld killings. It was all the inmates could talk about.

At Thursday afternoon rehearsal Moss and Budgie edged past Officer Strange and Senior Officer Dover into a room that wasn’t quite a theatre. It lacked a stage but had greater elbow room than a cell and was fitted out for occasional visits by government ministers and other worthies who might appreciate a purple carpet and a piano.

Budgie wolf-whistled and a doll-faced blonde sprang to her feet to hug him. This had to be the ‘do-gooder’ he had mentioned with suspicious airiness, Lisa-May the anthropology student who was the lead singer of The Skullery Maids. He had claimed he only attended the theatre group to impress the parole board. The couple was whispering sweet nothings amid peach perfume and holding hands like adolescents. While Moss took his place with Mac, Laurie, Jimmy and several other prisoners in a circle of chairs, the director eyed the glossy lipped young woman as if she was a piece of offensive graffiti.

‘Today we choose a name,’ Grey announced, pausing to clear his throat meaningfully. ‘A name to mark the beginning of the new era that *Baby Face* represents, fellow thespians.’

Laurie scowled, apparently suspecting himself somehow insulted by the term.

‘We have several suggestions on the table,’ Grey continued, which set Laurie staring alarmed at the empty floor space inside the circle of chairs, unable for the life of him to see a table. ‘“The Plaster Casts” is my personal choice.’
‘Trying to hijack a plane when you were on ice was your personal choice, but it
didn’t make it specially intelligent,’ Jimmy noted.

‘Think “break a leg” and casts of actors, you dimwits.’ Grey won no response. “Oh
all right, then, what was that idea of yours, Budgie?’ The director’s leathery face was fixed
in a frown framed by colourless wisps of hair. ‘Is a modicum of focus too much to expect?
There’s no Romeo in Baby Face and I’m thinking of giving Moss your Lewis Moran part.’

Inexplicably Budgie didn’t react. There was so much history here that Moss couldn’t
hope to fathom, nor did he know why so much happened in prison.

‘My idea is “Shake ‘m ‘n’ Speare ‘m”’,’ said Budgie, stroking Lisa-May’s goldilocks.

‘I reckon “C-Section Superstars”,’ Laurie offered, ‘after our C-Section of Namatjira
Prison.’

‘Awful, Laurie, an appalling effort,’ said Grey. ‘Are we an elite obstetric squad in
some kind of Caesarean section surgery competition?’

The door opened and Dover ushered a second outsider into the room, a middle-aged
man with a Father Christmas beard and a bomber jacket.

‘Max, you’re late,’ Grey said. ‘What’s wrong?’

‘Our musical is, according to the Herald Sun. Some hack’s caught wind of it. A friend
who works there rang to tell me that unless Obama’s caught on a sex tape, or a tsunami
wipes Melbourne off the map, a beat-up will be all over the front page tomorrow. “A round
of applause for murder, please”, “Break a leg, or a cranium: ghost of Carl Williams the hero
of crims’ stage musical”, you get the drift.’

‘Bullshit,’ Jimmy spluttered. ‘I’m Mick Gatto, right Moss? You gotta see me, I’m
suited up, and I’m all in Carl Williams’s face, you know, “Where’s the respect, mate? It’s
just not right to do a hit wearing trackies.” Even Laurie understands we’re taking the piss.’

‘The whole prison is dying to see me smash Mac – he’s Carl Williams – with the seat
pole off an exercise bike,’ Laurie said.

‘I can try to talk with Corrections, but...’ Max trailed off.

Grey checked the clock on the wall and said, ‘The show is pronounced dead at four
twenty-two.’ Nobody moved. ‘It’s obvious. Clear off then, go on.’

‘There’s a chance...’ Max began again, but the men were shaking their heads, aware
they were made children in prison.

Budgie hugged the doll-faced Lisa-May goodbye with shocking tenderness.

‘I know what you’re thinking,’ he said when the outsiders were gone. ‘And no, I’m not cunt-struck.’

‘At least I know now why you’ve been whacking off like a fourteen-year-old lately,’ Moss remarked.

‘The thing I don’t get is, she looks like your daughter on your arm,’ said Mac. ‘You’ve got more hair in your ears than on your scone. Why would she go for the forty-something-year-old shrunken ogre?’

‘Chicks like a real man, that’s all.’

Senior Officer Dover and Officer Strange sniggered. They pointed the prisoners out of the door and followed them towards the C-Section cells. Trudging along the corridor Grey whispered something to Budgie, and he raised his voice in reply.

‘She’s on my side and she wants a ride. Why shouldn’t I have a bit of fun?’

Moss, just behind the pair, said, ‘Because no-one fancies a woman basher, if they know he is one.’

Budgie seized a fire extinguisher from the corridor wall and pointed it at Moss.

‘Is this what I get for trusting you with personal shit? Lisa-May knows what I done, what I been through.’

Officer Strange stepped up to Budgie and urged, ‘Let’s be sensible, now, and put it down.’

Working to calm himself, Budgie nodded and replaced the fire extinguisher on its wall unit.

‘That’s it,’ the officer soothed. ‘Deep breaths in and out, in and out, in and out like Lisa-May’s boyfriend when she gets home tonight.’

Budgie lowered his head and resumed the walk back to the cells, while Officer Dover joined in the fun.

‘Lisa-May be a thrill-seeking little tease.’

As they arrived at Moss’s and Budgie’s cell, Strange said, ‘Happy whacking off, Budgie. We’ll be watching on the closed circuit telly.’
In their cell, Budgie walked to the high window and pulled himself up on the bars. There he hung like a giant chrysalis, while Moss flicked through his cherished copy of a play Charles Harpur wrote about his great-great-great-great grandfather. Unlike the others, Moss was glad Baby Face was dead, both the man and the play. The theatre group could perform The Tragedy of Donohoe instead. Naturally he would play Bold Jack, he thought, and Grey would make a first-class trooper Dreadnought hunting his gang of bushrangers. There was something unsettling about the director, but he was a rare sophisticate. When Moss closed the tattered script and looked up, Budgie was still suspended against the wall.

Later, as the cellmates lay awake in their beds, Budgie said quietly, ‘Lisa-May doesn’t have a boyfriend.’

‘Except you.’

‘Yep. Her uncle’s a polie, you know. He’s going to make the bastards let me out of this hole. I’m going up north to this place where nobody asks questions. Up near the New South Wales/Queensland border, it is, where if you’ll share a toke you’re a fair bloke; where the cops keep their snouts out because they don’t want fifty years of paperwork for the offences they’d find; where people don’t call you a dole bludger, ‘cause they’re on the rock ‘n’ roll themselves; where I’m still such a cleanskin I make Jesus of Nazareth look like Osama Bin Laden. Me and Lisa-May, mate, we’ve got it all planned.’

Moss meant it when, rolling over in search of sleep, he wished his cellmate good luck.

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Corrections Victoria

execution show

Grey scrunched tight the front page of the newspaper, which Dover had thoughtfully
bought for him, and dropped it onto the prison yard asphalt. *Baby Face* was officially
cancelled.

‘I spoke to Max on the phone,’ he said, as Moss, Jimmy, Laurie and Mac began idly
kicking the ball of newspaper between them. ‘He might be able to get a grant for a safe sex
awareness raising tearjerker.’

All the men bar Moss spoke at once: ‘Fuck that.’

Moss loaned Grey *The Tragedy of Donohoe*. By the following week’s meeting of the
group, which the director had christened The Plaster Casts, he was manic on his vision of
the play.

‘It’s whitefeller dreaming, a gunpowder Australian farce,’ Grey told the prisoners
and outsiders in the rehearsal room. ‘The year: 1830, when the British outpost in the Great
Southern Land was lurching from scandal to crisis under the tyrannical Governor Ralph
Darling. The stuff this country was built on was thick under his boots: the scum of people
planted in hostile soil; the free settlers and troopers learning what a shameful and
unblessed thing it was to take them to New South Wales; the wicked and the condemned
men exiled and with nothing to lose. And not an indignant Indigene in sight. Enter Bold
Jack Donohoe, a convict who broke the chains of men only to be enslaved by dark passions.
Dreadnought leads the forces of, well, let us say the forces of melodrama against him.
Meanwhile, the women create some intrigues, but they (well we know it in this cage) are by
the by.’

Moss smiled as he listened, noticing Max’s sage nod. Prison wasn’t the Hell he’d
expected, especially since Dover let it be known he was there for defending his daughter
from a rockspider.

Lisa-May was sitting on the floor with Budgie behind an upright piano in the corner.
With the exception of Jimmy, the remaining members of The Plaster Casts appeared to have
accomplished the astonishing feat of dozing in their undersized plastic chairs.

‘Excuse me, Director, Sir, Your Excellency,’ Jimmy began. ‘I’m sorry to be the one to
have to tell you, but this is prison. You’ll find the Annual Wankers’ Symposium at the Yarra
Gardens Convention Centre.’ Several of the dozers opened their eyes and murmured their
appreciation of Jimmy’s more recognisable tones. ‘I mean Jesus, Grey, I’ve got two uni
degrees and I don’t know what the frig you’re on about.’

‘Ignorance may play well in the yard, Jimmy, but in the theatre the cultivated intellect finds its reward.’

In the tense quiet, everybody in the room could hear Budgie’s and Lisa-May’s hissing. The words were unclear, but it was obvious they were arguing.

‘Look,’ said Moss, returning the focus of the group to The Tragedy of Donohoe, ‘the play is about my ancestor, the original Wild Colonial Boy. Charles Harpur wrote this play about him only three years after Bold Jack Donohoe was killed. The original version was too controversial to perform, and then it was forgotten.’

‘Until now, ladies and gentlemen,’ Grey boomed, standing on his chair. ‘What say you?’

The inmates flicked carpet fluff at one another and revived a worn out argument about whether it was possible to survive for days inside a whale as the prison chaplain had insisted.

‘We need some constables,’ Grey said.

Nobody raised a hand.

‘We also need some cold-blooded, marauding banditti. Have we a Webber?’

‘Yep,’ Jimmy snapped.

‘A Macnamarra?’

‘Me,’ shouted Laurie.

‘A Bomebard?’

Max’s hand shot up.

‘Ha, got you. Bomebard is the laughing stock, a bragging, cowardly trooper.’

The outsider’s white beard couldn’t hide his flush of embarrassment.

Moss edged toward the corner where Budgie and Lisa-May sat, meaning to call them back to take roles in the play. He hesitated, hearing Lisa-May whisper, ‘I’m not ready.’

He momentarily started back to the group, thinking she had addressed him, before realising she couldn’t see him on the other side of the piano.

‘Where would we do it, anyway?’ the whispers continued.

‘Here.’ The voice was breathy, broad.
'What, do it in a room with a dozen people hovering around? You’re joking.’

‘Is this funny?’ Budgie growled.

There was a pause and then a whimper.

Lisa-May stood, glaring at Moss as though he had just thrown the first rock at her stoning. She strode back to the group.

Budgie appeared and he and Moss blurted in synchrony, ‘I didn’t – ’

‘– mean to snoop on...’ Moss began.

‘– hurt her ...’ began his cellmate.

They both trailed off with weak grins.

‘Better come over with the others before you get stuck playing a woman in the play,’ Moss said.

Budgie casually clouted him on the ear.

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Moss held a cigarette lighter under Kim’s letter and carefully passed it between his fingertips as the flames rose. Budgie, lounging on his bed and sketching on scrap paper, looked across the cell and shook his head.

‘No woman is worth burning your fingers for, Moss.’

Kim had sent Moss the kind of letter that he was used to receiving from lawyers. It was typed, carefully phrased (‘after due consideration’, ‘the best interests of all parties,’ blah blah blah). One robot to another. All she needed to say was that she wasn’t bringing Zara to visit ever again. Moss dropped the letter and ground it to soot under his shoe.

‘Has Lisa-May’s uncle waved his wand yet?’ he asked his cellmate sourly.

Budgie flicked on the television. *Celebrity Fat Challenge* seemed to be on twenty-four hours a day, with *Live Cam, Behind the Scenes, Highlights and The Weekly Elimination*.

‘Booked your ticket to Northern New South Wales, have you Budgie? Told the old hippies on the commune to save a few macadamias for you?’

‘The pollie reckons he’d love to help out his niece’s feller,’ Budgie replied, ‘but his
hands are tied. I think I might have to make a few phone calls to mates who’d enjoy teaching the bastard what “hands are tied” actually means.’


‘The bitch can shut her pretty little hole about it and be grateful if I don’t wreck her for opening it in the first place.’

Moss’s hand had hesitated above the dotted line on the consent form to receive two visitors. He hadn’t seen his mother-in-law since his arrest... going on two years. He’d been judged enough times already without meeting her canny gaze. Yet without a chaperone, Zara couldn’t visit Namatjira.

Trinh stood by the wall dividing the Visits Centre from the playground, absent-mindedly stroking her granddaughter’s hair. Zara looked shockingly grown up, too much so for the pose. Her ba had traded her stained grocery store apron for a blouse, black skirt and shoes which shone as vainly as the sun at Namatjira Prison.

‘You have heard of Tran Khai Thanh Thuy?’

Moss blinked.

‘A relation of yours?’ he asked, ushering his visitors to a table.

‘Yes. How do you say?’ she checked with Zara.

After a consultation, Zara translated, ‘Tran Khai Thanh Thuy is the daughter of her cousin’s cousin on the other side of the family, I think.’

‘A criminal,’ Trinh proclaimed, and Moss leaned back warily. ‘Tran Khai Thanh Thuy is a criminal sent to prison in Vietnam.’

‘Um, sorry to hear that.’

‘But they let her out of prison in Two Thousand Eight.’

Trinh was watching Moss from across the table. He wasn’t about to play her game and ask the obvious question.
‘What was her crime?’ Zara innocently obliged.

‘Thuy dares to write Vietnam must be democracy. Dare join Bloc 8406, illegal democracy group.’

Moss cringed. If only Trinh would simply call him a thug and a bastard unfit for her daughter and granddaughter and be done with it. The old woman probably expected him to rage about how unfair her relative’s imprisonment was. She could forget it.

‘It’s so unfair,’ Zara protested. ‘Thuy should be a legend, not a prisoner.’

‘Yes,’ Trinh said, a twinkle in her eye. ‘And she is not the only one. Plenty of people are in prison still, for they write Vietnam must be democracy.’

‘But, but,’ Zara said, ‘it’s not like she hurt anyone.’

The look she gave Moss was suddenly full of regret, as the comparison she and her ba had drawn became clear.

Trinh watched him tight-lipped, perhaps with disdain, or perhaps with pity.

‘Remember the time those idiots came into your shop wearing Viet Cong army helmets?’ Zara asked Trinh. Bless her, the girl was doing her best. ‘Little Saigon was full of South Viets, refugees, and they started telling the idiots to take off the helmets. They were like, “No way. We paid good money for these on our holiday to Ha Long Bay,” and, “It’s a free country”.’

Trinh nodded, brightening.

‘Customers – these little old ladies – started pelting the idiots with dragon fruit, lotus roots, green papayas,’ Zara continued. ‘One of them copped the chunkiest, spikiest durian from point blank range. Remember, Ba, when the sầu riêng hit him and he started shouting that he was going to sue. And you patted him like he was a toddler and said – this is the bit I won’t forget – you said, “Now aren’t you glad you thought to wear a helmet, with all this fruit flying about?”’

Trinh had not shared her past in Vietnam, over the fourteen years since Moss met her in Footscray.

‘I grow up in the North,’ she said.

Moss and Zara stared at her across the steel table in the Visits Centre.

‘My family, traders, have to our leave village, Khanh Nhac, in the American War.'
Disloyal to Ho Chi Minh, people say.’ Zara was rubbing her Ba’s wrinkled hands, Moss swallowing his rising shame. ‘We go to South, I marry and try to speak the same as him, if I speak at all. Not safe there either, so we find a boat. My father, my brother, my littlest baby die. I don’t blame the Communists, it’s war, I just go.’

Did Kim know this? Moss had tried once or twice to find out more from his wife, but she had been raised in Australia. She’d been spared the past, she said, and he was left to wonder if such a thing were possible.

Trinh fixed him in her gaze.

‘Now Moss, why do you want make more trouble?’

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Ba Trinh had obviously forgotten where the she parked the groceries delivery truck, which was quite an achievement since nobody else had left one of those outside Namatjira Prison.

‘You alright?’ she asked, as she led Zara on a lap of the car park. People said that when they meant, ‘I’ve got to get something off my chest’.

She shrugged.

‘Your dad, he remembers, ahh, events in his own way,’ Ba Trinh said. ‘I am outside when Moss fights at his party – can’t stop him. Nobody can.’

Zara pointed to a distant row of vehicles.

‘Over there.’

Her ba had stopped, however, lost in thought.

‘He remembers different, the way different people of the world hear the sound a dog makes different.’

‘Woof,’ she snapped. ‘Let’s get out of the sun, p-lease, before I turn into a real bi – ’

No, not with Ba Trinh.

‘Woof, okay. But you hear gâugâu, too, different Vietnamese for the sound a dog makes.’

Zara squinted back at Ba Trinh as they set a course for the truck the aging
storekeeper had insisted on driving.

‘It’s woof. Or ‘gâugâu’, yeah, but that’s all.’

‘Or is it hoang, as in Thailand? I hear these, people say long ago. Is it maybe gong, as in Malaysia?’

They reached the car and opened the doors to let the heat escape.

‘So nobody can say for sure what they hear, what they see, what they remember?’

Zara ventured.

‘They all can. They all are sure.’

‘How can a court ever be sure enough about what people did to put them in jail, then?’


Settling into the car, Zara shook her head.

‘Dad shouldn’t even be in jail.’

An hour into the next rehearsal of The Tragedy of Donohoe, Budgie was still on strike. Grey had tried to press him into the role of Mary Fence with the ill-advised entreaty that ‘Bold Jack loses his lustre without a gangster’s moll pining after him’.

There was talk of an Australia Day opening performance, however, and everybody seemed to have forgotten the disappointment of Baby Face: The Carl Williams Story. The Plaster Casts – all except Lisa-May who hadn’t shown up yet – had spread out as far as possible in their guarded room to rehearse their lines. Grey stalked the inmates, who mumbled through archaic blank verse.

‘Thought mad,’ Mac stuttered.

‘No, no, no,’ Grey lectured. ‘Thou’rt mad. It makes no sense otherwise.’

‘Well, someone’s bloody mad.’

‘Moss, show your understudy how to act,’ Grey commanded. ‘Act Two, Scene Six.’

Moss wandered over and recited, without glancing at his copy of the script:
I ever was, and feel I ever shall be,
The slave of passion. Shame, fear, respect,
Gratitude, consequence, – all, all
That awe to peace those of the general man
Hang but like slips upon the necks of mine.

Max, the inmates and officers stared at Moss.
‘Blow me if you aren’t a walking freak show, Moss Donohoe,’ Jimmy exclaimed.
‘I can’t remember me sisters’ names some days,’ said Laurie. ‘You make me sick.’
‘Moss isn’t that clever,’ Budgie told them. ‘Once I caught the bugger counting the
legs of a spider in our cell ... and he only counted six legs.’
‘There were six legs left because you had pulled two out, mate,’ said Moss.
‘He’s full of it,’ countered Budgie. ‘Anyone can memorise a verse for a party trick.
Let’s see, Mossy Balls.’ He flicked through his photocopy of the script. ‘All right, I want Act
Three, Scene Five. No cheating. “Then had you seen...”’
Moss concentrated hard, while The Plaster Casts crowded around him.

How his death wound did ope its bloody chaps
And spout at him that made it – I could not howl –
A bear robb’d of her whelps – a mad hyena
Famishing in the toils – Avoid me,
Hate me – Hide me ye gloomy woods.

Grey and the outsiders clapped.
‘Yeah, we hate you,’ Jimmy said. ‘You’d better hide.’
The greatest crime is pretension.
Grey stood on a chair and ordered, ‘Back to work at once, good fellows. Budgie, my
Mary Fence (yes that means you), you absolutely must be ready for a full run through next
week.’
Between lines of the play, the men speculated on Lisa-May’s whereabouts.
Jimmy said she was being cavity searched and he’d have a video of her ordeal, titled *Natural Blonde*, available by the following week, via a friendly prison officer, at the very reasonable price of three decks of smokes. Laurie suspected she’d been rolled for drugs while entering the prison. The rehearsal ended without her. On the way back to the cells Mac gave the explanation which Moss found most convincing. Lisa-May had simply opted for a more enjoyable way of spending Thursday afternoon than suffering Grey’s hectoring and Budgie’s bad breath. Listening to school aged relatives play the recorder, perhaps, or spewing and licking it up, or sitting in the bath with an electric toaster.

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The rumour spread faster across Namatjira Prison than Moss could run. Someone had ‘got to’ Lisa-May, whatever that meant. Mac, Jimmy, Choc, Laurie and the rest in the Rec Room either didn’t know any more wouldn’t explain it to him.

‘Slow down, Moss,’ said Officer Dover. ‘Rec Time’s not over yet.’

She didn’t stop him, however, from leaving for the cell where he was sure he would find Budgie. What had the shrunken ogre gone and done?

The sound coming from the bathroom adjoining Moss’s and Budgie’s cell was one he had heard before. After his Pop died, his mother left his father in the bathroom and took Moss and Krystal outside, for a talk, supposedly, but all they did was huddle on the verandah. It was August, arctic and dimming. The sound of weeping found them still, a noise more credibly the release of a muddy spring than a man.

Budgie flushed the toilet and emerged. He flicked on *Celebrity Fat Challenge: Behind the Scenes* as though he hadn’t noticed Moss in the cell. In the bathroom Moss found a photograph bobbing in the toilet bowl. He only recognised the woman in it by her blonde hair and dangly earrings. Sprawled on concrete somewhere, Budgie’s girlfriend looked up at him through slits. She had two black eyes. Moss read, in permanent marker: ‘Lisa-May be changing her name to Panda.’

Moss vomited on her. He reached into the slop to tear the photo into strips and flushed the toilet again. Finally she was gone.
25.

Donohoe’s Cave

Sydney, March 1st, 1828. On the day he was sentenced to death for highway robbery, Bold John Donohoe bolted into the bush. He had been under guard in leg irons. When Moss was a boy his Pop had described one of Bold Jack’s hideouts, Donohoe’s Cave in the rocky rises above a bend in the Nepean River. He said it was there the bushranger received word that William Smith and George Kilray, the two men convicted alongside him, had been hanged. Kilray’s rope broke and he watched as Smith, dangling above him, kicked and shat. A new rope was fetched and Kilray was luckier, said Pop, on his second drop.

Moss heads west from Fairfield, trying to imagine it’s 1830. Where the suburbs of Sydney meet the Blue Mountains, he cuts south along the Nepean River. He has already shown his face too often today, but he is quickly lost, with no chance of finding Donohoe’s Cave unless he calls upon local knowledge. The man behind the counter in the Wallacia general store regards Moss unhurriedly, as there are no other customers.

‘Fishing at Norton’s Basin? Plenty of easier places to get to, sport.’

‘I heard it’s pretty.’

The old man winks.

‘Cross the bridge over the creek, up the hill, right at the quarry sign, gravel track to a place called Warragamba Park. Can’t get any further in a two-wheel-drive like your Falcon.’

If the police track him to Wallacia they will have a description of not only the suspicious ‘fisherman’ but also his vehicle. His luck will have to run out soon. He’s so hungry that it’s hard not to snatch at all the food that he can’t afford off the shelves, but it’s also hard to rob a bloke who grins at you like the old storekeeper does.

Following his instructions, Moss drives through the bush until he arrives at a gate high above the river gorge. A bike is chained to it. Moss drives back the way he has come until he finds a gap in the trees, where he parks the car out of view from the track. It must be about five o’clock, judging by the angle of the sun through the eucalypts. Time to start
the hike while it is still light. Carrying a backpack containing only a sleeping bag and the jar of Turkish delights from the caravan on the Murray River bank where he slept last night, he makes his way back to the locked gate.

The rocky gorge before him is untamed. Perfect, if he can find a way down and a place to cross the river to the cave on the other side. He follows a rugged shale track until it bends away from Norton’s Basin, the deep pool he can make out through the bush where the Nepean bends, upstream from its junction with the Warragamba River. There a steep, rock-hopping foot trail leads Moss down the gorge. From a boulder he peers across to the unmistakable black shape of a cave above the water.

“Ello, ‘Ello, ‘Ello,’ calls a storybook English bobby, or so it seems until a bald head appears through the scrub. ‘Spot of bushwalking, mate?’

‘Er, yes.’

The man clambers onto Moss’s boulder. He is clad in lycra and beaming like he is on the podium at the Olympic velodrome.

‘Me too, when I can’t get somewhere on two wheels. How did you hear about the place?’

‘The shop in Wallacia.’

The bald man turns in a circle, taking in the rugged landscape. ‘God’s own, isn’t it? Just the ticket if your job is as stressful as mine.’

Moss gives a terse nod and hops off the boulder. *Don’t trust your own mother.*

‘I must say,’ the lycra man’s voice chases him, ‘you look familiar.’

Moss doesn’t turn back. He scuttles down the trail until he reaches the sandy river bank of Norton’s Basin. At the southern end of the deep pool the river splashes shallow between rocks, which Moss bounds easily across. He follows a wallaby trail around the basin, climbing through dense scrub to a wall of rock. One, two, three, four footholds are cut in the wall, the number his Pop told him Bold Jack had made on the climb to his hideout. Moss clambers up to a ledge backed by another rock wall, this one sprayed pink and blue with indecipherable graffiti between patches of lichen. Around the corner he stoops into the gloomy refuge of Donohoe’s Cave.

The grotto is smaller than he had imagined, no more than four metres deep, but
Moss is satisfied to slump on its rough floor and gaze out of its mouth across Norton’s Basin. At last he has time to contemplate the beauty of this meeting of rapids and tortoise-shell pool, flame coloured crags and forest of river she-oaks, gums, banksias and black wattles. And it is only a coo-ee or three from the nearest housing developments. With places like this to hide, it’s a wonder convict bolters were caught at all. They had to keep out of the way of spears, though, and they had to eat. He opens the jar of Turkish delights and chews his way through the lot of them.

The sun is dipping behind the gorge as he climbs down again to the rapids, for a drink of river water in the last of the autumn day’s warmth. This is a place he could get used to.

He takes the wallaby trail back to his cave. By seven o’clock he is snuggled under his blanket, breathing slowly, listening to the birds’ evening song. The tune is a living record, probably the one the birds’ ancestors serenaded Bold Jack Donohoe with. In the receding light the cave mouth seems to close in time with Moss’s eyelids and he gives himself to the millennial might of the mountain.

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‘Mr Knox, what exactly did you find suspicious about the man you met?’ asks the duty sergeant behind the desk at Penrith Police Station.

The cyclist scratches his groin through skin-thin lycra.

‘He didn’t want to talk to me.’

That’s hardly strange for someone who has chosen to take a ramble down a secluded river gorge, in Sergeant Buck’s opinion. He doesn’t want to talk to the cyclist either.

‘I got back to my bike at the gate in Warragamba Park,’ Mr Knox continues, ‘and there was no car parked there.’

The Sergeant yawns. In the bush bordering Sydney he has encountered people on
spiritual retreats, latter day swagmen, kooky cave-dwellers awaiting nuclear apocalypse, masturbators, astronomers and yobbos. If such folk were hauled away, half the country would be behind bars.

‘So the individual must have walked to Norton’s Basin from Mulgoa or Wallacia, Mr Knox. It’s hardly suspicious behaviour.’

‘Well, he had this steely look in his eyes.’

‘I had better arrest my mother-in-law, too, then.’

The cyclist stares hard at Sergeant Buck.

‘He took off like a wild animal. Now, if you won’t take my report seriously, sergeant, I will go over your head.’

The sergeant nods, marvelling that even in leggings so tight, Knox is clearly pulsing with testosterone.

‘We are grateful for your report and will make thorough inquiries.’

‘Tonight.’

Far out.

‘Of course, Mr Knox.’

An hour later the sergeant and a sleepy junior partner are sitting in a patrol car in Warragamba Park, above Norton’s Basin. The headlights catch bats and the waving tops of the trees on the steep slope toward the river, but no suspicious hikers. Sergeant Buck hands the young policeman a torch. They wander down the track until the constable twists his ankle on a tree root. Typical, the sergeant thinks, and leaves him behind. With his torch trained on the uneven track, he hikes downhill for about half a kilometre of unfamiliar terrain, listening to his noisy footfall and unwittingly passing by the unmarked shortcut to Norton’s Basin.

The track narrows in the scrub close to the junction of the Nepean and the Warragamba Rivers. Under a moonless sky, Sergeant Buck is a dropped torch away from oblivion. If there’s a psychopath on the loose, this is the worst place to meet him. It could be that escaped prisoner the Hari bloody Krishnas reckoned they spotted recently, the one in the fuzzy video on telly. Dingo, everyone is calling him. He tries telling himself there is probably nobody other than the odd wallaby out here, but it does little to calm his nerves.
Back at the top of the hill fifteen minutes later, the sergeant finds his junior partner sitting contentedly on a log.

‘How’s that ankle?’

‘Eh? Oh. Better.’ The prick snickers. ‘Find anyone?’

‘Nah. Bloody spooky out here at night, but.’

They drive back to Wallacia and park outside a little weatherboard house off the main road, where a puckered face peeps out from between the curtains. When the sergeant knocks, however, there is no answer. After a while he calls to the old man through a door so flimsy he could smash it with a single kick.

‘Mr Greg, it’s the police. I need to ask about a customer of yours.’

A voice from behind the door growls, ‘Scram.’

Sergeant Buck rolls his eyes at his partner.

‘Mr Greg, open the door please.’

Silence.

‘Something to hide, perhaps, Mr Greg?’

‘I only came across a decent copper once in me life.’

The sergeant sighs. Here we go again, another ingrate mongrel whose ingrate mongrel father probably socked some other ingrate mongrel at the pub and never forgave the policeman who dragged him off. Either that or the joker is still sore about a speeding fine he got twenty years ago.

‘I only came across a decent copper once in me life,’ the voice behind the door repeats, ‘and he was flat as a pancake in the middle of the highway under twenty-six tons of semi-trailer.’

The sergeant snorts, undaunted.

‘We understand a tall man, about thirty, wearing a hi-vis top and a VB cap, was in your store today.’

‘Nup.’

‘You gave him directions to Norton’s Basin, we believe.’

‘People believe in the second coming. Life’s full of disappointments.’

The young constable threatens, ‘You could be arrested for aiding and abetting a
known criminal.’

Laughter reaches the policemen’s ears from inside the house. The sergeant, who has no reason to suppose a criminal is in the area at all, screws up his nose at his partner and starts walking back to the patrol car. Waste of bloody time.

‘What?’ the young constable asks, following the sergeant. ‘He’s lucky I don’t break his teeth.’

‘You reckon the old codger’s got any left to break, super-cop?’

The storekeeper finally opens the door as the police are climbing into their car.

‘I’ll let you bastards guess who was driving the semi-trailer the day I came across that decent copper,’ he taunts.

The sergeant starts the engine, troubled by the feeling he will hear more of Mr Knox and the suspicious bushwalker. Why does every busy-body amateur cyclist have to squeeze into lycra?
Moss and Budgie ignored the call to the Thursday afternoon meeting of The Plaster Casts. Mac had come to visit with a dozen bottles of home-made vodka and deck of cards, while the prison officers looked away on the proviso of an equal supply of bottles from the celebrated C-Section distillery.

‘Stuff the play,’ Budgie said, leaning back on his bed against the concrete wall. Beside him Moss protested, ‘The play is brilliant. I knew my lines before I picked it up.’

Mac, who had finished one bottle already, handed more vodka to each of the men. ‘I only kept going to rehearsals ‘cause Budgie reckoned – I can say it now – he reckoned we were gonna bust out on opening night,’ said Mac. ‘You know, in costume with beards and guns we ... wait for it –’

‘You were going to cunningly swap the props for loaded rifles?’ What could possibly go wrong?

Mac was impressed. ‘Sharp, mate, sharp. Anyhow, I say stuff the dogs that got to Panda.’

Budgie tensed and Moss whispered to Mac, ‘Don’t call her Panda, mate.’

‘I don’t even know who they are, who got to my girl,’ Budgie said.

‘I’ll find out,’ promised Mac. ‘You’ll know who they are by the simple fact they’ll fucking vanish.’

Moss struggled to follow the conversation as it ranged modes of mutilation befitting Lisa-May’s attacker. The room swayed and he tried to remember some thing some bloke told him some time. He offered, as a balm, ‘Women are like pine needles.’

The men mulled over Moss’s assertion.

Finally, Mac enquired, ‘How? They don’t grow on pine trees, Moss.’

‘They talk, they walk, they aren’t pointy,’ noted Budgie.
‘Women are like pine needles,’ Moss repeated, unable to elaborate.

Mac pushed him playfully.

‘Someone call this feller a taxi,’ he said as Moss slumped sideways.

He lay on the bed and vainly searched his mind for the truth about pine needles.

Grey vanished, and with him Namatjira prison theatre. Mac seeded a rumour that it was Grey who organised the bashing of Lisa-May and, as promised, he’d reaped vengeance on Budgie’s behalf. They hadn’t witnessed what Moss had, during the wee hours while his cellmate slept: the director cheerfully whistling Magical Mystery Tour as two officers escorted him from his C-Section cell forever. Budgie had drawn a flock of pelicans in aerial formation over a mountainous coast that morning, with not a single mutilated breast or cored skull in sight. Moss decided to keep his mouth shut. Besides, he couldn’t prove Grey’s guilt. Jealousy was motive enough for a psychopath, if he was one, but surely there was more to it.

Several weeks later, loafing in the yard, Budgie expounded on the supposed similarities between Choc’s mother and a vacuum cleaner. Jimmy found it hilarious, Moss found it boring and Choc, Grey’s former cellmate, found it the perfect occasion to share what he had learnt about Lisa-May. The Shaman had been released recently, still owing three hundred dollars to the card sharp, Grey. Debts accrued at Namatjira didn’t dissolve so easily. A job on a young woman by the Shaman was worth six hundred dollars, at mates’ rates. Half a dozen prison officers, who had guarded the Plaster Cast prisoners and watched the romance between Budgie and Lisa-May blossom, chipped in fifty dollars each to cover the shortfall. It was for the girl’s own good, a taste of the real Budgie, Dover had assured Grey. The director had then used a contact in Corrections Victoria to arrange a transfer to Fulham Prison, in Gippsland.

Budgie spat casually.

‘Why does everyone keep going on about that Lisa-May slurry?’
Over the weeks that followed, the bin by the door in his and Moss’s cell overflowed with sketches of intestine lynch-ropes and peeled thighs. Mummified heads lolled on disembowelled bodies in cages built of bones. Moss was becoming a world expert on cracks in the ceiling.

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Zara stacked the boot of the car with presents she and her mum had received in the mail, ready to take to Auntie Krystal’s house on Christmas Day. There were more than they expected, given what her mum called The Situation. It was going to be freaky eating Christmas lunch with Shane’s dingoes drooling in the background. Pop and Nanna could hardly invite everybody to their motorhome, though. Zara’s mum wasn’t offering to cater and Ba Trinh wasn’t into Christmas, not that she got out of sending presents. Arc had posted presents from ... Masada? Where on Earth was Masada? Guilt must have got to chesty Chessie Petrovic, who took away Kim’s proper job, because she sent a parcel, too. There was also one package that arrived the other day addressed to Zara. No surname, no return address.

Zara and Kim were the first to arrive at Auntie Krystal’s house, as the smoggy morning turned scorching hot. The hostess was hysterical about a plum pudding she had hung in calico two months earlier, which was covered in mould. Shane surprised the guests with his tuxedo and warm kisses that smelt of raw mince and bourbon. He had not only shut the dingoes in the shed, but also volunteered to cook Christmas lunch. Watching his calloused mitts squelch rissoles on the bench, Zara was glad she made the salads herself and Nanna had promised to bring a turkey.

By midday the feast was prepared and the guests had all arrived and crowded around the Christmas tree, ready to take turns opening their presents. Auntie Krystal and Shane gave her a giant pink handbag (straight to the bin with that!). Fluke and Shelley gave her a necklace threaded with opals they had prospected at Lightning Ridge. By the time Zara had opened a bottle of InstaGleam Illuminating Body Cream from Ba Trinh, she’d
almost forgotten the mess she had for a life. She tested the cream on her arm and marvelled at how it shimmered, just as Melody’s and Sas’s skin did since they had started using it.

She saved the mystery parcel for last. Glimpsing the present, she tried to rewrap it, but there was an instant chorus of, ‘Let’s see.’ She scanned their eager faces, faces that might never look at her the same way again. Taking the book out, she closed her eyes and held it up for all to see: a grimy edition of *True History of the Kelly Gang*.

‘Aw, yeah,’ said Shane, as if he had a clue who sent the present. Only Zara and her mum could possibly have known who had offered it to her on the drive home from Fiends’ Gap before her dad got locked up. Kim snatched the book and read the inscription inside its front cover. Her hand jerked to cover her mouth. She was still a moment, and then she stood and walked slowly out of the room, dropping the book on the carpet. Shelley picked it up and read aloud:

To the girl I promised this book,
I found an ancient receipt with your address on it the other day, cleaning to move house, and remembered the time you and your dad gave me a lift on the Calder Freeway. (Forget your names, sorry.) Better late than never, as they say.
Merry Christmas, from Tim Malley.

Zara couldn’t explain to the family that her dad killed an innocent man. That Peri’s boyfriend with the whistle and gurgle laugh was not the hitchhiker Moss convinced himself he was on the night of his thirtieth birthday party (*you convinced your dad, you did, YOU*). That Peri’s boyfriend hadn’t stalked her and taken photos of her. That the hitchhiker was equally innocent. That the creep was somebody else and, worst of all, she now suspected she had known who it was all along.

Still she couldn’t dob. Her mum would tell Moss the truth, divorce him, hate him. Oh God, what would her dad do when he found out? He would realise what a filthy fuck-up
a girl would have to be to bring it upon herself. Tickle tickle, kiss kiss, one two three, and what a game it was back then, at eleven and ten, earlier maybe – nothing was definite, nothing simple. They’d both see it in her, finally, see that she’s not worth spitting on.

‘Zara,’ Auntie Krystal was pleading. Zara!’

‘You have to tell us what’s the matter,’ said Nanna.
Numb. Too numb to reply.

Eventually the Shane said, ‘We should eat the lunch before the flies do.’

Zara held her silence throughout the meal, while the others watched her curiously.
They made feeble chatter about the dingo fence built in the 1880s from the Darling Downs to the Great Australian Bight; the joys of motorhome living; fuel consumption in heavy vehicles, and the price of a KFC Dinner for Two. When Fluke held his lighter under a tablespoon of brandy and poured it onto the plum pudding, the blue flames lulled the guests into a stupor.

Kim emerged from the toilet only to murmur her farewells and to slip out to the car.

Zara followed and loaded her Christmas presents into the boot, except for the grimy novel from the hitchhiker. She read the hitchhiker’s innocent inscription again – better late than never – and then dropped the book into Krystal’s wheelie bin.

‘What are you going to tell your father?’ Kim asked when Zara got into the passenger seat.

‘Me? Nothing. You?’

‘… I don’t think I’ll know until I go and see him. Don’t you cry. Don’t. He’s brought everything on himself.’
Tickle tickle, kiss kiss, one two three.

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Moss couldn’t taste the bacon and eggs. Lunch was to be roast chicken, plum pudding and ice cream, followed by a dinner of ham, salads and jelly. So said Laurie, who seemed to
believe it was worth going to prison for the Christmas fare. Zara’s gourmet delights, any
day of the year, would put the screws’ treats to shame.

‘Chin up, Moss, or they’ll add you to the list for suicide watch,’ warned Mac, as the
cellmates sat side by side at breakfast. ‘The screws will raid the cells for drugs, turn over
rubbish bins looking for home brews (C-Section distillery’s safe, course) and they’ll nail you
for anything they can.’

That was why Moss found several syringes, a fire cracker and a snuff DVD under his
own mattress before breakfast, then.  Thanks, Budgie!

‘Tolerate, don’t celebrate,’ Mac advised. ‘That’s how you get through Christmas
inside.’

After lunch Moss tried to phone Krystal’s house, but was forbidden because his
sister’s name wasn’t listed on his phone card. He must have looked pathetic, because the
supervising officer eventually said, ‘Oh alright, since it’s Christmas.’

Shane picked up the phone and informed Moss that Zara and Kim had already left.
Shelley and Krystal were cleaning up and Fluke was in the shed with the dingoes.

‘I’ll take the portable phone out to your old man,’ Shane said.

Moss protested that he was on a twenty minute time limit and wanted to talk to
Zara and Kim. He had to hear their voices, listen for their lo... Christ, he was going soft.
Shane must have been walking with the phone in his pocket, because all Moss could hear
were footsteps, followed by the shed door grinding open. Although Shane’s voice came
faintly on the line, he seemed to be shouting.

‘What have you done to my dingoes, Fluke?’

The dingoes howled horrendously off key. Could it be... Moss heard his dad’s slow,
full bodied laughter. The phone must have been passed to him. Before Moss hung up,
Shane groaned, ‘Aw, Fluke. You do not get a bloke’s dingoes stoned without permission.’

Moss tried phoning Zara and Kim at home. No answer, same on his wife’s mobile.
He waited for her recorded message, in which he could make out one or two indistinct
words in the girlish voice of his daughter from the background. He pressed redial and
listened over and again until Jimmie, waiting his turn, tired of signalling a slit throat and
yanked the phone from his hand.
27.

Natural Justice

The dawn screeches of cockatoos invade Moss’s dream as the death cries of his towering scrap metal creations at Fiends’ Gap. He is devouring the Fiends, hungrily taking all their rage and terror back within him. He wakes in Donohoe’s Cave with no recollection of himself as a swollen great Saturn. His stomach rumbles. There is nobody to complain to, however, so he dismisses his hunger as he has dismissed heat, cold, cramp and knitting needle stab wounds since his escape.

Standing at the edge of the cave with his head bowed slightly under its upper lip, he gazes down past a ledge further below to the water. He slips out of his clothes and edges left from the cave to the footholds and back around the ledge, from where a sheer cliff plunges ten metres to the clouds reflected on the river’s surface. Before his mind can stop his body, he leaps. The water clamps him all over before he is ready and he opens his eyes centimetres from a boulder that juts from the cliff into the deep. In the unmeasurable time it takes to sink, paralysed by the shock of the cold on the stone bed of the river bend, Moss imagines the realm above the surface proceeding exactly as it was destined to, without him.

*The nosy cyclist cycles and the general store keeper winks and Phan Thi Sang spins the steering wheel grinning. The Commander, without a car, sucks in sweet air walking to the shops in Castlemaine for the first time since he got his licence. Arc scrubs the deck of the Bass Strait ferry, or perhaps takes his chance to sail a yacht on Lake Eyre, yet unable to enjoy it without his mate.*

*Namatjira Prison’s community service team builds a whole lot of nothing. Jimmy, Laurie, Mac and the others hazard Hepatitis C in unoriginal ways and Moss doesn’t blame them. Nor does he blame his mother and father for careering across the red sand, shaved aerodynamic, a thousand kilometres from their shame. The stalker creep, though, burns in Hell. Until now, Moss never needed Hell.*

*In Footscray the Morning Crew keeps on calling and Krystal Verity swears to the cops*
she hardly knows her brother's name. On the back step of her blue house in Footscray Trinh savours the steam off her tea as though it’s the warm breath of the daughter and granddaughter she lost to Sydney. Kim smashes a test tube and wonders why her hands shake. She’s convinced they’ll be still before long and if only he could tell her she’s wrong wrong wrong. Zara packs a toiletries bag and a change of clothes and umms and ahhs over the wording of the farewell note she will leave on her pillow.

Moss could let the Nepean flood his lungs and there would be no proof, just a girl waiting, sighing, closing, finally tearing the note on her pillow into tiny pieces. A monk to the principles of disappearance no more, he pushes off the bottom of the river, more certain than at any time since his arrest that he has a place in the realm above the surface.

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Mr Greg watches the naked swimmer break the water again and gulp for breath. From his hiding place under a river she-oak on the other side of Norton’s Basin it is tricky to tell, but, yep, it’s a hundred to one the same character from the shop yesterday, the tall bloke he gave directions to this very spot. With the aid of his specs he sees that the swimmer’s got a face on him like his galloper is first past the post at long odds. A well-nigh suicidal leap off a cliff into the Nepean will do that for a man. A man who survives, at any rate.

The shopkeeper tracks upstream along the bank and then picks his way across the rocks to the swimmer’s side of the river. With all the slyness his arthritic body can muster, he creeps back towards the Basin to take a proper gander at the character in question from the cover of the scrub.

When there are no customers in Mr Greg’s store he watches telly, which is how he first came across a report about the runaway prisoner dubbed Dingo. Take off a bit of the nose and the cheeks and give him a shave and the bloke who he met yesterday would’ve been the spitting image of the one in the photos and video Channel Nine flashed for all the world to see. Peering down to the water, he grins. Behold the head of Dingo.
Unarmed, with his wrinkly body clad only in shorts and a singlet, Mr Greg tackles the rungs cut in the rock wall to Donohoe’s Cave. Not bad for an old feller, eh. He’s served time with plenty of Victorians. God knows he’s served time with men from all over, at some time or another. The mail is, from one or two who keep up with a Namatjira Prison lifer called Mac, that Dingo should have got a medal instead of nine years. Dingo topped a rockspider who stalked his daughter, they say. It would be common knowledge except the judge in his wisdom ruled the evidence inadmissible (‘baseless hearsay’, he decided) and irrelevant to whether Dingo did the deed. Course it’s bloody relevant, it’s obvious to Mr Greg, same way you don’t go to court each time you put a raghead out of his misery in Afghanistan. The upshot was the media left the stalking of the daughter out of their reports.

Now all that bothers him. That does. Not the topping the rockspider bit, mind. When a bloke goes down for doing what any decent father would be justified in doing, it’s his natural bloody right to break out, no matter what is the kerfuddled law of the land. Only the most miserable kind of bastard wouldn’t tell the escapee that the pigs have been snorting about his trail. This he believes with a passion that would make the brothers at St Michael’s School for Boys cry. In his Grade Three handwriting – the grade St Michael’s expelled him – he etches with a shard of rock on the cave wall:

**Cops here soon. Long live Dingo.**

Enjoying himself stupendously, Mr Greg adds:

**K I L L T H E R O C K S P I D E R S**

He is admiring his work when all at once the air deserts his lungs. There is an arm around his neck and none of his old headlock escape moves are working. His face hits the shale floor of the cave. The pressure on his throat eases, finally, and he manages to plead, ‘Don’t kill me.’
'You wrote this on the wall?' a voice above him demands.

'What do you reckon?'

Free to stand up, Mr Greg turns to face Dingo. It’s him, dead cert.

'Sorry.'

The word sounds bizarre, coming from Dingo.

'Don’t worry about me,’ Mr Greg says. A few deep breaths have restored his enthusiasm. Why, he once survived after some dickheads at Long Bay Gaol poured rat poison down his throat. ‘You can’t take chances, right? The disguise is a beauty, by the way. Pity they’ve got a spot-on description out. You know, there’s a lot of fellers want you to stick it up ’em, mate. Take out every last fuckin’ rockspider and as many pigs as you can along the way.’

Dingo looks at him as though he doesn’t want to mention that he’s noticed bird shit in his hair.

Before parting, Mr Greg reaches for the cave dweller’s right hand – you can tell a lot from a handshake – and the hesitant grasp almost convinces him he’s actually met some nameless nudist freak. The face and height are matches for Dingo, it can’t be denied, yet what kind of desperado is fussy about his allies? All this begs a Bundy and a quiet mulling over. There’s the tatt they always mention in the descriptions, Z, right there where a collar would sit on his neck.

‘By the way, Dingo, what does the Z–’

Dingo clenches his teeth and Mr Greg retreats from the cave in a hurry, eyes darting between Australia’s Most Wanted and the sheer drop beside them. He follows the rock wall around and down to the track. Some hotheads he’s known over the years wouldn’t take kindly to all this, he reflects. He sees it differently, doesn’t need to be thanked. He’ll give it a few years, or a few weeks more likely – be bloody realistic, a few hours – and then the grandchildren will hear how he saved Dingo’s hide. He can almost see their doting eyes looking up at him, little pictures of respect they are.
Sergeant Buck’s cheeks redden as the Assistant Commissioner of Police repeats for the third time, ‘Did you, or did you not, abort the attempted capture of Mostyn John Donohoe last night because you took fright in the dark?’

The Sergeant silently curses the young constable who supposedly twisted his ankle and waited while he at least made a go of the search at Norton’s Basin. The Assistant Commissioner has to be livid to venture to the police station in Penrith and ambush him behind his desk. What else could he have done last night, though? In a country where the average person has only heard of a minute fraction of the towns, let alone pockets of wild bush, a cop needs help. That canny old shopkeeper, Mr Greg, wouldn’t have squeaked even if he’d gouged his eyes out and fed them to him.

‘Listen, I had no reason to believe the man was in fact Dingo.’

‘“Dingo,” now?’ repeats the Assistant Commissioner with disgust. ‘He’s some kind of folk hero to you, too, is he?’

‘Roaming the country, hunting the f – (excuse me), hunting the animals who molest children, so they say.’

‘We’re pinning him with assault, kidnap, theft …’

‘Word is, Dingo’s descended from Bold Jack Donohoe.’

‘Potentially arson, the Ballina attacks, the Byron Bay rape… on top of the original killing.’ The Assistant Commissioner’s voice wobbles. ‘How is that not enough to sully a man’s reputation in this country?’

But fuck just one inflatable doll at the Christmas party … eh Commissioner?

Sergeant Buck made a few calls about ‘the suspect’ and a few Internet searches after returning to the station last night. Apparently a second escapee is the one on the rampage in Northern New South Wales, not Dingo who the police have blamed, the notion being that the public will cough up Dingo if it learns fear and loathing.

‘There’s a lot of support out there, and in the ranks too, Commissioner. A lot.’

The older man scowls in the narrowing space across the desk between them.

‘Listen, Buck, I’ll level with you. The rednecks can’t get enough of Mostyn Donohoe, even since Killer on the Run went to air. The vigilantes, the Underbelly watchers, victims of crime support groups, death penalty believers, all the rabble, they adore him. We have to
stomp on that, and fast.’

‘I heard bored housewives are circulating some kind of muscle powder Internet commercial, Get Ripped Quick, with him in it half-naked.’

The Assistant Commissioner straightened his back and switched on his boss voice.

‘Do you have any idea, Sergeant, who reported sighting the suspect?’

‘Yes. A goose in cycling gear, a baldy, struck me as a paranoid busybody. A Mr Knox, I think his name was.’

‘Very good, Sergeant. He was Owen Knox, in fact. Owen Knox QC, if you don’t mind. Told me this morning he doesn’t like to throw titles around when all that needs be done is the proper execution of the duties of a minor officer of the law.’

‘I’ll take another look, Commissioner,’ Sergeant Buck gushes. ‘I’m no coward.’

His superior laughs.

‘Yes, you will indeed take another look, if you value your job. You’ll do it under the command of Detective Keyes, Vic. Police, who has been tracking Mostyn Donohoe since his escape from Namatjira Prison last month. And Buck, I promise you that the next officer I hear say the name Dingo will be a human traffic light in George Street for a year.’
Kim sat in the Namatjira Prison Visits Centre, alone in a crowd like the first time Moss saw her at the Saturday Market in Castlemaine. Without him now, as before, she was perfectly poised. He hesitated at the entrance; his wife looked so pretty that if he stepped close enough to touch her he was in danger of becoming a blubbing mess.

‘Aren’t the ladies meant to shed a tear for you, Moss?’ Officer Strange asked.

In reply he forced a grin and slapped himself on the cheeks, before walking into the Visits Centre. Kim remained seated on the far side of a steel table as he approached.

‘How are you, Moss?’

‘Well, I’m starting to feel like Ebenezer Scrooge, except everyone is from Christmas Past.’

Leaning on her elbows, she cradled her face in her hands and studied him through her thin-rimmed glasses, as if to commit his image to memory.

‘You’re not going to live in Sydney.’ It wasn’t a question. ‘Zara doesn’t want to go,’ Moss added, hoping it was true.

A frown crossed Kim’s face like cloud shadow.

‘What I still don’t get is what was so monumentally wrong with what you – we – had, that you decided to obliterate it.’

‘I didn’t decide to hit the bloke. I thought he was the creep who stalked Zara and he had come back to –’

‘No, Moss. No. There must have been more.’

Moss stood and paced about, shaking his head, until a prison officer told him he had to either sit down or go outside. There were rules about everything. You weren’t allowed to kiss, the signs on the Visits Centre walls warned.

Kim followed him through the glass door and they began a lap of the well-worn path in the grass around the small playground area.
‘It’s just that I thought happily married part-time dads with plenty of opportunity for junk sculpture and gallivanting about with their loopy mate were disqualified from working-class angst.’

‘The Roman emperors had orgies and grapes in the bath. That didn’t take the edge off their wrath when they got angry, did it?’

A ten-year-old boy at the top of the slide asked his prisoner father what an orgy was, and the man gave Moss a dark glare.

‘There has to be a reason you wound up here.’ Kim was pleading now.

‘Was there a reason my great-great-great-great grandfather got himself shot to pieces?’

Kim let out the particular groan that she reserved for mentions of Bold Jack Donohoe. The ten-year-old boy and his father, as well as several other children, stopped playing to listen in.

‘I don’t have to tell you about genetic heritage, Kim.’

‘Good, ’cause I came here to talk about our marriage.’

Moss stopped short in the shade of the three-metre high concrete fence. He clenched his fists and unclenched, clenched and unclenched, awaiting his full sentence.

‘How do you feel about me, Moss?’

‘Funny, that’s what the anger management lady said.’

‘I didn’t marry an emotional retard.’

‘Sounds like you need an appointment with the anger management lady.’

‘Try being serious for a fucking minute.’

Some of the prisoners’ children giggled and a preschooler pointed at Kim and called, ‘Naughty. Smack.’

Moss retreated with Kim to a corner, face to face. Close enough to kiss, he thought bitterly.

‘Well, how do you feel?’ persisted Kim.

‘Isn’t it obvious?’

I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you I love you.

She said, ‘You used to write me poems.’
‘And you didn’t used to swear at me.’
Her chest swelled and, ever so faintly, she seemed to smile.

‘What? Kim?’

‘Remember when I spewed in the bed at my place and you said, “You’d better have food poisoning...”’

‘... or else you’re in the pudding club,’” Moss finished.

‘And I swore like a pub brawler then.’

Moss rested a hand on Kim’s hip and felt its audacious weight there. He remembered, alright, but to speak would have risked breaking the trance of her nostalgia.

‘I was bent over gagging and there you were, patting my back and beaming like a lighthouse and declaring at the top of your lungs, “By Jove, you’ve got a bun in the oven. You’re up the duff. You’re in strife. You’re knocked up.” Mum heard every word and shouted, “Quiet”, but of course it was gobbledygook to her.’

Moss closed the space between his lips and Kim’s.

‘Gross,’ complained the ten-year-old on the playground.

Kim wriggled free so quickly, maybe she hadn’t kissed him back. Out of the corner of his eye Moss saw a prison officer heading grimly towards him.

‘And I thought,’ Kim said into her hand pressed against her face, ‘I thought, I don’t want to have a baby with this boy.’

Fury’s poison flooded him. How easily he had mistaken mourning for nostalgia.

‘You started opening doors for me like I was crippled, not pregnant, remember?’ Kim said. ‘You made that hideous plaster babushka that was supposed to be me.’

Officer Strange stepped between Moss and Kim and tried to usher him away, but he wasn’t ready to leave.

The words he forced out sounded alien: ‘Are you divorcing me?’

Kim leaned back against the wall and paused before answering quietly, ‘No.’

Focusing on Kim, who rubbed her temples and looked back at him as though he was a magic eye puzzle, Moss felt a painful pressure on his wrist. He twisted instinctively out of Officer Strange’s grip. Immediately a crushing forearm locked around his neck, followed by a knee in the back that drove him down on the grass. Within seconds he was pinned to the
ground and surrounded by officers. The sounds of their urgent breath intermingled with
the gasps of the spectating visitors. He could see only the blades of grass before his eyes,
and several pairs of boots. Perhaps Kim had left already, because when he called her name
only Strange answered.

‘Zip your slit, Moss. Get up, walk to the gate and forget any more visits. You’re
banned.’

Passing through the Visits Centre, still surrounded by officers, Moss glimpsed the
men he called friends inside, those lucky enough to have visitors. Jimmy, Mac and Laurie
cheered as though he had laid a match-saving tackle in the backline, seconds from the siren
at the MCG. If only he had stuck at football.
Moss parks down the road from Zara’s school, in the direction he saw her friend walking home yesterday. It is quarter to eight and he doesn’t expect the African girl to pass by for another half an hour, but he can’t afford to risk missing her. He changes a tyre, and then changes it back while he waits, lest he be mistaken for a loiterer. Ha-de-ha. What else is he other than a desperate loiterer whose final hope expires this morning? So much for biding his time. He’ll have plenty of that back inside Namatjira Prison. Unless…

The African girl approaches on the footpath as he is tightening a nut. She is early and alone, thank goodness. The moment she passes, he takes an envelope from his pocket and tosses it onto the footpath.

‘Excuse me,’ he calls to the girl.

She turns and he points to the envelope.

‘I think you dropped something.’

She shakes her head, but picks up the envelope labelled with a professional looking sticker the fine folk at Officeworks printed yesterday: ZARA DONOHUE – CONFIDENTIAL. Moss turns swiftly back to the tyre he is changing. Her footsteps are slow to begin again. She’s wary, then, as expected. Fortunately his back, under a rugby jumper, is all she has to appraise. He has heeded the Wallacia storekeeper’s warning and switched his hi-vis outfit and cap for jeans and a top, which he selected from the overflowing bags beside a Salvation Army op shop collection bin on the way to Fairfield this morning.

After a minute, when he stands and walks around to the driver’s side, a woman he hasn’t noticed until now catches his eye. She is crouched planting chillies out of pots in her front garden.

‘All sorted out?’ she says, glancing curiously at the tyre Moss took off and put back on again.

Thumbs up. Let her call the cops; it probably won’t make a difference now. You
hear about self-made men – ‘Crazy’ John Ilhan, Frank Lowy, Walt flipping Disney – when you are young enough to believe the possibilities of your future infinite. You imagine you can make your name, make yourself, your future and your life, and, if you have to, you can do it all over again. They’re illusions, luck upon accident upon chance, and there are laws even for chance. You are a barnacle on a whale.

Even if the police don’t ambush Moss when he tries to pick up Zara, she will cry to fathom the flooding will in him. She will see it immediately, won’t she, and hear it in his voice? She will sense what he has dismissed as the flotsam of insomnia, that he has imagined a thousand times seizing her sapling wrists and twisting her into the boot of the car. If that’s what it takes.

Detective Keyes, Detective Liston, Sergeant Buck and the four other police in their party crowd into Donohoe’s Cave. Bowing to avoid scraping their heads on the cave roof, they read the warning Mr Greg scratched into the rock.

‘Cops here soon,’ Detective Keyes muses. He bustles through the men to the ledge outside beside the cave and gazes across Norton’s Basin. ‘I want the Donohoe girl’s school monitored, I want the wife returned to the Phans’ flat under guard and I want patrols on the arterial roads out of Fairfield.’

‘Make it arterials out of Sydney,’ says Liston.

‘Yes, spread the net. Read me, Buck?’ asks Keyes, ‘Or should I bring the Assistant Commissioner in on this?’

They’ll change their tone when he personally snaps the cuffs on Dingo.

‘Got it, Detective.’

On the hike back up to Norton’s Basin Road, Keyes mutters, ‘Why would someone want to abet a killer on the run like Moss Donohoe?’

And how, Buck won’t dare ask aloud, does someone make detective without knowing the answer? He’s not beyond the glamour, however perverse it is when you think
it through, of Dingo’s case. For the first time since Sunday School, he prays. *God let it be me, let it be me he who takes him dead or alive.*

‘Alright hotshot,’ Liston says behind Buck, ‘Who wrote on the cave wall?’

‘That’s easy. Last night we interviewed a man –’

Keyes interrupts. ‘Excellent, Buck. On second thoughts, leave the spreading of the net to people halfway competent. You make yourself useful and arrest Donohoe’s aider and abettor.’
Kim’s mother had a twinkle in her eye as she played interrogator on the way to Melbourne Airport.

‘Tell for me, Mrs Donohoe, you want my job in five years? You want to sit here, CEO? Speak fast, I am a busy man.’

Kim sighed. She had an interview in Sydney at the headquarters of Horizons of Plenty Pty. Ltd. and was desperate enough to win the job of research scientist that she had asked her mother to rehearse with her. She had also asked for a lift to the airport and now realised that the groceries truck, spluttering midstream in the morning traffic, was never going to get her there in time to catch her 9:45 flight.

‘Bad attitude Mrs Donohoe.’ Trinh shook her head grimly. ‘Next tell me about family.’

‘My mother’s a sadist.’

‘Pretty lady like you has no husband, no little ones?’ the interviewer probed, as she swung the wheel to exit the freeway.

‘Let’s see,’ Kim muttered under the rumble of the engine. ‘My “little one” refers to me as Cunt. You have to give me the job so I can ditch my homicidal husband – and of course my undead-of-pneumonia mum – and start again somewhere nobody has heard of Moss Donohoe. Three cheers for family.’

The truck’s brakes grunted, halting in the drop-off zone outside the terminal. Kim pecked her mother on the cheek and tried to hop down from the cabin, but she held her by the blouse with a determination suggestive of a button bursting interview attire disaster.

‘One more question. You are captain of a sinking ship and not enough space on lifeboat for all passengers. You can take wise old ones soon die anyway, or cherry blossom children, but they are not strong enough to row to an island...’

Kim groaned.
‘These are not times to lose humour sense,’ her mother said, releasing her.

Inside the terminal, Kim stood behind a cranky businessman at the end of a snaking check-in line. He complained that increased security checks since the previous day’s thwarted airport bombing in the United States had delayed the departure schedule. She would make the flight and the job interview in Sydney, courtesy of the terrorists. Only when the plane lifted her above Melbourne did she begin a giggle that burped into a belly laugh. Thank God for the terrorists!

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The Australasian headquarters of Horizons of Plenty Pty. Ltd. were in an office building two minutes walk up the hill from Circular Quay. This wasn’t simply Sydney, Kim comprehended as she stepped out of the underground train station and twirled in slow motion. This was the foundation stone of Australia and more: the global city. Before passing through the revolving glass entrance to the high-rise, she again sucked in the view down the street to the glimmering water, the ferries, the yachts and the Sydney Harbour Bridge. Around her, suited city workers wove between stately sandstone and towers of steel, glass and concrete, strangers to humility.

Inside, on the ninth floor, a receptionist led her to the plush boardroom, where a young man with a perfect tan was tapping at his smart phone. She wasn’t afraid; all her awe was spent. She truly belonged there and the realisation was bracing.

‘So, you passed the first test – you found us,’ said David Jewell in his rounded Canadian tones. The David Jewell.

On television recently he had vowed that his company would relegate famine to history. In the flesh, biceps hoisting his polo shirt sleeves, he had a heady aura of triumph. Two middle aged men in suits didn’t bother trying to look important as they shuffled into the room and sat beside him.

‘Our personnel manager, Dwight Coombe, and our research director, Waldo Vandenberg,’ said Jewell.
'It’s a pleasure to –’

‘Now,’ Jewell proceeded, pointing Kim to a seat, ‘how would your family feel about relocating to Sydney?’

‘My husband and I have a beautiful daughter who is thirteen. We are all excited about the prospect of a change.’

It was closer to the truth than the interview panellists were probably used to hearing. She was still married to Moss (whether they would be, at the dim distant end of his prison sentence, was another matter). He definitely wanted a change (a change from lockdowns and morons with two gears: fight or fuck). Kim hadn’t heard anybody else describe Zara as beautiful, but despite all her daughter’s curses, The Stalker and The Situation, she hadn’t lost the last of her childish purity. That was a beauty of sorts.

‘I must tell you, this research scientist position has become vacant because an employee shared classified information with his wife, a journalist who then caused all sorts of unnecessary grief.’

Kim gave a suitably wide-eyed look. Of course she remembered the report on 60 Minutes and the footage taken by environmentalists as they broke into the Horizons of Plenty laboratory. They freed six spurless platypuses, which Horizons of Plenty declined to discuss.

Jewell leant across the boardroom table and looked into Kim’s eyes like a casual lover.

‘What are your personal views on GE?’

Kim took a deep breath.

‘I believe that in this fraught age genetic engineering offers humanity’s best hope of not only meeting our fundamental food needs, but also approaching an era of efficient abundance hitherto confined to the realm of imagination.’

The interviewers’ smiles were so wide they practically joined together in a single enchanted row. So, there were people who believed her words as fervently as she did. She seized the chance to seal her success.

‘I am a realist; I dream the impossible.’ Perhaps Ché Guevara hadn’t been advancing a career with a multinational company when he said that, but stuff him.
Jewell, Coombe and Vandenberg didn’t try to hide the looks of approval they exchanged. The interview ran through the predictable phrases and nods and pauses until Kim heard the word she yearned for: ‘Congratulations.’

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Zara detected something new about her mum, in the seconds before Kim recognised her and Trinh sitting at a table in PJ O’Brien’s, the airport pub. Back from her triumphant trip to Sydney, Kim was walking through the terminal with her chin jutting at an elevated angle. What sort of place was this to meet, Zara would have liked to know? Pubs smelled like beer and wine and wee. Her mum announced the ‘exciting opportunity’ (read ‘stupid job’) over the phone, and Zara had given up plenty by agreeing to come to the airport, after several rounds of pleading from Ba Trinh, to pick up this woman in the lilac blouse. This child shaker. This traitor. Now she was expected to celebrate with her in a damned terminal bar.

Ba Trinh gave Kim a massive cuddle.

‘Good for you, I suppose, about the job,’ Zara said, swaying out of cuddling range.

‘Just so you know, I’m not moving to Sydney.’

It was as if her mum and her ba couldn’t hear her.

‘I nailed that interview like a crucifix,’ Kim boasted.

‘What do you tell of family, then?’ asked Trinh.

‘I’m married and we have a precious, delightful, beautiful daughter whom we love to bits.’

Yeah right. The only beautiful parts of her were stinging under her sleeves.

Her mum ordered champagne, a shandy for the truck driver, Ba, and the inevitable token apple juice for Zara. Whoo-hoo.

‘This Horizons of Plenty does crazy business, Kim?’ Ba Trinh asked.

Kim scanned the pub like she reckoned she was a secret agent in a spy movie. Some backpackers were trying to scam free drinks from the barman. An elderly father and his son sat wordlessly at a table, while at the far wall a gaggle of women raved over each other in
German, or Swedish, or whatever.

‘Misunderstood business.’

Ba Trinh drained half her glass in a loud slurp, perhaps thinking no amount of shandies would register on the breathalyser if the cops pulled her truck over. It was like when she asked for an incy piece of chocolate cake at Zara’s thirteenth birthday and demolished the lot one incy piece at a time.

‘I hear they make odourless pig,’ she said.

Kim looked around PJ O’Brien’s again before speaking.

‘That’s brilliant, not crazy. It gets even better. Horizons of Plenty is making poverty history, developing GE crops that locusts won’t touch, fruit and veg. you can store at room temperature for months – right up your alley, Mum.’

They clinked glasses. Zara wasn’t one to miss a toast, even though the version she offered was, ‘Stick Sydney right up your alley.’

‘What?’ Kim asked. Zara put on her bewildered look, though, and her mum shrugged happily. ‘I asked the Phans straight away, when I got the job offer, if we could stay at their place for a while. You remember my Auntie Sang and Uncle Phuoc?’

Zara could picture the smiley lady and her money-lender, pawn shop husband all right.

‘You two will like Fairfield,’ Ba Trinh said cheerily. ‘Fairfield is Footscray of Sydney.’

Then Zara’s mum started going on about how understanding the Phans were of The Situation and how the family would stick together. Oh, this was too lovely. Sticking together, like her mum and dad. Like them and Ba Trinh. Right. She would order another juice and some chips – Kim could hardly say no – and give her the silent treatment for the rest of the night.
Outside people flitted from perch to perch like swallows, it seemed to Moss. Kim and Zara were gone.

Prison had shown him paranoia eating men alive. It had also stolen his ability to see it. Budgie had hardly expected that his wife would divorce him and Lisa-May would have to learn to talk again after the bashing, from goo-goo ga-ga up. That’s what happened, though, so who was to say what was paranoia? At that very moment Kim was probably sitting with a pre-digital age family photograph album on her lap, cutting him out of Zara’s memories. The girl would be in her room, disconsolate, but not for long. She would make friends, acquire a stepfather who really loved callisthenics and could race her to calculate the square root of 3136. Some day too soon, she would wake up as a woman, checking career, relationships, bills, property, status and the rest off the list, until the safely distant blight on her past, the unfortunately biological but undoubtedly wrong father, was dead to her.

He lived, but there was no proof.
Miracles

Zara waits by the First Hour Free sign in the K-Mart car park, straining to control her bladder. For all her damnations of her mother the traitor, for all her silent wincses as the blade pierced her skin, for all her secret promises to her dad, she can’t stop thinking that she is too plain sensible for the appalling risk she is about to take. Her worst crimes are tipping blood into her mum’s bed and wagging school. She is an A Plus student with a future her teachers and family are fond of describing as ‘glittering’. Or were fond. No, she can’t do this.

Even Yenee, whose own father was some kind of mercenary in Ethiopia, looked terrified passing the envelope to her ten minutes ago. When she arrived at school Yenee had led her behind the grounds maintenance shed. She passed her the envelope and said in her heavy Amharic accent, ‘Bad feel, my friend. Is from bad man father I think so.’

Zara should have listened. She will go back to school. Her dad will understand that he has asked for too much.

A white Ford Falcon sedan, as described in the unsigned note inside the envelope Yenee gave her, turns in to the car park. It is cruising straight for her. She could run, maybe. Too late. The Falcon idles beside her. Yet the big nosed man at the wheel is a stranger in a rugby top, with crooked aviator sunglasses and these ridiculous mutton chop sideburns.

‘Hello Zara,’ he says.

The deep voice is right, at least. She squints at the driver and he pulls the collar of his shirt down and scrapes at his neck with his fingernails to show her a corner of his tattoo, through some kind of makeup.

‘You know of a decent studio around here where I can get this finished?’ he asks.

Only Dad could imagine she’s ready for jokes.

‘How about you hop in so we can decide what to do?’

She opens the door (the door of a plane at thirty thousand feet) and sits stiffly in the passenger seat. This isn’t how it’s supposed to feel.

He takes Hamilton Road through Fairfield West and it is several minutes before Zara dares ask where he is driving her. They won’t be able to have so much as a decent conversation, he explains, unless they leave Sydney in a hurry. Dread shortens her breath. He’s right. The cops. With their guns, of course. Guns for hunting. For hunting the pair of them. Has her dad got one as well, tucked under his belt?

‘Take me to the flat,’ she blurs.

He is slow to speak, and when he says ‘Why, Zara?’ he sounds as anxious as her.

‘I need some clothes and, you know, toiletries.’

‘No. We’ll pick them up along the way.’

She begins to mentally rehearse the police liaison officer’s How to Rat Out Your Fugitive Parent show. Disgust creeps up from her stomach, acidic in her mouth. She swallows.

‘Along the way? Where to, Dad?’

Moss pulls over.


‘Let me grab my handbag from the flat first. Sang said she was going to Parramatta straight after dropping me off at school, so there’ll be no one there.’

This is the test. If he refuses, she’s being abducted. God his face is set hard. He stares ahead.

‘I should change,’ Zara quietly points out. ‘We’ve got no hope with me in school uniform.’

Moss spins the car around. He drives back to the flat and parks around the corner. As she runs inside alone, she realises with a jolt that he didn’t have to ask for directions.
Budgie sits on the cement rim of the swimming pool in Nimbin, splashing his feet lazily in the water. It’s a muggy day, like almost every day since he climbed out of a truck driver’s cabin into the Northern New South Wales heat the better part of three weeks ago, and there is no place he’d rather be. Where else does the public pool have free admission? He has begun venturing beyond his friends’ macadamia farm more often, this last week, on a motorbike that he pinched from a Danish tourist in Nightcap National Park. Oh, he should keep his head down, especially after a few regrettable incidents that have been reported in the media. Thing is, keeping your head down is as humiliating as prison and Budgie’s had enough of that for one lifetime. From now on he’ll be doing the humiliating, if there’s any to be done.

The chick in the butterfly bikini is gagging for it, by the look of her. But not with him. She can’t be over sixteen and there she poses all tanned and gorgeous with a slender arm coiled around one of the shade sail poles. It’s as though she doesn’t have the foggiest idea the swimming pool is in danger of overflowing from the drool of every bloke, and quite a few of the women, crowding the place. As though the princess knows she’s gonna get that tertiary admission rank and take some princesses’ course and flutter her eyelashes at everyone, then ride her white pony to the castle her daddy bought her, where she will suck some prettyboy’s cock till he groans, ‘Like a lolly, baby, like a lolly,’ and she’ll stop a moment to gurgle, ‘Our life is.’

Budgie remembers the look of helpless hatred on that last girl’s face (you would have loved it and never admitted it, Moss), the one he caught on the beach at Wooyung the other night. Didn’t even lay a scratch on him while he tied the seaweed around her throat. He still has a screw’s gun but he wouldn’t spoil a body like hers with a bullet.

Yeah, Princess is in for a surprise.

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Cherie in reception hisses, ‘The police are here,’ on the Horizons of Plenty internal phone line.

‘What do they want?’ asks Kim.
'Guess.'

Kim has told the police several times that she can’t discuss Moss at work. It’s pretty simple. Perhaps only nuffers – the ones capable of kidding themselves about goodies and baddies, wicked and right – sign up for the force.

The Horizons of Plenty CEO reaches her office before the police and slams the door.

‘Are we talking about a confidentiality breach?’

‘What? No idea, David. No.’

He nods, brow furrowed.

‘They’ve been trying to bring us down for years, the greenies, the luddites, the churches. Now the police? Speak quick, Kim, your career depends on it.’

‘David. Relax. I saw a pretty nasty hit and run on the way in this morning, right outside Circular Quay. Left my name with a policeman. I was running late by the time he showed, yeah? Said he’d take down the details later from me, as a witness.’

Not too sloppy for complete bullshit. David Jewell breathes through kiss-lips, however, and points at her forehead.

‘I’m going to have to start calling you Scheherazade. These stories, my people will check them for the slightest chink – no personal offence intended, my Asian ladyfriend – and then I will decide what to do with you.’

Seconds after he slips out of Kim’s office there is a rude thump on the door. She will make an after hours appointment with the police, shoo them away and get back to work. David Jewell may have lost his lustre, with or without his Bachelor of the Year title, but the progress she and her team continue to make astounds Kim as much as it pleases the Horizons of Plenty hierarchy. Within a year (not the five years the company had allowed for the project), they could be ready to patent the perfect native Australian farm animal. The Hopless Roo will fatten quietly. It won’t tear anybody to shreds kickboxing, or bound over paddock fences into the bush.

Opening her office door she starts, ‘Now’s not a good ti...’

These are two uniformed strangers, not Lily, the liaison officer who has coached the family on precautions in case Moss turns up in Sydney. They have bad news faces. She pleads wordlessly for some improbable alternative reason for their visit, just one small
Don’t say her name, don’t say, ‘Your daughter’. If Moss is dead, he had it coming. The thought shocks her; he may as well be dead already. Please don’t say Zara.

‘Mrs Donohoe? Kim Donohoe?’

She manages a little nod.

‘We need to take you home.’

‘What’s going on?’ It comes out as a wail.

One officer in front, one behind, they escort her towards the lift. Dozens of Horizons of Plenty staff seem to be watching, waiting for an answer the officers won’t give. Not yet. The cops hold their peace in the lift and Kim manages not to wail again.

Don’t try to understand what’s going on, don’t speak at all. Keep moving, keep busy, out of the lift, out of the building, into the police car. No siren. You’ve lost your job, but that’s fine. Really, it’s fine, your work is bigger than the company. A child, though, a child is...

‘Your husband has come to Sydney,’ the policeman driving says matter-of-factly.

Like they’ve been warning he might. Moss. It’s about Moss, not Zara. Morning: she’s at school, in class, where he can’t get near her.

‘What’s... what’s it got to do with me? I wouldn’t help him if he went down on his knees.’

The driver looks quizzically at Kim in the rear view mirror.

‘It’s a safety measure, Mrs Donohoe, you and the family together at home. We’ve sent people to pick up your daughter from school.’

Still no siren. No siren means no emergency.

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Moss is walking back to the car at the petrol station at Emu Plains, the last of his coins jingling in his pocket, when he catches sight of Zara typing a message on her mobile phone. He opens the door and grabs the phone from her hands.

‘Do you want me shot down today?’ he hisses. ‘You want to be there to see it?’
She shakes her head, bottom lip quivering.

‘Sorry Zara, love.’

He stomps on the phone, then picks it up and throws it into the bin. The man at the next bowser, watching, shakes his head in sympathy and remarks, ‘Kids and their bloody phones, eh?’

Moss gives a fraternal nod and gets back into the car.

‘What?’ he asks. ‘Don’t look at me like that. They can trace the mobile SIM card.’

‘That’s why you should drop it on the back of that sucker’s ute,’ she replies, nodding to the man at the next bowser, who has filled his tank and turned to go inside and pay.

Moss grins. Printed on the doors of the vehicle is Snowy Mountains Ski Hire. If the driver returns southward to the Snowy Mountains, he will lead the police at least four hundred kilometres in the wrong direction. The fugitive hops out, swiftly retrieves the battered phone from the bin and slips it under the ute tray tarp.

As they drive along the Great Western Highway into the foothills of the Blue Mountains, Zara says, ‘I only wanted Mum to know I’m okay.’

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Budgie sees the police coming, but it is clear from their darting eyes that they haven’t yet spotted him in the swimming pool throng. Typical, he thinks, he happens to be surrounded by the pool fence when he needs a quick getaway. And just when he was enjoying himself (doesn’t a bloke deserve an afternoon off from the hunt – theirs and his – for a dip and a perv, before the forces of injustice rattle the cuffs once again?).

He slinks into the water and submerges himself, watching like a crocodile with only the top of his head to his nostrils above the surface. A mother and three children paddle at the edge of the pool nearby, so he floats amongst them in an optimistic impression of the father of the family. The woman’s oldest boy frowns at him. Budgie spurts water out of his mouth and this fountain statue routine seems to warm the child’s spirits. The mother, however, is gesturing slyly to somebody out of the pool. Budgie doesn’t have to look to
know who it is. He splashes to the edge and onto the cement.

The police are running around the swimming pool towards him, shouting. They’re always shouting about something. He grabs the shopping bag with his valuables in it and scales the fence within seconds. One valuable he’ll really be needing, and it’s on permanent loan from Clive Strange. Five police, one Budgie. And they’re on his side of the fence already. Shit. There is no time to figure out who grassed him up to the cops. If you don’t have a few enemies, you must be a pushover. Not him, not anymore. A witness to one of his attacks is probably at the pool, for all he knows, but all that matters is what happens next.

Still running across the lawn, he reaches into his bag and fires the first shot from the screw’s gun before the police realise what’s going on. Behind the shocked cop clutching at his shoulder (now there’s another face you really would love to see, Moss) children are screaming and their parents are shouting. The whole world needs to shut up. How’s a bloke supposed to clear his mind?

The policeman nearest to him has his own weapon up. Quick bastard he is, but not quick enough. Budgie fires his pistol again and someone goes down. It’s a woman inside the pool fence stupid enough to watch the shootout like it’s on television. Was a woman. The police are sheltering behind trees, roaring. He can hear the cop closest to him delivering some ridiculous warning. Mate, we all know how this goes.

Gerald Arthur Budge takes four bullets in the chest, neck, face and stomach. He waits for the pain that won’t come, as he lies bleeding on the grass, sorry, so sorry he wasn’t a better shot. Miracles aren’t for blokes like us, Moss.
Retail Therapy

Six hundred kilometres inland, beyond the Great Dividing Range, the agricultural heartland is gradually turning the colour of rusted sheet iron. If Zara asks one more time when her lunch will be, in her gallingly polite little voice, Moss will have to pull the car over and walk away.

‘Dad, when will lunch be?’

He keeps driving after all. Out here, following the Lachlan River westward, it isn’t hard to imagine he and Zara have bribed the border guards and started anew in another country, where there are no laws and no history. Unfortunately there is no food either.

‘Dad, my tummy so wrecks.’

The words send pain through Moss’s own contracting gut. He steps on the accelerator, hoping to reach Condobolin before sundown. It is the next dot on his map of New South Wales and he determines to sort out a meal there, somehow, with no money. The cattle wandering across the road fail to sense the rush. They stare insolently at the vehicle trespassing upon the peace of their Tuesday afternoon, forcing Moss to ride the brakes and swerve.

‘We’ll eat, no fear. After that, do you want to call your mum from a public phone at Condobolin?’

Moss, receiving no reply, glances across to see Zara’s eyes jammed shut and her head vibrating against the passenger side window. Her eyes might never open again and it would be murder. If she isn’t dead she must at least have drifted into a coma, by the look of her. This time there is nobody else to blame, only a moment when Zara’s little body stopped. Life in prison is too lenient for a father like him.

It’s only been half a day since she ate, he recalls. Panicking won’t help. And still, so still she slumps. His own breathing stops. He reaches a shaking hand toward her, pausing millimetres short of her right pinkie finger on the vinyl seat.
Metal and bone meet in a devastating split second. The car skids off the bitumen. A calf lies motionless on the road, its mother staring dumbly beside it. Zara screams. The car spins to face backwards and comes to rest on the gravel between two more cows.

‘Zara, thank God you’re awake,’ gasps Moss. ‘You scared me.’

She stares at him, shaking her head. She feels her forehead, but the bump against the dashboard was not hard enough to do visible damage. Moss, who rode the thud like a rodeo star, waves to the cow near his open window.

‘Sorry about that, girl,’ he tells it in an ecstasy of relief. ‘Really sorry. I think, I think I might have just killed someone you know.’

They climb out of the car and walk back to the felled calf.


There is the finest trickle of blood from the calf’s nostril, which seems to have taken the bumper bar to the side of the head. The flies are on its open eyes already.

‘God or no God, we still need someone to thank,’ mutters Moss.

He takes hold of the calf by its hind legs and tries to drag it. Even his prison gym-swollen muscles are inadequate.

‘What are you waiting for, Zara?’

‘She’s like a fawn, chestnut and white like Bambi.’

‘Bambi would be older than your grandparents by now, did you know? What must that be in deer years?’

‘Like, over nine hundred. She’s beautiful, isn’t she?’

‘Beautiful roasted on the campfire.’

‘No!’

‘No point wasting the meat. Did Bambi die in vain?’

Zara screws up her nose at him but eventually heaves the front legs as Moss heaves the hind legs. At the edge of the road she kneels beside the calf and strokes it like a pet. She shoos the flies away and gently closes its eyes. Since its meat is about as likely to pass her lips as a letter is to arrive from the Queen inviting the Donohoe family to dinner, Moss leaves her and inspects the damage to the car. The right headlight cover is smashed and the front edge of the bonnet is bent, wedged so he can’t open it. Lucky, though, could have
been worse. He can hear a truck in the distance and tells Zara to draw a curtain on her melodrama and jump in. They are on their way before the truck passes the roadkill.

‘There are Stock Crossing signs all along here, Dad. Look, there’s one.’

Moss shrugs.

‘Too many signs, not enough portents.’

They drive the last twenty minutes to Condobolin without further conversation. Entering the town of several thousand people they cross the Lachlan River with its thirsty red gums and the Memorial Park with its palm trees. They stare like tourists as they drive streets as wide as tennis courts past the Aboriginal Medical Centre, the Red Dog Saloon and the Olympic swimming pool.

Outside the supermarket Moss botches his attempt at the required reverse angle parking, thudding against the curb and eliciting a shake of the head from his daughter. At thirteen she probably thinks she could do better than collecting a cow and a curb in a single day’s driving. Yeah, maybe. A terrier chained at the supermarket entrance is the only other witness to Moss’s embarrassment. Before they get out of the car he holds Zara’s hand.

‘Do what I say. Promise.’

‘Or else?’

‘Yeah. Or else.’

On the way in, Moss sways away from the sprightly terrier, while Zara gives it a pat. They head for the fruit and vegetables section of the supermarket. A girl who couldn’t be much older than Zara is refilling the aisle nearby and a bustling mother of four boys is slapping at their greedy hands to protect the arrayed grapes. Moss takes a plastic bag and, resisting the urge to look around too obviously and assess the risk, fills it with apples. If only it was winter instead of early autumn, he could plausibly wear a thick coat and leave with the pockets stuffed with food.

He motions to Zara and slips amongst the aisles. There he passes her an apple and mutters, ‘Quickly, right?’

Only when chewing does her frown depart.

‘It’s not stealing, Zara. Not unless you leave the store with something you haven’t paid for. Legal fact.’
‘But you will.’
He points to his stomach.
‘The apples will be gone before we leave.’
Scanning each end of the aisle for danger, Moss fails to observe the teenage girl who is still refilling the other side of the shelves, barely two metres away.
‘Mandy, Mandy, Mandy,’ comes a man’s voice from the next isle.
Moss and Zara stuff the half-eaten apples in their pockets and turn toward the voice. The shelf stacking girl they can see has witnessed their feasting, no doubt, and sized them up: vagrants, tumbleweeds – just weeds, probably. They take a sudden interest in the breakfast cereals on their side of the shelves.
‘These tins won’t stack themselves,’ grumps the man out of view. ‘If you want to stare at something, go home and watch telly so I can employ a girl with some oomph about her. Fair enough?’
‘Fair enough.’
‘Finish this and then come help out the back.’
Through a gap in the shelves, Moss and Zara can see Mandy rolling her eyes. Hollywood grade mascara is smudged down one of her chubby cheeks. If she perceives Moss from her angle she ignores him. It is Zara’s frightened gaze that she meets. For several seconds father and daughter wait like guilty prisoners in the dock, hoping with no reason for hope. Mandy raises a vertical forefinger to her lips. Zara nods and, withdrawing her finger, the other girl grins. Charity? Sorority? Indifference? They won’t forget Mandy, whatever possessed her.
‘Well?’ Zara whispers when Mandy and the manager are safely out of sight.
Moss puffs his cheeks and takes in the scene. The four grape pincher boys have trailed their mother to the dairy section, as her piercing refrain of ‘Get your grotty fingers out of that yoghurt this instant’ makes clear.
‘Well,’ Moss says, ‘anything packaged sets off the detector at the front. Stick to fruit and veg. A couple of bags will do.’
‘I’m not running off trying to lug grocery bags, Dad. I mean, what’s the plan, sock the checkout chick in the head?’
‘Shhh. Checkout lad, actually, and no, nobody gets socked.’

They pack potatoes, carrots and tomatoes and try to appear calm as an elderly man sidles up and begins selecting onions.

‘Nice day for it,’ he remarks.

Moss and Zara titter in nervous unison. The man adjusts his glasses and studies them.

‘Ah, yep, spot on, spot on,’ Moss offers.

The sound of barking coming from the supermarket entrance distracts the elderly shopper.

‘Bingo,’ the man growls, quite convincingly canine himself. ‘That’s enough.’

As the man returns to filling his basket, Moss and Zara slowly make their way toward the front counter and Moss whispers his plan. She hesitates, then walks outside. There she pats Bingo the terrier, who rolls merrily on his back and demands a belly scratch.

Inside, the mother of four is at the checkout. There will be no icy poles for boys who keep swinging on the steel checkout gates, she threatens. Moss hangs back as she unloads her trolley. The teenage boy serving her is sweating under pressure. He rushes a mountain of goods past the scanner and drops a carton of eggs on the linoleum.

Through the front windows Moss can see his accomplice slipping Bingo’s chain off and pointing the dog toward the supermarket doors. Bingo scampers inside, tail wagging, and explores the forbidden palace. The boy serving snatches the public address microphone and calls for the manager, who rushes from the storeroom and takes up pursuit of the dog. Mandy appears and joins in, giggling, along with Bingo’s bewildered owner.

Moss quickly steps over the one-way metal gate of the side entrance and out to the car. Zara is waiting in the passenger seat, trying her best to look prim and cross.

As he pulls the car onto the main street of Condobolin, he begins singing:

\[
\begin{align*}
B & - I & - N & - G & - O, \\
B & - I & - N & - G & - O
\end{align*}
\]

His mouth is full of carrot and in his enthusiasm half chewed carrot flies onto the steering wheel and the windscreen. Zara squeals.
'How was that time Nanna and Pop and me visited you in, in there? You lost it 'cause my milkshake went everywhere. It was a crack-up.'

Moss squints, remembering against his will, and keeps singing. His daughter joins the chorus:

B - I - N - G - O,

And Bingo was his name-o

Next stop is a public phone for Zara to call Kim. No chance, no dial tone.

She turns pensive, back in the car, as they drive through the town. On the porch of an aluminium house, an elderly couple stands inert, arms crossed, brows furrowed, tracking the strangers.

‘Remember when I tried to keep a moth ’cause you wouldn’t let me get a puppy?’ Zara asks.

‘Yeah. Giant brown ugly thing.’

‘Peanut Butterfly.’

She cried for hours when Peanut Butterfly died. She loved it to death, he had to explain to her. Little Zara carried it around in her cupped hands for a day and a half, refusing lunch lest her pet take wing, until Kim poked holes in a margarine container and called it Peanut Butterfly’s Castle. Is Zara psychoanalysing him? He’s the child? He has earnestly poked air holes in a margarine container and stuffed some grass inside, only slowly beginning to comprehend how far shy of adequate these caring gestures are from guaranteeing that the pet will thrive. That’s her game, is it? Smartalec.

‘So?’

‘Why wouldn’t you let me have a puppy, even when Shane and Krystal were giving one away?’

‘I had plenty to look after already.’

Zara scoffs louder than necessary. Yeah, so he failed to pick her up from school plenty of times because he was busy sculpting, or at the tip, or fishing, or on ‘retreat’ with Arc in the bush somewhere. Sometimes he fell asleep in the middle of her school reader.
Once or twice he terrified her curious friends with his voice when they picked up his Bold Jack Donohoe clay pipe.

‘Well, a pet dog is a wolf inside, Zara.’
‘Not a dingo?’
‘Ha. He’s wild, sly, ruthless, instinctual. Remember a while back, that toddler in Gippsland had her face ripped off by the family hound while her dad dozed on the couch?’
‘You enjoy scaring me.’
They fall silent passing the police station in Dennison Street.

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Fluke Donohoe and Martin Bryant share a bong in the back of the Pleasure Seeker while Shelley goes shopping. The three of them go almost everywhere together, but the Port Arthur mass murderer has drawn the line at afternoon retail therapy in Alice Springs, drawn it in the dry sand of the Todd River with the end of his AR15 rifle, as is his wont.

He’s like the Magic Pudding the way he keeps coming back, no matter how many times Fluke severs his windpipe or smashes his face with a rock or sprays his brains all over the upholstery with his own semi-automatic weapon. The waving locks are bloodless blond again and his blue eyes are wide and ... can you even say this? pure. Since he insists on being called Son, Fluke has introduced him to Shelley. She won’t even look at him, but that’s okay, he didn’t think much of the bloke either at first. Most of the time Marty is as rude as the Magic Pudding, to boot. Still, credit where it’s due, he forgives and forgets remarkably well.

Reclining on the bed, they don’t sense the movement at first. The engine revs and they hear hoots of laughter and voices from the front of the motorhome.

‘Fang it, mate, quick.’
‘Oi, can you smell mull?’
‘Shit, there’s someone in the back, look.’
Fluke sees two faces, boys who could scarcely be any older than Zara. The driver's voice is piercing.

‘Let's roll the fogey, cash him out.’

Marty will deal with the little fucks. Yet at the vital moment he lies back and grunts, stoned to la-la like a schoolgirl off one cone again. The vehicle crashes through a wooden car park fence into the dry riverbed, in first gear by the sound of it. Without thinking, Fluke opens the door and jumps, landing harmlessly on the sand. He pleads to Marty to follow, and those wide blue eyes just stare right back.

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Shelley browses the magazine rack in the Alice Plaza newsagent, counting four, five, six, trying to forget talk of skulls and bricks. Who ever thought there could be so many publications devoted to boar hunting? Fluke says he is discovering the hunter inside, learning what it really means to be a man. It’s all a little New Age for her. Worse, he reckons the guru teaching him to release his warrior roar is their second son Marty. Moss is their only son. They’ve driven the Pleasure Seeker as far as the Red Centre, twenty-three degrees south, and already Fluke’s going troppo.

She passes the home and garden mags she used to read when she had a home and garden. When she first notices the latest edition of *Eve* she tries to walk away, out into the mall, the desert, the sea so far across the overcooked country. Her son, airbrushed suave and tanned, is right across the cover. Yet there is nowhere to turn where she can be certain people won’t be raving on about Dingo.

She heard plenty last night from some yobbo in the pub where they went for dinner. Dingo was asleep in bed with his wife when several Vietnamese gangsters invaded his home wielding meat cleavers, apparently. They were there to rob him but decided to kidnap his daughter while they were at it. Shelley considered telling the yobbo in the pub who she and
Fluke were, setting the record straight. You lose a bit of authority, however, when your husband has just ordered the $12 Parma & Chips Counter Meal Special for imaginary Marty.

‘Dingo served in the army,’ the yobbo claimed. ‘He’s from a line of rough-nuts, you know, all the way back to the original Wild Colonial Boy, the bushranger Bold Jack Donohoe. So Dingo tracked them gooks down and fought them the Aussie way, toe to toe. Doing time for topping a rockspider with his bare fists, he was, till he shot through. Should have got a Tidy Towns award instead, or one of them fuckin’ Order of Australias.’

The bartender ventured that Moss was an Aussie Mowgli who learnt from dingoes how to attack and vanish in the bush, the way the Indian boy in The Jungle Book grew up among wolves.

Whoever Dingo is, he isn’t the boy Shelley raised. And yet that’s him now, winking at her from a tee-shirt in Alice Plaza. The man in the Dingo tee-shirt leads a preschooler by the hand and, as they pass her, Shelley says, ‘Excuse me, mate. Where’d you get that?’

‘The Internet.’

Entrepreneurs don’t waste time. The Dingo tee-shirt wearer grins and turns around so she can read on his back: ‘Where is Dingo?’ There is a map of Australia with locations of reported sightings, each marked with a red cross. Colac, Brisbane Ranges, Albert Park, Geraldton. What? Western Australia, now? Tennant Creek is listed, and Longreach and Burnie and Mackay.

‘So, are you for or against?’ he asks.

His little girl saves Shelley from an answer she could never give, by pleading for an ice-cream until he picks her up like a guitar and, with a half nod, heads for the food court. Shelley finds herself back at the newsagent, paying for a copy of Eve magazine.

‘You look kind of familiar,’ the lady at the counter says.

How original, darl. Shelley tucks the magazine in her handbag and escapes the retail wonderland in Alice, but if only she could wake up under a tree and it would be the Eighties again. The kids would be playing with snails in the backyard of their cottage on the hill in Castlemaine. Fluke would come home from work wearing his 'I sold a house for a bundle' smile and for a moment they would stop and sigh simply to watch the bubs who gave them
life as surely as Shelley and Fluke had given it to Mossy and Krys-Krys.

Alice Springs is sweltering in mid-afternoon as Shelley walks back to the Pleasure Seeker, except the vehicle isn’t parked where she left it. The hunter with the warrior roar sits on the ground, snivelling, ‘Marty’s gone, Shell. Our boys are gone.’

He waves up the dry river without looking.

‘Shell, we’ve lost our boys.’

She trudges in the direction he waved, until the odour of burning rubber reaches her on the breeze. Although she’s in no shape to run, she defies the heat to rush the last few hundred metres to the remains of the Pleasure Seeker. It’s crumpled against a gumtree, smouldering wheels sunken in river sand. A drunken crone with a toothy grin, watching from the shade of the tree, inclines her head toward the molten wreckage.

‘We gave her mouth to mouth but she didn’t come good.’

‘The motorhome?’

The crone nods contentedly.

‘It was joyriders took her. I seen ’em. Stacked her, then torched her. Boom!’

Shelley ventures closer, straining to make out the clothes cupboard, her Henry Lawson Collected Short Stories, Fluke’s akubra, anything at all. The heat stings her eyes but it doesn’t matter – there’s nothing left. Her worldly possessions are the clothes she wears, a handbag and purse inside it and, oh, let us not forget the magazine.

‘Boom,’ the drunk repeats and falls about cackling.

_Eve_ promises an exclusive with Dingo.

His bushranger forebear John Donohoe terrorised the fledgling New South Wales colony a hundred and eighty years ago, earning the monikers ‘Bold Jack’ and ‘Jack the Stripper’. Now Mostyn John Donohoe has lived up to the name, not by stripping the well to do of their possessions, but by baring all in a startling photo-shoot. Support for the enigmatic fugitive dubbed Dingo has grown since he escaped from custody in Victoria in February. These images
will no doubt win further admirers. He’s all man, as you will see, but he isn’t afraid to show his feminine side.

Can’t be anything Shelley hasn’t seen before. She pulls the Dingo sealed section from the centre of the magazine, ignoring her drunken companion.

‘Boom, baby, boom.’

Her son doesn’t have the scar above his eyebrow that she first saw when she visited Namatjira Prison, nor the Z tattoo the reporters keep saying he’s got on his neck. He poses with a vacuum cleaner, then again rocking a cradle, then baking a cake, in each shot managing to look perplexed about how he came to lose all his clothes. That’s her Moss. That’s not Dingo ‘showing his feminine side’.

‘Boom, freakin’ boom, boom.’

She tears a glossy page off and flings it on the carcass of the pleasure seeker, where it convulses before breaking into flames. One by one she screws up the photos and conducts a cremation ceremony to the sounds of approaching sirens.

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The police liaison officer, Lily, offers Kim a Tim Tam biscuit and she waves it away, sick in the stomach as she’s been for the past six hours. Zara has vanished. She was marked absent from Home Group and her first classes of the day, according to Lily. She broke the news after the police had escorted Kim to the Phans’ flat, where they have held vigil since then, staring at the phone. Zara has wagged school before with that girl Stacey. Maybe there’s nothing more to it.

Auntie Sang keeps telling everyone she watched Zara cross the road overpass outside school and walk in through the gate this morning. She may be at a friend’s house, she suggests, giving her mum a fright before she gets homesick and returns overnight for a repentant hug. Thirteen-year-olds get up to that kind of mischief all the time, Sang reminds them.
Lily glances at her two colleagues, who stand by the kitchen window while the women huddle around the table with the portable phone between them. Their look says exactly what Kim is thinking: those mischievous thirteen-year-olds don’t normally have convicted manslaughterer fathers who have escaped from jail and come for them from interstate.

The armed coppers keep complaining of a smell coming from the study. Thankfully they haven’t investigated it. Auntie Sang caught Kim feeding Joey Nine last night.

‘Talk about bringing your work home,’ she said.

Uncle Phuoc put Kim on notice: family or not, she would have to move out if she didn’t get rid of the ‘mutant’. Phuoc is at his pawn shop now, having declared, ‘Even the bereft must earn to eat.’ The police decided to let the old man go with a plain clothes officer.

Lily asks Kim for a third time whether there was anything strange about Zara’s behaviour before she left for school with Sang. She’d had it up to here, Zara had said as she got dressed, gesturing somewhere above her head. When she wasn’t stuck in school she was stuck in a miniscule flat with the relatives, Joey Nine and the Horizons of Plenty lab equipment, and she was sick of sleeping top to toe with ‘Judas’. Judas! That made Kim laugh; it was a step up from her usual grubby slanders, between mutterings about her supposedly heroic father. None of this will she tell the young police liaison officer.

Yet Lily has an air about her, so upright, so caring, so... uniformed, which compels Kim to make some sort of confession.

‘Work doesn’t know about Moss,’ she says. ‘I had to fib.’

Lily smiles and rubs Kim’s back.

‘I’m here to support you through this.’

Auntie Sang puts the kettle on, as she’s done at least once every half hour since the police picked her up shopping in Parramatta and took her home to Fairfield. She repeats what has become a mantra during this vigil: the neighbours in Flat Three have reported that they saw no man with Zara when she returned home from school at twenty past nine.

And still, like Kim, Lily and the cops with guns at their hips know Moss and Zara are out there together. She can tell by the downturned corners of their mouths. They’ve all
heard on the news about the men who reap vengeance on the wives who leave them. They do it (they do it all the time!) by destroying what they both love most – their children. All Kim can do is hope Zara is found alive.
Dust to Dust

The car clock reads 6:35 and Zara’s dad doesn’t seem to have a clue where he is driving them. He simply pulls into the car park at the swimming pool in Condobolin and they chomp through the supermarket loot. Never in her life has she been so hungry that raw tomatoes tasted this delicious.

‘Come on, then, let’s have a dip, have a shower,’ her dad says when they tire of stuffing themselves.

‘Shouldn’t we be, like, getting out of here? I’m not the pro here, but in the movies the crooks don’t hang around at the local pool.’

‘Relax, relax. Nobody even noticed us leaving the supermarket. Come on, it’ll be fun.’

With that, he gets out and rustles around in the boot for a towel. Zara has no bathers to wear, having somehow overlooked such a getaway essential when fleeing Fairfield. She is too old to swim in her undies, too young not to care about doing it anyway. Swivelling to look at the swimmers through the wire fence, she rules out paddling alongside the locals. Wouldn’t do it at the best of times.

Some boys are playing rugby in the water, thrilling in tackles that plunge their victims to the bottom of the pool. Two Indigenous girls more or less her age duck-dive, then reappear at the surface and climb out to sit and get their breath back. Their skin is black and blinding and impossible to ignore, spotlit by a shaft of late sunlight. Their shoulders rise and fall, rise and fall, a simple movement full of cool, of a poise she’ll never have.

There’s another reason Zara can’t swim, at least not without a tee-shirt on. The row of nicks between her elbows and her armpits would be on display, red and stinging in the chlorinated water. She might as well wear a sign reading Messed Up Bitch. And to think, her own dad there...
He taps on the window and holds up his hands inquiringly.

‘Not supposed to swim for half an hour after food, Dad.’

He heads for the pool gate without nagging. Eyes closed, she sits in the car and finds that her usual disappearing act doesn’t work when she’s the one she’s hiding from.

A minute later her dad is back in the driver’s seat, looking sheepish.

‘I didn’t have enough coins left to get in.’

How could anybody think he’s a criminal mastermind when, right after conning her into pinching fruit and vegies, he forgets how broke he is? To think, this morning she was starting to believe it, a ditz frightened of her own dad. D – I – N – G – O and Dingo was his name-o.

‘The petrol gauge doesn’t work,’ he says. ‘The last full tank took me about six fifty kilometres. How long ‘till we conk out, Miss Maths?’

She leans across to check the trip meter.

‘What was it on when you filled up at Emu Plains?’

He shrugs. ‘I didn’t quite fill up. There’s the receipt, on the floor.’

‘Eighty six dollars at one forty a litre. And a tank is?’

‘Ah, sixty-eight litres, I think.’

‘Hmmm.’ She scribbles on the back of the receipt. ‘Let’s see how far we’ve come on ninety percent of a tank, then.’

Moss studies his map.

‘Two eighty plus sixty-eight plus one seventeen plus a hundred kilometres. Add ten or so for cruising around town.’

‘Are you admitting you can’t figure it out for yourself, Dad?’

He nods, grinning, and she rubs it in.

‘You’re helpless without me –’

‘ – to keep breathing,’ her dad says.

Despite all that has happened today, Zara smiles back at him. In jail, they both know, he couldn’t have admitted anything like that.

‘Don’t you forget it, Dad. We’ll conk out after about ten kilometres.’
They stop at a petrol station, where Moss refills the tank and Zara fills a collection of old juice bottles with water from a tap between bowsers. The Commander’s car is as thirsty for water as they are, its temperature dial nudging the red, but Moss can’t open the bent bonnet. He fetches a wrecking bar from the boot and, walking back around, catches sight of Zara’s horrified face. She recoils as he pokes his head through the open driver’s side window.

‘Relax, love. Never know what’ll come in handy when you’re a fugitive.’

He wedges the wrecking bar under the bonnet where it is jammed from the collision with the calf, and levers it free. Pouring water into the radiator tank, he flashes a grin to his passenger, who rolls her eyes like any embarrassed teenager.

‘Please please please please don’t just burn out of here, Dad.’

‘Course not. I don’t want half of New South Wales chasing us any more than you do.’

He walks into the shop and waits behind a giant truck driver, who chats about roadkill with the attendant, a woman in her thirties. Moss freezes.

‘Yeah, I spotted a few of them snake necked turtles crossing the road today, like cow pats on legs, they are,’ the driver says.

He politely steps to the side of the counter to allow Moss to pay while they continue the conversation.

‘Bloke in here ten minutes ago back reckoned a calf was hit just out of town, left to die on the side of the road,’ the attendant reports, before switching her attention to Moss.

‘Hi. Forty-eight sixty, thanks.’

Moss opens his wallet and makes a show of tipping it upside down, apparently appalled to discover it empty.

‘What! This is a bit embarrassing. He steps to the doorway and calls out to Zara, ‘Mary, Mary Araluen, hey! Your brother’s got into my wallet again. Any chance of a loan ‘till we get home?’
Zara, sitting in the car, shakes her head.
‘Mary, love, you’ll have it back in five minutes,’ he calls. ‘Forty-eight sixty.’

She shakes her head.
‘Sorry, I haven’t got any on me.’

Moss rubs his eyes, as if in disbelief, and shakes his head.

‘My son’s autistic and he has a thing about money,’ Moss says, meeting the attendant’s eye.

‘Mmm, I think I’ve got a thing about money too,’ she replies. ‘I need it each time somebody fills up their tank with my fuel, you see.’

He has need for acting talent, to look embarrassed.

‘He’s ten. He’s autistic, you know. I’ll get home and the notes will be in neat little piles on his window sill, the coins will be all counted out and my credit card will be lying around the backyard somewhere. It’s not the first time.’

The woman sighs.

The truck driver looks Moss over and then turns to his friend.

‘Fair go, Andrea.’

‘I can be back here in ten minutes,’ gushes Moss.

‘Where do you live, mate?’ the truck driver asks.

Moss is ready with his answer: ‘Oh, Dennison Street, cop shop side further up. Just moved in on Saturday. Everyone I’ve met has been that friendly I don’t know why I stayed in Adelaide so long.’

Andrea the attendant listens and taps her nails on the counter as she makes up her mind what to do.

‘I’ll tell you what, give us your name and number and go grab your money.’

‘No worries. Charles Harpur, pleased to meet you. We’re getting the landline on this week, but the mobile’s 0409 668 612. Oi, I’ll leave my Mary here till I get back if you want.’

Andrea and the truck driver laugh and Moss turns to leave.

‘Catch you in ten,’ he assures Andrea.

Climbing into the car, Moss remarks, ‘Your cameo was magnificent, Mary Araluen.’
He grins at Zara, but she’s studying him warily. They drive back in the direction of Dennison Street, in the centre of Condobolin, to complete the act.

‘Who wouldn’t trust this face?’ Moss asks, checking himself in the rear view mirror. The fuel will take them another seven hundred kilometres. With food, wits and a dash of luck, the possibilities are opening up.

‘I trusted your old face,’ Zara replies bitterly. ‘But this silicon face? You’re kidding.’

His pride in a fine performance is tarnished. There is probably a verse in the Bible that explicitly bans the use of fictional autistic children by confidence tricksters. His petty thefts aren’t worthy of Bold Jack Donohoe, to be fair, but they’re a start. The convict bolter posed as a wealthy landowner to befriend and rob a genuine one, escaped mounted bounty hunters on foot, trailing blood from a gunshot wound, locked constables in their own loghouse... each feat absurd and true.

‘If I’m Mary Araluen, you must be John Smith, or something totally unbelievable.’

There is that quietly disappointed tone again.

‘Charles Harpur.’

Zara gives an exaggerated groan and turns on the radio. She usually plays commercial music, but all she can find as they settle into the drive out of Condobolin is the news on the ABC.

The news reader stumbles through the story, for once unable to hide his emotion:

A court has heard how the older brother of a girl who was tipped out of a fishing boat near Eden pleaded with his father to go back and get her because she couldn’t swim. Thirty-year-old Damien Rhyce Gladly is standing trial for the murder of his seven-year-old daughter, whose name has been suppressed. She died during an access visit, amid a bitter custody dispute between her estranged parents.

If only there was something Moss could say. ‘Nice day for it’ won’t do. Avoiding eye contact, he surveys the landscape through the windscreen. Saltbush, wisps of sun bleached grass, sparse coolibah trees casting elongated shadows, all shockingly insignificant under
the wash of unbroken blue. Zara busies herself rummaging through her handbag until she finds her nail polish. She paints her fingernails black and he opens his mouth to complain of the ethyl acetate fumes, yet it seems the wrong moment to complain. Some kids would have screamed at him by now, demanded to know where they were going and threatened to run off at the next stop. Is she scared? More to the point, should she be scared of him?

‘Don’t worry so much,’ she says. ‘My science teacher told me worrying can cause cancer.’

With some effort he flattens his creased brow and looks at her.

‘That’s a worry.’

He loves her laughter, even the hint of it he wins now. He is reaching for the off button when the voice on the radio stills his hand:

Police have shot dead escaped Victorian prisoner Gerald Arthur Budge. They closed in on the armed man, a known associate of notorious fugitive Mostyn ‘Dingo’ Donohoe, at around 4 pm in Nimbin. He fired at police, wounding a bystander who remains in a critical condition in Lismore Base Hospital.

Zara gasps but Moss finds himself whooping involuntarily. So much for the principles of disappearance, Budgie. He catches her eye and sees her horror.

‘I’m in the clear, Zara.’

‘The clear. The clear nothing of a black hole.’

That’s where Budgie is, not him.

‘Budgie hurt those girls up north. I’m innocent, love.’

‘Course you are. You just needed the radio to tell you so.’

As they drive on, he considers once more the train of events that have led them here, to the edge of something vaster than the great unknowable interior of the continent. In the time it took to spit, Potbellied Joe’s fall set Moss apart from the common people whose virtue begins to look like complacency, or even simple conceit. Had he been born a cannibal his kinsmen would have eaten heartily. Had he been born a medieval nobleman,
people would have called him a knight for slaying his enemy. What age is this that would deny him even his own family?

He slows the car, as they approach a dry creek bed with a beard of she-oaks, and pulls off the road down a dirt track. The scenery doesn’t exactly inspire a career in the postcard industry, but at least some hills are discernible on the horizon in the syrupy twilight.

‘Have we been going the right way for Melbourne?’ Zara asks.
‘You can take any road from Sydney and wind up in Melbourne eventually, with enough twists and turns.’ Safely out of view of passing truckers and perhaps police, half a kilometre from the road, he parks. ‘This will do for a camp.’

He climbs out of the car and begins fetching camping equipment from the boot before she can ask anything else.
‘The tent and the inflatable mattress are all yours. I’ll sleep in the car.’

Zara stretches her arms, standing beside the car.
‘Where are we?’

He shrugs, aware only that they are twenty minutes out of Condobolin beside a track that follows a dry creek bed. Zara sets up the tent while he gathers sticks and lights a campfire.
‘If we get separated,’ he begins.
‘We won’t.’
‘Meet me at Fiends’ Gap on my birthday.’
‘You’re freaking me out, Dad.’
‘Fiends’ Gap. Promise.’
‘Promise you’ll stop freaking me out.’
Arc is certain the Shepherd has been watching him since the cops visited Masada a week ago. During prayers in the Deuteronomy Room, when the eyes of the Children of the Second Holy Ascent are closed, Arc feels his leader’s gaze on him, reading him, and he doesn’t dare peek. Yet the Shepherd spoke for Arc, after he sent the police away. He called him a ‘righteous son’ and told the Children of the Second Holy Ascent his persecution was a portent they had been expecting. Arc’s been tossing and turning through the nights, waiting for blue and red flashing lights.

The Shepherd has appointed him foreman of the building works at Masada. The Children are adding another dormitory wing to their compound in the hills of North East Victoria, now that so many of them are observing the edict to double their number before the Second Holy Ascent. Arc has never before seen so many pregnant women in one place. The Ascent is supposed to occur within the next two years, although he is still confused about whether the Shepherd will be ascending, or somebody else, or the babies, or the stark raving lot of them, and it’s got to the point where it would be embarrassing to ask.

He is swinging a pick, choking on the dust alongside twelve other Children, unsure why there is also an edict against mechanical digging of foundations. Stuff it. What’s the point being foreman if you can’t take the odd unofficial break? As the air clears he notices the Shepherd watching from his tower above the compound, beckoning him with the slightest movement of a single finger.

The Shepherd’s octagonal tower is built of glass, and there he spends most of his time watching and waiting for portents. Or perving on the Children. When Arc first arrived he tried to believe, tried to turn Masada into something more than an escape. It was useless. A bit of brainwashing wouldn’t go astray, he thinks, climbing the winding staircase up the tower. The other Children don’t seem to need it, as though the Shepherd himself is a drug they are all hooked on.

‘What have you hidden from me?’ the Shepherd asks when they come face to face. He holds Arc’s chin in his hand and studies him. Arc clings to the Shepherd and buries his face in the leader’s black robes, sniffling. If his old man was still alive to see it he would have knocked him down for acting like a fucking fairy.

‘Purge your soul, child,’ the Shepherd urges soothingly.
Arc cries like he’s never cried, for the drafts and squalls of life on the breeze that’s blown him here. He cries for Demi in her train carriage in the Wombat State Forest, for Zara who loved him, for Kim and yes, for his friend. For Moss who is the smartest bloke he’s known and the stupidest for letting him into his house.

When he runs dry he says shakily, ‘I didn’t do it. I planned to, but – ’

‘Didn’t do what, child?’

‘There was this girl. I couldn’t get her out of my head. I followed her, took photos I shouldn’t have, went around to her place and snuck in. She was... amazing. Is amazing. Her name’s Zara and she’s the brightest, most gorgeous – ’

‘And did you – ?’

‘No! No, her parents – my friends – called the cops. I took off. Well, I still sent messages online for a bit, but I haven’t seen Zara since I came here.’

Arc isn’t a believer, but he needs the Children of the Second Holy Ascent. He needs Masada, where he is a decent man among many, where they trust him and he deserves it. And now the Shepherd will banish him.

‘What else, child?’

‘There is nothing else.’

‘Then in Masada find your place on Earth and may God keep a place for you in the Kingdom of Heaven.’

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Zara’s dad has insisted on keeping the campfire small in case someone spots the smoke. Even so, he can’t seem to help himself fiddling with it and putting more sticks on. It’s only about eight-thirty and they’ve run out of wood.

‘I’ll go and check the rabbit traps. You can take a bucket to collect some of the cow pats around about and keep the fire going with them.’

‘Yuck, Dad.’

If there’s a rabbit, which is highly doubtful, it would probably taste better if it wasn’t
cooked with crap.

‘Don’t be a sook,’ he says. ‘You’ve seen for yourself there’s hardly any decent wood around on these saltbush plains. Anyway, people all over the world use manure for fuel. Just about every human need can be met by the humble cow, in fact. Milk, meat, leather, the list goes on.’

‘Oh? What about buildings?’

‘Ha, don’t need them.’

‘What about love? Do cows give you sweet, tender love?’

‘Just collect the pats, Zara.’

Moss stalks off one way, Zara the other. She bends wearily to kerplop each cow pat she find into the bucket. This is so unfair. The other girls from her Home Group will be at that party they spent a week of school whispering about. Stacey and Co. might be cows whose pats wouldn’t be worth burning, but what she wouldn’t give to trade places now, to laugh and flirt and swoon and know, there on the balcony of Stacey’s cousin’s bayside house, that it is all before them.

For Mostyn John ‘Dingo’ Donohoe, AKA Dad, it is all behind him and he doesn’t even realise it. Like how he assumed no servo cashier and no truckie could possibly have heard of that dead poet when he pinched the name Charles Harpur. Why is it that instead of growing wise, the older people get, the more they forget of what is possible, of what others might be? He’s too far gone to change, her dad. Cowpat Dad. Fuckhead Dad. Poor Dad.

A thud and a snort break the hush. The beasts might be half a kilometre away or right behind her, Zara can’t tell. She starts to run in the direction of the fire and trips over a saltbush, scattering the load of cow pats. Lovely, just lovely, true blue life on The Land. The animal noises have stopped now. She grits her teeth, grabs at the pats and bustles back toward the camp.

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Moss, too, hears the sounds of the herd. The steady animals are comforting, simple enough
to trust. Two of his handmade string traps are empty and the third seems to have vanished. He wanders searching until he catches himself wondering what he is searching for. Time to give up. He pauses to watch Zara traversing the moonlit plain. Seconds later she folds into the earth, as though she was only ever beheld in the mind’s eye of some sleepwalking drover who would wake in the morning with a yen he couldn’t explain. The pale slip of a figure rises again into view, reaching the other side of the dry creek bed.

Back at the camp he screws up his nose.

‘It smells like fresh cow dung.’

‘Dher, Dad.’

Under the full moon a puddle glints beside Zara’s camping chair, a tiny oasis in the parched plain. Moss groans.

‘Did you use up drinking water washing manure off your hands?’

She nods coyly.

‘You’re supposed to use dry cow pats, Zara.’

‘You didn’t tell me that.’

‘It’s obvious.’

‘It’s only obvious to you because someone told you. Gooey marshmallows burn. Petrol is a liquid and it burns.’

The fire splutters. It has minutes to live.

Moss and Zara go to sleep early and fitfully, until she gets out of the tent and bangs on the car window next to his head.

‘I’m so cold,’ she complains when he grumpily swings open the door. ‘Dad, I think I might lose some toes.’

Zara’s teeth clang like a machine.

‘Come on, it’s only autumn. And toes aren’t essential. Think about it.’

‘I’ll die out here.’

‘Better to die in your tent than live in a cell. Where’s your Donohoe spirit?’

‘But I …’ Zara trails off.

‘We are all prisoners. Even you. School, work, taxes.’

‘Rubbish, Dad.’
‘What?’
The chattering of Zara’s teeth answers him.
‘It’s only me, love. What is it? Hop in and tell me.’
Zara drags her sleeping bag into the back seat.
‘Well, it’s just, what you said, it’s... rubbish,’ she mumbles. ‘This is the twenty-first century. People already tried kings and noblemen and peasants and convicts. They tried Communism, they tried everything they could think of. This,’ Zara says with a broad sweep of her hand toward the world at large, ‘is miraculous. I might help cure cancer, if I go to uni when I finish school. I might travel the world hitting little white balls and finding ways to spend the gazillions of dollars I get paid.’
‘What if you were African?’
‘We’re not! I might spend my life building sky-scrapers, you know? Or I might dance, just dance. You could have, too,’ she says accusingly.
‘I hate dancing.’
‘Do you actually listen, ever? Donohoe spirit!’
‘I never said I was Bold Jack Donohoe. He was insanely strong, smarter than –’
‘And they shot him down anyway.’
‘Nobody’s pretending to be –’
‘Good, ‘cause you’re not.’
‘Yeah, but I mean, you sent me the clay pipe of Bold Jack. In a way I...’
‘No, you’re not.’
‘In spirit...’
‘The spirit of fighting to the death? Was living with mum and me so shitty you had to wreck it for us all?’
‘I was defending you.’
‘But...’
Zara throws up her hands, cutting short whatever she was about to say. The girl knows something about it that he doesn’t, then. She climbs out of the car and begins noisily rifling around in the boot, muttering about blankets and basic planning. The pitch between moonset and sunrise is suddenly silent. Zara returns with her arms full. She
doesn’t seem to be able to speak. Moss flicks on the torch and it isn’t a blanket she carries, but a roll of gaffer tape and a shovel.
Kim wakes to the ringing of the Phans’ portable phone on the kitchen table in front of her. She grabs at it and waits to hear the words she’s been dreading since Zara disappeared. Detective Keyes is on the line.

‘Relax, Mrs Donohoe, we’re still following a number of leads.’

He’s been repeating the message every few hours. Bone sore from slumping on the table, where she must have drifted off, Kim looks around and finds herself alone. 05:17, the microwave clock informs her. Too early to relax, or too fucking late.

‘Where are they, Detective?’

‘They?’

‘You reckon I’m a dim bloody sim, don’t you, mate. Moss must have got to my daughter.’

Keyes is quiet a moment. Lily the police liaison and the gun-toting goons have left the Phans’ Fairfield flat and haven’t been replaced, which can only mean they are convinced Moss is out of range again.

‘We were looking into a fuel theft out west, a man and girl at Condobolin. But then we tracked Zara’s mobile phone SIM card to the Snowy Mountains, heading south off the main roads, as remote as you can get. Signal has dropped out now, but don’t panic, we’ll catch up with them. There, you’re in the loop.’

She’s in the loop, spinning upside down, stumbling to the study, doing what Uncle Phuoc has demanded. She edges along the narrow gap between her bed and the headhigh stacked boxes of Horizons of Plenty transgenesis lab equipment, to the clothes cupboard against the wall. Joey Nine’s dark moist eyes search her for his usual green porridge breakfast. Instead she has a cardboard box for him.

‘We’re going out, Nine.’

Like a baby, he’s light at first, but after walking to the train station in the last lullled
grey minutes before sunrise, it’s a relief to board the 5:51 to the city and spread out on the seats. Nine scratches at the box.

‘Hush,’ she whispers. ‘Don’t be afraid.’

To him afraid isn’t a feeling or a word, she supposes, it’s just another sound the monsters make. He’s as soft in his oversized head as he is in his hind legs. A bit like some of the early-bird passengers in the carriage. Nobody asks what’s in the box. A normal six-month-old joey’s legs would be growing hard and fast as it began to venture from the pouch, and Nine can barely muster a little cardboard scuffing.

Kim switches train lines and soon arrives at Martin Place, near the State Parliament building. She emerges into a cloudy March morning that is eerily calm in the heart of Sydney. She walks down Macquarie Street and finds that locked iron gates and fence pikes block her way to the steps of Parliament, where she has pictured farewelling Joey Nine. Instead she’s stuck on the footpath, with a leery security guard facing her direction. Too bad. She opens the box and sees Nine coiled tight, quivering, cold or scared or both. Soon he will feel nothing, left behind for journalists to report on and the public to rage over. Euthanised – given eternal youth. Like Zara is going to be, or has been already.

‘Gi’s a squiz,’ asks some grizzly-haired park-life who’s strayed from the Domain. He smells worse than Nine. ‘Carn, gi’s a squiz,’ he repeats, pointing to the box she carries.

It can’t hurt and it might get rid of him faster. She opens the lid and the stray recoils and shakes his head.

‘Fuckin’ freak show, lady.’

‘Yeah, and the biggest fuck-up isn’t in the box.’

The man stumbles away, scratching his head.

‘I’m sorry, Ninny, my bubba-boo rubber roo,’ Kim murmurs, looking into those wells that reflect everything.

Joey Nine is the only pipefish transgenesis roo that’s been allowed to live beyond a hundred and fifty days. She used to wonder, although she could recite the Macropus Giganteus lifecycle easily enough, why David Jewell and the Hopless Roo team leader before her chose that expiry date. Not anymore. At a hundred and fifty days joeys open their eyes. Nine is ogling her; he’s a witness, and lie about it as long as you like, but between
unobserved and watched the skein of the decency stretches and tears. Kim crosses the street and begins her journey back to Fairfield.

‘Those of us left are sticking together, Rubber Roo.’

Her visions of revenge for her inevitable sacking seem suddenly pathetic: Horizons of Plenty raided and disgraced and David Jewell sobbing on camera after media and police investigations into the bizarre transgenic joey found dead at Parliament House. And then what? A clampdown on genetic engineering?

No. She will finish Hopless Roo herself.

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Sitting in the shade of a she-oak as the sun sears the fugitives’ campsite near Condobolin, Moss lists for Zara the non-sinister uses of gaffer tape:

- Protective cover for earrings while playing sport
- Hanging decorations on tent or getaway car walls
- Emergency wound dressing
- Headband
- Snakebite compression
- Patch holey clothes
- Mark hopscotch lines on the ground
- Repairs of sunglasses, shoes, tents or cars
- Leg waxing (optional)
- Replacement for nail polish
- Cutting into pieces and arranging them into letters to spell a message on a tree or wall, e.g. I’M OK MUM

As for the shovel, he tells her, the only burials it will help with are those of campfire
ashes and ‘number twos’.

‘Alright, alright,’ Zara says tiredly.

The rims of her eyes are red from not sleeping last night. He mustn’t look any better, after wandering the plains either side of first light, brooding over her silent accusations. Hasn’t he looked after her? In this well chosen campsite they have heard only trucks and a handful of cars pass on the road nearby, no sirens promising hellfire. They ate a fine healthy breakfast of fruit this morning and there’s still a bottle of drinking water left, even though Zara wasted some washing cow manure off her hands.

‘Dad.’ Her voice barely travels the metre between them. It’s no secret they are only sitting so close because shade is in short supply. ‘Dad, where are we really going?’

Moss looks around as if, by the dry creek on the bleached fallen leaves of the she-oak, they might actually find themselves riding some kind of intergalactic ship. He’s already told her several times, as her rate of nagging rises with the temperature, they’ll have to sit tight while he sorts out a safe haven. There’s some truth in it. For some reason it drives her wild when he tries to explain that camping out is only a ‘temporary arrangement’.

‘Cocorocó,’ Zara blurs.

‘What is that, some Japanese punk band from the Eighties?’

‘Cock-a-doodle-doo.’

‘You’re being juvenile.’

‘The Portuguese and the English roosters are being juvenile. They can’t even agree on their motto.’

‘Put a sock in it, Zara.’

‘Not gaffer tape?’

‘What’s got into you?’

‘Ô-ô-o-o cried the Vietnamese rooster as the axe fell.’

‘God.’

‘Yeki-yeki-yek,’ the Thai rooster called to his headless running mate across the rifles of the border guards.’

‘You need a padded cell.’

‘Nice! Alexander Pearce died for your sins.’
‘Why did I…?’
‘Why did you whisk me to paradise? We are a lovey dovey family, remember? Mother dear is going to be so dazzled by your daring that she will pay a sky writer to write COME BACK MJD in a hundred locations around Australia on the off chance you’ll look to the sky and – aaaaggggghhhhhhhhh.’

Zara springs to her feet and sprints aimlessly from the tree. She dances maniacally and, screaming, falls and rolls in the dust and jumps back up several times before Moss can reach her.

‘Calm down, it’s alright,’ he says, although her screaming terrifies him.

Clawing at her back through her tee-shirt Zara yelps, ‘Bull ants!’

‘Take your tee-shirt off, for Christ’s sake.’

She tears it off and, swatting madly, asks him, ‘Can you see it?’

He can see one bull ant squashed dead against the small of her back and several ant bites rising livid on her skin. A second bull ant he flicks off the hem of her shorts with his hand. What else he sees makes no sense. His daughter’s upper arms are laced with thin red lines. They can’t be ant bites. Some lines are faint and glint smooth in the sunlight, some are scabbed and others are angry crimson and puckered. She checks her tee-shirt for other ants and hurriedly pulls it back on. Too late.

He reaches to her and gently rolls up her sleeve, terrified she will recoil. She closes her eyes in abandon.

‘You made these lines?’

‘Dad, they’ve practically healed, anyway.’

‘But why?’

‘I … deserved it. At the start I did, and then I kind of liked it. They were my notches on the cell wall, one for each day you were inside. Dumb girl stuff.’

They hear a car nearing on the road that passes close to the campsite. Moss leads Zara by the hand behind some acacias.

‘What did it feel like? Cutting yourself.’

‘Like...’

‘Say it,’ he urges, even though he dreads hearing, ‘Like the first time I had sex.’
‘At school I did an assignment about the convicts, Alexander Pearce and those, Black Caesar, of course Bold Jack. A convict on the triangle would take a hundred lashes without giving any bastard the satisfaction of hearing him yelp, if he could. He’d be blood and backbone to the cat and he’d turn, in the moment before passing out, to face the soldiers and convicts watching and to smile. That’s what cutting feels like. Like we can handle anything.’

‘So why, why did you stop?’

Zara swallows hard.

‘Because you escaped. I was waiting for you to come.’

Moss covers his face in his hands. She will help cure cancer if she gives the cause her brimming will. He believes it. She might build sky-scrapers, or dance, or read the news, or invent a chip to track lost car keys, or lead the country. But not in the red dust under the needled she-oak, swatting at the flies.

‘Now I find out it was better at Phuoc and Sang’s place,’ Zara says. ‘At least they had the Internet.’

Arc’s leader called on him in the night. His only regret was regret itself, he said. God gave Demi to the Shepherd when she was a girl, gave her the blood that stained his sheets, gave him his life among the Children at Masada as he must also take it away. And at daybreak Arc at last believed.

The Children of the Second Holy Ascent have spent all morning looking for the Shepherd at their compound among the mountains and found only his black robes in the glass tower. He has ascended, the Children agree. Arc gathers them together in the Deuteronomy Room and tells them there is no other explanation.

‘Like the Lord Jesus, the Shepherd has foretold his ascension to the Kingdom of Heaven.’
They are on their knees before him, Demi’s sister in the front row, tears of elation streaming on their faces and his. What a fool he was to lose himself searching for absolution in the black robes of the Shepherd. Justice doesn’t run in a circle, but a dizzying spiral around him, untouchable at its centre. This he has been given, as the Shepherd was given: the spirit of fifty-three Children whose joy or despair turns on his word. Instead of withering with their first leader’s disappearance, their faith has bloomed on the day of the Second Holy Ascent.

‘Children of the Third Holy Ascent, pray with me:

My only regret is regret itself
My only regret is regret itself

To hear the voices of mothers and daughters and brothers and grandfathers rising as one in answer is to believe. The tongue Arc speaks in this place of miracles would only have been alien gabble to the bullshit artist overseeing the building works yesterday and the holiday apartment cleaner and station hand and bushman gambler who once knew Dingo Donohoe. He has forgotten Zara forever.

The shame is in shame’s possession

Shame’s possession

Of the sinner’s body the Lord gave unto me;

The Lord gave unto me;

I am condemned in His eye if I am guilty of bowing before guilt

If I am guilty of bowing before guilt

To repent the life that went before is to sever the cord which through God’s umbilical Children feeds the virgin dawn colour and light

Feeds the virgin dawn colour and light

For in Masada I am born again

Born again!
They hear the vehicle long before its silhouette tops the rise. As it turns in their direction Moss is roadkill, blinded by the beams, his lungs useless. Zara tugs his arm.

‘What are we waiting for, Dad?’

Justice. The same thing he’s been risking her life to escape. But it’s a red ute with a mounted spotlight, not a cop car, which slows to a casual halt beside the Commander’s Falcon before Moss can speak.

‘Evening,’ comes a middle-aged woman’s voice as the door opens. In shorts and a dirty shirt, she strides over like she’s late to a friendly Guy Fawkes Night.

Zara’s still got him by the arm and she squeezes a warning.

‘Lost?’ the woman asks.

‘Nup.’ He’s talking like a local already.

‘Shooting?’ she tries.

They’ll have to wait and see about that.

‘Camping?’ Though there isn’t a fence from horizon to horizon, the woman’s got her hands on hips like she owns the place.

‘Yep,’ Moss replies.

‘I own the place. Carol Wellington. My husband’s Terry Wellington.’

Zara and Moss must look bemused, because the woman adds, ‘You know. The Wellingtons of Seven Mile Hill.’

‘Oh yeah, of course.’

‘Where you from, then?’

Finally standing up, he notices the woman’s startled backward step. It’s like that, then, a game. He gives her a warm grin.

‘We’re from Adelaide, on the way to my mother-in-law who’s on her last legs in Sydney.’
‘It’s no worries you camping a night,’ Mrs Wellington is saying as though she doesn’t know he’s Dingo. ‘Quicker to stick to the Mid Western Highway on the way through, mind.’

She’s sizing them up while she chatters, no doubt about it. Since Sydney he’s run out of skin-tone silicone to remould his nose and cheeks. She seems to be fixated on his neck. Ah yes, the Z tattoo he’s neglected to cover with makeup. He’s made a name, like he always wanted to: Dingo, a hero to redneck morons everywhere. Ha. Yet to the farmer’s wife he’s probably just a dumb crim. Is that all he is, blundering into the back of beyond with a girl and no plan? A dumb crim riding his luck, no better than Budgie, no better than brain-dead Laurie. No better than Potbellied Joe, who, Moss has to accept, was as powerless to stop himself coming after Zara as Moss was powerless to stop himself charging at the stalker.

‘Come meet my daughter Celia.’ She’s talking to Zara, a hand on her arm so the three of them form a touchy feely human chain. ‘You’re what, fourteen, fifteen?’

A little flattery to steal Zara. She beams.

‘Thirteen.’

‘You’re kidding. Celia’s thirteen, just turned actually, still got leftover birthday cake up at the homestead if you’re interested. Come have a dip in our pool, feed Roast his milk bottle. He’s an orphaned lamb.’

Zara looks to Moss, bright eyed after a tedious day in hiding.

‘Bit late for a dip, isn’t it Mrs Wellington?’ he asks. Of course it is and she knows it. The last he’ll ever see of his daughter is her riding in the ute with this stranger, that childish smile on her face. How long then until the sharpshooters swoop on the campsite and all Zara knows of it is the distant whir of a chopper?

‘Never too late, mate,’ Mrs Wellington says. ‘That’s my motto. Never too late.’

If only it were true. Moss wanders as casually as he can to the boot of the Falcon and retrieves the wrecking bar.

‘She’s not going with you, Mrs Wellington,’ he says, slowly walking toward her.

Zara is blubbering. Now is not the time to go to pieces. She clings like a toddler to the witch, who can’t seem to move. Mrs Wellington’s muttering something to herself, no, not to herself, but to Jesus, to God. Prayers! He’s the one she should be praying to; Budgie
was right about how it feels to wield a weapon.
‘Arc was the stalker,’ Zara sniffs.
Moss stares at her, the weight of the iron in his hands suddenly crippling.
She repeats, ‘Arc was the stalker,’ and still he can’t make meaning of the sounds.
The last time he saw his friend was before... just before Zara found the photographs of her at the park. Impossible. Since she was a baby at Lorne she’s been Arc’s doll. His doll. It’s some kind of trick to save the witch who will wreck everything if he lets her run.
‘Dad!’ his daughter bawls. ‘You’ve already killed one innocent person. You make a choice. Do you want to do it again?’
She and the witch are coiled tight.
‘Get in the car, Zara,’ he orders.
The witch gasps, hearing the name that confirms the identity of the campers, but nobody moves. Moss’s arms and fingers ache and so does his head. If Potbellied Joe was innocent… he can’t be. He was the hitchhiker who took the Donohoes’ address, the creep with the whistle-laugh who turned up at Moss’s thirtieth birthday party. Wasn’t he? But what kind of swaggie hitchhiker would know the tricks of online stalking?
‘Arc kissed me,’ Zara whimpers into the witch’s bosom. ‘Held me upside down and tickled me all over. And I let him. That’s how I know, Dad. It was him. It was –’
‘Shut up.’
He backs away and checks through Mrs Wellington’s ute, where he finds a hunting rifle stowed behind the driver’s seat. His daughter screams, watching him retrieve it. Now, now, Zara, no surprises. This is what dumb crims do, men who will always destroy more than they create. He’s run out of choices. Even she must see that. Hope is the victim’s privilege, and any claim he had to that disappeared when she finally managed to cough up her dirty little secret.
‘You’ll have to get in the back, Mrs Wellington,’ he orders.
Gritting her teeth, she leaves Zara hunched alone and walks shakily to the ute. Kim used to tell him he was thrashing at fresh air, that he’d better exorcise the caveman in him before someone got hurt. Well, Kim, look at him now, heaving the farmer’s work-thinned body onto the tray. She sits quietly; senseless escape attempts are out of the question.
‘Zara, we’re going.’

She glares at him, as though trying to decide what he’s capable of. He doesn’t know it himself. He collapses the dome tent and dumps it, along with their belongings from the Commander’s Falcon, beside Mrs Wellington on the tray of her ute.

‘I’d never do this,’ he tries to explain, ‘except it’s either you or me.’ As he draws the cover over the tray, she only shakes her head and ducks underneath.

‘Come on, Zara. Passenger seat, first class.’

Eventually she walks across and climbs in, but now she won’t look at him.

The key is in the ignition. Moss drives north on the Condobolin to Nymagee Road, cuts west to Kidman Way and then north again. The songs and chatter of yesterday are unthinkable. He would tell her, if he could, that ‘Bold Jack’ didn’t want to fight. His men stole provisions for their journey to a white settlement of the free. They believed they would find it by a great lake three hundred miles inland from Sydney. There the escaped convicts would swim, they would wash and fish and forget that the Governor had promised a fortune to any cur who could drag them to the gallows. And this is where their journey would have ended, on the lonely red plains.

For three hours Moss concentrates on driving just below the speed limit, alert for flashing lights or the drone of aircraft. Only a handful of trucks and cars pass them all the way to Cobar. It looks like some kind of mining town. As they pass by the giant tinnie of beer on the verandah of the Grand Hotel, he turns at last to Zara.

‘I’d never hurt you. Or Mrs Wellington.’

A strange sound begins in her, a coo-co-h-rr-c, coo-co-h-rr-c. She is laughing, laughing at him. He has a rifle on his lap and they are driving nowhere – west by nowhere – after all. Wilcannia 260, a road sign says.

He drives into the night, into the outback, trying to remember Zara before she became like this, suddenly set so hard. Maybe she can do the same for him. She’s running between the Fiends and, like a child who still thinks fear is an occasional visitor to dreams, she climbs one and rides it in the dewy gully on an autumn morning.

Wilcannia 203. Now she’s out the front of the Donohoes’ weatherboard place between the Greek Orthodox Church and Giles Stone’s townhouse in Footscray, and she’s a
lithe little thing reaching up to the giant mosquito net, needle and thread in her hand, sewing a zipped entranceway before her mum arrives home.

_Wilcannia 155_. Deeper, further from here and now, Zara is so soft he’s afraid he’ll roll over and squash her in his sleep, but in this moment she giggles between him and Kim, tiny and perfect on the king sized bed in a holiday apartment at the edge of the Angahook Lorne State Park.

_Wilcannia 100_. The problem with his mind’s eye is that it doesn’t blink. There’s Arc catching the giggling girl they both loved, dangling her by the ankles. Officer Strange’s blindfolded face slumps on the mud between the reeds at Clifden, too, and Potbellied Joe falls in the time it takes to spit.

Moss tries to concentrate on strategy. No point roaring into town after town after town in the middle of the night. The trouble is that, although much of the land at the edge of the ute’s high beams looks like one vast, arid, gravel track, there hasn’t been a marked road off the Barrier Highway for a long time. He’s parched, his bony backside throbs and his eyelids keep drooping. Zara must feel the same, but she won’t complain – the upside of a daughter who is trying not to speak to you.

_Wilcannia 62_. There, whizzing past, is some kind of trail. No signs, but then again the signs don’t mean much to him out here anyway. He slows and U-turns and Zara gives a whine.

‘Shhh.’

‘I know,’ she hisses. ‘Shut up, chin up, no fuss, right? Hop into a little ditchy-itchy, a little gravey-avey dug with your shovely-lovely.’

Moss groans. She’s nothing like Mrs Wellington. She’s not going to make what he has to do easy. He turns off the road on to the rough wheel ruts of the trail. After a bumpy kilometre or two he stops the ute and takes a deep breath. Looking at his daughter, his will falters. He can’t end it like this. Yet it’s clear she has become a liability who’ll get them caught before long.

‘Tired?’ he asks, his voice wobbling, but she doesn’t answer. ‘I’m going to give Mrs Wellington a sip of drink.’

He gets out and opens the tarp, to find the captive lying silently exactly where he left
her. She sits up and gulps the water.

‘I, I hate what’s happening too,’ he mumbles.

He takes the tent out and sets it up amongst the saltbushes. Inside he arranges a foam mat, taking care to manoeuvre pebbles and twigs from under the nylon floor to the sides. He lies the sleeping bag straight, zipped up all the way, and dusts off the pillow for Zara.

She ignores him when he beckons.

‘Are sure you don’t want the tent?’ he calls. ‘It’ll be crowded with three of us in the ute.’

With that she tramps to the tent, bows her head and flops into it without a word. Back at the ute he waits in the passenger seat an hour, two hours and longer, desperate to let Zara sleep. Yet it is only he whom he can be certain has slept, as his forehead bumps against the cold glass and he wakes. 03:05 reads the car clock.

Moss eases the door open and walks around to the tray once more.

‘Please don’t make a sound,’ he whispers. ‘You’ll be safe at home tomorrow.’

Her entire body quavers, in only a shirt and shorts in the outback night air. Quickly he binds her wrists and hands in gaffer tape.

‘I hope they don’t shoot too straight,’ she says, mustering spirit though her teeth chatter. ‘You deserve to die slowly.’

Can’t argue with that. He wraps the tape over her mouth and around her head.

‘Zara will take it off when she gets up. You’ll look after each other. I need a head start, you understand.’

He lifts her out of the tray, lays her gently on a bed of sand beside the track and fetches a blanket to draw over the goose bumps that have tightened the faint wrinkles on her skin. He stands to leave.

‘Sorry.’ He’s speaking to so many people that it’s hard not to choke on the word.

While he turns the key in the ute and it growls in the still night, Zara is far away dreaming of building sky-scrapers, or curing cancer, or touring the world to play golf, or to dance. He hopes, and so hope hasn’t expired, no matter how much of the boy from Castlemaine has. Perhaps she will be waiting for him at Fiends’ Gap on his birthday, like she
promised, although he’ll have to see whether he is free that day. Do you get to keep your licence to make ‘Dad jokes’ after dumping your daughter in the outback?

Perhaps Zara stirs and listens to the changing of gears as he steals away to the road alone. Perhaps she was already gone an hour ago when his eyelids sank in relief. Perhaps she’s stayed awake since they arrived and, watching through a slit in the entrance of the tent, her hatred falters. She will understand and that is enough.

FINIS.
Preface

As Major Buckley counsels the narrator in *Geoffry Hamlyn*, to write of a horse one must write also of its riders and their forebears, until “the history of the horse would be reduced to very small compass...” (Kingsley 1859, 5-6). Its existence has limited meaning out of context, and the same may be said of a literary work. Thus I place *Dingo* in a tradition of novels which portray Australian outlaws, particularly gentlemanly bushrangers. Moss ‘Dingo’ Donohoe is comparable to a convict ‘bolter’ (escapee) whose public image assumes a life of its own, signified by the character’s supposed descent from the celebrated bolter bushranger, John ‘Bold Jack’ Donohoe (ca. 1806-1830).

*Dingo* concerns much besides the fugitive narrative and various research projects could complement the manuscript. My research on literary representations of gentlemanly bushrangers provides the opportunity to make an original contribution the field of knowledge of Australian literature. I extend an established body of criticism and also reveal some surprises. My writing on colonial era novelists builds on scholarship by Victor Crittenden, Ken Gelder, Elizabeth Webby, Lucy Sussex, Peter Cowan and many more. Folklorists Graham Seal and John Meredith have influenced my treatment of a topic of such breadth, as they have combined literary and historical studies to approach the larger cultural significance of texts under analysis while rigorously supporting their arguments (see Seal 1996; Meredith 1982).

By taking an overview of the gentlemanly bushranger character in the novel from its creation to today, I identify landmarks and trends which closer studies of individual authors
and periods may miss. Despite scholarly interest in bushranger literature, there has been uncertainty about the beginnings of the gentlemanly bushranger character type. He (fictional and real life bushrangers were usually male) appeared in the 1843 novel, *Tales of the Colonies* (Rowcroft 1843), a decade earlier than has recently been suggested (cf. Crittenden 2009, 8).

The rise of the bushranger to Australian national icon was more gradual than a casual appraisal may indicate. It was interrupted by condemnatory literary depictions by novelists who had a habit of pointing out that the lionised frontier criminal had sharp claws and a ready bite. A nationalistic mythology of bush pioneering, which flourished in the late nineteenth century, eulogised the gentlemanly bushranger from a safely inoffensive historical distance. Bruce Bennett defined myth as “an invented story, arising from a collective belief, which gives events and actions a particular meaning” (Bennett 1994, 58). That story, however, is apt to evolve.

Another surprise of the research is that Ned Kelly, whose memorialisation has come to dominate Australian bushranger mythology, was largely neglected by novelists for the first half century after his execution in 1880. Unlike the Kelly Gang, the gentlemanly bushrangers most beloved of novelists and readers until well into the twentieth century eschewed violence and often fell blamelessly from lives of privilege into crime. Just as rebellious ballads reflected the views and fantasies of convicts and emancipists (ex-convicts) in early colonial Australia, novels from the 1840s onwards tended to reflect the views and fantasies of their educated elite readership.

Underpinning my research is a question which unites it in this thesis with the novel, *Dingo*: ‘What would it take for an outlaw of today to inspire the kind of public sympathy and favourable literary portrayals that colonial era bushrangers sometimes enjoyed?’ So much has changed that only a very different breed of outlaw could expect similar reactions. The term ‘outlaw’ is used loosely, referring not only to a formally declared outlaw, but also to anybody living defiantly by crime. As Seal observed, the outlaws of yore were fêted not for
their criminality, but rather because supporters perceived their deeds as resistance by the underdogs in an unjust society (Seal 1996, 197).

Public interest in the escapades of audacious criminals occasionally demonstrates the ongoing appeal of the outlaw around the world. The cases of William ‘Billy the Hunted One’ Stewart in New Zealand (see Ritchie 2009) and the ‘Barefoot Bandit’ (see the Colton Harris-Moore Fan Club 2011) are anomalous, remarkable because they are rare throwbacks to a bygone era. A more significant outlaw equivalent is Julian Assange, the Australian founder of the Wikileaks whistleblower organisation. Seal foresaw that information, rather than gold, would be the booty of the outlaw heroes of the Internet age (Seal 1996, 195). By redistributing knowledge from the information rich to the information poor, Assange and his unarmed allies have threatened authorities across the globe (see Assange 2011).

Some of the starkest examples of people’s willingness to champion certain criminal offenders are in cases of vigilantism against paedophiles in Australia (see Marx 2011; O’Leary 2008) and abroad (see Tolkin 1999; Frank 2000). Moss Donohoe’s attack on his daughter’s suspected stalker in Dingo divides opinion, with some people demonising him and others lauding him as a hero. It has parallels with documented cases. In one such incident in Queensland in 2008, a father inflicted brain damage on the molester of his child. A supporter of the father argued that the bashing was a “human, primal reaction” (Bentley 2009). Dingo takes up this conflict between the primal and the civilised.

Like the colonial rebel bushranger, the dingo is familiar but dangerous, hunter and hunted. Some long to believe in its better nature and make a pet of it. Most people, though, distrust the skulking canine, especially since a dingo took baby Azaria Chamberlain from her family’s tent near Uluru in 1980. W. Carlton Dawe was one of several novelists to find found outlaw symbolism in the dingo. “I am sick and tired of this sort of life,” big Joe Devine tells his bushranger mate, Tom Stanford, as trapped under police fire they prepare for their final fight in Mount Desolation. “It’s well enough for a dingo, but it’s death to a man” (Dawe 1892, 306).
Much of *Gentlemen at Heart* focuses on novels that respond to the celebrity or notoriety of outlaws, whereas relevant short fiction, plays, poetry, film, visual arts, children’s fiction and non-fiction warrant analysis in subsequent studies. Representations of women and Indigenous people in bushranger literature would also be valuable foci for further research. The novels discussed are selected examples of those which generate or perpetuate the mythology of the gentlemanly bushranger, or which subvert that mythology in notable fashion.

Chapter One investigates the conditions that gave rise to the literature of bushranging during the period of transportation to the penal colonies of New South Wales and Van Diemen’s Land (late 1700s to mid 1800s). In this analysis I draw on Michel Foucault’s account of the bourgeois appropriation of the formerly lower-class genre of crime literature in Europe and Thomas De Quincey’s ideas about aestheticisation of violence.

Chapter Two follows the changing relationship between novels and nascent Australian bushranger mythology during the mid to late colonial era. Chapter Three analyses the contribution to bushranger literature by Ernest William Hornung and Hume Nisbet. The novels of these British authors provide the basis of discussions about rising Australian literary nationalism in the late colonial era and the implications of satirical representations of gentlemanly bushrangers by outsiders. In Chapter Four I extend Bob Hodge’s and Vijay Mishra’s conception of bushranging as hyper-real “theatre” to examine continuities between colonial era crime and performances of outlawry in post-Federation Australia, as depicted in novels (Hodge and Mishra 2001, 345). Since the 1960s novelists have challenged bushranger mythology, though it has proven as persistently popular as it is amorphous.

Together, *Dingo* and *Gentlemen at Heart* explore the complexities and contradictions of the outlaw hero tradition in Australia. Equally they affirm that it is a potent tradition still.
WORKS CITED (Preface)

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Chapter One

Treasonous Bolters to Noble Bandits

It seems, at first, a ‘chicken and egg’ riddle: what came first, folklore of the gentlemanly bushranger or novels that generated such folklore? The answer is unambiguous. Exceptionally high minded, well educated, courtly bushranger characters of the type that became common in Australian novels did not emerge from the local ‘lore of the common people; the traditional beliefs, legends, customs, etc., of a people’ (Macquarie Dictionary Online 2011). Nor did these peculiar characters abruptly ride onto the scene. Instead crime and adventure romance novelists assimilated the figure of the Australian bushranger into the European ‘noble bandit’, or ‘outlaw hero’ tradition.

The treasonous local folklore of the lower classes celebrating convict bolters provides a stark contrast to the inoffensive entertainment of a fair contest between gentlemanly bushrangers and the forces of the law found in novels of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Bolters hid in the bush and survived by stealing, and were then synonymous with bushrangers. Like Colonial Era visual artists such as Conrad Martens and Joseph Lycett, whose paintings of the Australian bush reflected their European views of how idyllic landscapes ought to appear, rather than what was before their eyes, some novelists wrote the archetypal Robin Hood character into a bush pioneering narrative. Colonial era novelists often entertained the educated class of British and colonial Anglophile readers instead of striving to understand the phenomenon of bushranging and its well established cultural significance in the colonies.

Clear evidence exists that a fascination with the phenomenon of bushranging was widespread prior to the first novels dealing with bushrangers in the 1840s. Ballads, plays, countless newspaper articles, biographies (e.g. Wells 1818) and poetry (e.g. Juvenal 1827), as well as depictions of bushrangers in visual art (e.g. Earle 1827), predate such novels.
Original Australian folk ballads about bushrangers were in circulation at least as early as 1830. By this time a ‘currency’ (native born) population of British descent had begun to emerge as an identifiable Australian folk (common people) with derivative but increasingly distinct folklore (Manifold 1964). Ballads are herein defined as “narrative folksongs or literary imitations thereof” (Manifold 1964, 7). Convicts and poor settlers grafted their compositions on sailors’ songs and ballads such as those popular from the Irish Rebellion of 1798 (Moodie Heddle 1962, 34-35). Many of them celebrated the incredible adventures of the Irish convict bolter, John Donohoe, who arrived in New South Wales in 1825. Donohoe gained notoriety as an audacious highwayman and plunderer of stations from 1827 until troopers shot him dead in 1830 (Manifold 1964, 21-24). Among Donohoe’s feats was his escape while in irons in the centre of Sydney after hearing his death sentence.

New South Wales Colonial Secretary Alexander McLeay’s request to Windsor police for information to be included in a reward notice: ‘Give me the particulars, description &c. of the man under sentence of death who some time ago escaped between the court house and the jail – I think his name is Donnahoe. Herewith. Should he not be advertised?’
Bushrangers were potent symbols of dissent against the perceived injustices of the New South Wales and Van Diemen’s Land penal systems. Most versions of ‘The Ballad of Bold Jack Donohoe’ and ‘The Wild Colonial Boy’ share a chorus with the lines:

   We’ll wander o’er the valleys and we’ll gallop o’er the plains,
   For we scorn to live in slavery, bound down by iron chains.

(Meredith 1968, 97)

The ballads and later novels share British influence, but like creatures evolved from a common ancestor, they developed distinctively under dissimilar conditions. In both forms, bushrangers were represented as potential heroes akin to the mythical British noble outlaw archetype that had been celebrated across the centuries (Seal 1989, 25). Ballads were traditionally “essentially lower class and popular” (Manifold 1964, 14), in contrast to the novels. An overt ‘moral of the story’ was uncommon in the oral tradition associated with the ballads (Seal 2002, 133), whereas novelists typically warned of the moral perils of outlawry.

Although there was no ideological uniformity in the early ballads (Butterss and Webby 1993, xvii-xx), a notable proportion of them was unrepentantly rebellious. The most subversive were banned for the entire colonial era (Manifold 1964, 15 and 41), perhaps due to their association with Irish nationalism. An alternative term for ‘bushranger’ in the early colonial period was ‘croppy’, indicating a conflation of bolter bandits and the Irish nationalist rebels to whom the term originally referred (see Lang 1842).

The earliest known Australian ballad, ‘Jim Jones’, in the voice of an English convict, shows that sedition was not actually confined to the Irish. In the penultimate verse, Jones vows to bolt and join the bushrangers. He then concludes:
And late at night when everything
Is quiet in the town,
I’ll kill the tyrants one and all,
I’ll shoot the bastards down:
I’ll give the law a little shock;
Remember what I say,
They'll yet regret they sent Jim Jones
In chains to Botany Bay.

(Wositzky 1978, 10-11)

Offenders, not merely outside observers, conceived of themselves as participants in a justified rebellion that was distinct from ordinary crime. An 1825 report in the Colonial Times and Tasmanian Advertiser of the capture and death sentences of seven unnamed Van Diemonian robbers and receivers included verse purportedly found in an offender’s pocket, written partly in blood (1825a, 3). Its want of poetry is the best evidence that it may have been authentic (see full version in Appendix A). The anonymous author’s commitment to sacrifice alongside sworn comrades appeared obligatory and inevitable, as “True to our guns, then we must stand”. Such fatalism is a familiar refrain of nonfictional and fictional outlaw narratives. The writer in blood evidently sought to link himself to a struggle of consequence, beyond his natural attempts to avoid capture and punishment.

The verse exhibits the qualities of a convict bolter folklore which was clearly in existence in Van Diemen’s Land little more than two decades after the British established penal settlements there. The writer viewed his gang as rising heroically against oppression, vowing to “rob the rich to feed the poor” (see Appendix A). The Hobart Town Gazette declined to print the “miserable song” but remarked, “Such wretched expedients do these unhappy creatures adopt to keep up their spirits...” (1825b, 2).
If the blood verse was genuine and sincere, it epitomised the convict bolters’ sense of victimhood, perhaps even martyrdom. If it was a cruel parody it equally confirmed the prevalence of the values which it lampooned, for only such a basis in reality could have permitted exaggerated mimicry. Those values, especially fair play and daring, are also manifest in novelistic representations of bushrangers. The crucial difference is that early colonial era convict folklore asserted that lowly transportee rebels, as opposed to gentlemen thrust by circumstance into outlawry, personified the heroic bushranger.

The bushranger characters in plays that predate novels of the Australian colonies are also dangerous bolters. In 1829 David Burn’s *The Bushrangers*, inspired by the real life bolter, Matthew Brady, was produced in Edinburgh (Burn 1829). Another executed bolter, Michael Howe, inspired W.T. Moncrieff, with WG Elliston’s assistance from Hobart (Miller 1958, 1), to write *Van Diemen’s Land: An Operatic Drama, in Three Acts* (Moncrieff 1831). Henry Melville’s *The Bushrangers; Or Norwood Vale*, was produced in Hobart in 1834 (Melville 1834). The following year Charles Harpur imitated Shakespearian tragedy with his bushranger play, *The Tragedy of Donohoe* (Harpur 1835, revised and variously renamed over the following 32 years).

Bushrangers were already the stuff of folklore and some ‘high culture’ texts, then, before they began appearing in novels of the Australian colonies in the 1840s. The romanticised outlaw hero or gentlemanly bushranger versions, upon which this chapter focuses, were there at the beginning but remained a rarity among ruthless ruffian characters in novels of the mid-nineteenth century (cf. Whitworth 1865; De Boos 1867, 1871; Tucker 1952/1845; Kingsley 1859). Only with distance in time and geography from the tumultuous scenes of convict transportation and outbreaks of rebellion did many novelists tend towards romanticisation of bushrangers.

Cultural commentators have tended to emphasise the potency of the bushrangers as symbols of resistance, rather than as actual menaces (Ward 1958; Hughes 1987). Eric Hobsbawm argued that ‘social bandits’, as he termed folk hero outlaws such as
bushrangers, did not form revolutionary forces and were “little more than symptoms of crisis and tension in their society” (Hobsbawm 1969, 19). Hodge and Mishra concurred that the bushrangers were unable to seriously threaten existing authorities (Hodge and Mishra 1991, 31). Yet at their peak in the first half of the nineteenth century, bushrangers were a force to be reckoned with.

At certain times and places the squatters had a well founded fear that the rule of law in the fledgling colonies was under threat. In an 1825 letter to the Colonial Secretary of New South Wales, James Mudie, of ‘Castle Forbes’ in the Hunter Valley, wrote that bolters had raided his friend’s station, with inside information presumably from convict servants. Bushrangers, he warned, “...have now formed such a chain of connections, that we may expect this part of the Colony in a state of rebellion” (Mudie 1825). Newspapers published long lists of convicts at large. In the Bathurst district, brutalised convict Ralph Entwistle escaped and led the ‘Ribbon Gang’ in liberating assigned convicts by force (Cubbitt 1998). Numbering up to 130 mostly Irish-born bolters in 1830, the doomed gang was but one of the largest of many which created panic among the propertied classes and won sympathy among those who considered convict rebellion justified (“Supreme Court” 1830, 3).

Representations of bushrangers in the arts were hotly contested during the convict era. Witness the response of the Sydney Monitor editor, Edward Smith Hall, to The Tragedy of Donohoe (Harpur 1835). Even he, the liberal thinking founder of a newspaper that usually took the side of convicts and criticised the colonial authorities, argued that “… as for the mean, stupid animal Donohoe, the very name is enough to damn the piece” (Perkins 1987, xxx). The play was not produced, perhaps not for want of quality, but due to sensitivities about mining the psyche of a bushranger at a time when bushranging was still rife.

Novelists, too, wrote amid real life floggings, shootings and hangings. A review of Charles Rowcroft’s Tales of the Colonies (Rowcroft 1843) praised the one-time Van Diemen’s Land resident’s generally “true to life” account of settlers’ experiences. In his subplot about
bushrangers, however, it argued the author had lost himself “in the extravagance of romance” ("Tales of the Colonies, or, The Adventures of an Emigrant" 1844, 122).

If novelists’ romantic imaginations led them to participate in myth creation, equally they responded to previous fiction and folklore. The melding of historical bushranging cases with an imported literary tradition of fictional noble banditry helped shape the Australian myth of the gentlemanly bushranger. The myth embodies the bushcraft, stalwart loyalty and valour the colonists sensed they would need in order to master the alien environment. According to the related popular myth of outback mateship and stoic endurance, which David Myers has labelled “the most heroic of our national myths”, the pioneers that shaped the Australian character fought all manner of threats (Myers 1987, 7). Bushrangers may be considered along with bushfires and floods in a narrative that positions colonists as victims, instead of lethal invaders of Indigenous land.

Indeed Indigenous resistance fighters and bushrangers were sometimes depicted as twin threats in novels of the colonial era. The historical figure of Musquito (sometimes spelled Musqueeto) is described in Tales of the Colonies as a “devilish savage”. His band of warriors attacks settlers in concert with the bushrangers and he claims symbolic fraternity with their leader (Rowcroft 1843, 54; 116; 127). In John Boyle O'Reilly's Moondyne, the local tribe venerates ‘Moondyne Joe’ and aids his escape from hard labour in irons. Finding Moondyne dead, chief Te-mana-roa says, “This man belonged to us... he was true to my people, and they understood and loved him better than his own” (O'Reilly 1879, 255). This profound affinity is again evident in Hume Nisbet’s A Bush Girl’s Romance. The Indigenous rebel leader, Worrogonga, befriends and shelters the bushrangers as common enemies of the squatters (Nisbet 1894a, 172).

Novelists relied heavily on past representations of loveable rogues in fiction. They often intimated that the gentlemanly bushranger myth derived from the archetypal noble highwayman of the ‘Mother Country’. A sympathetic constable sent to recapture Brandon, in Rowcroft’s The Bushranger of Van Diemen’s Land, compares him to Dick Turpin, the
legendary English highwayman (Rowcroft 1846, Vol. 1, 46). Similarly in Rosa Praed’s *Outlaw and Lawmaker*, the squatter Frank Hallett compares the chivalrous daredevil, ‘Moonlight’, to the French aristocrat turned English outlaw, Claude Duval. He reluctantly admires “this masked miscreant with the soft voice and courteous manners who flashed out on moonlight nights to stick up a gold escort…” (Praed 1988, 10).

Frederick Sinnett contended, in his 1856 review of Australian literature, that most novelists “remodel models rather than the life” (Sinnett 1997). Their writing imitates that of others, however unintentionally. The excitement, intrigue and moral dilemmas of the phenomenon of bushranging presented colonial writers with fresh material, yet they rarely responded with great originality. According to Sinnett, “Give them a set of circumstances, for the mode of handling which, for novelistic purposes, they have no precedent, and they know not what to make of it” (Sinnett 1997). The potential was evident for powerful, distinctively Australian literature about the bushrangers. Few authors appeared capable of fulfilling the potential for powerful, distinctly Australian novels about the bushrangers during the 1840s and 1850s.

Bushranger literature evolved through constant exchange between the experiences, literary modes and perspectives of ‘colonials’ and Britons, in an age when the distinction between the two was sometimes marginal. In the sesquicentenary of the First Fleet’s landing Rex Ingamells argued that Australian culture had been “smothered” under the influence of the English (Ingamells and Tilbrook 1938, 11). Australian art, he claimed, need to be freed from “whatever alien influences trammel it, that is, to bring it into proper contact with its material” (Ingamells and Tilbrook 1938, 5). Indubitably authors with experience ‘beyond the Great Divide’ produced the finest examples of bushranger novels. They simply were not, by and large, native born and bred.

The possibilities of defining a national literature or Australian culture, as some critics have attempted (Ingamells and Tilbrook 1938; Ward 1958; Thom 1989), are dubious. Readers would be the poorer without the work of authors who either were residents briefly, like
many from Rowcroft onwards, were expatriates like Praed, or had a British or Irish family and literary background, like Rolf Boldrewood (Thomas Alexander Browne). To expect an inimitably Australian treatment of bushrangers in an immigrant society was unrealistic. As Stephen Knight has written, the best remembered Australian colonial era crime fiction was “strongly hybridised” (1992, 8). It combined the ‘settler saga’ with somewhat sympathetic, if not always romantic, depictions of bushrangers, and colonial experience with literary treatment modelled on European literary heritage.

Moodie Heddle observed that ‘Captain Starlight’ in Robbery Under Arms (Boldrewood 1882-1883) was “an Australian model of the gentlemanly highwayman Englishmen loved to read about” (Moodie Heddle 1962, 62-63). Other romantic outlaw characters apparently modelled on the gentlemanly highwayman in the first century of novels of Australia, included Rowcroft’s ‘The Gypsey’ (1843); O’Reilly’s ‘Moondyne Joe’ (1879); Nisbet’s ‘Captain Rainbow’ (1892a); David Hennessey’s ‘Jack Salathiel’ (1913), Dorothy Langsford’s ‘Jim Burton’ (1925) and Charles Rodda’s ‘Captain Scarlet’ (1926). See Appendix B for further relevant titles.

Meanwhile novelists’ response to the lower class folklore of the convict bolter rebel was to supplant its unrepentant sedition with a familiar narrative formula most satisfying to their predominately middle to upper-class readers in the colonies and in the United Kingdom, where most such novels were published. John Manifold argued that the dominant bourgeois culture “saps and destroys folk cultures” (Manifold 1964, 174). Is this what happened when novelists began writing about bushrangers?

Novels certainly seem associated with bourgeois culture, in comparison to the ballads sung in taverns, poor ticket-of-leave settlers’ huts and among convicts who were typically illiterate. The innocuous gentlemanly bushranger figure of some of the novels may well have sapped the symbolic potency of the bushranger as convicts’ resistance leader, although the end of the convict era would have eventually had the same result. Moreover, it was not a case of fiction trumping reality. Both bushranger types were fantastical.
creations; their audiences had divergent fantasies of the convict’s liberation and revenge and the gentlemen’s adventurous derring-do.

The curious relationship between literature and crime, in which writers of the nineteenth century increasingly made a harmless novelty of criminals, has been observed in Europe. Foucault traced the history of crime literature from ‘broadsides’ to detective novels. The broadsides, which were publications sold to the crowds at public executions, detailing the misdeeds and purported confessions of the condemned, inadvertently generated admiration and sympathy for perpetrators among the lower classes whose criminal tendencies they were intended to curb (Foucault 1995, 66-68). Meanwhile novels, by and for the middle and upper classes, turned from ugly depredations by the desperate or obnoxious to scandalous swindling by fashionable rogues whose cleverness matched their trackers’ (Foucault 1995, 68-69; 287). Bourgeois crime literature, Foucault observed, “transposed to another social class the spectacle that had surrounded the criminal” (Foucault 1995, 69).

The idea that an exceptional bushranger might perform armed robbery with admirable chivalry and gallantry in life, as in literature, echoes De Quincey’s conception of perfect crime in On Murder Considered as one of the Fine Arts (De Quincey 1827). This satirical lecture to the fictitious Society of Connoisseurs in Murder argues that murder, as much as anything else, can be considered as a work of art. Literature from the Bible to Shakespeare is implicated in this aestheticisation of the worst of human behaviour. De Quincey’s lecturer contends that there are “infinite degrees of merit” even in that which is objectionable, giving the examples of a thief and an ulcer (De Quincey 1827, 201). At a time when secular Enlightenment notions of human motive, rather than ‘the Devil’s work’, had taken hold, the bushrangers’ sometimes extraordinary feats and their gamble of liberty or death fascinated novelists.

Writers in Australia were preoccupied with crime and punishment, unsurprisingly given the penal origins of the British colonies. The first locally published novel was Henry Savery’s
semi-autobiographical account of convict life, *Quintus Servinton* (Savery 1830; Gelder and Weaver 2008, 2). The first published novel by an Australian born author, John Lang’s *Legends of Australia*, also concerns a convict (Lang 1842). Frederick Howard, protagonist of the only volume of the planned *Legends* series which Lang actually completed, is a Lieutenant in the Horse Guards. He is convicted of murder and transported to New South Wales, followed by his loyal wife.

Far from criticising the convict system, Howard helps to annihilate two fellow convicts who have become bushrangers, ‘Ben’ and ‘The Dutchman’. Ben “had been banished from his home to a country where tyranny and cruelty then raged throughout; goaded by repeated wrongs he had turned desperado...” the author reflects (Lang 1989, 124). This passage is a precursor of later literature sympathetic to bushrangers, yet it stands alone in a novel which overwhelmingly depicts the penal colony as a place of opportunity. Howard and his wife are eventually able to restore their ruling class status by purchasing shares in a pastoral station.

The bushranger was one criminal type which proliferated in a colonial era literature full of crime. He was anything but a uniform character. Early representations of bushrangers as righteous rebels (in convict folklore) or sinners who face fair and bitter justice (in some plays and early novels), contrasted with later representations of morally ambiguous or admirably upright bushrangers who delighted in their adventures and either died tragically or escaped altogether.
Introducing the Gentlemanly Bushranger

Rowcroft’s writing signalled a tension that defined subsequent bushranger novels, between the horror and degradation of bushranging and the agreeable adventure of noble bandit stories. *Tales of the Colonies* introduced the gentlemanly bushranger type, which is represented as hypocritical in *The Bushranger of Van Diemen’s Land* (Rowcroft 1845). In the first novel Rowcroft drew on personal experience to voice the narration of a free colonist, ‘William Thornley’. Rowcroft found in the colony “a setting for fiction comparable to the Wild West in America” (Rosenberg 1954). A mysterious character known as ‘the
Gypsey’ [sic] prefigures the model of the gentlemanly bushranger that later gained such popularity.

The gentlemanly bushranger is attractive, masculine and charismatic. Thornley is quick to notice the natural leader of the gang, the Gypsey, who is “one of the finest men I ever saw. Tall, broad shouldered, and muscular…” (Rowcroft 1843, 126). Physiognomy and phrenology were widely accepted in the nineteenth century and physical descriptions constituted useful shorthand by which authors communicated character. Henry Kingsley, for example, explicitly denoted the iniquity of his fiendish future bushranger character, Charles Hawker, in *The Recollections of Geoffry Hamlyn* by the narrator’s observations:

> We young fellows in those days knew little enough about phrenology... (but) The forehead was both low and narrow, sloping a great way back, while the larger part of the skull lay low down behind the ears.

(Kingsley 1859, 19)

The gentlemanly type of bushranger is an extraordinary individual and a civilising force. The Gypsey in the *Tales* is a refined exception among his coarse mates, whose innate criminality serves as a foil reflecting his virtue all the brighter. Thus novels of exceptionality and wronged nobility by privileged authors like the Eton-educated Rowcroft, writing about similarly privileged protagonists, offered readers “a reaffirmation of the solid certainties of bourgeois existence” (Hodge and Mishra 1991, 129-130, in reference to Clarke 1870-1872). The Gypsey retains his fundamental decency despite the desperation of life and death struggle. Even the magistrate, whom the Gypsey saves from the murderous gang, remarks that he “really is a fine fellow” (Rowcroft 1843, 106-107). He has the cunning and audacity of the archetypal Robin Hood character, too, venturing from the bush to Hobart in disguise.

The ease with which the best and worst of humanity are misidentified, by accident or design, is a common theme in bushranger novels from Rowcroft onwards. Incidents of
mistaken identity invite empathy for the gentlemanly bushranger and the innocent accused. Each has more in common with the civilised readership than with those of the criminal classes whose villainy is supposedly innate. This lends the gentlemanly bushranger moral ambiguity. At the same time, mix-ups are reminders of the danger of rushing to earthly judgment. The middle aged farmer in the _Tales_, Thornley, has reason to be terrified when twice mistaken for a bushranger. Soldiers are not “too particular about shooting a bushranger” (Rowcroft 1843, 134). In the first case a sergeant rains invective on his captive and ridicules his protestations of innocence (1843, 133-137). In the second case, a corporal arrests Thornley on suspicion of confederacy with the Gypsey and mocks the unhappy settler as “Mister Gentleman Bushranger” (1843, 189-190). How simply might fortunes turn, Rowcroft implies.

The propensity for characters in early Australian crime fiction to change identities or disappear may have reflected colonists’ anxieties about the unsettling bush landscape (Gelder and Weaver 2008, 4). Fictional episodes of mistaken identity also had an historical basis in what Alexander Harris called the “most flagrant outrage” of police arresting free immigrants without any evidence to implicate them in bushranging (Harris 2003, 70). Indeed Harris, by his unreliable account, escaped the constables and survived with the assistance of convicts and Indigenous people in the bush after being falsely accused of receiving stolen livestock.

Gentlemanly bushranger characters, like the Robin Hood archetype from whom they are descended, oppose unjust authority without posing a menace to society. The Gipsey in the _Tales_ chivalrously eschews violence against innocents, especially women and children. Courage and loyalty, however, are indispensable traits. The Gypsey is a formidable adversary who declares when cornered in a firefight, “...better die by a musket ball than a rope” (Rowcroft 1843, 126). Ultimately he throws himself off a precipice, together with a constable who has seized him, rather than be taken alive. It is because “the Gypsey was a good friend to the prisoners, and he died game...” that one of the conspirators in a plot to abduct his daughter refuses to harm her (1843, 283).
Beloved of the lower classes, the gentlemanly bushranger is respected by the upper classes for his typically superior intelligence, family background and education. The Gypsey is just such a noble renegade, as readers eventually learn that he is a falsely convicted English gentleman named George Shirley, whose brother stands to gain his estates by removing the rightful heir, George’s daughter, Georgiana. After helping to foil the abduction plot, Thornley cares for the orphan until she comes of age, in accordance with a gentlemen’s pact he and George have made.

The gentlemanly bushranger belongs in a broader outlaw hero tradition that is virtually universal in literature and oral folklore. Real life outlaws who became folk heroes range across cultures and eras, from Song Jiang and the outlaws of the marsh in twelfth century China to Ustym Karmàliuk in the Ukraine, Belle Starr in frontier America and George ‘Scotty Smith’ Lennox in South Africa (see Seal 2001). Authors of bushranger novels wrote within a complex of bandit narratives that preceded them and proceeded into the twentieth century and beyond with the likes of Salvatore Giuliano in Sicily and Phoolan ‘Bandit Queen’ Devi in India.

Virtually all outlaw heroes are the subjects of literature. Indeed their resurrection as legends after death is a defining motif (Seal 2009, 80). Seal, in his survey of the cultural tradition of outlaw heroes in Britain, America and Australia, also nominated nine other recurrent motifs. The hero is a friend of the poor, oppressed, forced into outlawry, brave, generous, courteous, does not indulge in unjustified violence, is a trickster and is betrayed (Seal 1996, 11).

Seal drew on Hobsbawms’s seminal study of ‘social banditry’ (Hobsbawm 1969). Social bandits, roughly synonymous with outlaw heroes, typically won the support of their peasant communities by their lawless challenge to unjust authorities or overlords. Social bandits were inherently ambiguous figures, though. They were outsiders, beyond the law and beyond the normal lifestyle, but they were only heroes of the community on which they depended, to the extent that they represented its interests and values. They rebelled
against those with wealth and power, yet successful bandits acquired a measure of each (Hobsbawm 1969, 76). The gentlemanly bushranger of Australian novels is likewise an intrinsically contradictory character.

Rowcroft’s second novel set in Van Diemen’s Land exposed the hypocrisy of the wholly fictional protagonist, Mark Brandon. *The Bushranger of Van Diemen’s Land* (Rowcroft 1845) is akin to a theatrical farce, and is coherent only in this context. Villains, ‘natives’ and the well-meaning but inept settlers and officers of the law sail in circles on a bay and then march in circles through a patch of forest, sometimes clashing and sometimes amusing readers with slapstick and absurd dialogue. Brandon’s apparent gentility is a cynical act concealing his malicious nature.

He initially resembles the Gypsey, beginning with physical and intellectual distinction. A wanted notice describes him as “…five feet eleven inches in height; broad-shouldered; waist slim… his hands rather white and delicate” (Rowcroft 1846, Vol. 1, 47). He has the hands of a gentleman, then, and the manners to match. Silliman, a hostage of Brandon and his mates, pinpoints a contradiction of the gentlemanly bushranger. “Oh! Mr. Brandon is quite the gentleman…” he says, “He just chucks you into the sea, or knocks you down with the butt-end of a musket… but it’s all done in the politest way in the world!” (1845, Vol. 1, 156). Crucially, Brandon fails a test of loyalty when he abandons his fellow convict bolters to die fighting soldiers on the beach, while he escapes (1845, Vol. 1, 252).

To maintain readers’ esteem for exceptional bushrangers, authors not only reminded them that these characters were gentlemen at heart, but also skipped over violent incidents. Rowcroft signalled Brandon’s own awareness of this sort of psychology. The bushranger orders his followers to “execute the practical parts of the ruffianism…”such as tying the hands of the hostages they have taken for ransom and occasionally clouting one of them (Rowcroft 1846, Vol. 1, 295-296). Meanwhile he plays the ‘defender of decency’, offering protection from rape and murder, to manipulate the hostages into obedience. The eighteen-year-old captive and beautiful heroine of the piece, Helen, “could not suppose
that the man who addressed her with a demeanour so respectful, and with such a propriety of language, could be the unprincipled ruffian that he really was” (1846, Vol. 1, 293-294).

Sympathy for such a man is folly, Rowcroft implied. The naïve constable who arrests Brandon remarks, “...every one says that you are a perfect gentleman and, except murder and robbery and that, which I allow a gentleman is sometimes forced to do, that you never harmed a soul...” (Rowcroft 1846, Vol. 3, 152). Any doubt that Rowcroft intends the constable to be a laughing stock is eliminated when Brandon leads him to a ‘plant’ of sovereigns in a hollow tree trunk, traps him inside and escapes with the sovereigns and the constable’s gun. The gentlemanly bushranger of myth and his believers are mercilessly lampooned.

The novel becomes more moralistic toward the end, as the virtuous free settlers and officers drive the villain to a living hell. Weak and wounded by a bullet from his pursuers, Brandon is carried off by an eagle, which eats one of his eyes but accidentally drops him into a crevasse where a bushfire is burning. There is no glory in his demise; he is a “wretch” (Rowcroft 1846, Vol. 3, 279).

Rowcroft’s treatment of bushranging in Tales of the Colonies and The Bushranger of Van Diemen’s Land anticipated the patterns of representation witnessed in subsequent novels by other authors. The adventure and the allure are there, in the 1840s, and so are the debacles and the disillusionment with the romantic outlaw hero. Rowcroft undermined the very myth of the gentlemanly bushranger to which he had contributed in Tales of the Colonies. Bushranger characters were far too much fun and far too culturally significant in the colonial era, however, for novelists to neglect.

The Australian novel had its beginnings at a time when a fascination with crime, its perpetrators and the aesthetic possibilities of its representation, were evident across all classes in Europe as well as in the colonies. From popular ballad to painting, poetry, theatre, non-fiction and the novel, fantasies of the romantic outlaw hero abounded in the
early to mid nineteenth century. The convict bolter variant celebrated in ballads of the oppressed symbolised rebellion for freedom, whereas the novelistic gentlemanly bushranger introduced by Rowcroft was contrived to entertain a British and colonial educated elite. Beginning with the same author, however, novelists interrogated the hypocrisies of outlaws whose violence and greed failed to live up to their reputations as noble-minded victims.
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Chapter Two

Historical Novelty

During the mid-nineteenth century the figure of the bushranger underwent a transformation, both in practice and in the novel. The convict bolter was a byproduct of the transportation system which ended with the last shipload of convicts to Western Australia in 1868, having been phased out in the other colonies in the previous two decades (Smith 1974, 494). Thus the bolter bushranger became an historical novelty, instead of a present threat. The miscreant of the Gold Rushes and onwards retained the nomenclature and the aura of the bushranger, despite typically having more in common with lifestyle thieves and gangsters of today than with desperate transportee fugitives.
No doubt a majority of colonial Australians disapproved of bushranging; the curious fact is that a significant element approved. In colonies initially comprised mostly of convicts and emancipists, the desire for an ‘oppressed hero’ seemed to blind a certain element of society to the awful truths of their violence. Each dead bushranger was commemorated as a “martyr to convictism” (White 1970, 5). Most intriguingly, offenders won support after bushranging became the organised crime of the goldfields. Crowds of working-class people gave heroes’ welcomes to bushrangers brought to Sydney in the 1860s (Ward 1958, 170). A policeman pursuing the Clarke gang in the Braidwood district of New South Wales in 1866 bemoaned the indescribably “great sympathy shewn for the bushrangers” (Carroll 1866).

Humphrey McQueen downplayed the level of support they received, likening them to “louts of the contemporary bikie variety” (1970, 137). Yet bikies, if not outlaw gangs of them, enjoy some support, too, particularly from churches and charities for their Christmas toy rides (see “Bikers Unite for Christmas Toy Run” 2009). Novels of the mid-nineteenth century reflected disparate conceptions of bushrangers, as some novelists found heroism and others found only horror.

In The Emigrant Family (Harris 1849) Alexander Harris drew on sixteen years of bush experience to write of the frontier lawlessness which gave rise to bushranging outbreaks in the 1840s. The novel is nominally concerned foremost with the Bracton and Kable landowner families and their romantic entanglements, however, the narrative following the singular Martin Beck is most compelling. Sinnett criticised the predictable romantic plotlines (Sinnett 1997) and Harris’s second publisher saw fit to rename the novel Martin Beck (Harris 1852).

Young Beck is “well-built and good looking” (Harris 1967, 308), but here ends his likeness to gentlemanly bushrangers in the mould of Rowcroft’s ‘the Gypsey’. He is a free, native-born colonial of African-Caribbean descent. An outsider in the racist colony of New South Wales, he nonetheless gains the position of overseer at Lieutenant Bracton’s Rocky Springs station, where he proceeds to indulge in the relatively routine crime of cattle duffing. When found
out, he and a stockman accomplice flee and found an outlaw gang, initially depending on sympathetic stock-keepers for shelter and supplies but inevitably resorting to armed robbery. The final action takes place amid a bushfire, which, as in *The Bushranger of Van Diemen’s Land* (Rowcroft 1845), signifies a prelude to sinners’ eternal torment. Fire levels the battle field and destroys, by its overwhelming and unpredictable force, the illusion of complete human control over destiny. The virtuous young English immigrants, Willoughby Bracton and Reuben Kable, shoot Beck dead as he is in the act of violently robbing Rueben’s sister, Mary.

Harris’s selection of a freeborn colonial for bushranger chief was crucial, because he denied the character the simple rationalisations for crime that were ready-made for convict bolters. The author, an English army deserter who encountered numerous bushrangers and bounty hunting troopers while working as a sawyer in New South Wales, sympathised with convicts driven to rebellion by the cruelties of tyrannical masters. He observed in his memoir, *Settlers and Convicts* that “it was a point of honour among the sawyers” to abet bushrangers (Harris 2003, 35).

In *The Emigrant Family* Harris accentuated Beck’s criminality in contrast to the case of a former London solicitor’s clerk, who fell on hard times and committed forgery to save his starving wife and child. The blameless clerk character was transported, ruthlessly flogged until he bolted, and then shot by police. His death occasioned the author’s condemnation of abuses in the convict assignment system which amounted to breaches of “Divine law” (Harris 1967, 188-189).

Meanwhile an early reference to the “misshapen composition of his internal character” (Harris 1967, 31) foreshadows Beck’s callous deeds as an outlaw, such as hanging an informer. Beck loses the support even of the anti-authoritarian stock-keepers. His threat to cut off the Bracton sisters’ hair, an insinuation of more depraved intentions, is “so revolting to manly spirit, that no one thought of vindicating him” (Harris 1967, 398). Nor is he purely evil, though. As John Thom recognised, bushranger literature delved deeper than the early
convict era balladeers’ “simple endorsement of reciprocity, or moral equivalence” of bushrangers and troopers in violent and corrupt penal colonies, to “question the function and seek the limits of dissent within society” (Thom 1989, 17).

The Emigrant Family began a thread of bushranger literature more concerned with psychology and philosophical questions about personal autonomy and the law, than with romanticising adventurous gentlemen. Reviewers of a 1967 edition (Harris 1967) derided stylistic shortcomings of the novel, but they agreed it was an insightful document of colonial conditions and attitudes (Turnbull 1968; Kramer 1968). “We shall expect to see it helping to make weight in the bibliography of many a doctoral thesis in years to come,” predicted Clive Turnbull (1968, 21).

Mary Vidal offered a psychological explanation for the behavior of her bushranger character, Jack Lynch, in Bengala (Vidal 1860). He is an assigned convict, but he absconds not because of any innate criminality or greed. Rather he seeks to rescue his sweetheart, Nellie MacLean, whom Arthur Fitz has set his lustful gaze upon and deceived into travelling to his station. Nellie escapes on the way, but she soon perishes and retribution becomes Lynch’s mission.

Bushrangers do not pose a threat worthy of alarm in this novel, which is essentially a domestic comedy following courtships at Langville pastoral station. Vidal’s depiction of Lynch is surprisingly forgiving, considering that the atrocities of the notorious real bushranger, John Lynch, including rape and numerous axe murders, shocked New South Wales while she was living there. Indeed the case of John Lynch attests to the colonials’ habit of referring to all manner of rural criminals at large as bushrangers, as terms such as serial killer and sociopath were yet to be coined. Vidal’s husband was also robbed during the English couple’s five-year stint in the colony (McKernan 2000, 9-10).

The fictional Lynch, though “capable of any excess, if – if provoked” (Vidal 2000, 217) is ultimately the object of pity. He is betrayed, ambushed sleeping and shot dead without having taken a life himself. Vidal’s sympathetic portrayal is such that she draws an implicit comparison between Lynch and Jesus Christ. “For the wild dogs have got their homes, but
Jack Lynch has not a stone to lay his head on,” the bushranger laments (Vidal 2000, 312-313), alluding to the Book of Matthew: “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head” (The Holy Bible, New International Version, Matthew 8.20). Although Vidal had Lynch himself make this audacious equation of a persecuted convict and a fellow misunderstood wanderer, instead of giving it authorial authority, it nonetheless suggested her compassion for the marginalised individual she took the bolter bushranger to be.

Vidal’s contemporary and fellow English writer, Henry Kingsley, also wrote about bushranging after spending about five years in Australia. As Susan McKernan has stated, Vidal’s treatment of bushranging in Bengala was “more ordinary and more credible” (McKernan 2000, 14) than that of Kingsley in The Recollections of Geoffry Hamlyn (Kingsley 1859). Kingsley reacted strongly against sympathetic depictions of bushrangers. Charles ‘Captain Touan’ Hawker is such an abomination the character’s initial conviction and transportation are incidental thematically, serving rather as plot devices to allow him to terrorise Mary Thornton and the other good Devonshire folk among whom he grew up, when they migrate to southern New South Wales. Hawker commits rape, and the murders of his own son and a baby.

Kingsley’s fanatical demonisation of Hawker was evidently a considered authorial decision, because Kingsley revealed his awareness of the more sympathetic gentlemanly bushranger myth through the story of ‘Bougong Jack’ [sic]. The narrator, Hamlyn, talks of Bougong Jack as an English émigré born John Samson, who roamed the Gippsland High Country. He was supposedly a fine scholar, a composer and an outstanding horseman who went into hiding to avoid charges of stock theft and eventually returned to ‘civilisation’ to become “…one of the most thriving men in that part of the colony” (Kingsley 1859, 397-390). Like most myths, the story of Bougong Jack seems to contain a kernel of truth but exists in many different versions (see Harding 1967). Suggesting Kingsley’s dim view of the gentlemanly bushranger myth, he affords bushrangers no such appeal in the main narrative, only ignominy.
In novels prior to Robert Whitworth’s *Mary Summers* (1865), the bushrangers’ enemies were ragtag alliances of landowners, soldiers and magistrates (see Rowcroft 1843, 1845; Harris 1849; Kingsley 1859; Vidal 1860). Whitworth introduced a contest between detective and bushranger, which became a pattern in subsequent novels. The author, a trained stage actor, adapted the clash of arch nemeses from theatrical melodrama to the novel.

Whitworth’s righteous detective, David Turner, is on the trail of ‘Billy the Bull’, an ex-convict who has committed two coldblooded murders. Young Dick Evans is an associate of Billy’s “naturally inclined to evil” (Whitworth 1994, 24). He leads a gang of bungling bushrangers who kidnap the beautiful seventeen-year-old Mary Summers from Marrang Station, in the Shoalhaven district of New South Wales. Feisty Summers escapes and Turner captures the bushrangers, before proceeding to chase Billy to the latter’s death over the edge of a ravine. Despite its lack of subtlety, Whitworth’s novel represented a significant step towards the integration of bushranger tales into the nascent crime novel genre. The detective is the hero, although, as Crittenden has observed, many later and more sympathetic bushranger stories are written from the offender’s point of view (Crittenden 1994).

Some writers, like Charles De Boos, endeavoured to represent an external reality of bushranging. De Boos, an Englishman of supposedly aristocrat French descent, left for the Australian colonies in 1839 and gained his understanding of the seamy side of the 1850s Gold Rushes in his posts as Mining Warden and Police Magistrate (Crittenden 1992). There was no room for romance in his depictions of bushrangers in *Mark Brown’s Wife* (De Boos 1871). Honest diggers like Mark Brown despise those who are intent on stealing the gold and savings for which they have toiled.

The character of ‘Ruggy Dick’ was possibly based on the bushranger active in mid-1860s New South Wales, Richard ‘Ruggy Dick’ Middleton (see "Telegraphic Messages (From our Correspondents): Goulburn" 1865). This ex-convict is the antithesis of the gentlemanly bushranger. He beats Brown unconscious and leaves him on a bull ants’ nest to die. Among
the hundreds of miners who form a vigilante brigade upon learning of this atrocity is De Boos’s narrator, Tom Drewe, who tracks Ruggy over the years and exacts some measure of vengeance. He explains how Ruggy’s monstrous schemes drove Brown’s wife, Cicely, to adultery, alcoholism and prostitution, and how the “t’other sider” (Vandiemonian ex-convict) finally murdered her. De Boos, in his stern, relentless realism, was careful not to portray all bushrangers as equally wicked. Some of Ruggy’s gang members are relatively decent, just as in one of his previous novels, *The Stockman’s Daughter*, ‘Opossum Jack’ is akin to a gentlemanly bushranger and ‘Rover’ is thoroughly detestable (Crittenden 2009, 8).

If the greed and thuggery of Goldfields bushrangers endangered the noble minded outlaw hero type in fiction, Mary Fortune revived it in her serialised novel, *The Bushranger’s Autobiography* (Fortune 1871-1872). Like De Boos and Vidal, Fortune explored vengeance, but crucially she did so from the point of view of a bushranger. Eber Pierce, a promising and attractive youth, leaves Ireland to become a soldier in England. There he falls under the influence of the beguiling Howard Britten, with whom an old enemy has conspired to lead Pierce into debt and infidelity to his aristocratic sweetheart, Mary Greville. After she breaks off with Pierce and he learns of the conspiracy, he vows to take revenge on Britten, who has sailed for Melbourne.

Pierce is serving as a cadet in the Castlemaine gold escort when it is attacked by bushrangers led by Britten. The gang abducts him and frames him for horse theft, driving him into hiding. He then leads a rival gang and becomes the notorious ‘Captain Dareall’. It is typical of this highly original gem of colonial literature that Pierce’s stalwart mate, ‘Basil Carew’, turns out to be a woman ‘ruined’ by Britten, Myra Shelford. She has also ventured across the globe to reap vengeance on the villain.

Fortune was disinclined to leave acts of brutality to implication, as many writers of her time did. The horror of the vividly described gang rape and murder of Pierce’s first love, Mary, by Britten and his men, serves to impress on readers their hero’s relative integrity. Even a man whose station Pierce visits to rob declares, “… I don’t care in what circumstances you
may be unfortunately situated at present, you are a gentleman at heart” (Fortune 1871-1872, November 1871 edn, 156).

Over the course of an intricate plot Pierce proves as gallant, clever, adroit and compassionate to vanquished enemies as any outlaw hero in literature. Fortune even affords him a hero’s ending, returning to Ireland after Britten’s death without having condemned his soul to Hell. The importance of this distinction, which colonial era authors made over and again, is reflected in the view of a servant named Dick. “I’d side any day with a man who is brave enough to set the d----- laws at defiance, and take his own rights in the world,” says he in *The Bushranger’s Autobiography*, “but the curse of God is on the murderer!” (Fortune 1871-1872, January 1872 edn, 275).

Despite its romantic flourishes, the novel delved deeper into the narrator’s psyche than many of the colonial era did. Often novelistic bushrangers appeared in subplots within broader depictions of pastoral station life (see Rowcroft 1843; Harris 1849; Kingsley 1859; Vidal 1860). Fortune’s more thoroughly drawn first-person narrator reflects, “You must have led an unhappy and roving life to know how hard it is to be still, and to go quietly through the world like the people – the tame nothingness people around you” (Fortune 1871-1872, September 1871 edn, 34). Here Pierce makes a rare admission: that all the commonly cited provocations and adverse circumstances fail to account for the making of outlaws, without also allowing for their deep-seated adventurousness.

Fortune’s brilliant evocation of life and loss on the Victorian Goldfields in *The Bushranger’s Autobiography* seems to have drawn on her personal experiences of travelling the diggings with her father. Other more autobiographical writing of hers traverses similar terrain to the novel, thematically and geographically, such as an anecdote about gold miners swearing an oath of secrecy in respect of a revenge murder (Sussex 1989, 118-119). The alcoholic Fortune was no stranger to strife among the less reputable elements of colonial society (Sussex 2009). As with Harris, the sometime bush sawyer and convicts’ friend, broad
experience of different social strata seems to have enriched Fortune’s writing about colonial era crime.

John Boyle O’Reilly had unrivalled insight into his subject in *Moondyne* (O'Reilly 1879). O’Reilly, like the title character of his novel, was a convict who escaped to rise “by the sheer force of his genius and his worth” to become an esteemed public figure abroad, in the author’s case in the United States (Roche 1891). Bennett observed that O’Reilly’s writing appeared “to some extent ego-driven” (Bennett 2000, 38). O’Reilly was a romantic hero of sorts in his real life, as an Irish political prisoner transported to Western Australia, who not only escaped in 1869 but also organised the rescue of other political prisoners in 1876.

Left: John Boyle O'Reilly the convict. Photograph by Thomas Larcom, 1866. *Mountjoy Prison photographic collection.*

Right: John Boyle O’Reilly commemorated as a “Poet, Patriot, Orator”. Bronze monument sculpted by Daniel Chester French, Boston, 1896.

The gentlemanly bushranger protagonist in *Moondyne* (O'Reilly 1879) embodies the belief that a poor criminal and a wealthy, respected gentleman are not necessarily made of
different stuff. ‘Moondyne Joe,’ inspired by the real life bushranger, Joseph Bolitho
‘Moondyne’ Johns (1835-1900), is transported to Western Australia for poaching deer in a
lord’s park to feed his starving mother and sisters (O'Reilly 1879, 136-137). Following the
exceptional gentlemanly bushranger pattern, he is physically and intellectually irrepressible.
“In strength and proportion of body, the man was magnificent — a model for a gladiator”
(1879, 7). In spite of suffering degrading subjugation between escapes from bondage, he
upholds common sense, truth and kindness, so that “the worst of the convicts grew better
when associated with him” (O'Reilly 1879, 14). When Moondyne becomes stupendously
wealthy, thanks to the goldmine his Indigenous friends show him, he assumes a new
identity back in his homeland of England as the respectable Mr Wyville.

O'Reilly attempted something none of the other romanticisers of outlaw figures attempted:
to argue through the voice of a revolutionary protagonist that the so-called ‘criminal type'
was the product of a society unjustly stratified according to property. Moondyne might be a
melodramatic adventure novel in which the author had little regard for reality (Brady 1988,
106), however, his political analysis was earnest. Moondyne speaks of burning title deeds
and says, “… the throne cannot escape injury if the axe be laid to its base" (O'Reilly 1879,
92).

People ought to be judged only according to their personal merit, O'Reilly suggests,
regardless of their station in life. Mr Wyville’s superior wisdom and integrity enable him to
influence penal reform. Appointed Comptroller General of Convicts in Western Australia,
he institutes fair rewards for good behavior and “from that day the colony ceased to be
stagnant, and began to progress” (O'Reilly 1879, 235). In a second reversal of fortunes, Mr
Wyville dies attempting to save two sinners, the bigamist Draper and the child killer Harriet,
from a bushfire. The Christ-like hero “had given his life for men” (O'Reilly 1879, 254). In the
optimistic world of Moondyne, the bushranger and the landed gent may be moral equals.

In Rosa Praed’s 1893 novel, Outlaw and Lawmaker, another fictional bushranger who
attains high status draws parallels between himself and John Boyle O'Reilly. The Fenian
‘Morres Blake’, alias ‘Moonlight’, confides to the heroine, ‘Elsie Valliant’, that like O’Reilly he incited revolt in his regiment (Praed 1988, 277). Praed wrote of Moonlight after encountering O’Reilly in Boston, where he had become a public intellectual and a leading light of literature, journalism and progressive politics (Ferres 2003).

Considering O’Reilly’s fortunes, the interchangeability of the outlaw and lawmaker in Praed’s gothic romance novel seems more than a dramatic device. Moonlight, who rises to the position of Colonial Secretary, evinces the possibility of honour in crime for a cause, of the exceptional individual’s capacity for excellence in fields as disparate as highway robbery and public office. Some would say the disparity is minimal; Praed at the least implied that virtue and status were liable to inversion in ‘Leichardt’s Land’ (Queensland).

Moonlight’s apparently farfetched relationship with power is only as incredible as that of many people in Australia’s historical record. Sir Charles Gavan Duffy (1816-1903) was imprisoned for nationalist campaigning in Ireland, for example, yet he later served in the United Kingdom’s House of Commons and, after migrating to Victoria, became the colony’s Premier (Parnaby 1972). Thomas Walker (1858-1932) found no shortage of strife, including the accidental burning death of a man at one of Walker’s séances in Canada and his drunken shooting of a clergyman in Sydney (Smith 1976). He became a New South Wales parliamentarian and Western Australian Attorney General. Even the notorious Van Diemen’s Land bushranger Martin Cash, sentenced to death but sent to Norfolk Island instead, became a constable in 1854. Perhaps Dale Spender’s description of Outlaw and Lawmaker as “a most realistic romance” (Spender 1988, xi) is more accurate than it might initially seem to the twenty-first-century reader.

Most colonial adventure romance novelists shied away from commentary on the gentlemanly bushranger’s dalliance in the sort of violent crime that supposedly merited the gallows for lower-class offenders. Praed’s characters freely articulate their ideas on the matter. Blake tells Elsie:
You don’t get the sort of drama we should enjoy; on the Australian stage it is too crude... not complex enough for people who by right of nature belong to an advanced civilisation... And so we must make our own drama.

(Praed 1988, 106)

Blake raises funds for the Irish nationalist movement, but he becomes a bushranger foremost for the excitement. He is superior, sophisticated, altogether too well bred to content himself with the grind of the pioneers’ lifestyle, which he condescendingly terms “the decorous Philistine routine” (Praed 1988, 138). How far the figure of the bushranger had come since desperadoes like Bold Jack Donohoe threw off their chains.

Considering the array of literary representations of bushranging after the convict era, ‘bushranger’ clearly had multiple meanings. ‘Redcap’, station plunderer of Boldrewood’s *The Squatter’s Dream*, is to some extent the typical gentlemanly bushranger. He is “one of the mildest-mannered men that ever ‘stuck up mails and fobbed a note’” (Boldrewood 1890, 155). The parlour maid, however, raised in the bush, thinks of him as nothing more than an “exaggerated ‘traveller’” (1890, 157). For his part Doctor Bateman humorously complains that Redcap’s gang is too harmless to provide him with business by spilling blood (1890, 168).

Novelists were as divided as Boldrewood’s characters were on the nature of the bushranging after it changed from convict rebellion to Gold Rushes gangsterism during the mid-nineteenth century. Some treated it as “a relatively benign form of anti-authoritarianism” committed by heroes and likeable rogues (Gelder and Weaver 2008, 5-6). They contrived extravagant romance adventures that carried forth in colonial settings the European noble bandit tradition. The censorious authorial voices of De Boos, Kingsley and others, who presented outlaws as menaces to society, had in common with those of their more idealistic counterparts an awareness of burgeoning bushranger mythology and a compulsion to respond to it in fiction.
Restless Bones

With the annihilation of the Kelly Gang in 1880, bushranging was not *relegated*, as the common phrase goes, but rather raised to that great realm of History which, from a safe distance, so appeals to the imaginations of authors and readers. It mattered not that real life rural marauders, such as Jimmie and Joe Governor, occasionally bobbed up well after Ned Kelly was hanged. According to Hodge and Mishra, once the authorities and the public *believed* the era of bushranging was over, a definitive image of the bushranger “could be endorsed from above, undisturbed by the threat of revolt from below” (Hodge and Mishra 1991, 134-135). This glosses over the great diversity of perceptions of bushrangers in late colonial society and in novels, but it draws attention to the readiness of a wide readership to embrace fiction that patently mythologised the bushranger.

Post-1880 writers commemorated the bushranger as an excitingly formidable but ultimately doomed figure. An important novel in the shift toward a comfortable place for the bushranger in cultural memory was *Robbery Under Arms* (Boldrewood 1882-1883), about which much has already been written (see Docker 1996; Eggert 2007; Ryan 1992; Turner 1989; Webby and Eggert 2006b). ‘Captain Starlight’ and ‘Jim Marston’, representing the debonair British renegade aristocrat type of outlaw and the decent but wayward currency lad born of convict stock, respectively, are both killed. ‘Dick Marston’ narrates *Robbery Under Arms* from his cell while awaiting execution (later commuted to a prison sentence).

The timing of the novel at the supposed end of the bushranging era helped make Boldrewood’s captivating images of bushranging defining ones, just as Marcus Clarke’s *His Natural Life* (1870-1872) shaped lasting public perceptions of the penal system when it was published shortly after the last transported convicts arrived in Australia. And just as Clarke’s innocent hero, ‘Richard Devine/Rufus Dawes’ was the Christ-like exception to the grim crowd of convict wretches after his tribulations, so were the bushranger characters of late colonial era novels exceptional individuals. Potentially challenging ideas, for example that disenfranchised convicts deserved compassion and respect, or that Australia was
founded on ruthless exploitation of convicts, were neutralised in *His Natural Life* because convicts en masse were still maligned.

The bushranger is another figure by definition marginalised. Bushranger novels could have been, but were not, the sites of sustained social critique of the inequity between the ‘squattocracy’ and the rural working-class which was the context of many bushranging outbreaks. Like Clarke, novelists writing about bushrangers often constructed “a melodramatic substitute for historical understanding” (Hodge and Mishra 1991, 130).

Although not every representation of bushrangers fitted a mould, it is intriguing that so many novelists perpetuated a mythology of the gentlemanly bushranger that had little to do with the historical record (see titles in Appendix B). Few individuals possessed the estimable traits of their fictional counterparts. Frederick ‘Captain Thunderbolt’ Ward was also known as ‘the Gentleman Bushranger’, as was Matthew Brady, and Edward Davis maintained a rare dignity all the way to the gallows. Most, however, seem to have been unprincipled opportunists and sometimes callous thieves and murderers. This did not trouble novelists who drew on the abstracted European tradition of the noble bandit. They actively endeavoured to portray their exceptional bushranger characters sympathetically, taking care to keep their violence out of view or in the commission of accomplices.

Bushranging became in some novels of the late colonial era a kind of understandable, if unfortunate, expression of masculine exuberance. Just as a gentleman might satisfy his sporting impulse on a field of play, or in a theatre of war, so he might by taking up arms on horseback in the bush. Boldrewood’s conception of his characters, ‘Dick and Jim Marston’, epitomised this sentiment. He wrote that they were “… very fine specimens of the ‘native’ born Australian – who had taken the wrong road – more’s the pity – if the Boer War had been on at the time, they would have distinguished themselves” (letter of 18 September, 1907, to J.G. Lockley, quoted in Webby and Eggert 2006a, 611).
The conflicted masculine identity of fictional bushrangers reflected a contradiction between two Imperial British values which colonial Australian society still largely shared. The “pluckiness of spirit, physical prowess and military derring-do” that they admired was at odds with their exhortation to young men to “become dutiful, domesticated husbands and responsible citizens” (Dixon 1995, 30). Without arguing just cause for bushranging, authors implied that its perpetrators were adventurous individuals of great potential. Dawe’s ‘Tom Stanford’ in *Mount Desolation* is “a tall, dark-complexioned, broadly-built young man of about seven-and-twenty – a typical Australian, active, hardy, sport-loving, blunt, but honest as the day” (Dawe 1892, 21). Driven to his single bushranging feat, a bank robbery to pay the debts of his sweetheart’s father, Stanford is doomed to die in a shootout. The recurring narrative is of tragic waste.

For all that fiction has shaped historical understanding, it is by no means necessarily written for the purpose. Representations of bushrangers seem largely determined by the needs of drama and artistry, by poetic justice rather than legal or social justice. Realism ought not to be assumed to be a default mode simply because it gained a fleeting ascendancy relatively recently in the long history of literature.

The satirical touches of Hume Nisbet and EW Hornung represent an alternative, albeit sometimes subtle, mode of social critique. Moreover, for some of the sheerest frivolity to be found anywhere in literature, readers may be grateful that novelists writing about bushrangers often aspired primarily to entertain. Nisbet treated readers to ‘Captain Rainbow’, a writer thrust into a life of abandon in the bush by the cruelty of reviewers (Nisbet 1892a). Hornung’s cultured bushranger ‘Stingaree’, after making off with jewels and the station manager’s daughter, “seemed to her to slacken his pace for the express purpose of humming the 30th of the Lieder Ohne Worte to the time of the pony’s hooves” (Hornung 1896, 144-145). If Rowcroft was indeed lost in the extravagance of romance, the novelists who followed him remained willfully, blissfully lost.
WORKS CITED (Chapter 2)


Chapter Three

Bailing Up Bushranger Mythology: EW Hornung’s and Hume Nisbet’s Novels of the 1890s

Two brilliant novelists of the 1890s stand out from the host of authors who wrote about bushrangers. Hume Nisbet and Ernest William Hornung neither attempted to define them as doomed heroes, nor harked back to the era of the convict bolter rebel. These British writers drew upon time spent time in Australia in their teens to develop bushranger characters who struggle with their experiences as outsiders cut adrift from the certainties of their upbringing. Nisbet and Hornung also assimilated the bushranger, a variant of the British highwayman in their rendering, into the crime and adventure romance genres which were ascendant during the late colonial period. They brought humor and panache to create a sometimes insightful, always entertaining body of bushranger literature.

Nisbet and Hornung were the literary equivalents of ‘colonial experience men’. The archaic term referred to upper-class young Britons sent to the colonies to gain experience, usually on pastoral stations, before returning to take up positions in their family businesses in the Mother Country (Fahey 2003). A verse of the traditional bush ballad, Click Go the Shears, makes clear the disparagement such sojourners could expect:

The colonial experience man, he is there of course,
With his shiny leggin’s on, just got off his horse
Gazes all around him like a real connoisseur,
Scented soap, and brilliantine and smelling like a whore.

(this version collected in Wositzky 1978, 60-61)
Colonial experience men were not expected to get their hands dirty, but nor were they entitled to automatic respect from the currency folk of the Australian bush. So it was with Nisbet and Hornung, who published in Great Britain and forged their successful careers there rather than in the colonies that had fired their imaginations. Born in Edinburgh, Nisbet travelled to Victoria in the 1860s, as a sixteen-year-old. Though he returned to the United Kingdom seven years later, he went on to roam widely in the Pacific region (Cowan 1988). Hornung’s family sent him to New South Wales in the 1880s to overcome his severe asthma. From ages seventeen to nineteen he worked as a tutor at Mossgiel Station in the Riverina (Knight 2006).

The most captivating of Nisbet’s and Hornung’s bushranger characters embody adventurism, the feeling of going into the unknown and finding their cherished notions of honour and propriety sorely tested. The authors must have shared such sensations as they travelled around the world on the cusp of adulthood. If personal experience gave their fiction substance, the authors’ irreverent humour and surprising plots gave it its most memorable qualities.

Mythology, however, is for some a prop of earnest national iconography which foreign authors knock at their peril of critical backlash. Myers has called the traditional myths of national identity “proud lies that help average Australians to walk tall” (Myers 1987, 9). Among them is the myth of the “the brave bushranger who takes from the rich and gives to the poor and defies all authority” (1987, 5). Abhorred by the ruling class, he becomes to the poor a heroic revolutionary symbol (Clark 1963, 162). The bushranger myth was not Hornung’s or Nisbet’s to seize and gallop away with, to endorse or subvert. Yet they did both, at times within single novels, with glee.
While Boldrewood and his ilk of writers carved a distinctly Australian bushranger figure, Hornung dressed him first as the universal ruffian and later as a caricature of the English gentleman. Hornung adapted the bushranger to the romance and crime genres in the same manner as others adapted the character to adventure, gothic and detective genres. His abiding interest early in his career seems to have been entertainment. Certainly the Englishman, with a Hungarian-born father, demonstrated no interest in propagating nationalistic Australian iconography. His stint on a pastoral station enabled him to bring his wit and insight to bush life and legend and to contrast supercilious ‘new chums’ against the philistine native born folk.

*The Boss of Taroomba* (Hornung 1894) is a romantic melodrama which lacks the originality of Hornung’s subsequent bushranger novels. It assembled the ingredients, however, that he was to make brilliant use of in *Irralie’s Bushranger* (1896) and *Stingaree* (Hornung 1905). At the isolated Taroomba station we have a forthright currency lass, Naomi Pryse, an English sojourner, Hermann Engelhardt, and motley bushmen. We also have a local bushranger legend, in this case about ‘Tigerskin’, whom the heroine’s late father shot dead.
Bushrangers are “as extinct as the dodo,” Pryse assures Engelhardt (Hornung 1900, 52). Soon a survivor of the Tigerskin shootout arrives with two murderous mates to plunder her family silver. Engelhardt, a delicate lover of poetry, aspiring composer and butt of station hands’ humour, proves a worthy hero by saving Pryse from a fate worse than death and winning her hand. There is none of the subtlety of the social satire to which Hornung treated readers through his later bushranger character, ‘Stingaree’. There is, however, all of his talent for parody and taste for the entertainingly ridiculous.

‘Stingaree’ makes his dashing debut in *Irralie’s Bushranger* (Hornung 1896). Knight has described Hornung’s 1890s bushranger novels as “station thrillers” that have been largely forgotten (Knight 1992, 8). No doubt much popular fiction was comprised of “imperialist potboilers” (Dixon 1995, 8). With his Stingaree character, however, and with cleverly executed plots and pointed social satire that finds its mark more truly than ever today, Hornung deserves critical attention.

In *Irralie’s Bushranger* the heroine, Irralie Villiers, again reflects post-1880 complacency, claiming the bushrangers “are all dead and gone” (Hornung 1896, 8). Suspicion of imposture falls on the new English owner of Arran Downs station, Earl Fullarton’s son Greville. He arrives on foot with a revolver in his shabby coat. Sitting atop the luggage, which arrives separately and for which he has no key, he appears “a picturesque, unshaven adventurer, like a beggar enthroned” (1896, 50).

The gentleman whom Villiers has expected reaches the station and has the other man safely locked up. He is an insufferable snob who complains about the piano and refuses Australian champagne. The station hands mutter about stockwhipping him and remark that the legendary noble outlaw, Stingaree, would have had better manners. Significantly, the managers and owners of stations in the district admire him. In an inspired plot twist, the supercilious aristocrat steals diamonds entrusted to him for safe keeping from Stingaree, which same bushranger he is revealed to be. The ‘common men’ who idolise Stingaree
have in fact been cursing him, while the sycophantic Anglophiles of the middle class have been made fools by their prejudices.

Like authors from Rowcroft onward, Hornung played with the continuum from villain to hero, civilised to brutal. Even after the revelation of the innocence of the man in the lock-up, and the guilt of the finely attired pianist with the monocle and jeweled rings on his fingers, he “looked still, and in the teeth of the facts, the likelier gentleman of the two” (Hornung 1896, 148-149). Stingaree follows the pattern of the exceptional bushranger, as he stands in contrast to his coarse accomplice, Howie. Whereas some authors’ characterisation of the exceptional bushranger was deeply philosophical (Boldrewood 1882; Dawe 1892), Hornung parodied the gentlemanly bandit of folklore and literature. Physiognomy and social standing proved nothing of one’s moral caliber, he implied.

Hornung was the ideal candidate to write social satire about notions of gentility and refinement. He attended the prestigious ‘public school’, Uppingham, and in adulthood moved in upper-class sporting and literary circles (Knight 2006). Yet in some regards *Irralie’s Bushranger* is a conventional adventure romance novel. The Earl’s son marries Irralie Villiers and the bushranger is last heard of serving a life sentence in Darlinghurst Gaol.

Stingaree reappears in a novel bearing his name, coming into his own as the protagonist (Hornung 1905). Hornung wrote in the casebook form that was becoming popular in crime fiction, for example in his brother-in-law Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s *Sherlock Holmes* (Doyle 1892). Each chapter of *Stingaree* is a cohesive story in which the bushranger beats the odds in some dramatic plot twist to prove again his shrewdness and gallantry. Portraying a bushranger as an outright hero was a far more ambitious task than Hornung attempted in his previous novels. The result is extraordinary.

Stingaree holds up a theatre, not to steal from the audience, but to dictate the program so that a talented singer, Hilda Bouvarie, may gain recognition. Bouvarie believes him to be
the “kindest, most enchanting, most romantic criminal the world had ever seen!” (Hornung 1908, 26). In a memorable episode Stingaree clears his name of a murder and robbery by disguising himself as his nemesis, Police Superintendent Cairns, and catching the real culprit. Before revealing his true identity and galloping off, he explains that he “itched to uphold the honor of the road of which he considers himself a not imperfect knight” (1908, 166).

The extent to which Hornung intended to parody the outlaw hero myth, either in its European tradition or Australian literary derivative, is difficult to gauge. Certainly he evoked these associations. The bushranger “was reported a man of birth and mystery, with... as romantic a method as that of any highwayman from the Old World from which he hailed” (Hornung 1908, 32). To those of the upper classes he is a “good old sportsman”, to some of the lower classes a hero. After being the passenger of a coach stuck up by the bushranger, “a flagrant Irishman declared it was the proudest day of his life...” (1908, 237).

Werner Friederich’s view of Stingaree as “glorification of bushranger romanticism and heroism at its best” (1967, 121-122), however, seems a face value judgment. Hornung’s colonial experience was in the Riverina region, where the likes of murderous Daniel ‘Mad Dog’ Morgan and Andrew ‘Captain Moonlite’ Scott had rampaged within living memory. He crafted Stingaree as virtually their fictional opposite, a comparison that added bite to the unabashed humour of the novel.

In this altogether superior finale to Hornung’s bushranger novels, the author resisted the predicable marriage of Stingaree and Bouvarie. As though to temper the levity of his rollicking yarns, and to invite contemplation of the kind of fate even the most successful of bushrangers might ultimately face, Hornung presented the pair as aging and ill-suited. The jailed Stingaree executes one last bold escape, not to an admiring gang but to anonymity.

The author’s novels with Australian settings, like those of his contemporary, Nisbet, were defined by their outsider perspectives. Hornung brought a fresh eye to bushranger
mythology and his work was incisive, yet his status as an interloper in the colonies presented the challenge of authenticity. Hornung was a most successful author in his home country, where readers with no experience of Australia relished apparently authentic depictions of the bush (Pryke 2009, 9). Yet even a review of Stingaree published in London facetiously described its setting as “the sort of Australian bush that only an Englishman knows” (“The Ideal and the Real” 1905, 18). The quaint British gent turned bushranger, Stingaree, in his “foolish English riding-clothes”, was planted in a contrived Australia of the imagination, according to the same review.

With the passage of time, 1890s Australia can only be a land of the imagination, a contested territory to which Hornung’s claim is as valid as Henry Lawson’s. As Myers has commented, “Interpreting the 1890s is rather like interpreting the Bible” in that infinite visions and versions may be constructed from the texts (Myers 1987, 17). It was, however, undoubtedly a period when many leading writers developed myths of national identity. Lawson and Paterson wrote of life on the land, of egalitarian mateship, defiance to authority and stoic endurance against all manner of hardship.

Bush ballads and short stories, rather than novels, were most popular and were often printed in The Bulletin, which “set the nationalistic tone” predominant in Australian literature in the 1890s (Myers 1987, 14). Hornung had no stake in it. Amid the droughts, labour disputes and 25 per cent unemployment of the period, romantic national mythology offered ordinary people a comforting antidote to the reality of economic depression (Myers 1987, 15-16). For this reason the irreverent novels of well-to-do British sojourners were unlikely to become Australian classics in the authors’ time.
Deadwood, Rainbow, Wild & Co: The Misunderstood Bushrangers of the Novels of Hume Nisbet

Nisbet recounted tales of life and death with a jaunty spirit, conjuring some exquisitely absurd and hilarious images of bushranging. He was acutely aware of the mythology of the gentlemanly bushranger, to which he applied a sharp twist in each of his novels. The protagonists were young men untutored in the vice that was rife in the colonies, who, owing to unfortunate series of events and plotting by their enemies, found themselves outlawed. Since they were such jolly fine fellows, the author had no difficulty portraying them as heroes worthy of the heroines whose hands they invariably won.
Rumour begets repute; repute begets myth; myth begets peril for its flesh and blood subject. In *Bail Up!* Raike Morris learns how little control he has over the process, when the excited public dubs him ‘Captain Deadwood’ for holding up a coach armed only with a stick, which he pretends is a rifle. In a frenzy of rumour, some praise him for “levying his blackmail as gently as the circumstances would allow” and others claim he is a “ruthless ruffian… sparing neither man, woman, nor child” (Nisbet 1890, 45).

The popular and physically outstanding Morris matches the public conception of the exceptional bushranger. Growing up he is a “champion batsman… the best swimmer… a splendid horseman” who, like Ned Kelly, saves a person from drowning (Nisbet 1890, 3). He is driven to theft by hunger and rage after being cheated of his earnings. Like many a romantic bushranger character, Morris preserves his honour because somebody else does the necessary dirty work. In his case it is Wung-Ti, the almost supernaturally powerful and clever criminal who engineers his two escapes from prison and kills Morris’s enemies on his behalf.

The setting of Queensland in the 1860s is on a topsy turvy moral plane, where pillars of the establishment prove brittle. Reverend MacSalter is a greedy schemer, willing to falsely swear recognition of Morris to secure reward money. Harley Graves, the squatter who cheats Morris, is a despicable drunkard and gambler who also steals from his own father. Some of the stockmen at Boolburra Station agree, “...Deadwood is a hundred times the better man!” (Nisbet 1890, 141). The working-class folk have installed him among the ranks of mythic heroes by the time of his trial for bushranging. An angry mob in Brisbane tars and feathers MacSalter and Graves for betraying him.

Misfortune might place anybody on the wrong side of the prison walls, Nisbet suggested. Sharing stories with the ‘gentry’ among the inmates, Raike is “astonished to find out how innocent they all were, and how liable to wrongful imprisonment a man might be through the spite and malignancy of humanity at large” (Nisbet 1890, 148). In context it does not seem an ‘innocent criminals’ joke, but rather a philosophical comment about the folly of
rash judgment. Authors of mistaken identity narratives, such as Rowcroft and Hornung, implied similar misgivings about prejudice based on visible status. At the same time they reinforced class prejudice by insisting on the aristocratic blood of their exceptional gentlemanly bushranger characters, from the ‘Gypsey’ to ‘Stingaree’.

In *Bail Up!* Nisbet’s agenda was unusual, because he cast a working-class currency lad as the protagonist and claimed that no class distinction existed in Brisbane in the mid-1800s (Nisbet 1890, 3). It accorded with an idealistic view of the nascent nation as a land of equality, which believers in the ‘workers’ paradise’ Down Under could contrast against the entrenched privilege and disadvantage of the United Kingdom. Morris’s personal attributes and actions alone appoint him as a gentlemanly hero.

Nisbet’s critical reception in Australia was unenthusiastic, however, not least because of his criticism of colonial bigotry. Critics denounced his “distorted view of colonial life” (Turner and Sutherland 1898). At a time when rising Australian nationalism was defined by ‘whiteness’, Nisbet railed against the subjugation of Indigenous people (see preface to Nisbet 1894a). He depicted Chinese-Australian characters like Wung-Ti in *Bail Up!* as astoundingly clever in comparison to the sometimes degenerate British colonials, albeit that these characters turn their talents to crime. Others were busy writing “lurid invasion narratives featuring Chinese and Russians” (Dixon 1995, 136).

Though he disapproved of the uncivilised excesses of colonial behavior, it would be a mistake to hold up Nisbet as an icon of progressive thought. He was a firmly upper-class gentleman’s club member who actually argued against steps to alleviate poverty, at least until the morals and hygiene of the poor improved (Nisbet 1892b, 306). Nisbet nonetheless rattled that banner of 1890s nationalist bigotry, *The Bulletin*, by setting some of his fiction on Australia’s racial fault lines (Cowan 1988). He had made an influential enemy.

Like other writers of romantic adventure genre novels of the 1890s, Nisbet seems to have been guided primarily by the needs of drama, ahead of politics. Romances were high sellers
in the late 1800s, too, which may have been a consideration (Cowan 1982, 81). In *Bail Up!* Morris is to quite literally sail off into the sunset with his sweetheart, and so he must leave Australia. The press incorrectly reports that Captain Deadwood has been “massacred by natives”. It is another reminder of the discord between life and myth. This discord was far from resolved in *Bail Up!*, as the novel itself embodied the idealism of bushranger mythology.

In *The Bushranger’s Sweetheart* (Nisbet 1892a) Nisbet merrily lampooned the bushrangers’ sympathisers, while unfolding the sympathetic ‘fallen noble’ narrative of Luck Mort and his friend ‘Captain Rainbow’. Mort, the first person narrator, spends an aimless youth in Kent riding, hunting, lounging about smoking cigars and reading, until his aristocratic uncle disinherits him and promptly dies. He flees from debtors to a setting Nisbet knew well, the seedy streets of 1860s Melbourne. In his youth the author had frequented the same haunts and found employment at the Theatre Royal, as Mort does in the novel (Cowan 1988). He is drawn into the intrigues of Rainbow and his actress sweetheart, Jessie Carew. Arrested for running an errand for Rainbow, Mort remarks on the bizarre experience of becoming an instant celebrity bushranger:

> I had at last become an important item of society and… would be lodged free of expense. I should be honoured by having my name and description published, the same as if I had done some great and glorious action.

(Nisbet 1892a, 113)

Nisbet was a master of irony. Sometimes it was laid thick, as above, and other times barely discernible, as in a remark about Mort’s “handsome handcuffs glistening in the morning sun” (Nisbet 1892a, 113-114). His lack of critical acclaim in Australia as a novelist may have been in part due to the inability of reviewers to identify his satirical tint (Cowan 1982). The following exchange between two sympathisers of Mort, for example, can be read for priceless hilarity or as a scathing critique of colonials:
“Poor young fellow, what’s he done?”
“He’s a bushranger; can’t you see by his fine horse.”
“Ah, it’s all the good-looking chaps gets copped; what a shame, ain’t it?”

(Nisbet 1892a, 114)

The romantic women’s imprudence in leaping to conclusions is clear, but Nisbet’s parody of a lower-class subset of society did not necessarily equate to a general slur about colonial ignorance. Colonials could be hypersensitive to criticism, as Anthony Trollope attested after the publication of his *Australia and New Zealand* (Trollope 1873). On his return trip to the Antipodes “any hint of conveying censure was treasured up and quoted against me with indignation...” (*The Tireless Traveller* 1941, 89).

Readers must snatch Nisbet’s earnest morals while on a rollicking narrative ride. In *The Bushranger’s Sweetheart* his humour extended even to the name of Luck Mort. The archaic ‘mort’ meant ‘a large quantity’ (The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary 1993), whereas the novel follows a man in dire need of luck. Loyalty and valour are supreme values in *The Bushranger’s Sweetheart*. Mort, the most noble minded character in the novel, risks his life to fight the police alongside Rainbow.

Nisbet initially characterised the main bushranger in the novel as a faintly ridiculous version of the gentlemanly bandit. Rainbow is a former author imprisoned for the attempted murder of a critic who sabotaged his career. Here, surely, Nisbet responds with mirth to the mixed critical reception his own novels received in Australia. The criminals Rainbow meets and goes on to lead are, he claims, “honester fellows than that literary clique” (Nisbet 1892a, 106).

Surprisingly, Nisbet as a critic favoured realism in literature and the visual arts (Nisbet 1892b, 110). His literary philosophy echoed that of Émile Zola, “that Rembrandt of modern French literature” (Nisbet 1892b, 43), who believed ‘true’, or in his term ‘naturalist’, works
had exclusive claim to greatness and morality (Morris 2003, 71, cf. Nisbet 1892b, 108). His writing was imbued with greater imagination and whimsy than he cared to admit. Rainbow is as charismatic as Robin Hood. Mort reflects upon his inability to reconcile what he knows of Rainbow with the fact that he lives by armed robbery:

> He was so confoundedly poetic in his sentimental moods, so exuberant in his gaiety... so mercurial and possessive altogether that he quite carried us off our feet.  

(Nisbet 1892a, 250)

Mort, like a significant element of the public, is able to rationalise ambivalence to outlawry because it is obscured by glamour.

The author depicted Rainbow as the civilising force of the gang, in adherence to the mythology of the exceptional bushranger. The others “are getting tired of my mild measures, and I am dead sick of them and the dingo life I lead,” he confides to Mort (Nisbet 1892a, 169). His loyalty is neither to the gang, nor the ‘criminal class’ generally. He abandons the bushrangers and defends Fernwood Station alongside the wealthy squatter, Mr Condon.

When a worthy nemesis catches up with Rainbow, their mutual respect lays bare the contradictions of the mythology of the gentlemanly bushranger. Trooper William Thompson and Rainbow agree that neither wishes to spill blood, but the bushranger explains that he has made the predictable vow never to be taken alive. He loathes violence while committing himself to it. The bushranger is amusingly slighted at Thompson’s suspicion that he will attempt escape. “‘Do I look like a man of that sort?’ asked Rainbow, with the old flash in his wearied eyes” (Nisbet 1892a, 308). Here Nisbet reminds readers of another contradiction in the mythology of the gentlemanly bushranger, between surviving by deceit and staking his pride on being taken at his word.
Not so different... Bushrangers and their pursuers are literally on the same page in Patrick Marony’s portraits from ca. 1894.

Chas. White, author of Story of Australian bushranging; Dr. Pechey, present at Keightly episode; Hipkiss gave Ben Hall first death wound at Billabong 5th May-65; Ver. Rev. Dr. Gibney heroic rescue at Glenrowen [Glenrowan]; Superintnt Hare author of Last of the bushrangers; Ben Hall; Lowry; Starlight; T. Clarke; Rutherford; Martin Cash Tasmanian outlaw after sentence lived a respected farmer; Const. Bracken escaped from Kellys Glenrowen [Glenrowan]; Insr Stephenson daring capture & shooting of Lowry; McKinley [McKinlay?], Burns& Day daring shooting & capture of Angel & Thurston; J. Hawthorne now a squatter Wee Waa daring capture of Dunne.

National Library of Australia

Rainbow plainly believes he has more in common with Thompson, nominally an upholder of society’s values, than he has with his fellow outlaws. The pair make camp and sit “smoking together and speaking like good friends” (Nisbet 1892a, 308). The bushranger is hopelessly conflicted, as his lifestyle is intrinsically radical. In the nineteenth century his family – the
outlaw, his unwed lover and his adopted Chinese-Australian boy, Dicky – would have outraged many. Indeed the fate of all three is untimely death.

The author expected readers to take heed of the fortunes of his characters:

> The whole path of honour is pointed out, and we glow as we read with the desire to follow. What sermon could teach us more?

(Nisbet 1892b, 220)

Again Nisbet’s fiction exceeds his theory, as Rainbow pays for his transgressions despite belatedly taking the only “path of honour” he can find. From comical beginnings, the character is the archetypal doomed romantic outlaw who is so easy to love. He preserves his honour by shaking hands with Thompson at an old-fashioned dawn duel, in which the trooper kills him.

The resolution to Mort’s story massages away the social realism of some passages in *The Bushranger’s Sweetheart*. The narrator strikes gold, gets married and regains his ancestral estate in England. Mort has witnessed how easily fortune can turn against even the noblest person, but in the end he is smugly triumphant. Cowan adjudged that Nisbet tempered his realism with detached irony because he “was never quite reconciled to... the kind of novel which must result” (Cowan 1982, 83).

Perhaps Nisbet’s retreats from serious social critique devalue his points about the capacity of even the most upstanding citizen to commit crime in certain circumstances, and about the senselessness of the hysteria around celebrity criminals. Yet his novels would not be romances without granting the favoured protagonists, and by extension the readers, at least some wish fulfillment. Nisbet’s hybrids are sublime.

In *A Bush Girl’s Romance* (Nisbet 1894a) the author’s serious contention was that outlaw and establishment figures were interchangeable in the corrupt and, at its worst, wholly
depraved colony of Western Australia. The villain of the piece, Captain Derrick Wild, finds no trouble graduating from convict to bushranger and then, under the alias of Captain Denvers Wildrake, to district police chief. He leads his officers with impunity in a series of murderous outrages.

*The Bulletin* bristled at the outsider’s representation of the state of affairs:

> For a howling parody of Australian life the *Bush Girl’s Romance* takes the palm. It is, therefore, likely to be a huge success – in England.

(1894)

If such defensiveness was to be expected on this occasion, equally justified was Nisbet’s denunciation of pastoralists and police for massacring “the original Lords of the Australian soil, the Aboriginals” (Nisbet 1894a, v). He graphically described the enslavement and sexual and physical abuse perpetrated by the worst of the colonists. Most of Nisbet’s bushrangers in the novel were brutal, but they were no worse than the supposedly respectable members of mid-nineteenth-century frontier colonial society (Cowan 1982, 88).

James Danton, the hero of *A Bush Girl’s Romance*, bolts after being wrongly convicted of forgery and transported. He attracts undeserved notoriety as a ruthless bushranger, as Wild blames the crimes of his gang on the hapless fugitive. Both Danton and Wild fit the mould of the exceptional, gentlemanly bushranger. Tall, strong Danton is “good looking and of the Saxon type” (Nisbet 1894a, 3). His ability to converse about great authors and distant lands dazzles Helen, the sheltered daughter of the Turro-Side Station owner, Richard Craven. Wild, too, is exceedingly well spoken, with “features of the most noble and heroic cast” (1894a, 78). In fact he is more accomplished than Danton, as he is a crack shot; a superb musician; an “epicure in fine dishes…” who is able to charm his way in or out of almost any situation (1894a, 53).
Through comparisons between Danton and Wild, Nisbet developed his theme of the superficiality of outlaw mythology. The false equation of class and virtue is Nisbet’s particular target. Helen’s Uncle Timothy, immediately admires Wild as “worthy of the old school” (1894a, 52). Timothy is a “stauch Tory... who upheld the inviolable rights of pedigree and landlordism... while burning alive he regarded as a mild punishment for the proletarian who raised his voice against these old and sacred institutions” (Nisbet 1894a, 80). Nisbet’s characterisation of him as a laughing stock is instructive about the author’s intention to satirise social prejudices.

Nisbet believed the sign of a lady or gentlemen was “unaffected ease”, rather than high culture and education, which he declared to be more often the making of “prigs and insufferable pedantic bores” (Nisbet 1892b, 214). The idiosyncratic author was as misunderstood as his bushranger characters were, by those who supposed that he singled out their fair colonies, rather than humanity at large, for deprecation. Paradoxically, Nisbet delighted in creating characters who epitomised the gentlemanly bushranger myth. Thus he potentially helped to perpetuate the notion that gentlemanly bushrangers belonged in a special, somehow forgivable category.

Significantly, it is on the insistence of Richard Craven, an emblem of upper-class respectability, as the major land owner and magistrate of his inland district, that Wild commits his most dastardly crime. Wild is reluctant to ‘disperse’ (massacre) the Indigenous people, but must oblige Craven to keep his post as police chief. It is the ultimate betrayal, as the Indigenous resistance leader, Worrogonga, has sheltered the bushrangers. Here is the author’s sharpest twist of the mythology of the gentlemanly bushranger. Until Wild leads the massacre readers can still admire him, as his worst violence has hitherto been referred to, ‘out of view’. At Worrogonga’s camp “the pseudo police force were upon them with knives, pistols and clubbed guns, stabbing men, women and children and scattering their brains” (Nisbet 1894a, 192). There is no honour or fair play in the surprise attack.
As Nisbet was writing the novel, William Lane was busy establishing the New Australia settlement in Paraguay (see Whitehead 1997). Wild plans to sail to South America with his homicidal gang and found another, altogether less utopian colony. Having dashed readers’ faith in the fundamental decency of a classic gentlemanly bushranger, the author enlisted the mighty survivor, Worrogonga, help to capture Wild. The blackest pitch of humour prevails. The ‘Patrician’ bushranger prepares a brilliant feast on the morning of his hanging. “Only coarse criminals, who indulge in ham and eggs ... play that penitent thief game,” he tells the prison chaplain, “for they are suffering pangs in their stomachs, which they think are the prickings of conscience” (Nisbet 1894a, 309). In *A Bush Girl's Romance*, as in Nisbet’s other novels, sober appraisal of conflicted bushranger mythology, and of other facets of colonial society, goes hand in hand with playful dialogue and characterisation.

Nisbet’s most manic, eccentric bushranger character has a surprising amount in common with the author. Impassioned passages of Nisbet’s *Where Art Begins* verge on mania, or obsession, as though he was every bit as possessed by his own aura of brilliance as Wild was. Consider his bizarre conclusion about the virtue of ‘true art’ (reflecting “the example which nature sets before it”) and the consequences of ‘false art’ (“the personating and choosing of monstrosities”) (Nisbet 1892b, 108). False art, he declared, turns society “cruel and remorseless”, leading less intellectually gifted people to become “such epicures in horrors as the Whitechapel monster whom we have come to know as Jack the Ripper” (1892b, 107-108). How curious this is from an author who specialised in writing bushranger characters in the 1890s and later wrote a number of supernatural horror stories (Nisbet 1894c, 2008).

The ‘gastronomic artist’ bushranger’s passion for fine food matches Nisbet’s passion for art; Wild thinks it a grave crime to serve poor dishes. His cuisine enlightens and improves those he graces with it, in the same way that Nisbet hoped his novels and paintings would “educate the world, and refine and elevate their creations and ideals...” (Nisbet 1892b, 209). Naturally, then, the more acceptable hero, Danton, clears his name and marries Helen at the end of *The Bushranger's Sweetheart*. 
Nisbet’s varying responses to bushranger mythology in this novel and in *Bail Up!* and *The Bushranger’s Sweetheart* were delightfully droll. His reliance on irony belied his sincere agenda as an artist and writer. Deadwood, Rainbow, Wild and the others were liable to be misunderstood, as arch villains or perfect heroes, when they were as captive to circumstances and passions as anybody else. The author may have appeared simply contemptuous of colonial life and its emergent mythology, whereas he absorbed bushrangers and their attendant ethical quandaries into an ultimately heartfelt literary project. In novels, he believed, readers pass “to the Valley of the Shadow of Death and are able to conquer the Monster without any risk of scars” (Nisbet 1892b, 221). How much sweeter the conquest might be in Nisbet’s work if we doubted our return until the finish and did have metaphorical wounds to show for it all. His contribution to bushranger literature, however, as idiosyncratic as it was, deserves to be celebrated.

**Inventions, Inversions, Interventions: The British-Australian Novels in Context**

Novelists of the late colonial era strove to understand the phenomenon of bushranging and the persistent mythology surrounding its perpetrators. Dawe (see Dawe 1892) and Boldrewood (see Boldrewood 1882-1883) were among the finest who wrote of injudicious but essentially decent currency lads. Their characters existed in authentically and distinctively Australian cultural and physical realms, amid allusions to the mythology of bushrangers like Bold Jack Donohoe, Frank Christie/Gardiner and Ned Kelly. Although Australians had not agreed upon a coherent image of the bushranger, it was part of a larger discourse about pioneering, anti-authoritarianism, mateship and bush iconography through which Australian literature came of age in the 1890s.

*The Bulletin* promoted the binary oppositions of ‘Australian nationalist’ against ‘British colonial’ and ‘folk’ against ‘commercial’ fiction (Sheridan 1985, 50). Unfortunately this approach, which has also pervaded academic criticism, undervalued the best of crime and
adventure romance genre novels (Dixon 1995). Among them are the works of Hornung and Nisbet. Among the leading authors to write of the bush contemporaneously with the literary ‘colonial experience men’ were those whose classics are most fondly remembered: Henry Lawson, Joseph Furphy, Banjo Paterson, Barbara Baynton, Steele Rudd and Miles Franklin. In contrast to them, Nisbet was “sublimely unaware of the burning debate of a national Australian literature, by Australians, and for Australians” (Cowan 1982, 97). Yet discerning readers would have found a surprising amount in common between the Scot and Lawson, for example.

Lawson was lauded as the ‘voice of the bush’, representative of a national ethic around the time of Federation (Lee 2004, 232). His narrator in Wanted by the Police suggests a cause of the sympathy for outlaw fugitives: “... in our heart of hearts we are antagonistic to most of the laws, and to the police magistrates...” (Lawson 1970, 314). Nisbet’s genteel new immigrant character, Luck Mort, enters the fray because “human nature” spurs him to battle on the side of the fugitive, Rainbow (Nisbet 1892a, 228). It is in harmony with the affirmation by Lawson’s narrator that “the Soul of Man says: Thou shalt not betray the wanderer” (Lawson 1970, 314). The finest writers sought the universal within the unique and the unique within the universal, regardless of their backgrounds and diverse fictional settings and styles.

Writers responding to bushranger mythology in the late nineteenth century did so in the context of the growing popularity of crime novels. This period gave rise to the ‘gentleman’ criminal in fiction in Europe as well as Australia. It was a character type epitomised by Guy Boothby’s ‘Dr Nikola’ and ‘Simon Carne’; Arthur Conan Doyle’s ‘Professor Moriarty’, and Hornung’s ‘A. J. Raffles’ (Cowan 1982, 94). David Latta has described Hornung’s bushranger, ‘Stingaree’, as “an Australian version of Raffles” (Latta 1989, 100). Stingaree, who first appeared in 1896, was in fact the forerunner of Raffles, the character who debuted two years later and for whom Hornung is best remembered. If only Stingaree played cricket he might almost have been interchangeable with Raffles in Le Premier Pas, the tale of Raffles’s
bank robbery at Yea while recovering from an injury on his bowling finger during a tour of Australia with the English team (collected in Hornung 1907).

There is no evidence that Hornung considered bushranger mythology any more than a template on which to devise his social satire. The bushranger was, after all, a criminal, and therefore available to the crime novelist. The bushranger could serve as an arch villain, such as ‘Ruggy Dick’ in *Mark Brown’s Wife* (De Boos 1871), a tragic hero, such as ‘Tom Stanford’ in *Mount Desolation* (Dawe 1892), or a complex lovable rogue of the variety Hornung and Nisbet experimented with. The worthy trooper character found in bushranger novels filled perfectly the role typically played in crime fiction by the nemesis detective. *Mary Summers* (Whitworth 1865), discussed in Chapter Two, is an early example of the literary cross-pollination between the genres of crime and the station thriller or bush melodrama.

The bushranger was not only a criminal, but also an adventurer. His romantic lustre in the public imagination enabled Nisbet to appropriate him as an object of heroines’ desire in his romance adventure novels. Australia was, for most of the British among his readership, an exotic setting, like India and Persia were in *A Desert Bride* (Nisbet 1894b), which was published in the same year as *A Bush Girl’s Romance* (Nisbet 1894a). The role of bushranger in adventure romance novels was sometimes akin to that of the sheikh of ‘desert romance’, who is both a danger and an ultra-masculine love interest. According to Robert Dixon, the abduction narrative was a conventional imaginative entry into adventure for female readers (Dixon 1995, 42). In numerous bushranger novels the implicit threat of rape is part of the dramatic formula (Rowcroft 1845; Whitworth 1865; Boldrewood 1875; Nisbet 1894a; Praed 1893). The exceptional bushranger’s chivalry usually overcomes his brutish impulses, preserving the ‘honour’ of all parties.

The bushranger, then, was something of a man for all seasons. Villain, tragic hero and troubled adventurous currency lad alike gave the order to ‘stand and deliver’. By the 1890s
bushranger mythology had long been considered public property, so much so that it has been described in retrospect as “a national institution” (Ward 1958, 45). The bushranger won admiration for bravery, horsemanship and bushcraft when these were highly regarded traits of the pioneers whom colonial Australians held up as national icons. Ward aligned the bushrangers’ resistance to the tyranny of colonial authorities with an emergent nationalism in which Australian identity was constructed against that of the British (Ward 1958, 164). Few authors have made merry with bushranger mythology as freely as Nisbet and Hornung. It paradoxically gave their work both distinction and little prospect of unanimous acclaim in the colonies as Australians rallied republican sentiment in the lead up to Federation.
WORKS CITED (Chapter 3)


Chapter Four

The Unending Encore of the Undead Outlaw Hero

“What did he do, again?”

A girl of perhaps eleven idles before Ned Kelly’s bullet pocked armour, eyes flitting about the Changing Face of Victoria exhibition with less reverence than her father might have hoped for.

By her side he replies in churchly tones, “Oh, he took money from the banks. The police gave him a hard time, too.”

And that is what she will carry.

It may be the museum gloom of the upper level of the State Library of Victoria, or the father’s awareness of his lie by omission, that causes him to hush. He won’t mention police killed and young lives wasted. The historical record is worse than unsuitable; it is practically treasonable. What compels the father to perpetuate a mythology of noble banditry, of rebellion against injustice, of blameless armed robbery?

A partial answer lies in the romantic tradition manifested in bushranger fiction. Returning to Bennett’s definition of a myth as “an invented story, arising from a collective belief...” (Bennett 1994, 58), this chapter considers the shape of the enduring bushranger story and the beliefs it embodies.
Fusion and Confusion in Bushranger Mythology

Over time the differentiation between history, mythology and literature diminishes, especially in cases of bushrangers with aliases. ‘Starlight’, for example, might refer to Harry Readford or Frank Pearson. Neither was known as ‘Starlight’ until the publication of Robbery Under Arms (Boldrewood 1882-1883), in which the author borrowed elements of their biographies to create his English-born gentlemanly bushranger character with the same soubriquet (see also Sherman 1965; Clune 1945a; McCarthy 1972). The ‘Starlight Gang’ in The Bushranger’s Autobiography predates their fictional and real life bushranging careers (Fortune 1871-1872). Meanwhile the real life ‘Captain Midnight’ (c. 1850-1878), another partial inspiration for Boldrewood’s aforementioned character, began his career as Thomas Smith, which was also an alias of the Victorian bushranger, Frank ‘Captain Melville’ McCallum (1822-1857).

Confusing? Bushranging lives and mythology can be understood as forming a great complex in which flesh and blood participants follow a narrative foretold. Appendix C illustrates further the exchanges between aliases and characters inside and outside of novels. Bushrangers’ aliases signified the performatory quality of their behavior. They often adopted catchy, aggrandising monikers befitting their roles in a well established plot of promise, defiance and probable tragedy. Bland alternatives would have served the simpler purpose of concealing their real names. Hodge and Mishra astutely described bushranging as “a set of texts enacted with actual bodies and actual bullets, a hyper-real form of political theatre”(Hodge and Mishra 2001, 345).

Career bushrangers such as Francis ‘The Darkie’ Christie performed their roles in the time-honoured narrative of derring-do in the knowledge that their reputations were at stake. It was a narrative encoded in novels since the beginnings of colonial Australian fiction. Christie, also known as Frank Gardiner, pleaded his qualification to the ‘tobyman’ (British highwayman) tradition in a newspaper letter:
Having seen a paragraph in one of the papers, wherein it is said that I took
the boots off a man's feet, and that I also took the last few shillings that
another man had, I wish it to be made known that I did not do anything of
the kind... As for a mean, low, or petty action, I never committed it in my
life...

Fear nothing, I remain, prince of Tobymen, Francis Gardner [sic], the
Highwayman.

(excerpt from
Christie 1862)

Shortly after writing this letter, Christie led the biggest successful heist in Australian history,
holding up the Lachlan Gold Escort at Eugowra Rocks. The Sydney Morning Herald
complained that “this scoundrel” enjoyed higher celebrity “than men in other countries
offer to their great generals and great poets” (1864, 4). How gratified the fêted outlaw
must have been had he only lived long enough to see the proliferation of published works
about him, numbering at least fifteen (for example Clune 1945b; Macklin 2005).

Novelists from the colonial era onward have stressed the significance of the performatory
quality of bushranging. The response of ‘Gentleman Bill’ to Jack Lynch, the newly turned
bushranger in Bengala (Vidal 1860), evinces his familiarity with the outlaw trope. “Lynch’s
first appearance in character!” he remarks wryly when the gun-toting desperado threatens
him (Vidal 2000, 296). A performatory conception of bushranging also directed
perpetrators in their understanding of expected behavior. Neil Fergus, the reluctant
bushranger of Charles Rodda’s The Scarlet Mask, overcomes his abhorrence of armed
robbery by considering his alter ego ‘Captain Scarlet’ as “a posturing rôle in a strange play”
(Rodda 1926, 104).
The bushrangers’ instantly recognisable catch cries were also explicitly performative, as they established the act being committed (see Austin 1962). Those who uttered the words, ‘Bail up!’ or ‘Stand and deliver’ to travelers on lonely bush roads performed bushranging and became bushrangers with as much ceremonial certainty as a judge’s utterance of a death sentence so often performed their condemnation.

Kathryn Heyman emphasised the fatalism of bushranging conceived as performance, through a co-narrator character in her novel, *Captain Starlight’s Apprentice* (Heyman 2006). ‘Jess’ performs in a circus and acts in early twentieth-century bushranger films. In
desperation she reenacts armed robbery to survive as a fugitive after murdering her abusive, traitorous husband. “And what was I to do?” she reflects, under fire on a ledge, “but let go and feel myself tumbling... with the glorious grace of a dancer” (2006, 237). She is following a script which, she knows all too well, usually ends in bloodshed.

The transfer of a gendered mythology typifies its mutability, as different people in different times and places find symbolism in bushrangers. Ken Gelder and Rachael Weaver have described the bushranger of colonial Australian fiction as “a fluid, performative figure” (Gelder and Weaver 2008). The historical personage who partly inspired Heyman’s novel, Elizabeth Jessie Hickman, known as ‘The Lady Bushranger’, is also the subject of two biographies (Studdy-Clift 1996; Moore 2010). Hickman symbolises the capacity of a woman to equal any man’s adventurousness and indomitable spirit. She was all the more remarkable for pursuing her career decades after the political enfranchisement of the rural working-class and advances in communications and transport had aided police to all but eliminate bushranging.

Just as colonial era bushrangers such as Christie harked back to a noble bandit tradition, some modern day celebrity criminals have in turn harked back to the anti-authoritarian symbolism of the bushrangers to understand or rationalise their (re)enactments of outlawry. David Everett, a renegade ex-SAS soldier, claimed that the media portrayed him as “the biggest threat to Australian society since Ned Kelly” (Everett). Everett fought for the Karen ethnic minority in Myanmar in the 1980s before returning to Australia, committing armed robberies and living as a fugitive (Everett and Flett 2008).

Dawe represented in fiction the phenomenon of media-generated outlaw celebrity as early as the 1890s. The bank clerk robbed by the bushranger protagonist of Mount Desolation requires police protection from “the fearfully aggressive importunities of greedy news-collectors” (Dawe 1892, 171). With Tom Stanford and his mate, Joe Devine, in hiding, “the newspaper correspondents sustained the public interest with the most absurd rumours” (1892, 241). Their own legends in the making are beyond their control, Dawe stresses.
After the bushrangers’ demise Stanford’s “qualities were magnified so preposterously that he became a sort of popular personage” and Devine, who shot straight, unlike his mate, was “reviled as a human monster” (1892, 316).

Seal and Hobsbawm distanced modern gangsters and criminals, elevated to celebrity status by the media, from the outlaw hero tradition. They too often choose criminal careers and commit wanton violence, rather than being driven to such a life by injustice. Building on Hobsbawm’s conception of a ‘social bandit’ who is inextricable from a supporting socio-economic base (Hobsbawm 1969), Seal contended that latter day criminals, by contrast, represent their own narrow interests and “are not widely perceived as Robin Hood figures...” (Seal 1996, 192).

Brenden Abbott, known as the Postcard Bandit, is a rare example of a modern day Australian career criminal who created the perception of social banditry. Abbott gained notoriety for bold bank robberies, cunning jail breaks and stints as a fugitive (see Pedley 2006; Tilse 2003). “The truth to it all is I robbed the big guys...” he argued, and “… the banks are the biggest thieves in society” (ABC The Usual Suspect 2003). Abbott here linked his crimes with those of chivalrous, righteous folk heroes of yore who supposedly stood for the oppressed against injustice.

David Malouf’s The Conversations at Curlow Creek (Malouf 1996) suggested that the hunger of the population for drama has traditionally taken precedence over the contested facts of a case. Set in 1827, this “contemporary deconstruction and refictionalizing of the bushranger myth” (Hassall 2000, 146) follows a police officer named Adair who is to hang a captured bushranger named Carney. The main narrative ends just before the execution. In the epilogue of the novel Adair dines with an acquaintance, Saunders, who reveals that the word on the street is that Adair freed his fellow Irishman, Carney, at the last moment. A rumour need only “satisfy their notion of what might be true...” according to Saunders, “…preferably, like all good stories, an old one in a new form” (Malouf 1996, 204).
Even the ex-underworld criminal, Mark ‘Chopper’ Read, has sought to write himself into the old story of the outlaw who is at once principled and fearsome. He has described himself as “a regular bloke who, through his own means, has tried to do his bit for society” (Read 2011). His utterly ignoble, barely remarkable former career as a gangland stand-over goon in Melbourne belies the fantasy of his manufactured public image. Read and his chroniclers have nonetheless successfully milked his perverse celebrity for the past two decades (see for example Rule and Silvester 1991; Dominik 2000) to promote him to something of a folk hero in working-class Australia.

In his fourth book, *For the Term of his Unnatural Life*, Read repeatedly compared himself to Ned Kelly (Read 1994). A simplified version of the Kelly legend has come to overshadow the gentlemanly bushranger type descended from the European noble bandit, which many novelists idealised in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Manifold subtleties of class and sectarian politics, convict solidarity and adventurism of ‘currency lads’, which the colonial era bushrangers represented, seem to have now distilled to a defiant spirit. The
lowest of career criminals are free to imbibe it as they perform transgression on an urban stage bearing no resemblance to the colonial frontier.

**An Unstable Tradition**

Novelists continued to romanticise gentlemanly bushrangers into the twentieth century. Popular literature was, and is, partly responsible for perpetuating common perceptions of bushrangers which do not tally with the record of typically undistinguished rural crime and punishment, according to historian Susan West (West 2009, 22-23). Yet there was some diversity of representation within popular romance adventure fiction. Perhaps its detachment from realism freed authors to endow their bushranger protagonists with whichever traits best served their various purposes, from sheer entertainment to imaginative alternative history.

‘Captain Scarlet’ in *The Scarlet Mask* (Rodda 1926) is the stock gentlemanly bushranger character. Driven to outlawry in mid-nineteenth-century New South Wales, the faultless fictional hero inevitably proves his physical, intellectual and moral superiority to his law enforcement enemies and more brutish bushranger accomplices alike. There was “little romance” in their crimes, the narrator asserts tokenistically before recounting the gallant exploits of a “veritable knight of the bush” (Rodda 1926, 10; 139).

The most original of bushranger novels tested the margins of readers’ sympathy. It responded creatively to the mythology instead of mimicking it. Writers such as David Hennessey attempted ambitious, complex depictions of bushranger characters. In *The Outlaw* Hennessey challenged readers with “a new idea that an outlaw might be a patriot” (Hennessey 1913, 220). His protagonist, Jack Salathiel, inverts the opposition of law enforcement and bushranger lore enactment by leading a vigilante militia that brings security to outlying parts of New South Wales, which the colonial authorities have been unable to achieve.
Hennessey’s novel appears initially as a conventional adventure romance, which may explain its failure to attract any scholarly attention. “It has no subtlety...” according to notoriously blunt The Bulletin, “But– it has for hero a noble bushranger...” and Hennessey gives “a trustworthy picture of the conditions that made bushranging possible” (“Fiction" 1913, 2). The narrative becomes increasingly bizarre and compelling as Salathiel progresses from convict bolter to demigod.

Salathiel is “altogether different from the common run of convicts”, an ambitious young man, a scholar and flautist “by birth and education a gentleman” (Hennessey 1913, 5-7). Indeed his initial crime is worthy of Nisbet’s uproariously caricatured noble bandit character, ‘Captain Rainbow’ (Nisbet 1892a): Salathiel, a law student, steals a book from an academic rival. After fleeing a cruel master the convict leads a gang of bushrangers. His appearance, like “a wealthy sporting squatter or an officer of mounted troops in mufti” (Hennessey 1913, 12) fits the gentlemanly bushranger mould. Major McFarlane, impressed by the bushrangers’ rout of the military force sent to destroy them, praises their leader for his ‘English’ fair play and condemns the police force as a “banditti crowd” for its skulduggery (Hennessey 1913, 257-258).

The Jewish Salathiel views himself as a latter day David, the warrior King of Israel. David, outcast in the wilderness and hunted by King Saul, was “a fighter and an outlaw, and yet, afterward, came to a kingdom and a throne” (Hennessey 1913, 152). Among numerous Old Testament allusions, the idyllic mountain haven where Salathiel begins a settlement free of the corruption and vice of the penal colony is called the Glen of Adullam, after David’s safe haven (1913, 198-199). Several powerful supporters conspire to spirit Salathiel out of Australia. A born leader whose people are unready for his enlightened reign, Salathiel must leave the continent. He and his newlywed wife intend to return “when the day dawns, and the shadows flee away” (1913, 309).

The gentlemanly bushranger of literature has always been a problematic anti-authoritarian icon, never more so than in The Outlaw. Salathiel preaches to his followers against theft
after he inherits a fortune, and he even summarily executes a highway robber. He offers an alternative authority, not an alternative to arbitrary and coercive authority. Part of the broad appeal of the fictional principled bushranger figure is that he, unlike essentially criminal offenders, is “as capable of enforcing the law as he is of breaking it” (Gelder and Weaver 2008, 4)

Captain Jack’s natural affinity is with establishment figures, including military officers and a Queen’s Counsel. Such a bushranger character is a typically a safe object of admiration, symbolising resistance without really posing difficult questions about colonisation and systemic inequity. Hennessey, however, depicted Salathiel as a legitimate threat to a colony on the brink of outright revolt. Rather than gloss over the contradictions of the noble outlaw trope, Hennessey concentrated on them to write a provocative, at times surreal, adventure romance.

By contrast, Dorothy Langsford’s character in another novel titled The Outlaw, Jim Burton, must rank among the least offensive bushrangers in literature (Langsford 1925). Readers are spared the unedifying details of the petty thefts that seem to be the extent of his crimes, but given ample description of his rescue of the Lone Reach parson during a cyclone. Burton is too polite to fire back when the police attack, and he finds religion while dying of his gunshot wounds. As the parson reflects on his friend’s turn to banditry, “Whatever the reason, Burton was at heart a gentleman” (1925, 110). Indeed his papers finally reveal him to be the son of a fifth generation English doctor, who banished him at the age of nineteen for forging his signature to pay his sweetheart’s gambling debt. Here is the bushranger whitewashed of the dualities that gave him his power in fiction.

The bushranger is a threat and is threatened, the object of both fear and sympathy. He is an exceptional individual, yet enough of the everyman for readers to imagine themselves in his place. If readers are sure a character is harmless, their incentive to follow the narrative wanes. Tension propels the narrative when it is uncertain whether a likeable character will fulfil his threat to society, law and order and, most importantly, to the innocents in his path.
Subsequent novelists nourished Australian outlaw mythology through fictionalised biographies of real bushrangers. Frank Clune was a master of ambiguity of characterisation. Clune’s fictionalised biographies were unflinching about the violence of the protagonists (see for example Clune 1945b). They preserved some glamour for them, however, and as an oeuvre they contributed to the mythology of bushranging. In the 1960s Eric Harding was still able to promote ‘Bogong Jack’ as a model of the gentlemanly bushranger deserving of esteem over the police killer, Ned Kelly, without questioning the implications of embracing any bushrangers as national symbols (Harding 1967).

David Martin’s satirical comedy, *The Hero of Too* (Martin 1965), foreshadowed the subversions of bushranger myth pursued by the likes of Peter Carey and Richard Flanagan in subsequent decades. The local legend in the fictitious Victorian town of Tooramit is of an 1870s bushranger, Dick Grogan. Steve Turner, a young school teacher posted there,
discovers that the ‘real’ Grogan was the antithesis of the dauntless icon of hypermasculinity celebrated in folk songs, biographies and a statue of him which has been erected by public subscription.

Colonial era lawlessness has often been conceived of as masculine excess (Lynch 2005; West 2009, 160-166). Manliness in nineteenth-century imperial outposts demanded displays of traits such as “courage, self-reliance and physical prowess” (Hogg 2011, 356). By these measures the bushrangers of myth gave magnificent performances.

In contrast, Turner learns that the ‘hero’ of Tooramit was a coward. He was a bookish, sensitive misfit willing to abandon his mate, Lam Yut Soon, during a bungled robbery. In fact Grogan only committed his series of excruciatingly awkward crimes at the behest of the storekeeper’s wife, Maggie Bollman, with whom he had an affair in a vain attempt to disprove his patent homosexuality. “You have lost a ghost and found a man,” Turner’s sweetheart, Clare Lovelett, reassures the despondent researcher (Martin 1965, 352). The author undercut the myth, but rather than simply rejecting the trope of the gentlemanly bushranger, he asserted the primacy of idiosyncratic experience and narrative.

Then, in 1972, Thomas Keneally published the novel that ought to have shot the bushranger of Australian myth through his suddenly ungentlemanly heart. The atrocities of the protagonist in The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith, inspired by the real life Jimmie Governor, would have appalled many a noble bandit of romance adventure fiction (Keneally 1978). Instead of resorting to force reluctantly, Blacksmith “felt lordly drunk” as a police ‘black tracker’ bashing his former companions at Verona (1978, 39). After cleaving women and children limb from limb at the house of his employer, Newby, he becomes a fugitive and pursues an “agenda of mayhem” (1978, 81).

Keneally unflinchingly defies readers’ yearning for some alternative, palatable truth in this “historical fable” (Quartermaine 1991, 32). Peter Pierce conjectured that the novel represented a “version of the Kelly story” (Pierce 1995, 65), although perhaps more convincingly Jimmie’s numerous allusions to Ned Kelly stress the character’s pitiable fanciful
perception of the role he performs. Reaping vengeance for mistreatment at another former employer’s house, he realises Healy’s wife is the one he is really after: “Lush Mrs Healy was waiting to be split apart, as Petra Graf had waited” (Keneally 1978, 99). The bushranger is stripped of any claim to honour.

The self-styled bushranger, Blacksmith, flouts the tenets of the gentlemanly bushranger myth which generations of authors (and possibly some offenders) had imagined tenable. The exceptional, chivalrous chief who civilises his gang is nowhere to be seen. Instead Keneally’s novel explores “the cruel ironies of perverted passion, false pride and hypocritical self-righteousness” (Myers 1987, 140). Blacksmith is of the ‘wrong time’ to adhere to bushranger mythology (1900, when Kelly was supposed to be the last of the bushrangers). He was of the ‘wrong race’ (part-Indigenous instead of high-born British or proudly colonial-born) and the ‘wrong cause’ (avenging personal and racial insults, instead of seeking freedom or adventure).

If novelists of the nineteenth century selected from competing images of the bushranger, then novelists after The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith had at least one more image to contemplate. According to Hodge and Mishra, colonial authors were able to draw on contrasting literary representations. Bushrangers were either figures of resistance against systemic injustice, or romantic figures “celebrated for their noble and convenient suffering and demise”, forming together a “complex and unstable tradition” (Hodge and Mishra 1991, 120). With the last of the bushrangers long since passed away from living memory, their representation in literature is more than ever a question of which tradition to engage with, rather than how to match lived experience to written word.

Neither Martin’s satire nor Keneally’s grim realism buried bushranger mythology completely. Recent fictionalised biographies and literary nonfiction such as Fire in the Blood, about Francis Christie (Macklin 2005), You’ll Never Take Me Alive, about Ben Hall (Bleszynski 2005), and Captain Thunderbolt and His Lady, about Frederick Ward and Mary Ann Bugg (Baxter 2011), show that outlaw heroes have not entirely lost their allure.
Baxter’s Captain Thunderbolt is a “king of the road” who seems to be “reading from a manual, a list of do’s and don’t’s unwittingly absorbed after years of sitting around campfires and listening to tales of heroic outlaws and bold highwaymen, the ‘gentleman robbers’ of old” (Baxter 2011, 169; 151).

As long as a romantic mythology of bushranging retains cultural currency, literature will reproduce it. West noted that “bushranger books continue to pour off the presses” (West 2009, 22). She attributed unabated interest in bushrangers to the excitement of their exploits, nostalgia, “the search for a regional identity” and bushranger themed tourism (2009, 22). One can attend the annual Moondyne Festival in Toodyay (a haunt of Western Australia’s best known bushranger, ‘Moondyne Joe’), admire a stately Ben Hall statue and museum at Forbes in New South Wales, visit the site of the Kelly Gang’s last stand at Glenrowan in Victoria and much, much, more. As early as 1892 Dawe wrote satirically of the symbiosis of commerce and bushranger mythology. In Mount Desolation visitors flock to Wooroota following the bushrangers’ bank robbery, increasing trade so that the prevailing sentiment is “Long may such heroes thrive!” (Dawe 1892, 170).

Literature is also a site of contestation of cultural tenets, rather than simply their manifestation and consolidation. In recent decades some of the finest novels dealing with outlawry have have unsettled the hitherto comfortable illusions and contradictions embodied in the tradition of idealisation of perpetrators.

Long Live Sandawara (Johnson 1979) was a landmark novel of Australian outlawry because it juxtaposed a tale of frontier war heroism in the Kimberley with one of futile violent crime in modern Perth. Mudrooroo (also known as Colin Johnson) thereby joined the dots from colonial to contemporary violent crime, if not precisely from a bushranger to a latter day equivalent. Other novelists have tended to write about offenders in either historical or modern settings as though their narratives of resistance and transgression have no connection. Sandawara “voices the dangers of remaining stalled in the absurdities of a blood-stained Australian past” (Clark 2007, 119). The novel follows Alan, a disaffected,
urban Indigenous youth inspired to ill-fated banditry by the legend of Sandawara, an Indigenous outlaw of the 1890s.

Controversy about Mudrooroo’s constructed identity as an Aboriginal writer (see Foley 1997; Oboe 2003) complicates analysis of its racial politics, but it does not diminish the significance of his writing to a study such as this. Thomas Shapcott nominated Sandawara as a seminal novel of the 1970s (Shapcott 1980) and more recently Maureen Clark advanced the importance of Mudrooroo’s experimental “narrative collage” of parallel outlaw stories (Clark 2007, 118).

Alan, who brings the myth of Sandawara to his friends and imagines they can re-enact it a century on, proves a disastrous commander. “He stands posing in front of the painting of Sandawara, feeling more and more like the great leader...” yet his idealism wastes their lives (Johnson 1979, 117). Two “teenybopper” followers who have escaped from a juvenile detention centre are “all eyes and pounding hearts and happy to be along for the show” (1979, 156) before dying in a hail of police bullets during an attempted bank robbery. The author refused to perpetuate or deny simplistically the mythology of heroic resistance, instead stressing the importance of historical context.

In contrast to the realism of the narrative concerning Alan, the tone of parts concerning Sandawara is self-consciously romantic and mythical. Surprisingly, Alan and his associates are the thoroughly fictional characters, whereas Sandawara has an historical basis in the frontier resistance fighter known as ‘Pidgin’, ‘Sandamara’ or ‘Jandamarra’ (Idriess 1952; Shoemaker 1989). This contrast underscores how different the worlds are in which Sandawara and Alan contemplate armed rebellion. Sandawara struggles gallantly against annihilation by invaders. Life is cheap. Alan’s clumsy expression of frustration is founded on the delusion that he can become Sandawara resurrected. By extension, attempts by various modern day criminals to rationalise their offences by linking themselves to bushranger or outlaw mythology appear equally fanciful.
Mudrooroo’s self-aware process of constructing a mythic version of ‘Pidgin’ differentiated his novel from colonial era bushranger literature, in which authors typically reproved outlawry while patently investing in its glamour. Boldrewood, for example, was a squatter and magistrate who aspired to moral didacticism, yet in his most popular novels readers sense the thrills of criminal transgression (Dixon 1995, 33). Mudrooroo did not overcome this conflict, but rather confronted readers with it in _Long Live Sandawara_.

Authors of recent historical fiction concerned with outlawry have been particularly interested in playing with images of the archetypal tough, noble bushman. In Carey’s _True History of the Kelly Gang_ (Carey 2000), gang members and Ned’s father at times wear women’s clothing, which has troubled some readers whose idolisation of ‘our greatest folk hero’ is contingent on his heterosexual masculinity (*Ned Kelly Australian Iron Outlaw: Books: Fiction* ca. 2001). Carey “challenges the masculine symbolism of the Kelly gang”, according to Heather Smyth (Smyth 2009, 186). Susan K. Martin has noted, however, that Drewe (Drewe 1991) and Carey, in their literary depictions of Kelly, “are careful to recuperate Kelly for the cause of heterosexual masculinity by displacing homo-erotic bonds with hetero ones” (Martin 2005, 311).

Debates over dead bushrangers’ sexuality, which flared particularly in the 1960s, emphasise that the mythology around them is public property that is as fiercely guarded as it is fragile. The novel form provides for a depth of character and philosophical reflection unseen in early colonial era ballads, but neither the form nor its authors are inherently radical. Tensions in society are inevitably imprinted on recent novelists’ depictions of bushrangers, just as they were when colonial era writers such as Rowcroft, Fortune and Nisbet portrayed them variously, within single texts, as fiends and gentlemen at heart.

Novelists were surprisingly slow to write about Kelly. According to a 2005 survey, Kelly is by far the best known bushranger, with Ben Hall a distant second (Tranter 2008, 379-382). Ballads about Kelly were in circulation as early as 1879 (Seal 2002, 6) and the first book to chronicle the exploits of his gang was also published while the real life outlaws were still at
large (Hall 1879). Writers of nonfiction, short fiction, children’s fiction and script retold the Kelly story untiringly in the following decades, but his primacy in national memory was far from confirmed (see York 1999). For the first half century after his death novelists only alluded to the divisive police killer, preferring more colourful and palatable gentlemanly bushranger characters (excluding the children’s fiction, Borlase 1881, see also Appendix B). Numerous film and television productions about Kelly from 1906 onwards (see for example Tait 1906; Kathner 1951; Jordan 2003), as well as depictions in the visual arts (Nolan 1985) seem to have been the main vehicles of his growing legend prior to Carey’s internationally acclaimed novel (Carey 2000).

Kelly was not a transported convict, but “the Kelly style of angry self-justification” (Knight 1992) was a throwback to bolter ballads such as *Jim Jones* (collected in Wositzky 1978). It contrasted against the European noble bandit tradition in literature. Eventually some significant novelists warmed to Kelly (Lambert 1964; Langford 1980; Bedford 1982; Drewe 1991; Carey 2000). Just as nineteenth-century novelists subsumed lower-class convict bolter folklore within a bourgeois mode of representation replete with gentlemanly bushranger characters, later novelists appropriated Kelly “to the literary canon from the popular” (Martin 2005, 311).

Other authors also responded to the bushranger myth in fiction that implied their critical historiography, without entirely dispensing with the dramatic qualities of that myth. In *Gould’s Book of Fish* Richard Flanagan constructed Matthew Brady as a superhuman figure who looms large in the imaginations of convicts and soldiers alike in 1820s Van Diemen’s Land (Flanagan 2001). The narrator, Billy Gould, mistakes as madness Tracker Marks’s claim “... that the rocks were Brady, that the tarns were Brady, that the fish were Brady...” (2001, 364). He seems a deity. Seeking the outlaw hero on the Frenchman’s Cap mountain, the narrator comes upon the bones of other convict pilgrims.

Brady was loosely based on the historical personage hanged in 1826, but in the novel Gould wonders if the outlaw has become “just an idea” (2001, 390). It is what the other
bushrangers held up as heroes were, too, and why a stable historiography of bushranging is impossible. Different people have invested infinitely varying aspirations in the accounts they have chosen to accept. Thus Gould remarks on the convicts’ concepts of Brady, “For the Scots he was William Wallace, for the Irish he was Cú Cucalain; for all, a hero,” (2001, 347).

Flanagan’s Brady achieves none of the lofty ambitions dreamed for him by others. Our narrator finally stumbles into a camp where Brady had apparently lived with the Indigenous people whose remains are still scattered about the site following a massacre. Gould reads Brady’s journal, which, far from containing plans for an uprising, is full of shockingly artless jottings and “pathetick affirmations of love” [sic] (Flanagan 2001, 388-389).

Flanagan’s absurdist treatment of penal settlement in general, and of the bushranger myth in the Brady subplot, may be more viable and appropriate than a historical fiction that strives for elusive historical accuracy. Instead the author imitated in another manner the world he sought to characterise: tremendously complex, layered in unrecognised ironies and contradictions, and imagined in diverse and bizarre ways. It is a grotesquity concerned with the perversity of ‘official’ history and justice, where convicts suffer gruesome tortures for such crimes as “talking (insolence)” and “not talking (dumb insolence)” under a self-appointed Commandant who was reputedly transported as a convict himself (Flanagan 2001, 122; 163).

Because the bushranging phenomenon was a function of colonialism, bushranger mythology is an apt target of postcolonial fiction. In Gould’s Book of Fish a “baroque nightmare undercuts the rational myths of imperialism” (Nelson 2007). Bushrangers, who inhabited moral and geographical frontiers of what they understood as ‘civilisation’, were products of British colonisation of Australia, notwithstanding their clashes with colonial authority. The Brady character’s supporters believe he will bring “divine justice” to tyrants and traitors, restore truth to the historical record and free the convicts (Flanagan 2001,
In the bushranger’s fall from leader of a fantastical Army of Light to prosaic disappointment, the author did not spare the national myth of the bushranger.

The mythology has survived, though, embodied in the words of a parent viewing Kelly’s armour who passes a blatantly distorted history to his child. Instead of supplanting completely the quaint, genteel, essentially harmless novelistic bushranger, the Kelly story seems to have sustained Australians’ fascination in outlaws. It has proven again their remarkable capacity to idealise them. From the 1960s novelists such as Martin and Keneally have undercut outlaw mythology. Yet the bushranger is such a mutable figure, apt to play lovable rogue or misunderstood villain in genres from popular adventure romance to realist historical fiction, that distance in time only augments his appeal.
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Famous Last Words

On the occasion of the inquest into the shooting death of John ‘Bold Jack’ Donohoe in 1830, *The Sydney Monitor* predicted that bushranging would continue as long as penal settlements made wretches of men. “It is fit and proper, that cruelty should be visited on the nation that practises it with retribution,” sermonised the newspaper ("Donohoe. Coroner's Inquest on his Body" 1830). A little of the convict class’s empathy for the rebel, if not the sedition evident in the oral ballad tradition, seemed to have found its way into print. In fact bushranging was to continue long after convict transportation ceased in the mid-nineteenth century. Inspired by the European ‘noble bandit’ tradition, novelists helped to encode a mythology of outlaw heroism that retains currency in contemporary Australia and its literature.

Like Dick Turpin, the inglorious English criminal reinvented as a romantic hero by subsequent generations of writers, Australia’s bushrangers proved particularly malleable subjects of fiction post mortem. Convict bolters were emblems of defiance in the eyes of fellow convicts and their sympathisers, but they were anathema to colonial authorities and the landowner class. As nineteenth-century fiction ventured into the criminal intrigues of the European city and the contested spaces of the American Wild West, it also depicted the Australian bush frontier in a mode both acceptable and titillating to the bourgeois readership in the colonies and the ‘Motherland’. Bushrangers in the novel were sometimes appalling brutes, but they were not the ones novelists fixated on. Instead they imagined exceptional individuals distinguished by qualities which, though they had little connection to their real life counterparts, were recognisably drawn from the European noble bandit archetype epitomised by Robin Hood.

However much novels may have contributed to the development of a mythology of bushranging, novelists began depicting bushrangers after collective beliefs about their heroic rebellion, or alternatively their dreadful deeds, had taken root in the colonies. The celebratory mythology of bushranging embodies a belief in the legitimacy of mortal struggle in the face of unjust authority. Personal autonomy is its cherished ideal (Thom 1989, 1).
Over and again in fictional representations of bushranging the romanticised perpetrators are proud individuals both physically and morally robust enough to withstand trial by fire and, if necessarily, to place liberty ahead of life.

With the decline of bushranging after the convict transportation era and the demise of the Kelly Gang, novelists responded creatively to the mythology to develop memorably whimsical characters. Some fictional creations, such as ‘Captain Starlight’ (Boldrewood 1882-1883) and ‘Moondyne Joe’ (O'Reilly 1879) were loosely based on one or more historical figures. Others, such as ‘Captain Rainbow’ (Nisbet 1892a) and ‘Stingaree’ (Hornung 1896; 1905), stretched the romantic mythology to uproarious lengths. With the passing of the bushrangers’ actual threat, they were historical novelties to whom authors could assign the roles of rustic adventurer, romantic hero or arch villain. Yet as emergent Australian nationalism in the lead up to Federation confirmed the rural bandits’ place in bush iconography, especially in opposition to British authority, sensitivity about the appropriateness of given depictions of bushranging continued.

By the mid-twentieth century the stock gentlemanly bushranger character of popular fiction was tired. Paradoxically those novelists who have subverted the mythology since the 1960s have sustained the relevance and readership for the literature of bushranging. Martin’s well aimed satire (Martin 1965), Keneally’s savage realism (Keneally 1978) and the novels of others unwilling to uncritically reproduce romantic mythology have been among the most significant contributions to the outlaw narrative tradition. Ongoing memorialisation of the Kelly Gang attests to unceasing public interest in stories of rebellion, especially against unjust authority.

A satisfactory explanation for the glorification of outlaws in different times and places is unlikely to be found within a single academic discipline or in the high culture and archival texts traditionally studied in academia, as Seal has noted (Seal 2009, 84). The *Wild Boys* television drama series recently broadcast in Australia (Channel Seven 2011) is a popular culture text that might not usually attract scholarly attention, but which exemplifies the
currency of bushranger mythology and its patterns of representation. The main bushranger hero characters are straight out of the colonial novel. One is a fallen British nobleman like ‘the Gypsey’ (in Rowcroft 1843) or ‘Captain Dareall’ (in Fortune 1871-1872) and the other is a bold currency lad like ‘Dick Marston’ (in Boldrewood 1882-1883) or ‘Captain Deadwood’ (in Nisbet 1890).

This dissertation focuses primarily on the origins and evolution of the gentlemanly bushranger in the novel, whereas there is potential for further research that considers the perpetuation of bushranger mythology more broadly. The roles of women in the phenomenon and the literature of bushranging, as accomplices, authors and readers, deserve investigation. Intersections of bushranger and Indigenous history, involving ‘black trackers’, Indigenous bushrangers and resistance fighters, are particularly intriguing.

Seal has suggested that some modern criminals may model their behaviour on that of past outlaw heroes (Seal 2009, 82). This dissertation stops short of claiming that a reflexive cycle exists between outlawry and the mythology of outlawry encoded in literature. Whether or not cultural productions have ever led to actual deeds mimicking those depicted therein, offenders from Francis Christie to ‘Chopper’ Read have rationalised their crimes in reference to the outlaw hero tradition, however disingenuously, and displayed their awareness of it in their own writing. Authors, real life participants and later theorists have conceptualised violent crime in colonial Australia as the enactment of an established plot of glorious rebellion and, in most cases, tragedy.

Culturally diverse, technologically advanced, highly surveilled, overwhelmingly urbanised twenty-first-century Australia does not have anybody called ‘bushrangers’. Occasionally cases of criminals at large capture the imagination of the public. They rarely bear comparison to the noble bandits people have longed to believe in for centuries.

Enter the novelist, who trades in what might be and if only... The plotline following Moss Donohoe as a fugitive in Dingo is a variant on the convict bolter narrative. Although the
protagonist is no bushranger, he wins support from people who see him as an upholder of their values. Some characters find justification, however misguidedly, in Moss’s violent defence of his daughter, Zara, and his subsequent flight from prison. Heroism, though, is a trait best enjoyed from afar.

Outlaws enact the thrilling adventure that few others experience in their lives. They perform familiar roles as rebels and blood sacrifices in a narrative that both satisfies an intrigue for transgression and reassures readers that it has limits and consequences. The dualities embodied in outlaw heroes are the makings of complex fictional protagonists. Such characters are threats and threatened, exceptional individuals and loyal mates, fearsome and lovable, and as irrepressible as the mythology that shapes their enduring narrative.
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APPENDIX A

Untitled Verse, Van Diemen’s Land, 1825

By an unnamed captured bushranger, either Joseph Broadhead, John Everet, William Buckley or Charles Bradbury (see Colonial Times and Tasmanian Advertiser, 2 September, 1825, p. 4 and Supplement to the Colonial Times, 2 September, 1825, p. 1).

We are the boys that fears no dangers,
And what you term us is bush-rangers;
If it is our lives you do demand,
True to our guns, then we must stand.

We all are young and in our prime,
To meet our hardships we incline,
And if our blood you mean to shed,
Life for life before we yield.

’Tis to the bush we are forced to go –
You settlers prove our overthrow:
To rob and plunder is against our will,
But we must have a living still.

Now to this country we are come,
Banished from our native home,
And if we can’t go back no more,
We’ll rob the rich to feed the poor.

Reproduced in Colonial Times and Tasmanian Advertiser, 26 August 1825, p. 3.
APPENDIX B

The First Century of Bushranger Literature

1829: *The Bush Rangers*, the first known play based on Australian experiences, by David Burn

Circa 1830 onwards: Bushranger and convict folk ballads, authors unknown, some attributed to Frank ‘The Poet’ MacNamara, e.g. ‘Moreton Bay’ and ‘Bold Jack Donohoe’. Many earlier ballads probably existed but have not been recorded.


1834: *The Bushrangers; Or Norwood Vale*, play by Henry Melville.

1835: *The Tragedy of Donohoe*, by Charles Harpur (play inspired by the bushranger John ‘Bold Jack’ Donohoe). Excerpts were serialised in the ‘Sydney Monitor’ – later much revised and published as *The Bushrangers, a Play in Five Acts* (1853) and *Stalwart the Bushranger* (1867) – though not publicly produced until the 1980s.

1842: *Legends of Australia*, by John Lang (only parts 1-5 completed of a planned 12-part novel)

1843: *Tales of the Colonies*, by Charles Rowcroft


1845: *The Bushranger of Van Diemen’s Land*, by Charles Rowcroft (novel serialised in ‘Hood’s Magazine’)


1849: *The Emigrant Family, or, The Story of an Australian Settler*, by Alexander Harris

1853: *The Forger’s Wife, or, Emily Orford*, by John Lang (novel serialised in ‘Fraser’s Magazine’)

1856: *The Stockman’s Daughter*, by Charles de Boos (novel serialised in ‘The People’s Advocate and New South Wales Vindicator’)

1857: *The Two Convicts*, by Friedrich Gerstaecker (German-born sojourner)

1859: The Recollections of Geoffry Hamlyn, by Henry Kingsley

1860: Bengala, or, Some Time Ago, by Mary Theresa Vidal

1862: We’ve Taken Gardiner, play by WM Akhurst

1863: The Hillyars and the Burtons: A Story of Two Families, by Henry Kingsley

1865: Mary Summers: A Romance of the Australian Bush, by Robert P. Whitworth


1886: The Adventures of a Squatter, by Donald Cameron (serialised in ‘The Australian Journal’)

1867: Fifty Years Ago: An Australian Tale, by Charles De boos

1870: Adrift with a Vengeance: A Tale of Love and Adventure, by Kinahan Cornwallis

1871: Mark Brown’s Wife: A Tale of the Gold-Fields, by Charles De Boos

1871-1872: The Bushranger’s Autobiography, by Mary Fortune, writing as W. W. (serialised in ‘The Australian Journal’ as part of “The Detective’s Album”)

1873: Mike Howe, the Bushranger of Van Diemen’s Land, by James Bonwick

1874: For £60,000!!! : A Sensational Comedy in Four Acts, play by Helen Benbow


1875: Crushed: a Christmas Book, by Robert Whitworth


1881: Australia; Or, The Bushrangers, play by William Archer (authorship disputed)
1882: *Cowabee: An Australian Tale*, by Foster Osborn

1882/1883/189-?: (year disputed): *Esperanza: A Tale of Three Colonies*, by Edward O'Sullivan


1884: *The Sunny South*, play by George Darrell

1885: *The Crooked Stick, or, Pollie's Probation*, by Rolf Boldrewood (in ‘The Australasian’, *Christmas Supplement*)

1885-1886: *Les Mangeurs de Feu*, by Louis Jacolliot (French sojourner) (Serialised in ‘Journal des Voyages’)

1887: *An Exile's Romance, or, Realities of Australian Life*, by Arthur Keyser

1888: *The Bushrangers*, ‘minstrel farce’ script by Will Whitburn

1888: *Bingley's Gap: A Tale of Old Colonial Days*, by Mary Gaunt


1889: *Blacks and Bushrangers: Adventures in Queensland*, by E. B. Kennedy

1890: *Bail Up: A Romance of Bushrangers and Blacks*, by Hume Nisbet

1891: *Retaliation: A Tale of Early Melbourne*, by Thomas Henry Prichard


1892: *The Bushranger's Sweetheart*, by Hume Nisbet

1892: *Mount Desolation: An Australian Romance*, by W. Carlton Dawe

1893: *Outlaw and Lawmaker*, by Rosa Praed

1893: *Out Back*, by Kenneth Mackay

1893: *From the Bush to the Breakers*, by F. Frankfort Moore

1894: *Bushranger Bill*, monologue by Campbell McKellar

1894: *The Boss of Taroomba*, by E.W. Hornung

1894: *A Bush Girl’s Romance*, by Hume Nisbet

1896: *Irralie’s Bushranger*, by EW Hornung

1897: *The Track of Midnight*, by George Firth Scott

1899: *The Kelly Gang*, play by Arnold Denham

1900: *Wattle Blossoms and Heather: A Story*, by Bertha Batley

1900: *Benbonuna: A Bush Tale of the Fifties*, by Robert Bruce

1901: *Stephen Kyrle: An Australian Story*, by Katherine Andrews

1902: *King of the Ranges: A Blend of Fact and Fiction*, by Nat Gould

1903: *The Three Wagers*, by Nat Gould

1905: *Stingaree*, by E.W. Hornung

1906: *A Straight Goer*, by Nat Gould

1906: *Thunderbolt; Or, Three Days with Thunderbolt*, play by Ambrose Pratt and A.S. Joseph


1906: *On the Fringe of the Never-Never*, by Horace Kennedy Bloxham

1908: *Sweet Isabel of Narragoon: A Romance*, by Daniel Fraser Lumsden, writing as Lionel Laggard

1909: *The Stolen Racer*, by Nat Gould

1909: *The Spell of the Bush*, by John Cameron

1910: *Ubique, the Scientific Bushranger*, by Clarence W. Martin

1910: *The Squatter's Bairn*, by Ebenezer Mather

1911: *Gentleman Jack, Bushranger*, by John Sandes, writing as Don Delaney

1911: *The Outlaws of Weddin Range*, by Ambrose Pratt

1913: *The Outlaw*, by David Hennessey

1913: *For Turon Gold: A Tale of the Fifties*, by Don Delaney

1913: *The Captain of the Gang*, by Delaney, Don

1919: *The Outlaw's Daughter*, by Arthur Wright

1919: *The Cause of Kelly: A Complete History of the Primitive Colonial War Between the Kelly Family and the Police: A Drama in Blank Verse*, play by Robitt Jon Clow, writing as Clow the Younger

1919: *The Fortunes of Geoffrey Mayne*, by Charles Rodda

1920: *The Fenceless Ranges*, by Roy Bridges

1920: *Castle Vane: A Romance of Bushranging on the Upper Hunter in the Olden Days*, by J.H.M. Abbott

1921: *The Mystery of Wall's Hill*, by Kate Partridge (writing as Sydney Partridge) and Cecil Warren (writing as Cecil Haworth)

1921: *The Lost Valley*, by J.M. Walsh

1922: *The Ring Valley: A Novel of Australian Pioneering*, by John Fitzgerald

1922: *Old Time Australian Life*, by Isabella Watson

1923: *The Great Western Road*, by H.F. Wickham

1925: *The Outlaw, or the Dawning of the Morning*, by Dorothy Langsford

1926: *The Scarlet Mask: A Novel*, by Charles Rodda

1927: *From Bush to Mayfair: A Novel*, by John Primmer

1928: *Up the Country: A Tale of Early Australian Squattocracy*, by Miles Franklin (writing as Brent of Bin Bin)

Not included in this timeline:

• Children’s literature  
• Novellas and short stories  
• Poetry  
• Nonfiction, including biographies and autobiographies  
• Screenplays  
• Works wholly by authors who spent no time in Australia

This list is not comprehensive, as well over 1000 works of Australian literature relate to bushrangers, and many more may refer to bushrangers to a lesser or greater extent.

Where possible, dates listed are of first known publication or production, in any form (e.g. serialised prior to book publication).

The AustLit database available online at www.austlit.edu.au is the primary source of information for this timeline.
APPENDIX C

A Whirlpool of Bushranger Aliases

O'Reilly, Irish political activist and convict bolter, turned author, partial inspiration for the fictional Morres ‘Moonlight’ Blake in Rosa Praed’s Outlaw and Lawmaker (1893)

Joseph Bolitho ‘Moondyne Joe’ Johns (1835-1900) Bushranger

Inspired by ‘Moondyne Joe’ and ‘Captain Starlight’, according to author’s note

Harry ‘Captain Starlight’ Readford 1841-1901, Bushranger

Frank ‘Captain Starlight’ Pearson (1837-1899) Bushranger

Fictional ‘Starlight Gang’ in Mary Fortune’s serialised novel, The Bushranger’s Autobiography (1871-1872)

Fictional ‘Midnite’, title character of Randolph Stow’s satirical novel for children (1967)

Inspired by ‘Moondyne Joe’ and ‘Captain Starlight’, according to author’s note

Andrew George ‘Moonlite’ Scott (1842-1880) Bushranger

Thomas ‘Captain Midnight’ Smith (c. 1850-1878) Bushranger

Frank McCallum alias Thomas Smith, alias ‘Captain Melville’ (1822-1857) Bushranger

George ‘Frenchy’ Melville (? - 1853) Bushranger

Fictional ‘Midnight’ Character in G. Firth Scott’s On the Track of Midnight (1897)


Inspired by ‘Moondyne Joe’ and ‘Captain Starlight’, according to author’s note

Joseph Bolitho ‘Moondyne Joe’ Johns (1835-1900) Bushranger

Inspired by ‘Moondyne Joe’ and ‘Captain Starlight’, according to author’s note

Andrew George ‘Moonlite’ Scott (1842-1880) Bushranger

Thomas ‘Captain Midnight’ Smith (c. 1850-1878) Bushranger

Frank McCallum alias Thomas Smith, alias ‘Captain Melville’ (1822-1857) Bushranger

George ‘Frenchy’ Melville (? - 1853) Bushranger

Fictional ‘Moodyne’, title character of John Boyle O'Reilly’s novel (1879)

O’Reilly, Irish political activist and convict bolter, turned author, partial inspiration for the fictional Morres ‘Moonlight’ Blake in Rosa Praed’s Outlaw and Lawmaker (1893)

Joseph Bolitho ‘Moondyne Joe’ Johns (1835-1900) Bushranger

Inspired by ‘Moondyne Joe’ and ‘Captain Starlight’, according to author’s note

Harry ‘Captain Starlight’ Readford 1841-1901, Bushranger

Frank ‘Captain Starlight’ Pearson (1837-1899) Bushranger

Fictional ‘Starlight Gang’ in Mary Fortune’s serialised novel, The Bushranger’s Autobiography (1871-1872)
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